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The Diaries of Blanka Lebzelter: Traces and Spaces of Jewish
Life in 20th Century Romania

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For my grandmother, Mary Frances

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This trail also led me to conclude [...] that history is the unceasing attempt to understand what it is that has happened alongside all that might have happened as well or instead.

Olga Tokarczuk, *The Books of Jacob*¹

¹ Olga Tokarczuk, “A Note on Sources,” in *The Books of Jacob: A Novel*, trans. Jennifer Croft (Riverhead Books, 2022), 5.

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Chapter 1. Introduction: Finding Blanka

The Mediaș Synagogue

My first encounter with Blanka Lebzelter is a visceral memory. I had organised a clean-up of a synagogue in the small Transylvanian town of Mediaș² and was crouching on the frigid, musty, wooden floor of the women's balcony, it was late March 2009. The balcony was strewn, waist-deep in places, with all manner of papers and rubbish. Dusty books were partially contained in crumbling cardboard boxes, but most material was simply lying in piles on the floor. The synagogue had not functioned as such for some decades, but even in its last years of use the building, built in the late 19th century, and surrounding complex of garden and office, was rarely used for religious services for lack of a minyan.³ Rather, the few Mediaș residents who identified as Jewish might come for a modest communal holiday meal or, more likely, drop by the office to receive news and welfare payments by way of food tickets or other distribution of goods.

The Jewish community of Mediaș was not absent due to deportation and murder, rather the vast majority of members of this German- and Hungarian speaking community in southern Transylvania had emigrated to Israel over the course of thirty to forty years following World War II, a trajectory similar to that of most of the postwar Jewish population of Romania. At some point in time, probably already by the 1980s, the women's balcony and stairway leading up to it, came to be used as part genizah – a place to store any bit of worn-out or no longer used paper which might carry the name of god and therefore required ceremonial disposal – and part warehouse for odds and ends of questionable worth about which no one knew what to do.⁴

² Also Mediasch (German), Medgyes (Hungarian). Many places in this work have names in multiple languages. I use the Romanian spelling of Mediaș throughout this work and will provide a historical overview of this town and others that appear prominently in this work under “glossary of places” later in the introduction

³ The synagogue was built in 1894, see Helmuth Knall, “Chronik der Stadt Mediasch,” in *Mediasch: Beiträge zur Geschichte der Stadt aus vier Jahrhunderten*, vol. I., ed. Helmuth Knall (Crisserv Verlag, 2007), 402. The material from the archives makes clear the community met rarely for religious purposes already by the 1980s. For a reflection on the Mediaș Jewish community and a later project I undertook there, see Julie Dawson, “The Burdocks of Klettengasse: Reflecting on Presence in Mediaș, Transylvania,” in *Contentious Heritages and Arts: A Critical Companion*, ed. Marion Hamm and Klaus Schönberger (Wieser Verlag, 2020), 219-233.

⁴ The most famous genizah is the medieval Cairo genizah but spaces of many small synagogues and prayer houses across Europe were also used for such storage purposes and the content has often only recently come under scrutiny. For the Cairo story see Adina Hoffman and Peter Cole, *Sacred Trash: The Lost and Found World of the Cairo Geniza* (Schocken, 2011) and Rebecca Jefferson, *The Cairo Genizah and the Age of Discovery in Egypt: The History and Provenance of a Jewish Archive* (I.B. Tauris, 2021). For contemporary examinations of genizot in central Europe,



Figure 1. The women's balcony of the Mediaș synagogue. Source: Christian Binder, 2009.

There were the belongings of deceased or departed members of the community with no descendants; community archival material recording events of apparent inconsequence; car, radio, and oven scraps; and books – hundreds of books ranging from children's books to novels to prayer books in German and Hungarian, evoking the memory of what was once a relatively small yet thriving community.

especially in the Czech lands, see Lenka Uličná, "Modern Genizot: 'Sacred Trash' Reconsidered," *Muzeológia a Kultúrne Dedičstvo* 7, no. 1 (2019): 143–54 and Lenka Uličná, "Why Display Sacred Trash: The 'Secrets in the Attic' Exhibition," *Judaica Bohemiae* LVII, no. 2 (2022): 115–20. The Czechs began exploring their genizot already in the 1990s, see Olga Sixtová, "Findings from Genizot in Bohemia and Moravia," *Judaica Bohemiae*, 34 (1995): 126–134. In the past few decades there have also been multiple projects related to the genizot in surviving former synagogues in villages and small towns in Germany.



Figure 2. The stairway to the women's balcony. Source: Christian Binder, 2009.

The clean-up event, which I organised through a local NGO to take place over one weekend with a handful of volunteers, was initially focused on simply placing the books in better, more stable conditions, getting them off the floor, with covers closed and onto shelves or tables. At the time, we did not know that strewn amongst the books was archival material of the community: charts created during World War II at the behest of the antisemitic Romanian government detailing the genealogy of the rural Jewish population several generations back; photographs dating from the 1800s of community members; an Herbarium of local plants collected in 1913 by a local young man and soldier of the Austro-Hungarian army; moth-eaten tapestries, probably handsewn by the women, once used to ornament the aron kodesh (ark) or tallis and tefillin bags, embroidered with family initials. There were school papers, a battered megillah scroll, the seating chart for the synagogue, beer bottles, communist newspapers, Soviet-era magazines, shrouds for the dead, suitcases (empty), a communist Romanian flag. Hair was tucked in between the pages of prayer books, doodles covered the interiors of others, the margins of a Soviet-published English version of Tolstoy's short stories were pencilled over with the German translation for more obscure English words.

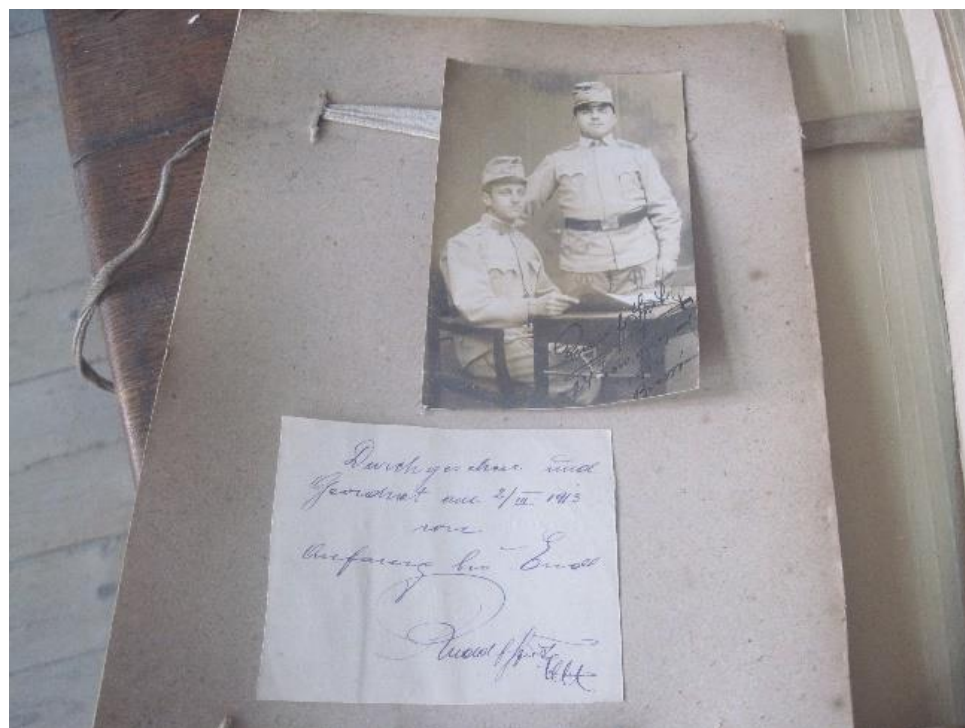


Figure 3. Herbarium found in the Mediaș synagogue, with photograph of the creator and his brother, in Austro-Hungarian uniform. Source: Julie Dawson, 2010.

After only a short while we realised that beyond the books, there were items of unknown provenance and value and I asked everyone to check each item carefully—only blank paper or obvious rubbish belonged in the rubbish pile, everything else, no matter what language or however trivial it might seem, should be retained for closer perusal at a later point.

The white cotton gloves we wore quickly turned grey then black. A thin sable film covered everything and was not dust, but rather years of accumulated carbon and pollution particles drifting in through the broken windows, born on the wind from the notorious massive industrial plants ten kilometres down the valley. Copșa Mica, a dismal collection of grey houses and communist-era flats, had the dubious claim to being the most polluted town in Europe, before the Chernobyl accident.⁵

⁵ Most scholarly studies on Copșa Mica relate to its post-communist levels of pollution, the corresponding danger to local populations, and measures taken to improve conditions. For example Iosif Vorovencii, "A Change Vector Analysis Technique for Monitoring Land Cover Changes in Copșa Mica, Romania, in the Period 1985–2011," *Environmental Monitoring and Assessment*, 186(9) (2014): 5951–5968, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10661-014-3831-5>. For a brief historical overview see *ibid*, 5952–5953. Otherwise Copșa Mica figures somewhat frequently in newspaper and magazine articles profiling pollution in Eastern Europe, most notoriously in the cover image for the 1991 National Geographic story, Jon Thompson, "East Europe's Dark Dawn: The Iron Curtain Rises to Reveal a Land Tarnished by Pollution," *National Geographic*, June (1991): 36–63.

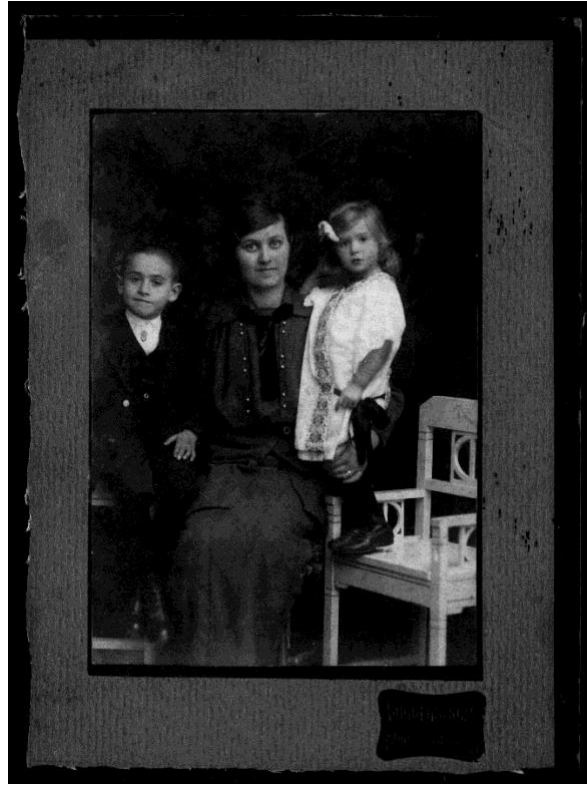


Figure 4. A photo found during the clean-up with imprint from a Mediaș photo studio, circa 1900. Source: see footnote 7.

Sorting through my own pile of brittle, sooty papers, I came across a simple notebook, a soft, sherbert shade of orange, 20 cm long, 10 across, the size of a child's school notebook. We felt pressed for time and I was working quickly, trying not to get distracted by the myriad potential in paper and word. The goal of the weekend was simply to create order and understand what was there. But the contents of this notebook immediately arrested me. Unlike the acidic, administrative papers, faintly typed in crooked letters and stemming from the community office during the communist years, this was handwritten in pencil using a firm, German script. I read:

Konstanza Sontag 23/IX [1951]⁶

Ich war in Bukarest und habe nichts ausgerichtet. Man hat zu keiner Audienz zugelassen, nicht einmal ins Ministerium hereingelassen. Obwohl es offiziell keine Audienzen gab hat man Provinzler doch hereingelassen und angehört,

⁶ Blanka recorded the date and place name in a variety of ways and using various spellings. All transcriptions of diary entries, including dates and place names, are exact transcriptions, even if mistakes were made or multiple languages were used. I will comment on this in the main text later in the introduction under "description of source." She almost always included the year in the date, this entry is one of the very few exceptions.

gerade am Tage wann ich gekommen bin hat dies aufgehört. Umsonst meine Plage gewesen und umsonst die Geldausgabe. Habe meine Freundin Lia welche ich mehr als 2 ½ Jahre nicht gesehen habe aufgesucht. Sie hat ein reizendes Mädel.

Was soll ich jetzt tun? Sitze seit Jahren in einer unbequemen provisorischen Lage und es nimmt kein Ende. Und meine Qualen nehmen kein Ende und verheeren mich.

Es naht der Winter, es ist schon empfindlich kalt. Was tun, sich anfangen für den Winter zu aprovisionieren? Dies ist eine sehr schwere Sache und mit was für einem Herzen kann ich das tun.⁷

Flipping the notebook closed, I studied the cover. It was blank but for a diminutive, communist motive of a rising sun.⁸ Again, I opened it, more gingerly this time, to the first page and read:

Konstanza Donnerstag 26/X 1950

Vor genau einen Monat habe den Schlusspunkt auf der letzten Seite meines vorigen Tagebuches gesetzt und sehr gezögert ein neues zu beginnen. Was für einen Sinn kann für einen Menschen wie ich das Führen eines Tagebuches haben. Ein verpfushtes verlorenes Leben, seit Jahren trage ich nichts weiter ein als Pech, Misserfolg und Leid. Doch ist für mich dieses Eintragen im Tagebuch so zur Gewohnheit geworden dass ich es nicht entbehren kann. Und so fange ich heute wieder an und beginne dort wo ich das letzte Mal aufgehört habe. [...]

⁷ The diaries are currently at the Leo Baeck Institute: Blanka Lebzelter Collection, AR 25437, Leo Baeck Institute, New York City. They are arranged chronologically. When I quote short excerpts within the main text, I will note the date of the entry in the footnote, unless the date is included within the quoted text. I will not recite the collection information at every quotation. The longer excerpts that proceed each chapter are dated. English translations of all German text can be found in the annexes at the end of this work, they are arranged by chapter. All translations from German and Romanian are my own unless otherwise noted. The citation for the photograph in figure 4 is “Photos from regional photo studios (Mediaș, Sibiu, Odorheiu Secuiesc, Budapest), Early 1900s,” Box 1, Folder 5, Mediaș Jewish Community Photograph Collection, AR 25402 / MF 1041, Leo Baeck Institute, New York City.

⁸ Thank you to my former colleagues at the Leo Baeck Institute who know this project from its nascent stage, especially Michael Simonson for providing me with a high-quality colour scan of the cover of the first recovered diary and Chris Bentley and Emily Andresini for their always cheerful and speedy facilitation of digital images of the diaries.

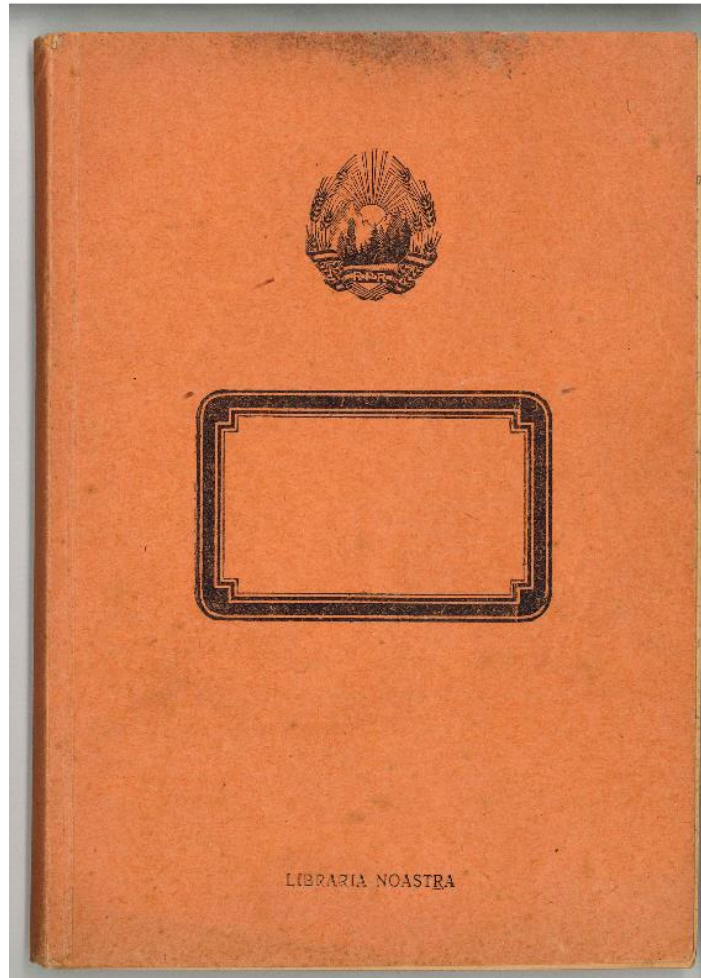


Figure 5. The cover of the first diary recovered. Source: Blanka Lebzelter Collection, AR 25437, LBI.

I again searched the cover and now the back and the final page, hoping for a name or some indication of the author's identity, but the notebook was accompanied by no exterior hints to its interior contents. That the notebook was a diary was clear, where and when it was written were obvious, the place and date scrupulously recorded by the author at the start of every entry. But why was a German-speaker diarist writing in the former Ottoman port of Constanța, a town on the Black Sea, 600 km away from Mediaș, far from the former Austro-Hungarian territories, where German-speakers were nothing unusual? Or perhaps the more relevant question was why was this diary, written in Constanța in the 1950s, now, in the early 21st century, lying in an abandoned synagogue in Transylvania? Putting these questions aside, I called a break and passed the diary around – the first entry made clear the author had written other diaries. I asked the volunteers to be more cautious than before when sorting material and especially to watch for notebooks and handwriting such as this.

That night, I huddled under the blankets of the narrow, wooden bed in our accommodation, the parish house of the Transylvanian Saxon village, Eibesdorf / Ighișu Nou. The synagogue at the close of winter had been freezing and despite bundling ourselves in winter clothing that included long underwear, coats, and hats, we were thoroughly chilled after spending the day in a building which had not seen heating for decades. Shivering, I opened the notebook to a random page and read:

21. VI 52

Bin am gleichen Abend nach Ploești gefahren. Angekommen in dieser fremden verhassten Stadt die ich lieber nie gesehen hätte, wohin gehen, was tun. In meinem verworrenen Gehirn war ein Gedanke klar: ich muss sie her auf den jüdischen Friedhof von Ploești bringen. Ich suchte die Comunitate⁹ auf und stiess auf Schwierigkeiten. Ich hatte nicht ausreichend Geld und die Comunitate verfügt heutzutage über gar keine Mittel. Gerührt durch meinen Zustand beschloss die Beamtin von der Comunitate mir das fehlende Geld vorzustrecken und nahm auch die Initiative zu den Besorgungen. Vor allem verschafte sie mir den Menschen der sich um die Ueberführung und die damit verbundenen Formalitäten kümmern sollte. Dann fuhr ich nach Paulești: Ich sass auf einer Bank blickte zur Totenkammer und weinte fassungslos. Ich ging nicht sie sehen, meine Nerven hätten es nicht durchgehalten. Ich fragte die Schwestern nach ihren letzten Stunden und was ich befürchtet vernahmen meine Ohren: Sie habe die ganze Zeit nach mir gerufen und gewusst dass ihr Tod nahe sei. Am letzten Tag ihres Lebens habe sie die Brille und die 2 Postkarten die sie von mir hatte verlangt und diese noch einmal gelesen. (Wie soll ich mit dem Gedanken an diese grausamen Qualen meiner teuren über alles geliebten Mutter leben können, und wozu? für wem?) Ich ging jenseits des „Sanatoriums“ im Walde umher und schrie, der Himmel musste meine Anklage, meine Mutter mein Flehen um Verzeihung hören. Und dann fuhr ich mit meiner Mutter im Sarge (konnte das möglich sein) den selben Weg zurück welchen ich nur vor ein paar Tagen mit ihr an meiner Seite, voll Hoffnung auf eine baldige Besserung, gefahren war. Es war

⁹ Romanian: community, that is, the official Jewish community which took care of administrative matters related to Jewish life in every town.

schon zu spät um sie noch am selben Tag beerdigen zu können. Am andern Tag stand ich an ihrer Bahre bis der Rabiner und der Kantor kamen. Dann wurde sie zu Grabe getragen. Meine gute, teure, goldene Mama wurde in die Erde versenkt.

Reading suddenly of the death and burial of the author's mother was both startling and bewildering. That the mother died in Ploiești, an industrial oil town west of Bucharest and not at all close to Constanța, seemed entirely illogical. Why was she there of all places? Moreover, I myself had recently spent three months in Ploiești for an intensive Romanian language course, during which I lived on the same street as the synagogue and Jewish community offices, they were a stone's throw away from my building. I had visited the office which the writer sought out and the very cemetery where her mother had been buried. This coincidence was bizarre. I found myself rereading the written passage several times and fell asleep musing on whether it would be possible to find out the author's identity.



Figure 6. The first diary found (dating 1950-1955), along with other material in the women's balcony of the Medias synagogue.
Source: Michael Nork, 2009.

By the end of the weekend two additional diaries had been found, together with several long letters, in the same handwriting, and identity cards for one of the Transnistrian ghettos. Taken together – through the signature of “Blanka” at the bottom of the letters and the name “Blanka Lebzelter” on the identity cards for the ghetto – it could be established with certainty that the diaries, written in the same hand as the letters, were also penned by the young woman, Blanka Lebzelter, who had been in her early twenties during the war, according to the ghetto identity cards. Eventually I came across one diary entry in which she explicitly stated her name, erasing any lingering doubt. In the years since, I have trained as an archivist and historian and my most pressing regret from the day(s) of the discovery is that I did not know or note in exactly what context the diaries were found – what papers or items were they next to – which might have provided further context.

Moreover, Blanka wrote of another diary – kept prior to the earliest one we found, dating from 1948. I still wonder whether the first diary was after all in the synagogue and mistakenly discarded. Or else why and how did it disappear, when the others survived? Many months later a fourth diary was found, the last of the notebooks she kept. The finding of this one proved crucial, probably more so than the missing first notebook: it explained, to an extent, the fate of Blanka and partially answered why the diaries were in Mediaș. The final lines read:

Bukarest mittwoch 26 IV 61

[...] Bin sehr erschöpft. Es naht der Augenblick die alte Heimat zu verlassen um eine neue zu suchen. Was werde ich finden?? Tagebücher darf man nicht mitnehmen, zum vernichten habe mich nicht entschliessen können. Werde sie jemand zur Aufbewahrung anvertrauen. Werden sie jemals den Weg zu mir zurückfinden?



I integrated the detailed finding of the diaries into this study for several reasons. First, the diaries and the story I will tell below of their author and her family is not merely the story of the fate of one central European Jewish family but rather a story of Romania in the 20th century: the narrative *includes* the finding in Transylvania, which extends the framework both geographically and temporally, not only to the early 21st century and post-communist period, but also to the years in between, during which the notebooks were indeed “safely kept” (“aufbewahrt”) for decades. The

“someone” to whom Blanka entrusted her writings was her first cousin, Babette Chomed (1904–1992), originally of Czernowitz,¹⁰ the erstwhile capital of Bukovina, a former crownland of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, then part of so-called “Greater” Romania, and today divided between Romania and Ukraine. Babette’s determination to hold her cousin’s notebooks in safekeeping over many decades shaped this narrative and was my first indication that the diary writer’s story would extend beyond her, to that of a network of family members.¹¹

Second, because I myself found the diaries, I became woven into the narrative, whether or not I wanted to be. The diaries were not sitting in acid-free archival boxes in a climate-controlled storage room, perused as one collection of many and selected based on a variety of factors, predetermined by myself or a research advisor. They had not been salvaged by grandchildren or the author herself and donated to an institute after the passing of the writer as the result of late 20th century self-awareness of potential historical value. Rather, the author chose to (attempt to) save them in the very midst of the historical moment in which they were penned, for reasons we cannot fully know. It seems less likely that Blanka, who was increasingly isolated over the period she recorded, believed her words chronicling her struggles and loneliness held an intrinsic historical value, though perhaps she did. Whatever her motives, her emotional attachment to her diaries and the story they recorded are clear in her final entry. She was convinced of their import, at least in her own life and for her own memory. And at several points in time, others made the same decision, under circumstances which we will never know. The books were saved and salvaged by anonymous and known individuals over five decades, each of whom must have acknowledged a cryptic and unfulfilled value in the words therein.¹²

¹⁰ Romanian: Cernăuți; Ukrainian: Chernivtsi.

¹¹ Babette Chomed’s year of birth is found on a variety of documents in the Mediaș archive and Czernowitz civil record books, the year of her death is recorded in Paul Celan and Gustav Chomed, “...*ich brauche Deine Briefe...*”, Barbara Wiedemann and Jürgen Köchel, eds. (Suhrkamp Verlag, 2010), 82.

¹² The diaries are currently at the Leo Baeck Institute in New York City and have been digitised and are openly accessible. For reasons of transparency, I wish to state that upon finding the diaries in 2009 I contacted Radu Ioanid, whom I had recently met, and who was then director of the International Archival Program at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM). I met him several weeks later in Bucharest together with Liviu Rotman, then director of the CSIER (Centre for the Study of the History of the Jews of Romania). They found the material interesting, though could not engage significantly with the contents due to the German. Liviu Rotman instructed me to bring the material to his institute, where all the papers were photographed for their records. Mr. Ioanid decided to take the Transnistrian identity cards to the USHMM (unfortunately these identity cards have not been located since then by any USHMM employees but I fortunately have the high-resolution photos taken by the CSIER), but I asked to retain the diaries so as to read them and try to learn more about their author. Eventually it was decided that the most appropriate repository for the diaries would be the Leo Baeck Institute, with its German-Jewish focus. No employees at the archive in Bucharest spoke German at that time and there was little interest in the documents, nor was their proper safekeeping and future accessibility ensured as the centre was at that time in the midst of moving premises.



Figure 7. Babette Chomed, circa 1949. First cousin of Blanka Lebzelter and keeper of the diaries 1961-1989. Source: see footnote 16.

Blanka herself was the first to refuse to destroy them, as demonstrated in her final statement. Her train from Bucharest to Vienna passed through Mediaș, the same train line that runs today and that I have taken countless times. In 1961 the journey took over thirty-six hours.¹³ Perhaps the train stopped at stations for long periods, allowing friends and relatives to disembark, rendezvous, pass parcels and foods to each other, say farewell. Presumably, Blanka somehow notified her cousin, Babette, to meet her at the station. She had not seen Babette since the war, indeed her diaries never mention Babette though a 1947 letter to Babette from Blanka was found with the diaries.¹⁴ Whatever words of greeting or farewell were spoken between the women or however the diaries arrived with Babette, she kept them at her home in Mediaș for the following decades.

Babette Chomed was one of the few Jews living in communist Romania who, it seems, did not apply for emigration to Israel. She may have been in the minority group of people who

Similarly, at that time the Mediaș synagogue did not have proper storage facilities for archival material. The community archives found in the balcony and elsewhere on the premises have since been processed thanks to a generous grant and are open to the public and in proper archival storage containers. The finding aid is here: <https://jbat.lbi.org/items/show/1796>. Retrieved on 6. December 2024.

¹³ In a letter dated 30. January 1959, Herbert Freedman wrote from the Bucharest – Vienna train (almost having arrived in Vienna), “the journey takes two nights and a day.” I will discuss this letter and related material later in this work. “Letter from Herbert A. Freedman,” 30. January 1959, 1955-1964 New York Collection, Folder Romania: Emigration, 1955-1963, File reference code: NY AR195564 / 4 / 49 / 2 / 684, item ID: 846948, American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee Archives, New York City.

¹⁴ This letter is included in the annex.

ideologically believed in the communist state, despite its faults. Her younger brother, Gustav Chomed (1920–2002), who was close to Blanka’s age, counted as such as a young man prior to World War II. After serving in the Soviet army, he returned to Czernowitz after the war but successfully emigrated to Israel in 1972.¹⁵ Or she may have felt disinclined to start over at an advanced age, she was after all born in 1904. Perhaps she was content with the life she had created in Mediaș, where she would have been able to speak German daily and in general have been amongst a community, Jewish and non-Jewish, whose cultural background was rooted in the Habsburg empire, with similarities to the environment in which she grew up in Czernowitz. In Mediaș Babette worked as a teacher, her file was found in the community archives. The final document in the file is dated 30. March 1989 and describes the “liquidation” of the remaining belongings of Babette Chomed who, several months earlier, at her own request had relocated to the Jewish home for the aged in Bucharest. The document explains that at the request of Ms. Chomed a package of private belongings weighing thirteen kilograms had been dispatched to her in Bucharest while the remaining contents of the apartment were sold or discarded; this was carried out by the employees of the now tiny Jewish community.¹⁶ Nothing is noted regarding personal papers. It is my belief that at this time the diaries were removed to the synagogue, saved from destruction by an unknown individual, most probably a community employee. Presumably there they stayed until the cleanup, twenty years later, in 2009.

¹⁵ I will discuss this family in greater detail below. Regarding the date of Gustav Chomed’s emigration to Israel and death see, Celan and Chomed, “*...ich brauche Deine Briefe...*,” 76. See also Amy-Diana Colin and Edith Silbermann, eds., *Paul Celan – Edith Silbermann. Zeugnisse einer Freundschaft. Gedichte, Briefwechsel, Erinnerungen* (Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2010), 320-321.

¹⁶ “Assistance file for Chomed Babette, refugee from Czernowitz, 1964-1989,” Box SD2, Folder 5, Mediaș Jewish Community Collection, Mediaș Jewish Community Archives and Synagogue, Mediaș, Romania. The photograph of Babette Chomed in figure 7 is also from this folder. The tapestries found in the synagogue were restored by professionals at a national museum in Sibiu through another grant-funded project. An EU Horizons 2020 project saw a collaboration between myself as researcher, Răzvan Anton, an artist from Cluj, and Alexandra Toma, the local site administrator, in the development of exhibition material based on the archives and community outreach events related to local Jewish history over three summers (2016-2018). Though community events sometimes take place in the garden and adjacent house (former offices), the synagogue itself remains in a derelict state.



Figure 8. The Mediaș synagogue and Jewish community offices (building to the left). Source: Julie Dawson, 2011.

This work is biographical in character. Using the diaries as a grounding point and anchor, I seek to trace the life and world of Blanka Lebzelter up until the point when the diaries conclude. Over the course of my research, I found that my examination was necessarily expanded – in terms of time, especially to the years prior to those chronicled in the diaries, but also to individuals. I realised I could not write about Blanka or apprehend her position without understanding, or trying to understand, her background, which included not only her family background but also the environment in which she was raised. Perhaps due to my own very tactile experiences with material objects and spaces of consequence in Blanka’s story such as the Mediaș synagogue and the Jewish cemetery in Ploiești, I found myself drawn to reflections on her spatial experience.¹⁷ Until 1961,

¹⁷ Arguably, my long-term encounters and interactions with material objects and spaces related to Blanka’s life, have shaped my interpretation of her past. During my first visit to her hometown of Waschkoutz, I was startled to see the local tradition of a “scarecrow”: wooden poles were stuck in the fields, each brandishing a dead crow, pierced through the middle by the sharp stick. It was difficult to separate this image of violence, pervasive throughout countless private

hers was a life constrained and constricted by the shifting borders of the Romanian state. With the exception of a passing, enigmatic few months in Vienna, it seems she was never outside territories controlled by Romania—and yet, as we will see, she was very much a child of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

The biographical trajectory of her parents, who as adults were firmly entrenched in the assimilated and educated Jewish-German petite bourgeois of Bukovina, marked her indelibly.¹⁸ It is the very improbability of this cluster of places being joined in narrative that propels the diaries into a story beyond the diary's voice: the writings of a woman raised in a Bukovina hamlet west of Czernowitz, who was deported east to Transnistria and afterwards kept a German-language diary in the Black Sea port of Constanța, buried her mother in industrial Ploiești, and whose legacy remained shuttered for decades in a drafty hall partially exposed to the elements in the Transylvanian town of Mediaș become a narrative of 20th century Romania, including its excesses and crimes. This work is the story of a survivor of the Transnistrian Holocaust (discussed in detail in a later chapter), displaced and left alone in the wake of the war. But it is also the story of the “unique lot” of the Bukovina Jews and their scattering in the postwar period.¹⁹ It is the story of early communist Romania and its housing, food, and medicine shortages and shortcomings; of the long shadow of World War I; and especially of the devastation wrought on victims whose injuries were never acknowledged.

Who was Blanka Lebzelter? What did she look like? When and where was she born? What happened to her and her family during the war? Why did she live in the Black Sea port town of Constanța, far from the home of her youth, in the postwar years? Why were her diaries in the synagogue of a small Transylvanian town? How did they come there, why were they separated from her? What happened to her after the diaries end? Where did she go, when did she die?

gardens and larger fields, from Blanka's own negative portrayal of the town and the pogrom which took place there. Thank you to Roland Clark for suggesting I reflect on this connection. In the present work I do not engage closely with questions of materiality of my sources, but recent studies have taken up this connection, for example: Albena Shkodrova, *Rebellious Cooks and Recipe Writing in Communist Bulgaria* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021); James Alexander Kapáló and Kinga Povedák, *The Secret Police and the Religious Underground in Communist and Post-Communist Eastern Europe* (Routledge, 2022); and Sonia-Doris Andras, *The Women of 'Little Paris': Fashion in Interwar Bucharest* (Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2024).

¹⁸ I describe her background and that of her parents in detail in later chapters.

¹⁹ See especially Gaëlle Fisher, *Resettlers and Survivors: Bukovina and the Politics of Belonging in West Germany and Israel, 1945–1989* (Berghahn Books, 2020).

These are, of course, only the most obvious questions with which I was confronted upon finding the diaries and answering them was a superficial objective of the present work. Upon reading the diaries in detail, however, countless more questions arose related to her postwar experience. Blanka's writings were sometimes difficult to comprehend and her grief and anguish so all-encompassing that I ruled out any cursory interpretation of her life.²⁰ As the years passed and my professional life became more entwined with Romanian archives and postwar Jewish history, I found that Blanka's voice within the diaries and the questions raised therein did not let me go. Her story did not fit into more well-known postwar narratives, which tend towards resilience and recovery. In discussions with other scholars, I found that Blanka's narrative consistently fell between the cracks: here was a single woman who had not married or had children in the postwar years, who had not managed to emotionally integrate into the postwar society and who recorded her anguish at her losses, trauma, and isolation as a conscious therapeutic practice. She also refused to discard her testament to grief. The singularity of postwar diaries kept by a Jewish woman in a communist state also struck me. Blanka could not bring the diaries with her because it was not permitted to take written materials outside of the country at emigration. Other Jewish women also kept diaries during this period but at emigration they were confronted with Blanka's dilemma—to destroy the material or pass it to a trusted friend or relative. The chances of this material having survived until today are slim and I know of no other such cases, though there may well be further discoveries to be made. At this point, however, I believe Blanka's diaries represent a very rare story of the survival of written material which the communist government had not intended to survive. After several years of working on projects related to Jewish Bukovina and Transylvania, I returned to the diaries and focused on seeking answers to my many questions, on doing justice to the complexities of Blanka's story, and acknowledging her gesture, through refusing to destroy the writings, that the story she recorded should be listened to. This project seeks to understand the world in which Blanka wrote, to reconstruct, where possible, aspects of her biography, and illuminate thereby the testimony of one survivor, a victim of abuse at the hands of many, both the state and discrete individuals. In this sense, this work seeks also to right a wrong, to perform a work of historical repair, and provide space for the narratives of those whose trace is

²⁰ I note this here because at various points in time people have asked, why not (or why did you not) just publish the diaries in their entirety, immediately? I have felt that this would be an injustice to Blanka, because so much of what she wrote cannot be understood without detailed contextualisation. There would, additionally, be legal issues to publishing the diaries in their entirety which I do not at this juncture wish to confront.

frequently missing from historical records, who are consequently marginalised many times over, in their present and ours.²¹

Description of Source and Note on Translations

The primary source and starting point of my project are the inscriptions of a private individual, who, according to her own words, recorded aspects of her day-to-day life over fourteen years out of a mixture of loneliness, sorrow, and habit. We cannot know whether she kept a journal during her years in the ghetto or prior to the war. In the ghetto, where paper was a commodity, it seems less likely, though hardly impossible. All we can know with assurance is that she began keeping a journal in Constanța, perhaps initially as a gesture of hope or to stave off boredom, as a way of marking what she anticipated would be momentous days, weeks, or years, replete with change, perhaps discovery and renewal of some kind. The first diary, unfortunately lost, was most likely begun in 1946, when she arrived in Constanța, and recorded through the end of 1947. It is an exercise in exasperation to imagine what these first pages recorded: did she summarise the journey from Czernowitz over Siret and eventually to Constanța (as she often did in the later books when returning from a trip), did she describe the living quarters she and her mother somehow found, or meetings with other Bukovinians? Was her writing thick and dark with anger or small and spindly with hopelessness after the currency reform of August 1947, which depleted the meagre funds the women had managed to scrounge together? Did she explain and name the “benefactor,” to whom she refers in hazy references in later years? Might she have somewhat formally introduced herself and outlined her life until 1946, as she sometimes did, with great variation depending on her respective mood, on the first page of a new notebook? These musing are futile, but I use them to illustrate the lack of context with which I was confronted at my first encounter of the diaries. It took many years of casual inquiry and occasional focus, during which my professional and familial obligations lay elsewhere, for me to understand the basic framework of Blanka’s trajectory and it was, in fact, not until I was able to turn my focus entirely to the diaries in the context of the doctoral program that several significant puzzle pieces fell into place.

²¹Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, “Small Acts of Repair: The Unclaimed Legacy of the Romanian Holocaust,” *Journal of Literature and Trauma Studies* 4, no. 1-2, (Spring/Fall 2015): 18.

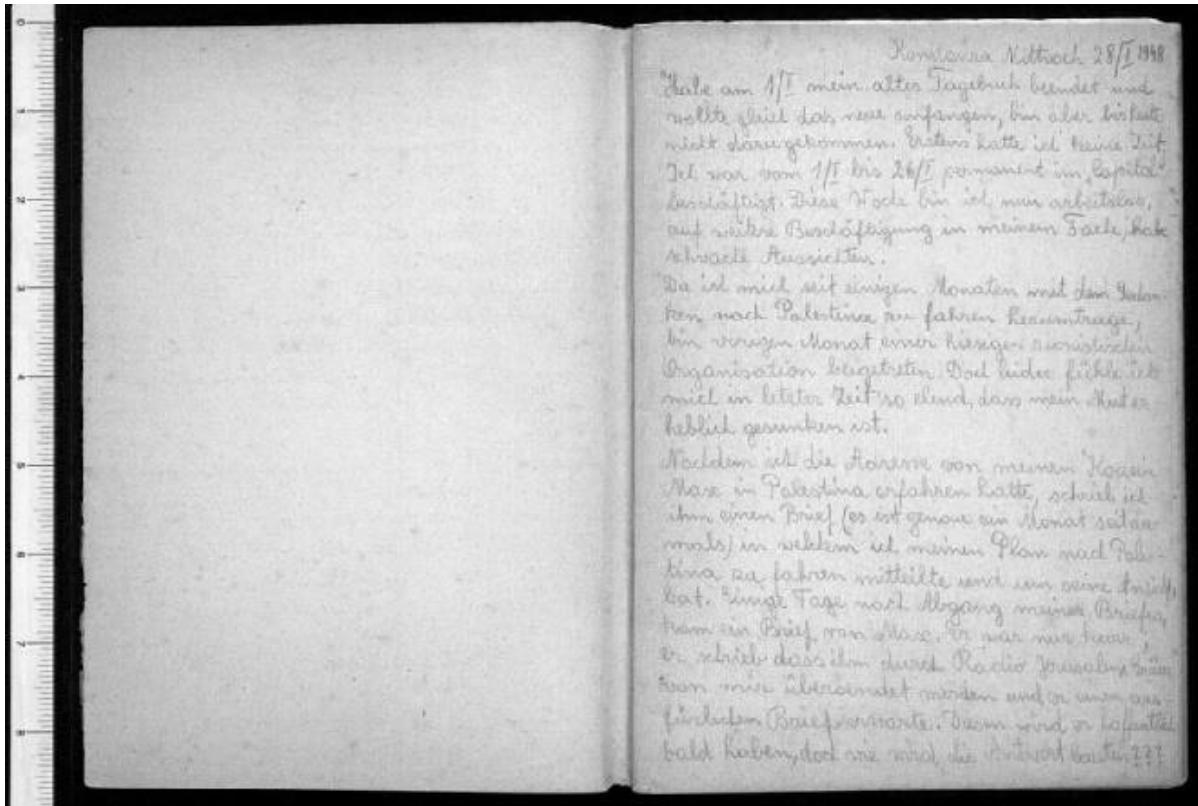


Figure 9. Page one of the earliest chronologic notebook recovered (1948-1950). Source: Blanka Lebzelter Collection, AR 25437, LBI.

Blanka's writings include not only her diaries but three long letters which she wrote to deceased loved ones and one letter to her cousin, Babette. All four diaries are written in pencil in simple notebooks, the size and type customarily used in schools. Blanka's handwriting is clear and always legible. Over the close to 900 entries, she almost never crossed out words. On the few occasions when she did, she normally blacked them out so as to be almost undecipherable. Generally, these edits are inconsequential: words are crossed out because they are repetitive, they are corrected for grammatical reasons or to an additional thought (ie. *Kleidungsstück* ~~oder~~ *Wäschestück*) or exchanged for a synonym. The only instance I found her deliberation on word choice to be of potential consequence was one of the few times she described the years spent in the ghetto. She wrote "Wir verliessen eine Stätte wo wir schreckliches ~~erlebt~~ mitgemacht haben, und sollten nun an einen Ort zurückkehren wo wir noch schrecklicheres erlebt hatten."²² My impression is that "mitmachen" denotes a role of activity or participation in some way, whereas "erleben" is passive, something that was done to the subject and about which they had no choice. This is the only

²² Mein Bruder, 1955. English: "We left a site where we had taken part ~~experienced~~ in the hideous and were now to return to a place where we what we had experienced was even more hideous."

instance where her decision to alter a word seemed to indicate a conscious desire to specify more clearly the past. On the other hand, she may have simply not wanted to repeat the word “erlebt” twice in one sentence. In any case, her diaries and the letters do not otherwise exhibit any evidence of editing.

Table 1. Chronological list of Blanka Lebzelter’s writings

Chronological list of Blanka’s writings	
<i>Diary or Letter</i>	<i>Date</i>
Diary 1	Missing (presumably 1946/47 – to Dec. 1947)
Letter: Liebe Babette!	22. June 1947
Diary 2	28. Jan. 1948 – 26. Sept. 1950
Diary 3	26. Oct. 1950 – 6. March 1955
Letter: Mein Mütterchen	December 1954
Letter: Mein Bruder	April 1955
Letter: Lieber Walter	May 1955
Diary 4	11. March 1955 – 3. February 1956
Diary 5	7. February 1956 – 26. April 1961 (entries from 28. Sept. 1960 are loose sheets slipped into back of notebook)

Table 2. Number of diary entries, by year

Number of diary entries, by year	
1948	65
1949	53
1950	32
1951	28
1952	28
1953	76
1954	67
1955	114
1956	105

1957	99
1958	100
1959	78
1960	17
1961	13
Total	875

Blanka wrote exclusively in German, though she slipped in Romanian words related to administrative or bureaucratic issues. Her German is a specific “Bukovina German” which uses, at times, antiquated expressions or words. Only once did she use a word which I, even after consulting with scholars, was unable to definitively give the meaning (this occurs in chapter three and regards the word *Küstendeckel*). As time passes, her spelling deteriorates, most frequently in the case of words for which there is a similar Romanian equivalent (the Romanian spelling is gradually assumed); her capitalisation, too, often takes on Romanian rules (where days of the week are not capitalised, for example). These changes mirror the declaration of her cousin, Gustav Chomed, to his childhood friend Paul Celan in 1962, “Du brauchst Dich also nicht zu wundern, wenn mir ab und zu ein Fehler unterläuft, da eine Sprache, wenn man sich nicht ständig in ihr übt, langsam in Vergessenheit gerät.”²³ Blanka also sometimes Germanised Romanian words, i.e. *aprovizionieren* from the Romanian *aproviziona*, meaning to secure or store up food and provisions (including heating material, prior to winter, for example).

After much back and forth, I have decided to keep Blanka’s original German texts in the main body of this work and to retain all idiosyncrasies and errors of spelling or expression. On the one hand these testify to her multilingual Bukovina background and her day-to-day immersion in the Romanian language and on the other to her determination to continue to create and maintain for herself a world in German. Thus, “errors” in the text which deviate from contemporary German spelling rules (which are numerous) were intentionally retained and I do not include [sic] after each instance. I carefully compared her original entries with my transcriptions and strove to faithfully render the texts, without any typographical errors of my own. Romanian words within the text are immediately translated in the footnotes. To ensure the accessibility of this work to non-

²³ Celan and Chomed, “...*ich brauche Deine Briefe...*,” 20. English: “You do not need to be astonished if I make a mistake now and then since a language, if not constantly exercised, slowly slips into oblivion.”

German speakers the annexes include English translations of all extensive diary excerpts, arranged by chapter, in the order in which they appear in this work. The longer excerpts between each chapter are also translated in the annexes. Shorter quotes from the diaries of up to several sentences are translated immediately in the footnotes, as are German texts from other authors. The English translations do not endeavour to reflect spelling idiosyncrasies, rather these strive to provide the utmost clarity to the reader, with consistent writing of dates and place. This is again in contrast to the original German texts, which are transcribed exactly as Blank wrote them and in which she varied how she recorded the date and in what language she wrote the place name.

State of Research

20th Century Romania / Communist Romania

This work covers a range of themes and topics that have received little or no scholarly attention thus far. Due to my examination of an individual's private chronicle of a period of almost fifteen years, the material covered is, at times, as varied as one human's interests or concerns from another's. At the same time, overarching historic themes are present and the contextual background infuses this woman's specific experience. As a Holocaust survivor in early communist Romania, the psychological and physical specificities of her situation did not entirely overlap with Holocaust survivors outside of Romania nor with the majority of Romanian citizens within the country who had not, however, suffered abuse and persecution at the hands of the Romanian state. In order to narrate and comprehend Blanka's position, the political, social, and cultural environment in which she found herself must also be understood and narrated. However, historical studies on early communist Romania are still few; studies examining the Jewish community in postwar Romania are even fewer; and studies looking at survivor experience within Romania are all but non-existent. Thus, this work aims not only to shed light on the experience of one survivor, but through doing so to also contribute to wider swaths of historical analysis of these topics.

The paucity of historical studies related to early communist Romania is glaring. Until recently, scholarly focus devoted to the 20th century has tended towards the interwar period,²⁴ the

²⁴ For interwar period, see amongst other, Irina Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania Regionalism, Nation Building & Ethnic Struggle, 1918-1930* (Cornell University Press, 2000); Oliver Schmitt, *Capitän Codreanu. Aufstieg und Fall des rumänischen Faschistenführers* (Paul Zsolnay Verlag, 2016); Hildrun Glass, *Zerbrochene Nachbarschaft: Das deutsch-jüdische Verhältnis in Rumänien (1918-1938)* (Oldenbourg Verlag, 1996); Roland Clark, *Holy Legionary Youth: Fascist Activism in Interwar Romania* (Cornell University Press, 2015); Maria Bucur, *The Nation's Gratitude: World War I and Citizenship Rights in Interwar Romania* (Routledge, 2022).

World War II period,²⁵ or – for those studying the communist period – the Ceaușescu years.²⁶ In general, research focus tends towards the elites, the leadership, the men in charge, with studies devoted to microhistorical approaches, women, or the peripheries – both in social and geographic terms – still very much on the margins. A spate of newer publications focused on minority subjects represents a new direction, these include Gaelle Fisher’s *Resettlers and Survivors: Bukovina and the Politics of Belonging in West Germany and Israel, 1945–1989*, Andreea Kaltenbrunner’s *Für den Glauben, gegen den Staat. Der Altkalendarismus in Rumänien (1924–1936)*, James Koranyi’s *Migrating Memories: Romanian Germans in Modern Europe* and even a recent issue of the *Journal of Romanian Studies*, which took as its subject “Rural Voices.”²⁷

The Romanian Holocaust²⁸

The Romanian Holocaust or Transnistrian Holocaust refers to the killings and deaths due to starvation, exposure, and disease of Jews and Roma as engineered by the Romanian state under Ion Antonescu in World War II. I will give an overview of this history in the biographical essay of chapter two. Chapter six is dedicated almost exclusively to the wartime experience of Blanka and her family. The camps, ghettos, and pogroms of the Romanian Holocaust have, in general, received less scholarly attention than the genocide orchestrated by the Nazi regime.

Over twenty years ago, in her review of several new publications on the subject, historian Irina Livezeanu lamented the fact that the “Romanian Holocaust has mostly been the object of neglect and distortion,” reflecting on why “the topic has not fully emerged into the ‘limelight’ of

²⁵ I exhaustively review literature related to Romania and World War II and the Holocaust below.

²⁶ Demonstrative of the initial focus on the Ceaușescu period is Katherine Verdery, *National Ideology Under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceaușescu's Romania* (University of California Press, 1991) and Gail Kligman, *The Politics of Duplicity: Controlling Reproduction in Ceaușescu's Romania* (University of California Press, 1998). More recently anthropologist Verdery and sociologist Gail Kligman explored the early communist period in their work *Peasants under Siege: The Collectivization of Romanian Agriculture, 1949-1962* (Princeton University Press, 2011). An early exception to the initial lack of interest in early communist history is Dennis Deletant, *Communist Terror in Romania: Gheorghiu-Dej and the Police State, 1948-1965* (Hurst, 1999). Other recent publications are Florin Abraham, *Romania since the Second World War: A Political, Social and Economic History* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2016) and Stefano Bottoni, *Stalin's Legacy in Romania. The Hungarian Autonomous Region, 1952–1960* (Lanham, 2018). The outstanding biography of Ana Pauker by Robert Levy, *Ana Pauker: The Rise and Fall of a Jewish Communist* (University of California Press, 2001) was an early outlier to the overall state of underrepresentation of the first decade of Romanian communism in academic scholarship.

²⁷ Fisher, *Resettlers and Survivors*; Andreea Kaltenbrunner *Für den Glauben, gegen den Staat. Der Altkalendarismus in Rumänien (1924–1936)* (De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2021); James Koranyi, *Migrating Memories: Romanian Germans in Modern Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2022); Iuliana Cindrea-Nagy and Roland Clark, *Special Issue: Rural Voices Journal of Romanian Studies* 5, no. 2 (2023).

²⁸ Parts of this section appeared in my article, Julie Dawson, “Survival in the Ghetto of Moghilev-Podolsky: A Microhistorical Inquiry,” *S:I.M.O.N. – Shoah: Intervention. Methods. Documentation* 9, no. 1 (2022): 79-93.

scholarly attention.”²⁹ Though ultimately critical of the works reviewed, she nevertheless applauded the publications as an important step, noting, however, in her conclusion that the incorporation of memoirs or similar ego-documents and testimonies would “give orders and statistics a human perspective and help with the challenge of interpretation.”³⁰ Several years later, in 2012, historian Roland Clark performed a new survey of the field, taking stock of the progress made since Livezeanu’s implicit challenge to future scholars.³¹ Though new publications had brought the field forward and provided new insights, from a methodological perspective the area remained remarkably monotone, with few larger studies incorporating interdisciplinary methodologies, moving beyond examining larger narratives, or utilising, as Clark asserts, “the nuanced perspectives that cultural and gender histories” could offer.³²

Foundational research on the atrocities committed by the Romanians during the Second World War has been performed.³³ From a macro-perspective trained on the perpetrators, the guilt of Antonescu and his government has been discussed from multiple sides,³⁴ the German element has been examined,³⁵ and the ethnic element has been reviewed.³⁶ Dalia Ofer surveyed ghetto life in Transnistria relatively early on³⁷ (in the post-communist period) and compared the conditions

²⁹ Irina Livezeanu, “The Romanian Holocaust: Family Quarrels,” *East European Politics and Societies* 16, no. 3 (2002): 934–947.

³⁰ Livezeanu, “Family Quarrels,” 947. Shortly thereafter, Peter Weber also noted and regretted the lack of testimonies in the early works on Transnistria, arguing for their incorporation in future studies and introducing and elaborating on four testimonial sources. Peter Weber, “Eyewitness Testimonies as Source of a Historical Analysis of the Deportations to Transnistria (1941–1943),” *Études balkaniques* 4 (2004): 28–34.

³¹ Roland Clark, “New Models, New Questions: Historiographical Approaches to the Romanian Holocaust,” *European Review of History*, 19, no. 2 (2012): 303–320.

³² Clark, “New Models,” 315. In addition to providing an overview of the Romanian scholarly response to the Romanian Holocaust over time, Clark specifically reviewed four new works: Denis Deletant, *Hitler’s Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and His Regime, Romania 1940–44* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Jean Ancel, *The Economic Destruction of Romanian Jewry* (Yad Vashem, 2007); Armin Heinen, *Rumänien, der Holocaust und die Logik der Gewalt* (R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2007); and Vladimir Solonari, *Purifying the Nation: Population Exchange and Ethnic Cleansing in Nazi-Allied Romania* (John Hopkins University Press, 2009).

³³ Some key titles in this regard are Radu Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania: The Destruction of Jews and Gypsies under the Antonescu Regime, 1940–1944* (Ivan R Dee, 2000); Tuvia Friling, Radu Ioanid, and Mihail E. Ionescu, eds., *Final Report of the International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania* (Polirom, 2005); Mariana Hausleitner, *Rumänien und der Holocaust: zu den Massenverbrechen in Transnistrien 1941–1944* (Metropol-Verlag, 2001); Matatias Carp, ed., *Cartea neagră: Fapte și documente: suferințele evreilor din România în timpul dictaturii fasciste, 1940–1944*, 3 vols. (Socec, 1946–1948); and Jean Ancel, ed., *Transnistria*, 3 vols. (Atlas, 1998). On the pogroms in villages in Bukovina prior to the deportations, see Simon Geissbühler, *Blutiger Juli: Rumäniens Vernichtungskrieg und der vergessene Massenmord an den Juden 1941* (Ferdinand Schöningh, 2013).

³⁴ Deletant, *Hitler’s Forgotten Ally*, and Heinen, *Rumänien, der Holocaust und die Logik der Gewalt*.

³⁵ Hildrun Glass, *Deutschland und die Verfolgung der Juden in rumänischen Machtbereich, 1940–1944* (Oldenbourg Verlag, 2014).

³⁶ Vladimir Solonari, *A Satellite Empire: Romanian Rule in Southwestern Ukraine, 1941–1944* (Cornell University Press, 2019).

³⁷ Dalia Ofer, “Life in the Ghettos of Transnistria,” *Yad Vashem Studies* 25 (1996): 229–274.

to ghettos under German control.³⁸ Scholars have focused their lenses on individual ghettos, including Golta,³⁹ Zhmerinka,⁴⁰ Shargorod,⁴¹ Djurin,⁴² and Murafa,⁴³ and looked closely at ghetto social structures.⁴⁴

Men inhabiting the fraught role of leader in the ghetto context have been scrutinised, both in the studies cited above as well as in articles specifically addressing the dilemmas confronting individual men and councils.⁴⁵ Reflective, interdisciplinary studies have appeared, some

³⁸ Dalia Ofer, *The Ghettos in Transnistria and Ghettos under German Occupation in Eastern Europe: A Comparative Approach*, in *Im Ghetto 1939–1945: Neue Forschungen zu Alltag und Umfeld*, eds. Christoph Dieckmann and Babette Quinkert (Wallstein Verlag, 2009), 30–53.

³⁹ Dennis Deletant, “Ghetto Experience in Golta, Transnistria, 1942–1944,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 1–26. Deletant writes that “the study of ghetto life and conditions under Romanian rule in Transnistria [...] has cast a spotlight on major ghettos such as Moghilev, Bershad, and Shargorod,” citing, however, as examples three works written by those imprisoned in the respective ghetto, two of whom held leadership positions at the time. I argue that these works, though immeasurably valuable, cannot be described as academic “studies” as such, but are rather primary sources at our disposal. In fact, there are no academic studies of length on the Moghilev ghetto. On the Bershad ghetto, see Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, *Ghosts of Home: The Afterlife of Czernowitz in Jewish Memory* (University of California Press, 2010), 274–286. They also write about the Vapniarka ghetto: see the chapter “There Was Never a Camp Here!” in Hirsch and Spitzer, *Ghosts of Home*, 197–231.

⁴⁰ Vadim Altskan, “On the Other Side of the River: Dr. Adolph Herschmann and the Zhmerinka Ghetto, 1941–1944,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 26, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 2–28.

⁴¹ Iemima D. Ploscariu, “Institutions for Survival: The Shargorod Ghetto during the Holocaust in Romanian Transnistria,” *Nationalities Papers* 47, no. 1 (2019): 121–135.

⁴² Sarah Rosen, “The Djurin Ghetto in Transnistria through the Lens of Kunstadt’s Diary,” in *Romania and the Holocaust: Events–Context–Aftermath*, ed. Simon Geissbühler (ibidem Verlag, 2016), 131–150.

⁴³ Sarah Rosen, “Surviving in the Murafa Ghetto: A Case Study of One Ghetto in Transnistria,” *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History* 16, no. 1–2 (2010): 157–176.

⁴⁴ Ana Barbulescu, “The Underlife of Transnistria’s Ghettos: Recategorizing and Reframing Social Interaction,” *The Journal of Holocaust Research* 35, no. 3 (2021): 196–213, and Ana Barbulescu, “Official Order and Ritual Disobedience in Transnistria’s Ghettos,” *Sfera Politicii* 6, no. 182 (2014): 114–126.

⁴⁵ In the Zhmerinka ghetto, Dr. Adolph Herschmann, held the position of leader; he was later tried, convicted, and executed by the Soviet courts for “collaborating with the enemy.” See Altskan, *Zhmerinka Ghetto*. In Shargorod, this was Meir Teich; for his own account, see Meir Teich, “The Jewish Self-Administration in Ghetto Shargorod (Transnistria),” *Yad Vashem Studies, Jerusalem* (1958), 219–254. For a scholarly review, see Ploscariu, *Institutions for Survival*. The man who assumed the leadership in Moghilev for a part of the time was Siegfried Jagendorf; like Teich, he later wrote an account of the period from his perspective: Siegfried Jagendorf, *Jagendorf’s Foundry: A Memoir of the Romanian Holocaust 1941–1944*, ed. Aron Hirt-Manheimer (Harper Collins, 1991). In his article, Altskan posited that, while initial studies on Transnistria addressed the broader picture, less attention was paid to individual ghettos or the roles of Jewish councils. My position takes this a step further, asserting that, at the current moment, very little attention has been paid to individual victims, in particular the most impoverished, those who perished, and women. While I understand that the historiographical process must first reckon with the large picture and – generally – the men who moved the gears, with interest thereafter trickling down to men who held leadership positions in smaller units, I believe we have long arrived at the moment in which scholars can and should be examining the lives of those on the lower rungs of the ghetto. This focus, however, requires diverse and complex methodological approaches, in light of the frequent absence of significant archival material about the lowest classes. That fact should not be a barrier but a challenge. See, for example, Nupur Chaudhuri, Sherry J. Katz, and Mary Elizabeth Perry, *Contesting Archives: Finding Women in the Sources* (University of Illinois Press, 2010). For more on ghetto leadership, see Gali Mir-Tibon, “‘Am I My Brother’s Keeper?’: Jewish Committees in the Ghetto of the Mogilev District and the Romanian Authorities in Transnistria, 1941–1944,” in *The Ghetto in Global History: 1500 to the Present*, eds. Wendy Z. Goldman and Joe William Trotter (Routledge, 2017), 127–146. On the postwar Soviet trials of several persons for “collaboration,” see Wolfgang Schneider, “From the Ghetto to the Gulag, from the Ghetto to Israel: Soviet

incorporating family histories,⁴⁶ others analysing these very works.⁴⁷ Questions around materiality have been broached⁴⁸ and issues related to memory are woven throughout many of the works cited that are related to survivor testimonies.⁴⁹ Important monographs by Diana Dumitru and Gaëlle Fisher address respectively the influence of prewar politics on wartime interethnic relations and the legacy of wartime events on the Bukovina diaspora.⁵⁰

The above survey makes clear the significant advances in scholarship in the field of World War II Transnistria and the Romanian Holocaust that have been made in the past decade. Nevertheless, studies employing approaches being developed by a new generation of historians are still rare. For example, noticeably lacking from this overview are works incorporating the “spatial turn,” which seems to have made almost no imprint at all, despite the fact that the Transnistrian Holocaust in particular, with its hundreds of ghettos and camps and fluid boundaries between captivity and (relative) freedom (as attested to in the testimonies of survivors), represents

Collaboration Trials against the Shargorod Ghetto’s Jewish Council,” *Journal of Modern Jewish History* 17, no. 1 (2019): 83–97, and Diana Dumitru, “The Gordian Knot of Justice: Prosecuting Jewish Holocaust Survivors in Stalinist Courts for ‘Collaboration’ with the Enemy,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 22, no. 4 (2021): 729–756. On Jewish leadership during the war, see also Iemima Ploscariu, “Speaking out in Times of Crisis: Differentiability in Romanian Jewish Leadership, 1938–1944,” *East European Jewish Affairs* 49, no. 3 (2019): 200–219.

⁴⁶ For works incorporating personal testimonies with historical analysis, see especially Hirsch and Spitzer, *Ghosts of Home*. Two slender volumes collecting interviews interspersed with historical narrative are Gaby Coldewey et al., eds., “*Czernowitz is gewesen an alte, jidische Shtot...*”: *Jüdische Überlebende berichten* (Heinrich-Böll Stiftung, 1999), and Gaby Coldewey et al., eds., *Zwischen Pruth und Jordan: Lebenserinnerungen Czernowitzer Juden* (Böhlau, 2003). There are numerous memoirs, such as: Mirjam Korber, *Deportiert: Jüdische Überlebensschicksale aus Rumänien 1941–1944: Ein Tagebuch* (Hartung-Gorre, 1993); Ruth Glasberg Gold, *Ruth’s Journey: A Survivor’s Memoir* (University Press of Florida, 1997); Klara Schächter, *Woss ich hob durchgelebt/Was ich durchgemacht habe: Brief einer Judin aus der Bukowina verfasst in Transnistrien 1943* (Hartung-Gorre, 1996); Emil Wenkert, *Czernowitzer Schicksale: Vom Ghetto nach Transnistrien deportiert: Jüdische Schicksale 1941–1944*, ed. Erhard Roy Wiehn (Hartung Gorre, 2001); Yosef Govrin, *In the Shadow of Destruction: Recollections of Transnistria and Illegal Immigration to Eretz Israel 1941–1947* (Vallentine Mitchell, 2007); Arnold Daghani, “*Lasst mich leben!*”: *Stationen im Leben des Künstlers Arnold Daghani*, ed. Felix Rieper and Mollie Brandl Bowen (zuKlumpen, 2002).

⁴⁷ Articles looking, in turn, at some of the many memoirs, testimonies, and memoir-like pieces, include: Stefan Ionescu, “The Boom of Testimonies after Communism: The Voices of Jewish Holocaust Survivors in Romania (1989–2005),” *Studia Hebraica* 5 (2005): 357–380; Dana Radler, “Bonded to Memory: *Terracotta Ovens of My Childhood* by Elite Olshtain,” *British and American Studies* 24 (2018): 179–188; Carol Simon Elias, “The Search for Politanky: A Hidden Holocaust Refuge in Transnistria,” *European Judaism* 52, no. 1 (2019): 119–134; Sonja Knopp, “Narrative Fissures, Historical Context: When Traumatic Memory is Compromised,” *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* 51, no. 2 (2014): 229–238.

⁴⁸ Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, “Testimonial Objects: Memory, Gender and Transmission,” *Thamyris/Intersecting* no. 13 (2006): 137–164, and Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, “Small Acts of Repair: The Unclaimed Legacy of the Romanian Holocaust,” *Journal of Literature and Trauma Studies* 4, nos. 1–2 (Spring/Fall 2015): 13–42.

⁴⁹ This is especially true for all of the works by Hirsch and Spitzer. See also Louise O. Vasvari, “En-gendering Memory through Holocaust Alimentary Life Writing,” *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 17, no. 3 (2015).

⁵⁰ Diana Dumitru, *The State, Antisemitism, and Collaboration in the Holocaust: The Borderlands of Romania and the Soviet Union* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), and Fisher, *Resettlers and Survivors*.

a topic ripe for detailed spatial analysis.⁵¹ The ghetto in Moghilev-Podolsky, where Blanka and her mother were held, was the largest of the Transnistrian ghettos, holding tens of thousands. Yet, a simple map of the streets exists only on-site, at the local museum and has never been used by scholars, to my knowledge – the most fundamental information on the physicality of the site is missing.⁵² This may be due partially to difficulties in accessing archives, but it is still startling. Indeed, besides an article that I wrote in the course of research for the present work, there is no single work – article, book, or otherwise – devoted to the ghetto of Moghilev-Podolsky.⁵³ In addition, and even more glaringly, studies approaching the Romanian Holocaust with a gender lens are few.⁵⁴ The lens has generally remained trained on the (male) perpetrators, for example in the case of two studies published in *Microhistories of the Holocaust*, both of which address perpetrators and explicitly “genocidal strategy and killing methods.”⁵⁵

Survivors

⁵¹ I will further address the “spatial turn” below under methodology. On the spatial turn in Holocaust studies, see especially Tim Cole and Anne Kelly Knowles, “Thinking Spatially about the Holocaust,” *European Holocaust Studies*, eds. Natalia Aleksion and Hana Kubátová, Vol. 3, *Places, Spaces and Voids in the Holocaust* (Wallstein, 2021), 291–296. See also Anne Kelly Knowles, Tim Cole, and Alberto Giordano, eds., *Geographies of the Holocaust* (Indiana University Press, 2014) and Janine Fubel, Alexandra Klei, and Annika Wienert, eds., *Space in Holocaust Research: A Transdisciplinary Approach to Spatial Thinking* (De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2024).

⁵² I include a photograph of this map later in the present work. The shifting street names over the course of the 20th century also complicate working with contemporary and historical maps; this is research best conducted on-site which was unfortunately not possible due to the ongoing Ukrainian-Russian war.

⁵³ The present work is also not devoted to a comprehensive analysis of the Moghilev-Podolsky ghetto, rather I describe the contours of ghetto life and reflect on what we can know, presume, and speculate regarding the experience of Blanka and her mother based on the material available to us. My article is Dawson, “Survival in the Ghetto of Moghilev-Podolsky.” Of course, Moghilev as such appears in all works related to Transnistria and has entries in the standard works on ghettos and camps of World War II, but this is different than a full-length scholarly article or book devoted to the subject.

⁵⁴ One article from 2006 addresses women’s testimonies specifically: Ronit Lentin, “Femina sacra: Gendered Memory and Political Violence,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 29, no. 5 (2006): 463–473. Recently historian Lilia Tomchuk has taken gender roles into account in two publications, Lilia Tomchuk, “Daily Life of Ukrainian Jewish Children in the Zhmerinka Ghetto during the Holocaust in Transnistria,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 37, no. 1 (2023): 90–105 and Lilia Tomchuk, “‘And I Gave Them Skirts like the Ones We Used to Wear’: Roma Women’s Recollections of Helping Jews during the Holocaust in Transnistria” in *New Microhistorical Approaches to an Integrated History of the Holocaust*, ed. Frédéric Bonnesoeur, Hannah Wilson and Christin Zühlke (De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2023), 181–198.

⁵⁵ Vladimir Solonari, “On the Persistence of Moral Judgement: Local Perpetrators in Transnistria as Seen by Survivors and Their Christian Neighbors,” in *Microhistories of the Holocaust*, ed. Claire Zalc and Tal Bruttman (Berghahn Books, 2017) and Alexandru Muraru, “The Beginning–First Massacres against the Jews in the Romanian Holocaust: Level of Decision, Genocidal Strategy, and Killings Methods regarding Dorohoi and Galați Pogroms, June–July 1940 in *Microhistories of the Holocaust*, *ibid.*

In the past years and decades significant headway has been made by scholars on the postwar lives and experience of survivors.⁵⁶ In 2010 the first issue of the journal *Quest, Issues in Contemporary Jewish History* was devoted to “Jews in Europe after the Shoah”⁵⁷; the *Jewish History Quarterly* of Warsaw put out a special issue in 2013 focusing on the immediate postwar years with individual articles describing cases in Poland, Austria, France, Ukraine, Switzerland, Germany, amongst others.⁵⁸ A perspective from Romania is missing from these and many similar publications.⁵⁹ Likewise, within Romanian studies and Jewish-Romanian studies, with the exception of a handful of instances, investigations into the Jewish experience in postwar Romania are by and large absent from historical analyses of this period. Those books that do exist, which include Liviu Rotman’s *Evreii din România în perioada comunistă*⁶⁰, Radu Ioanid’s *The Ransom of the Jews*, the memoirs of rabbis Alexander Safran and Moses Rosen, Robert Levy’s masterful biography of Ana Pauker, and publications by Jean Ancel, are important contributions to a topic dreadfully underrepresented.⁶¹ Nevertheless, they present overviews and narratives from the perspective of

⁵⁶ Reflective of the turn in research attention was the establishment in 2003 of the reoccurring international multidisciplinary conference in London, “Beyond Camps and Forced Labour: Current International Research on Survivors of Nazi Persecution.”

⁵⁷ Laura Brazzo and Guri Schwarz, eds. “Jews in Europe after the Shoah: Studies and Research Perspectives.” *Quest: Issues in Contemporary Jewish History*, no. 1 (2010).

⁵⁸ Katrin Steffen, Katrin Stoll, Helena Datner, eds. “To Stay or Go? Jews in Europe in the Immediate Aftermath of the Holocaust,” *Kwartalnik Historii Żydów* 246, no. 2 (2013). This special issue was itself a follow-up to a two-part conference in 2011 and 2012. Steffen et al, “To Stay or Go?,” 186. For an examination of survivors returning to Vienna specifically see Elizabeth Anthony, *The Compromise of Return: Viennese Jews after the Holocaust* (Wayne State University Press, 2021).

⁵⁹ For example, Dalia Ofer, Francoise S. Ouzan, Judy Tydor Baumel-Schwartz, *Holocaust Survivors. Resettlement, Memories, Identities* (Berghahn Books, 2012); Hagit Lavsky, *New Beginnings. Holocaust Survivors in Bergen-Belsen and the British Zone in Germany, 1945-1950* (Wayne State University Press, 2002); Avinoam Patt, *Finding Home and Homeland: Jewish Youth and Zionism in the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (Wayne State Univ. Press, 2009); Avinoam Patt and Michael Berkovitz, eds., “We are here”: *New Approaches to Jewish Displaced Persons in Postwar Germany* (Wayne State Univ. Press, 2010). Key books on postwar Jewish history necessarily involving survivors include Laura Jockusch and Gabriel N. Finder, eds., *Jewish Honor Courts: Revenge, Retribution, and Reconciliation in Europe and Israel after the Holocaust* (Wayne State University Press, 2015); Laura Jockusch, *Collect and Record! Jewish Holocaust Documentation in Early Postwar Europe* (Oxford University Press, 2012); Atina Grossmann, *Jews, Germans, and Allies: Close Encounters in Occupied Germany* (Princeton University Press, 2007).

⁶⁰ English: *Jews from Romania during the Communist Period*.

⁶¹ Liviu Rotman, *Evreii din România în perioada comunistă 1944-1965* (Polirom, 2004); Radu Ioanid, *The Ransom of the Jews: The Story of the Extraordinary Secret Bargain between Romania and Israel* (Ivan R. Dee, 2005); Alexandre Safran, *Resisting the Storm: Romania, 1940-1947. Memoirs* (Yad Vashem, 1987); Moses Rosen and Joseph Finklestone, *Dangers, Tests and Miracles: The Remarkable Life Story of Chief Rabbi Rosen of Romania* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1990); Levy, *Ana Pauker*; Jean Ancel, “She’erit Hapletah in Romania during the Transition Period to a Communist Regime August 1944-December 1947” in *She’erit Hapletah, 1944-1948. Rehabilitation and Political Struggle*, ed. Yisrael Gutman and Avital Saf (Yad Vashem, 1990), 143-167 and Jean Ancel, “‘The New Jewish Invasion’ – The Return of Survivors from Transnistria” in *The Jews are Coming Back: The Return of the Jews to their Countries of Origin after WW II* (Berghahn Books and Yad Vashem, 2005), 231-256. See also Hildrun Glass, *Minderheit zwischen zwei Diktaturen: Zur Geschichte der Juden in Rumänien 1944-1949* (Oldenbourg Verlag, 2002).

those pulling the strings. There are no microhistorical studies, no works focusing on women (with the exception of the—exceptional—Ana Pauker), nor any looking at daily life, rituals, or exploring identity negotiations.⁶² Moreover, few to none of those profiled in the works cited above were survivors of the ghettos or death camps. A fine-grained exploration of the emotional and physical experience of the survivor in postwar Romania is utterly absent.

Indeed, the dominant narrative of postwar Jewry is one of mass emigration or rebuilding, but this belies what was the reality for most.⁶³ Notwithstanding the isolated tales of those who later published memoirs, the vast majority of survivors remained within the country for years and even decades, with neither the physical, financial, nor legal means to depart.⁶⁴ Their story has not been told.

Diaries and Memoirs

The study of diaries as such is a field in its own right. This work, though drawing on methodologies and works of diary studies, is not necessarily positioned within the field: where diary scholars often draw on a wide range of diary sources to examine and scrutinise certain subjects, this work draws on a single diary to probe a life—and others connected to it—over a historical period.⁶⁵ Here,

⁶² One exception is Gaëlle Fisher's article, focusing on two cases studies covering a few years in the postwar period; she draws for the one portrait on family correspondence and for the uses excerpts from Blanka's diaries, see Gaëlle Fisher, "Between Liberation and Emigration: Jews from Bukovina in Romania after the Second World War," *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 62 (2017): 115-132.

⁶³ Scholarly works on postwar Jewish life are virtually non-existent, though this is slowly changing. There are isolated articles describing the initial years after the war and emigration narratives, see: Raphael Vago "The Unexpected Cosmopolitans – Romania's Jewry Facing the Communist System," *European Review of History* 17, no. 3 (2010): 491-504; Valentin Săndulescu, "Like coals under ashes, ready to scorch the earth once more: Notes Regarding Anti-Jewish Attitudes in Romania (1944–1947)," *European Review of History* 26, no. 6 (2019): 977-995; and Fisher, "Between Liberation and Emigration." Besides emigration, the narrative of successful rebuilding of life can be found within many, if not most, memoirs (Korber, Sorrell, Glasberg-Gold). Stefan Ionescu has addressed postwar restitution in many articles and in his recent book, Stefan Cristian Ionescu, *Justice and Restitution in Post-Nazi Romania: Rebuilding Jewish Lives and Communities, 1944-1950* (Cambridge University Press, 2024) and Ion Popa discusses dissidence in Ion Popa, "Jewish Dissidence in Communist Romania: Definition, Chronology, and Particularities," *Jewish Culture and History* (2025): 1–16. Many of these contributions, while filling crucial gaps, retain as their main protagonists men and those "in charge."

⁶⁴ For example, writers Aaron Appelfeld, Edgar Hilsenrath, and Paul Celan had all departed by 1947. Another survivor who later wrote a memoir, Ruth Glasberg Gold, left in 1946; she was an orphan and thus unburdened by familial responsibilities, as were the male authors above. Glasberg Gold, *Ruth's Journey*.

⁶⁵ Scholars who survey a wide range of diaries to describe discrete subjects include Thomas Mallon, whose standard work divides diarists into chroniclers, travellers, pilgrims, creators, apologists, confessors, and prisoners. See Thomas Mallon, *A Book of One's Own: People and Their Diaries* (Ticknor and Fields, 1984, 3rd Edition Hungry Mind Press, 1995); Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Harvard University Press, 2006); Li Gerhalter, *Tagebücher als Quellen: Forschungsfelder und Sammlungen seit 1800* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2021); and Alexandra Garbarini, *Numbered Days: Diaries and the Holocaust* (Yale Univ. Press, 2006). Of the many scholarly publications on the practice of diary writing I will cite here just a few: Philippe Lejeune, *On Diary*, ed. Jeremy D.

I have followed the example of historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich who examined and contextualised the diaries of an 18th century New England midwife, Martha Ballard, and in doing so created a richly detailed study of New England social history.⁶⁶ Ulrich used the diaries to write about such diverse topics as the high number of children born out of wedlock, community feuds and fights, violent incidents including rape and murder, race relations, religious belief, and herbal remedies.

Studies such as this, taking memoirs, diaries or similar narrative material as starting points to explore broader historical chapters, especially using women's voices, are only beginning to appear in the field of Romanian studies.⁶⁷ Publications of Jewish diaries have been restricted in general to the wartime period and do not venture into the postwar era, they have moreover rarely received an exhaustive analysis or historical contextualisation, though they can be invaluable to researchers as primary sources.⁶⁸ Memoirs addressing the Holocaust but written after the fact are

Popkin and Julie Rak, trans. Kathy Durnin (University of Hawaii Press, 2009), Batsheva Ben-Amos and Dan Ben-Amos, *The Diary: The Epic of Everyday Life* 2nd ed. (Indiana University Press, 2020). For a perspective focused exclusively on women Suzanne L. Bunkers, and Cynthia Anne Huff, *Inscribing the Daily: Critical Essays on Women's Diaries* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1996). There are also academic journals devoted exclusively to diary studies, I will not cite all these sources; other works that I have worked with include Rachael Langford, *Marginal Voices, Marginal Forms: Diaries in European Literature and History*, Internationale Forschungen zur Allgemeinen und Vergleichenden Literaturwissenschaft / 34. Rodopi, 1999 and Amy Simon, *Emotions in Yiddish Ghetto Diaries: Encountering Persecutors and Questioning Humanity* (Routledge, 2023) and Sidonie Smith, ed., *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader* (Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1998). The most well-known diary, arguably in the world, that of Anne Frank, has countless works dedicated to it and the analysis of Frank's life and legacy, these are far too numerous to cite. On this phenomenon see Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Jeffrey Shandler, *Anne Frank Unbound: Media, Imagination, Memory* (Indiana University Press, 2012). See also Anne Frank, *The Diary of Anne Frank: The Critical Edition*, ed. David Barnouw and Gerrold van der Stroom, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans and B.M. Mooyart-Doubleday (Viking, 1989).

⁶⁶ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary: 1785 – 1812* (Vintage Books, 1991).

⁶⁷ Andrada Fătu-Tutoveanu, *Personal Narratives of Romanian Women During the Cold War (1945-1989): Varieties of the Autobiographical Genre* (Edwin Mellon Press, 2015) is the first English-language publication to my knowledge to deal explicitly with the topic. In Romanian see Radu Pavel Gheo and Dan Lungu, eds., *Tovarăşe de Drum. Experienţa feminină în comunism* (Editura Polirom, 2008). I argue that Lebzelter's diaries do not fall into the same category as diaries by non-Jewish Romanian women from the same period (Annie Bentoiu, Alice Voinescu) due to their extremely divergent points of departure. For other contributions to communist memory see Marija Todorova et al *Remembering Communism: Private and Public Recollections of Lived Experience in Southeast Europe*. Leipzig Studies on the History and Culture of East-Central Europe (Central European University Press, 2014). The lack of studies on women and gender topics is not limited to Romania but rather an East European phenomenon and the ensuing challenges are acknowledged by others working on similar research projects, see Malgorzata Fidelis, "Recovering Women's Voices in Communist Poland" in *Contesting Archives: Finding Women in the Sources*, eds. Nupur Chaudhuri, Sherry J. Katz, Mary Elizabeth Perry (University of Illinois Press, 2010), on the lack of reliable secondary sources see especially p. 108.

⁶⁸ The most well-known Jewish-Romanian wartime diaries are those of writer Mihail Sebastian, *Jurnal, 1935-1944* (Humanitas, 1996) and Emil Dorian, *The Quality of a Witness: A Romanian Diary, 1937-1944* (Jewish Publication Society, 1982). Beyond the fundamental gender difference, these men both wrote in Bucharest from a position of relative privilege (they were not deported but suffered from other antisemitic policies). Sebastian's journal in particular has undergone repeated academic scrutiny primarily within Romania, for example Catinca Oncescu, "The Man of Paradoxes: Mihail Sebastian," *Journal of Romanian Literary Studies*, no. 37 (2024): 541–48 and most recently

more common. Similar to other ego-documents, these are useful as primary sources (with the caveat of selection and editing of memories that memoirs bring with them).⁶⁹ Like most publications treating World War II they end in 1945 or shortly thereafter and generally try to pen a positive ending of sorts: release, reunion, renewal. In the introduction to *Deportiert* Mirjam Korber sums up her postwar life in one sentence “Ich habe studiert, bin Kinderärztin geworden, habe geheiratet und habe Kinder.”⁷⁰

From those in Romania for whom there was neither reunion nor emigration away from the site of persecution there are fewer sources.⁷¹ In two memoirs of the postwar period (as well as other subjects) the narrators were children at the time. Aside from the essential difference between memoirs and diaries, what these writers perceived and were aware of as children differs from an adult’s experience.⁷² Moreover as an unpublished source Blanka’s diaries fall into a separate category and as such call for an analysis of a different kind. Published sources have been edited, redacted or written many years after the events. They were reworked and published from a

Emanuel-Marius Grec, *“I am Ashamed to be Sad”: Mihail Sebastian’s Journal as Lived History* (Vasile Goldiş University Press Arad, 2024). There are several ego documents penned by survivors of Transnistria during their time there including Schächter, *Woss ich hob durchgelebt/Was ich durchgemacht habe*; Korber, *Deportiert*; and Daghani, *“Lasst mich leben!”* (includes artwork).

⁶⁹ Memoirs of the Transnistrian Holocaust were reviewed in a footnote above. Autobiographical works sometimes blending fiction/non-fiction are more commonly by men, such as the established authors Aharon Appelfeld, *The Story of a Life: A Memoir*, trans. Aloma Halter (Schocken Books, 2004) and Edgar Hilsenrath, *Die Abenteuer des Ruben Jablonski: ein autobiographischer Roman* (Piper, 1997). Both men succeeded in leaving Romania immediately after the war. A multifaceted analysis of several autobiographical works related exclusively to the Transnistrian experience is Francisca Solomon, “Diesseits ins Jenseits des Dnisters: (Auto)biografische und narrative Dimensionen jüdischer Schicksale” in *Storylines and Blackboxes: Autobiographie und Zeugenschaft in der Nachgeschichte von Nationalsozialismus und Zweitem Weltkrieg*, ed. Johanna Gehmacher and Klara Löffler, Beiträge des VWI zur Holocaustforschung, Vol. 4 (2017): 129-147. See also Stefan Ionescu, “In the Shadow of Death: The Memory of the Romanian Holocaust Survivors,” *Studia Hebraica*, 4 (2004): 362-90. Norman Manea has also written on topics around the Transnistrian Holocaust, born in 1936, he was a child in World War II. Norman Manea, *The Hooligan’s Return: A Memoir*, trans. Angela Jianu (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003).

⁷⁰ Korber, *Deportiert*, 11. English: “I studied, became a pediatrician, married, and have children.” Korber does, however, follow this sentence with remarks on the grief and loss that followed her throughout her life. Nevertheless, she was able to study and have a family.

⁷¹ In her study of life in Jewish DP camps in Germany Kierra Mikaila Crago-Schneider notes explicitly the lack of diaries or personal letters from the time within the DP camps and comments that survivors tended to write either about pre-war life, war-time fate, and the period of reestablishment after the DP camp. The period in the DP camp – lasting for some more than a decade – was often entirely skipped over, see Crago-Schneider’s unpublished dissertation Kierra Mikaila Crago-Schneider, “Jewish ‘Shtetls’ in Postwar Germany: An Analysis of Interactions Among Jewish Displaced Persons, Germans, and Americans Between 1945 and 1957 in Bavaria.” PhD diss., University of California, 2013, especially p. 14.

⁷² Anca Vlasopolos, *No Return Address: A Memoir of Displacement* (Columbia University Press, 2000); Haya Leah Molnar, *Under a Red Sky: Memoir of a Childhood in Communist Romania* (Frances Foster Books, 2010). Miriam Korber discusses her life in Romania after the war here: <https://www.centropa.org/biography/miriam-bercovici>. Retrieved 6. Dec. 2024.

viewpoint of liberation, when the so-called “happy ending” of the story was known. Many female survivors who returned from Transnistria were able to reunite with surviving extended family members or sweethearts. All memoirs or ego-documents I consulted recorded, furthermore, the existence of male support in their day-to-day life in the form of husband, father, brother, or grandfather; these men imparted crucial protection and financial support, even if meagre, in a relentlessly patriarchal society.⁷³ A comprehensive study of diaries such as Blanka’s, kept for years and recording daily life in the wake of private devastation in an environment of isolation and marginalisation, does not, to my knowledge, exist.⁷⁴

Methodology

In the introduction to their seminal work *Inscribing the Daily: Critical Essays on Women’s Diaries* scholars Suzanne Bunkers and Cynthia Huff emphasize the myriad uses to researchers of the diary as a form:

Its status as a research tool for historians, a therapeutic instrument for psychologists, a repository of information about social structures and relationships for sociologists, and a form of literature and composition for rhetoricians and literary scholars makes the diary a logical choice for interdisciplinary study.⁷⁵

⁷³ I will not list all examples here, but for example Mirjam Korber, Dora Sorrell, and Chana Koffler reunited (or were never separated from) family members or sweethearts after the war. Korber, *Deportiert*; Dora Sorrell, *Tell the Children. Letters to Miriam* (Sighet Publishing, 1998); Chana Koffler, “Leaving Home,” (1949), trans. Julie Dawson, private archive of Howard Wiesenfeld.

⁷⁴ I have spoken with other scholars in my search for studies of diaries (or diaries themselves) kept by Jewish survivors in communist countries, but as yet found nothing that approaches Blanka’s writings. Most frequently there may be short diaries kept in the immediate years after the war (late 1940s), for example a presentation by Sharon Kangisser Cohen described the postwar diaries kept by a child survivor in Prague in 1945, but he soon relocated to Palestine. His journal is intriguing but the setting–Palestine–cannot be compared with Romania (territory of the perpetrators). Sharon Kangisser Cohen, “‘The Cold Shower of a New Life’: Child Survivor Yehuda Bacon and His Early Postwar Writing,” presentation at *Beyond Camps and Forced Labour: Current International Research on Survivors of Nazi Persecution Seventh International Multidisciplinary Conference*; London, 4.-6. January 2023. There are, of course, many studies on the effects of trauma, particularly on Holocaust survivors. I argue, however, that Blanka’s diaries, which were kept in a vacuum of sorts, represent a new kind of source, quite different, from (for example) recently gathered oral history testimonies. Specific to trauma and memory in Transnistria see Sonja Knopp, “Autobiografie, Trauma und Geschichte: Lebensgeschichtliches Erinnern und Gewalt in klinischen Videointerviews mit Überlebenden der Shoah in Rumänien und Transnistrian,” *Storylines and Blackboxes*, pp. 23-46. I will discuss trauma in more detail later in this work.

⁷⁵ Suzanne L. Bunkers and Cynthia A. Huff, “Issues in Studying Women’s Diaries: A Theoretical and Critical Introduction,” in *Inscribing the Daily*, 1.

Accordingly, the knowledge which can be gleaned from a careful analysis of Blanka's diaries is formidable, but as a complex and intricate source, multiple perspectives and tools are demanded.

In his essay "The Diary between Literature and History: A Historian's Critical Response," historian Jochen Hellbeck argues that "the diary brings the researcher closer to the most interesting though ultimately elusive threshold separating text and life, literature and history."⁷⁶ Working from this concept of diaries at the confluence of literature and history, I employ interdisciplinary methods, grounded in biography and microhistorical approaches, to analyse and contextualise Blanka's writings and life. I also draw on theories from cultural anthropology and comparative literature, in line with Helen M. Buss's arguments for employing Clifford Geertz's "thick description" and literary theorists' "close reading" techniques to "read the trace of a human person constructing her identity in her historical, social, cultural, and gendered place."⁷⁷ For the contextualisation of Blanka's wartime experience, I have also worked with oral histories.⁷⁸

Microhistory and Biography

Perhaps foremost, this work embraces a microhistorical approach. In their introduction to *Microhistories of the Holocaust*, Claire Zalc and Tal Bruttman describe microhistorical probes as "call[ing] into question the certainties of earlier historiographies, [...] by granting renewed importance to individual practices and experiences."⁷⁹ They posit that such an approach awards "increased attention to the categories of actors, the strategies of individuals and small groups, as well as to ways of writing history."⁸⁰ By employing a fine-grained lens on Blanka's day-to-day actions within a world of strictures, her agency comes into focus, as theorists of microhistory assert "it is on the micro-level that the agency of the ordinary people can be preserved."⁸¹

⁷⁶ Jochen Hellbeck, "The Diary between Literature and History: A Historian's Critical Response," *The Russian Review* 63, no. 4 (2004): 628-629.

⁷⁷ Helen M. Buss, "A Feminist Revision of New Historicism to give Fuller Readings of Women's Private Writings" in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 222. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (Basic Books, 1973), especially Chapter one "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture." See also Lauren Berlant, "On the Case," *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 4 (2007): 663-72, which has influenced my approaches to the project.

⁷⁸ For an overview of the methodological considerations, uses of, and shifting scholarly attitudes towards oral histories, see Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, *The Oral History Reader* (Third edition, Routledge, 2016).

⁷⁹ Claire Zalc and Tal Bruttman, "Toward a Microhistory" in *Microhistories of the Holocaust*, ed. Claire Zalc and Tal Bruttman (Berghahn Books, 2017), 2.

⁸⁰ Zalc and Bruttman, "Toward a Microhistory," 2.

⁸¹ B. S. Gregory, "Is Small Beautiful? Microhistory and the History of Everyday Life," *History and Theory* 38 (1999): 100-110, paraphrased by István Szijártó, "Introduction: Against Simple Truths," in *What is Microhistory: Theory and Practice*, by Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and István M. Szijártó (Routledge, 2013), 5. For an overview of sorts on the

In certain aspects this work recalls Alain Corbin's seminal work *The Life of an Unknown: The Rediscovered World of a Clog Maker in Nineteenth-Century France*, in which the author employed microhistorical approaches to uncover the life and world of a simple man long forgotten.⁸² In that study Corbin set out to write an alternative social history by reconstructing the experience of an illiterate individual randomly chosen from a civil records book. In the process he also wrote about others "swallowed up by history, erased by the passage of time."⁸³ His goal was to do the opposite of most social studies at that time, which employed sources from a "very small sample, of people whose fates were exceptional."⁸⁴ Instead Corbin sought to illuminate the unexceptional, to "repair the neglect of historians for all those things that are irrevocably relegated to oblivion."⁸⁵

The parallels to my project exist in my attempt to recreate and understand the world of a seemingly random woman, not one of the "elite," no one about whom anyone has ever heard.⁸⁶ The cleft in similarity lies, of course, in my access to the significant ego-documents she left behind, which facilitate a more biographical nature to the project, not to mention a confrontation with the interior life of an individual. Corbin sought to reconstruct and understand the clogmaker's *world*, but as he acknowledged, what comprised his life, his thoughts, and a thousand daily occurrences, could never be recovered. Because Blanka wrote and left her writings to be found, I can seek to

background and development of the microhistorical approach, see Carlo Ginzburg, "Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I Know about It," in *Theoretical Discussions of Biography*, ed. Hans Renders and Binne de Haan (Brill, 2014), 139–66. See also Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Harvard University Press, 1983) and Alain Corbin, *The Life of an Unknown: The Rediscovered World of a Clog Maker in Nineteenth Century France*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Columbia University Press, 2001). My use of approaches from cultural anthropology and microhistory builds on both my academic and professional experience as researcher in the ethnography-oriented multidisciplinary Horizons 2020 project TRACES: Transmitting Contentious Cultural Heritages with the Arts 2016-2019, in which I employed microhistorical perspectives and personal narratives in exhibitions at the Casa de lângă Sinagogă Mediaș cultural centre (*Liminal Portraits: Stories from the Margins*, 2017; „...but we brought it back...”: *Objects, Paths, Stories*, 2018). See also my article Dawson, "The Burdocks of Klettengasse." Regarding agency, I lean on the definitions used by sociologists and poverty scholars, defined by Sabine Alkire as "a person's ability to act on behalf of what he or she values and has reason to value," Sabine Alkire, "Concepts and Measures of Agency," in *Arguments for a Better World: Essays in Honor of Amartya Sen* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 457.

⁸² Despite his protests that the book "is not really an exercise in microhistory" I (and others) see it as such. Corbin, ix.

⁸³ Corbin, *Life of an Unknown*, viii.

⁸⁴ Corbin, *ibid.*, vii.

⁸⁵ Corbin, *ibid.*, ix.

⁸⁶ This course of inquiry repeatedly perplexed colleagues, especially archivists, who wanted to know the name of my protagonist, expecting to recognise her as a known author. That my research could be focused on a woman about whom no one had ever heard (who had not "done" or "written" anything acknowledged by the wider world) was inconceivable to many.

understand not just her world, but also aspects of her *life*. Historian Johanna Gehmacher summarises the distinction:

Voraussetzung jeder biografischen Thematisierung ist es, dass es irgendwelche Hinterlassenschaften eines gelebten Lebens gibt. Diese mögen wie immer fragmentarisch, schriftlich, mündlich, bildlich oder gegenständlich sei, doch ohne sie kann keine Biografie gelingen. Damit ist zugleich etwas nur scheinbar Triviales über jene gesagt, mit denen biografische Thematisierung such auseinandersetzt: sie haben Spuren über sich selbst als Einzelne in einem zeitlichen Kontinuum hinterlassen und unterscheiden sich damit von jenen Vielen, die das nicht getan haben.⁸⁷

However, a close textual analysis alone is insufficient for creating a historical study in this instance, not least due to what Christa Hämmerle describes as “strategies of silence, insinuation and periphrasis chosen by the author” and which point to the “particular ‘vulnerability’ of a private diary.”⁸⁸ Here Hämmerle speaks of the need to employ “intertextual analysis” simultaneously to studying the text itself.⁸⁹ Thus, I have paired the close analysis of the diary’s text with an examination of archival documents from institutes which brushed against, collided with, or were embedded in the realities of Blanka’s day-to-day life. This attempt to reconstruct social, cultural, and political contours which characterised her environment in essential aspects also takes into consideration concepts of a *Lebenswelt* analysis, in which, as summarised by Christoph Augustynowicz, “Gefühle, Einstellungen und Wahrnehmungsweisen eines konkreten Menschen“

⁸⁷ Johanna Gehmacher, “Leben schreiben. Stichworte zur biografischen Thematisierung als historiografisches Format,” in *Bananen, Cola, Zeitgeschichte: Oliver Rathkolb und das lange 20. Jahrhundert* (Böhlau Verlag, 2016), 1013. See also Johanna Gehmacher, Katherina Prager, „Transnationale Leben – Formen, Begriffe und Zugriffe“ in *Handbuch Biographie. Methoden, Traditionen, Theorien*, ed. Christian Klein, Christian (J. B. Metzler'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung & Carl Ernst Poeschel GmbH, 2022), 123-132. English: “[A] precondition for any biographical project is that there are some sort of residual traces of a lived life. These may, as always, be fragmented, written, oral, visual, or material but without them no biography is possible. At the same time, simply as a result of the existence of these things something may be said, which only appears trivial, about the person which the biographical project takes as its subject: they left traces of themselves as an individual in a temporal continuum and differentiate themselves thus from the many who did not.”

⁸⁸ Hämmerle, “Diaries” in *Reading Primary Sources: The Interpretation of Texts from Nineteenth- and Twentieth Century History*. eds. Miriam Dobson and Benjamin Ziemann (Routledge, 2009), 151.

⁸⁹ Hämmerle, *ibid.*, 151.

interact with the „sozialen Umgebung, den materiellen Bedingungen, den politisch-gesellschaftlichen Verhältnissen und den vorherrschenden Ideologien.“⁹⁰

From a theoretical standpoint I furthermore position myself within the framework of scholars of women's history who have worked to “[unearth] heretofore unknown women and [come] to grips with how and why the ‘smallness’ of their work or their worlds illuminates dimensions of the past.”⁹¹

Spatial Turn and History of Emotions

My work is intimately tied to a wide swath of Romanian and Ukrainian public and private spaces, not just archival repositories. Struck by Blanka's heated reactions to various spaces in her life, or by contrast, a surprising ambivalence towards others, I was drawn early on to the idea of highlighting place and space in her life. Thus, I also incorporate methodologies of the “spatial turn,” prioritising the question of “where” in my examination and considering the spatial experience of my subject, alongside her emotional reactions to space. According to Tim Cole and Anne Kelly Knowles “spatial thinking” “1) ask[s] explicitly geographical questions starting with the most obvious question ‘where?’ to sit alongside the historian's question ‘when?’ [and] 2) treat[s] space, places, landscape, and the materiality of physical environments not as background or the stage set of history, but as meaningful subjects of study in their own right [...]”⁹² Yi-Fu Tuan, the author of an early foundational text of this methodology writes of “attempt[...ing] to understand how people feel about space and place, tak[ing] into account the different modes of experience (sensorimotor, tactile, visual, conceptual), and interpret[ing] space and place as images of complex—often ambivalent—feelings.”⁹³ From a gender perspective, analysing how women and

⁹⁰ Christoph Augustynowicz, “Lebenswelten, Topographien und Funktionen an der galizischen Grenze: Der Fall Sandomierz 1772-1844,” in *Die galizische Grenze 1772-1867: Kommunikation oder Isolation?*, ed. Christoph Augustynowicz and Andreas Kappeler (Lit Verlag GmbH, 2007), 83-84. English: “Emotions, attitudes, and modes of perception of a concrete person” interact with the “social environment, material conditions, political-social relationships, and prevalent ideologies.”

⁹¹ Antoinette M. Burton, “Forward,” in *Contesting Archives*, viii. See also Gerhalter, *Tagebücher als Quellen*.

⁹² Tim Cole and Anne Kelly Knowles, “Thinking Spatially about the Holocaust,” *European Holocaust Studies*, eds. Natalia Aleksion and Hana Kubátová, vol. 3, *Places, Spaces and Voids in the Holocaust* (Wallstein, 2021), 291.

⁹³ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1977), 6-7. Spatiality in history is quickly growing in resources. In the field of Jewish-German history, see for example Simone Lässig and Miriam Rürup, *Space and Spatiality in Modern German-Jewish History* (Berghahn Books, 2017). Marion Kaplan has worked at the intersection of spatial studies and history of emotions to examine the lived experience of Jewish refugees in Portugal in her book Marion Kaplan, *Hitler's Jewish Refugees: Hope and Anxiety in Portugal* (Yale University Press, 2020). In literary theory/cultural studies see Carola Daffner and Beth A. Muellner, *German Women Writers and the Spatial Turn: New Perspectives* (De Gruyter, 2015) which includes a chapter on diaries.

men encounter and interact with spaces differently reveals deep social contradictions. In literary and cultural studies “thinking spatially” or “spatialisation” has been used as an insightful analytical framework when considering ideas of home, displacement, exile, and identity within writing, all of which permeate the pages of Blanka’s diaries.⁹⁴

Finally, in working with fraught passages of Blanka’s entries, which often variate by half-steps her themes of loneliness and misery, punctuated by regret and grief, I have turned to historians of emotions who assert the value of assessing feelings within a historical context and who have developed tools with which to evaluate emotions in primary documents.⁹⁵ In this context I found Thomas Kohut’s reflections on empathy in historical studies particularly perceptive. Kohut argues that “empathy also involves imagination, insight, sensitivity to people, emotional intelligence, even emotional resonance,” and that furthermore “without those qualities, there could be no understanding of the way past people experienced themselves or the worlds they inhabited.”⁹⁶ Thus, Kohut asserts, even though acknowledging an empathic approach may make some historians uncomfortable, many or even most of them nevertheless employ empathy in “knowing the past.”⁹⁷ For my own part, I believe approaching Blanka’s writing and experience requires an empathic interpretation of the emotional place from which she wrote. Nevertheless, though I write with an awareness of this methodology and have sought to be carefully attuned to an empathic reading, because so many basic aspects of the diaries’ context were missing and required explanation in order to apprehend her words, my final product is not an interpretation of her emotions as such, despite the ample source material. Rather, my work primarily focuses on tracing the path of a woman over forty fraught years, while explicitly acknowledging the emotions associated with her path.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ For an excellent analysis of the linking of space, home, exile, and diaries see Xenia Srebrianski Harwell, “Repositioning the Exiled Body: Alja Rachmanowa’s Trilogy *My Russian Diaries*,” in *German Women Writers and the Spatial Turn: New Perspectives* 17, ed. Carola Daffner and Beth A. Muellner (De Gruyter, 2015) 101–20. See also those diaries, Alja Rachmanowa, *Meine russischen Tagebücher* (Verlag Styria, 1960).

⁹⁵ On the history of emotions, see William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001); Jan Plamper, *The History of Emotions: An Introduction*, trans. Keith Tribe (Oxford Univ. Press, 2015); Barbara H. Rosenwein, “Worrying about Emotions in History,” *The American Historical Review* 107, no. 3 (2002): 821–845; Benno Gammerl, Philipp Nielsen, and Margrit Pernau, *Encounters with Emotions: Negotiating Cultural Differences since Early Modernity* (Berghahn Books, 2019).

⁹⁶ Thomas A. Kohut, *Empathy and the Historical Understanding of the Human Past* (Routledge, 2020), 2.

⁹⁷ Kohut, *Empathy*, 2.

⁹⁸ Marion Kaplan describes her work on Jewish refugees in Portugal as “an emotional history of fleeing” and examines “how spaces of flight and survival affected refugees emotionally.” With its expanded frame of geography and time, my work does not explicitly join these two together, though both categories are present. Kaplan, *Hitler’s Jewish Refugees*, 2.

Structure of Text

Though my research led me beyond the contours of the diaries' words, I use Blanka's writings to anchor the project and guide myself back from deviations away from the central theme. With the exception of chapter two, which serves to introduce the protagonist and provide general historical background, each chapter is prefaced with extensive chronological excerpts from the diaries, generally five to ten pages in length and corresponding to several months' time. The excerpts were chosen to illustrate a major theme of the respective following chapter.⁹⁹ By using extended and chronological excerpts rather than curated shorter snippets taken without context, I hope to ensure that Blanka's voice is given a sturdy platform. The work follows the chronology of the diaries, but this does not mean that it chronologically narrates Blanka's life. Rather, using the flashbacks she herself wrote into her writings (which includes the letters), I also employ flashbacks at various points. These explore prewar events, her family's background in the monarchy, the social and cultural setting in which she was raised, and the experiences of World War II. For the most part, I have inserted these at points in the postwar chronology when Blanka herself seemed to have reflected at great length on her life prior to arriving in Constanța.

At some point in time when working with diaries of impressive length, one must decide what topics to cover and what to leave out. Though initially I envisioned paralleling Blanka's entries with political developments in Romania, as my research progressed, I drew away from this idea. Though I strive to provide the macro framework of the political situation in which her life was embedded, I found that contextualising her losses grew in import and aided in understanding her emotional framework more than outlining regime policy changes. Furthermore, though she commented with some frequency on inconveniences caused by or hypocrisies of the Romanian communist state, for the most part she was mum on the political front. This may have been deliberate or indicate political ambivalence. Even after having spent years with her words, it is not clear to me the degree to which she (and perhaps many Romanian citizens at the time) understood the implications of contemporary political manoeuvring. Blanka's attention to contemporary politics was confined to events which would affect her day-to-day wellbeing—currency and labour reforms—and her long-term desire to leave the country—emigration policy. She was more intellectually involved with international affairs, especially as related to Israel, but also Germany

⁹⁹ As noted above, I here follow the example of Laurel Thatcher Ulrich in her analysis of midwife Martha Ballard's diaries.

and uprisings in other communist states (though she explicitly curbed her writing on these, the only time she indicated an awareness that what she wrote could be read by others and used against her).¹⁰⁰ Thus, though I devote significant space to communist policy towards emigration, this is otherwise not a political history of the period, but rather an integrated history of one woman's experience. Likewise, though the events of the Holocaust and associated trauma play a central role, I do not consider this a Holocaust history, though the Shoah is part of the story. Rather this project employs a longer lens, placing Blanka Lebzelter and her family into their prewar and postwar context, thus providing a more nuanced understanding of continuities and ruptures created by the Shoah over time, space, and at an individual level.

To assist the reader in understanding the basic contours of Blanka's life, **chapter two** begins with a biographical overview and contextualises the historical background of the postwar stage in Romania, which differed from elsewhere in Europe in significant ways. I also here include a brief introduction to Bukovina and its rich German-Jewish cultural tradition, about which much has been written. **Chapter three** focuses on 1948 and 1949, when Blanka affiliated most closely with local and national Jewish networks in her efforts to qualify for emigration. **Chapter four** describes her distress at failing to secure permission to emigrate and subsequent struggle to escape the severe precarity in which she and her mother were living. **Chapter five** takes the death of her mother, Anna, as a starting point to examine Blanka's parents' history and the trajectory of their families and the prewar social milieu in which they lived. Prefaced by a 1955 letter written to her deceased brother, **chapter six** continues to "look back," this time with a lens on the events and her experiences of World War II, prefacing this with several interwar incidents in her hometown. **Chapter seven** returns to "Blanka's present" of the late 1950s, focussing on her agency as demonstrated in her search for family members, cultivated close friendships, her passion for the cultural arts, and the act of writing itself, which was not limited to her diary. The second part of the chapter focusses on the limits of her agency in terms of erecting a safe environment and outlines the daily harassment and abuse with which she was confronted and acts of antisemitism in the workplace, both of which eventually led to severe deterioration of her psychological and physical state. **Chapter eight** concludes with reflections on the limits of historical research of private lives,

¹⁰⁰ She writes about the 1956 Hungarian uprising and several days later explicitly states that she will no longer write anything about the subject. She also comments on Stalin's death, without, however, offering any opinion.

a discussion on conditions required for recovering from trauma, and the importance of bringing uncomfortable narratives to light.

Glossary of Places and Note on Place Names

To make the material accessible to a wider range of readers and in an attempt to circumvent detours into the historical background of the various towns which appear in this work, I have included below a “glossary” of the sites which played key roles in Blanka’s life and appear in the work below. These very brief historical descriptions are not meant to be exhaustive by any means, but rather to provide the reader with a cursory framework (under whose rule was the site when) and point of reference. Those places which play a more significant role in Blanka’s life will be discussed in more detail in the main text of this work. In the glossary overview I also briefly note the significance of the place to Blanka’s narrative.

Many of the places appearing here have multiple names in several languages. For simplicity’s sake, I list all names only in this glossary (not in footnotes hereafter). After significant back and forth, in my main text I have decided to use German-language names for Bukovina sites prior to the fall of the Habsburg Empire and to switch to Romanian nomenclature for the interwar and wartime period. In those passages in which I describe present-day events, I use Ukrainian or Romanian spelling, depending on the contemporary country in which the respective town is located. The narrative I tell includes flashbacks and I hope, with this distinction, to also aid the reader in delineating regimes at various narrative points. In addition, this code-switching reflects Blanka’s own mixing of place-name spellings, sometimes German and sometimes Romanian, sometimes she mixes the two languages. Thus, this practice reflects the multilingualism of the writer, while nodding towards the linguistic complexities inherent in the region’s history. There are two exceptions. One is the town of Moghilev-Podolsky, today in Ukraine. Though it has multiple spellings in various languages, I maintain the spelling Moghilev-Podolsky (abbreviated: Moghilev) throughout the work because this is how it has appeared in most publications and written texts, especially those related to the Shoah, over the past several decades. Secondly, I refer to the town of Czernowitz, today Chernivtsi in Ukraine, using its German name throughout the text as this is how Blanka referred to it and the city recalled here by her and in the history of her

mother's family, is the Austrian-era Czernowitz.¹⁰¹ Place names in the diaries are transcribed as Blanka wrote them; for Bukovina towns, she used the German names and I also use the German names for the English translations. The glossary below is alphabetical according to the spelling of place name today.

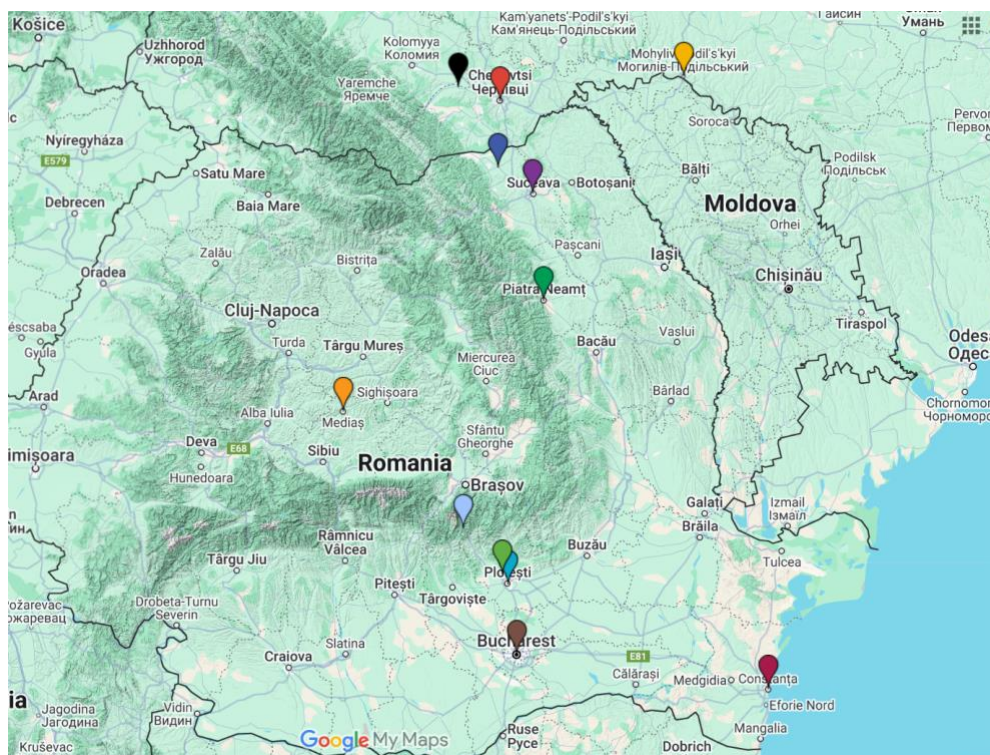


Figure 10. Map with primary points of reference indicated. Source: See footnote 102.

Key¹⁰²

	Bucharest (Romania): capital of present-day Romania. Under Ottoman rule until 1878, thereafter Romania. Blanka travels to Bucharest with some frequency to visit friends or on her way to other destinations.
	Constanța (Romania): Greek <i>Konstandza</i> , Turkish <i>Köstence</i> . Major port city on the Black Sea, built on the ancient Greek city of Tomis. Part of the Ottoman Empire until 1878, thereafter Romania. As a major Ottoman port town, the city was historically diverse with significant Greek, Turkish, Armenian, but also Jewish, German, and Tartar populations. It was only in the early 20 th century that the Romanian population became the dominant group. Blanka and her mother travel here from northern Bukovina in 1946 and remain. The diaries were recorded for the most part in this town.
	Chernivtsi / Чернівці (Ukraine): German <i>Czernowitz</i> , Romanian <i>Cernăuți</i> , Yiddish טשערנאָוויץ, Russian <i>Chernovtsy</i> / Черновцы, Polish <i>Czerniowce</i> . Capital of the Austro-Hungarian crownland of Bukovina until

¹⁰¹ More so than the smaller Bukovina towns, the name “Czernowitz” is used today in publications and discourse, to indicate not just a place but a cultural period and legacy. For example, Hirsch and Spitzer, *Ghosts of Home: The Afterlife of Czernowitz in Jewish Memory* or Florence Heymann, *Le crépuscule des lieux: identités juives de Czernowitz* (Stock, 2003).

¹⁰² The accompanying map by Julie Dawson, created using Google Maps, Map data ©2024 GeoBasis-DE/BKG (©2009).

	1918; part of interwar Romania 1918-1940; U.S.S.R. 1940; Romania 1941-1944; U.S.S.R 1944-1991; Ukraine 1991-present day. Blanka's mother was born and grew up here and Blanka had several relatives in the city.
	Mediaș (Romania): German <i>Mediasch</i> , Hungarian <i>Medgyes</i> . Southern Transylvanian town settled in the 13th century by the Transylvanian Saxons (<i>Siebenbürger Sachsen</i>). Part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire until 1918, belonging to Romania since then. Historically significant German- and Hungarian-speaking populations. Blanka's first-cousin, Babette Chomed (originally of Czernowitz), settled here after World War II and the diaries were found in the synagogue in 2009.
	Mohyliv-Podilskyi / Могилів-Подільський (Ukraine): Romanian <i>Moghilău</i> Russian <i>Mogiljow-Podolski</i> Могилёв-Подольский. This town has been almost exclusively referred to as “Moghilev” / “Moghilev-Podolsky” in published works and testimonies by survivors as well as historic institutes and archives. To avoid confusion, I also follow this usage and will not use alternative spellings. I use Moghilev-Podolsky and Moghilev interchangeably. Note this town should not be confused with the Belarusian town of Mogilev. The town is located on the eastern banks of the Dniester River, across the border from present-day Republic of Moldova (historically Bessarabia). Following the Second Partition of Poland Moghilev-Podolsky was part of the Russian Empire from 1793-1917, then the U.S.S.R. until 1941. 1941-1944 it came under Romanian control. 1944-1991 it was again part of the U.S.S.R. and since 1991 Ukraine. Blanka and her mother were deported to Moghilev from their hometown and spent three years in the Romanian-administrated ghetto from 1941-1944.
	Păulești (Romania): Village outside of the town of Ploiești in the Wallachian region of Romania and somewhat north of Bucharest. Blanka's mother, Anna, was sent to a tuberculosis sanatorium here in 1952 and died almost immediately thereafter.
	Piatra Neamț (Romania): Town on the eastern side of the Carpathian mountains, on the Bistrița river, in the Moldova region of Romania. Under Ottoman rule until 1878, thereafter Romania. Known for its forestry industry and large Jewish population, prior to the communist period and mass emigration. Blanka spent several months here on <i>hachshara</i> , a training camp, with a Zionist organisation in 1948.
	Ploiești (Romania): Regional centre north of Bucharest known already in the 19 th century for its oil industry. Under Ottoman rule until 1878, thereafter Romania. Blanka travels here in 1952 together with her mother to bring the latter to a nearby tuberculosis sanatorium. Her mother is buried in the Jewish cemetery.
	Rădăuți (Romania): German <i>Radautz</i> , Yiddish <i>רעדאָוויץ</i> . Town in southern Bukovina, part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire until 1918, thereafter Romania. Historically there were significant German and Jewish populations, in addition to Romanians. Blanka's father was born here and she visits her uncle here in 1956.
	Sinaia (Romania): mountain resort town on the southern side of the Carpathian mountains. Under Ottoman rule until 1878, thereafter Romania. Known for a 17 th century monastery and late 19 th century castle built for Romanian King Carol. Blanka holidays here in 1953.
	Suceava (Romania): German <i>Suczawa</i> , Yiddish <i>סאָטאָווא</i> . Regional centre of southern Bukovina. Part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire until 1918, thereafter Romania. Historically significant German and Jewish but also Polish and Armenian populations, in addition to Romanians. Blanka's first-cousin, Berta Lindenbaum née Heiss lives here in the postwar period with her husband, Dr. Max Lindenbaum. Blanka visits them in 1956, 1957, and 1958.
	Vashkivtsi / Вaшківці (Ukraine): German <i>Waschkoutz</i> [<i>am Czeromosch</i>] also <i>Waschkautz</i> or <i>Waszkoutz</i> , Romanian <i>Vășcăuți</i> [<i>-pe-Ceremuș</i>], Polish <i>Waszkowce</i> , Yiddish <i>וואַשקעוויטש</i> , Russian <i>Vashkovtsy</i> / <i>Вашковцы</i> . Town in northern Bukovina about 40 km west of Czernowitz. Part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire until 1918; interwar Romania 1918-1940; U.S.S.R. 1940; Romania 1941-1944; U.S.S.R 1944-1991; Ukraine 1991-present day. As opposed to the towns in southern Bukovina, the population was mostly made up of Ukrainians, with minority Polish, Jewish, and German populations (almost no Romanians prior to 1918). Blanka grew up in this town, her parents having moved there by 1921 at the latest (possibly already in 1918), previously having lived in the village of Zamostie (Ukrainian <i>Замостя</i> , Romanian <i>Zamostea</i>), a few kilometres away, where her father was stationed. Blanka's uncle and aunt

	with their four children also lived here from 1907 until the late 1930s. Blanka's father and brother were murdered here in a pogrom in 1941.

A Note on Archives

The archives I sought out hoping to complete gaps in Blanka's narrative or understand more fully her environment were many, but the number of times I found her name in an archival document were few. On the one hand, this is due to the inherent underrepresentation of the less powerful, and especially women, in archives. As Saidiya Hartmann asserts, "Every historian of the multitude, the dispossessed, the subaltern, and the enslaved is forced to grapple with the power and authority of the archive and the limits it sets on what can be known, whose perspective matters, and who is endowed with the gravity and authority of historical actor."¹⁰³

However, exacerbating the archival precarity of these subjects, is the specificity of working with repositories in Romania.¹⁰⁴ As a result of many historical factors, understanding the archives and their holdings is rarely transparent. Collections may be closed indefinitely or even permanently due to natural disaster (flooding is a common reason given), so for example, the town hall collection of Constanța from the 1950s, which I expected to provide me with various valuable details, was closed indefinitely when I visited in 2022. Another collection held at the National Archives of Constanța dealing specifically with communist-era matters (PCR Comitetul Regional Constanța (1950-1967)) and which, according to the inventory, has a number of folders relevant for my work, is permanently closed—it has never been processed, according to the local archivists. Establishing the accessibility of collections or files therein is a crucial part of the on-site work, most of the time this cannot be definitively undertaken without being on-site. Beyond potential material reasons causing inaccessibility, many files or collections are not permitted to be viewed if the material contained therein is deemed to be of private or personal nature. Thus, though Blanka certainly left behind a paper trail by way of numerous official submissions of complaint regarding the harassment by her neighbours and petitions that her emigration case be reviewed—illustrations of determined acts of agency—these memos, wherever they were filed (and this is not clear) are almost certainly closed to researchers due to the deemed private nature of their contents. Finally,

¹⁰³ Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (W.W. Norton, 2019), xiii.

¹⁰⁴ Obviously, archival conditions in many places are less than ideal for researchers seeking to understand historical events. I focus on Romania due to my own experiences but these difficulties can apply and be more complex elsewhere.

most of the local branches of the national archives keep a very limited schedule. Many are open only two days a week for four to five hours. These details present significant hurdles to undertaking research, in particular for researchers with familial obligations such that extended periods of time abroad are not possible. Indeed, this project would not have been possible had I not already been intimately familiar with the procedures and routines of Romanian repositories due to my previous work for the Leo Baeck Institute. Even so, each fruitful research trip had an equal supply of frustrations, surprises, and disappointments. I am especially grateful to those individual archival employees at the county National Archives branches of Constanța, Ploiești, and Piatra Neamț who allowed me to stay beyond customary opening hours or submit requests outside of official operating hours.

The pandemic and the war in Ukraine likewise hampered my original objective of conducting archival research there. Near the end of my project I succeeded in travelling, despite the war, to Chernivtsi and consulting the state archives, which visit proved fruitful indeed. Unfortunately, it was not possible to travel to Mohyliv-Podilskyi due to the war. I hope a later journey there will be possible. I am grateful beyond words to the staff at the Chernivtsi State Archives who accommodated my numerous requests over a short time period.

The digital turn in archives has changed the way researchers work and online indexes have made searches for individuals in record books possible which would heretofore have been unthinkable. I have profited from such tools in my work immensely: they enabled the creation of an extensive family tree and turned up precious details in contemporary newspaper articles, though proper citation for the digitised material has its own complexities. Depending on the digitising party, the original repository and fond information is not always transparent or even traceable. I have striven to provide as full citation information as is accessible for the digital material upon which I have drawn. Nevertheless, the trove of material that remains non-digitised and often only partially described in finding aids is boundless. It is by consulting this non-digitised material, held at the repositories scattered across Romania, Ukraine, and Austria, that the richness of historic complexity pierces a narrative.

Reflections on Ethics

From the beginning I have reflected on the ethics of working with diaries such as Blanka's, for which the author no longer has a say in what excerpts are published, examined in detail, and the

manner in which they are interpreted. Memoirs from this time are an entirely different genre, written not only in hindsight and without the urgency of day-to-day pressures, annoyances, uncertainties, but also redacted—interpersonal unpleasanties are easily left out, perhaps forgotten over time, any potential regrets or embarrassments of one’s own impulsive actions or trivialities need not be included. If a diary is published within the author’s lifetime, similar editing or redacting is possible and the reader may not be the wiser. Diaries published posthumously without the express permission of the author fall under a different rubric, though they also may be submitted to redaction by an editor or family member concerned about the appearance of the author, as we know from various versions of Anne Frank’s diary. Still, by erasing uncomfortable entries, the humanity of the author is in some way affected.

Blanka sometimes writes uncomfortable entries: she uses haughty and racist terms for abusive neighbours; she is easily offended by perceived slights from her few friends (the title “friend” she confers on only two women, both of whom live in Bucharest). In her irritation and injury, she sometimes lashes out at them in the pages of her diary, in words that are best described as “catty,” always to forgive them later. I do not know whether she would have wanted these episodes published. I also wonder about the episodes during which she is verbally and physically harassed by her neighbours. She is mortified by the physical attack and ashamed to visit a doctor. Blanka was proud and though I do choose here to recount her humiliations in the face of her neighbours and colleagues, I aim to do this in such a manner as to maintain the dignity of which she desperately strove to keep hold. She wrote that she did not want to be pitied by those around her, but in this study I cannot shy from the underlying reality that Blanka in general was unhappy, lonely, wronged, and suffered certainly from depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. I hope that Blanka would have understood that by airing the wrongs done to her and by using her own words to describe her misery, I endeavour to acknowledge her suffering and that of her family, a recognition denied her during the period of the diaries and for which she articulated longing.

Chapter 2. Biographical Fragments

Constanța Sontag 5 II 1956

Fange ein neues Tagebuch an. Das 5^{te} seit meiner Rückkehr aus den Todeslagern von „Transnistria“. Es ist ein in rote Leinwand gebundenes Heft. Blättern und blicke ich auf seine weissen Seiten und fühle wie mir kalte Schauer über den Rücken laufen. Wovon werden sie reden wenn sie nicht mehr weiss sein werden. Von meiner Geburt bis Julie 1941 war ich das verwöhnte Kind meiner Eltern, hatte einen einzigen herrlichen Bruder den ich vergötterte, und lebte relativ sorgenlos in meinem komfortablen mit einem grossen Garten versehenen Elternhaus. In der ersten Hälfte des Monats Julie 1941 blieb ich plötzlich ohne Bruder ohne Vater ohne Elternhaus ohne Brot. Wir waren Juden und deshalb durfte man uns morden. Mama und ich durch einen Zufall mit dem Leben davongekommen wurden nach „Transnistria“ deportiert. 3 Jahre lang haben wir täglich mit dem Tode gerungen. Wir haben den Tod des Fascismus und die Befreiung erlebt, doch unser Leben war zerstört. Ich habe als Wohnort April 1946 die Stadt Constanța blindlings gewählt und damit eine schlechte Wahl getroffen.

Im Mai 1952 ist meine Mama, die einzige Gefährtin meiner Einsamkeit, an den Folgen einer Lungenkongestion gestorben, und ich bin ganz allein in dieser gräulichen Welt geblieben.

Blanka recorded several entries providing biographical summaries such as the one above, generally this took place on the first or last page of a notebook or on her birthday, the twenty-second of February. As noted above, she also wrote three long letters to dead loved ones and tucked these, together with her Transnistrian identity cards, into one of the notebooks. Without these letters, two of which provide significant biographical detail down to sensory impressions, it would be more difficult, if not impossible, to trace several key stations in her life. Even so, the years of her childhood and youth are particularly murky. She herself described them alternatively in positive terms, as above, or negatively, as I will describe in more detail below. The vacillating light with

which she reflected on her past seems to have been most related to the circumstances of her immediate present when she recorded the respective entry.

It is a curious quandary to be in possession of hundreds of pages of an individual's private reflections but lacking all surrounding framework required to understand the context of the author's words. The more I read of Blanka's writing, the more I sensed the need to understand where she came from in order to comprehend her writing. Reading her emotional reactions to a variety of incidents, for example, her disdain for blue collar work; her keen interest in the performing arts; her determined, though futile, attempts to procure justice in the face of abuse via official complaints; and perhaps, even her introverted nature, felt like trying to apprehend a dimly represented image. I could make out only tattered outlines, the visage was without materiality, it literally lacked background or substance. By searching for missing biographical links, I sought to bolster the person of Blanka Lebzelter and thereby better understand her writings. At the same time, I was confronted with the knowledge that the entire process may be interpreted as an act of futility, due to the enormity of what can never be known. This work will go into greater detail on specific chapters of Blanka's life, reflecting both on what I have discovered and can never discover. In the biographical essay below, I sketch the framework in which her story unfolded, this is meant to anchor the reader in time and place and provide a roadmap for what is to follow.

Bukovina to the Black Sea

Blanka Lebzelter was born into a German-speaking assimilated Jewish family in the Habsburg crownland of Bukovina on 22 February 1916, in the very midst of World War I.¹⁰⁵ There is no record of her birth besides an entry in her father's military papers. The place cannot be determined with certainty, but at least one source, not necessarily dependable, states she was born in Zamostie,¹⁰⁶ a small village about fifty kilometres west of the Bukovina capital of Czernowitz, and ten kilometres from the somewhat larger town and administrative centre of Waschkoutz.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Her birthdate was exceedingly challenging to confirm as no birth record book survived and after and during the war she herself provided false ages. Her father's military registration and log of service form (*Grundbuchblatt*), however, recorded the birth of his daughter on 22 Feb. 1916. "Haupt-Grundbuchblatt Jossel Nute Lebzelter recte Wassermann," 1898-1920, Grundbuchblätter Landesgendarmierkommando Nr. 13 Czernowitz, Box 3227: 1911-1920 Aktiv, Heft 1, Blatt 51, Kriegsarchiv (KA), Vienna. I will discuss the ambiguities around her birthdate more extensively in Ch. 5.

¹⁰⁶ Ukrainian *Замостя*; Romanian *Zamostea*.

¹⁰⁷ Zamostie is recorded as her birthplace in an untitled document which is a list of the Jewish inhabitants of Vașcăuți (Waschkoutz) compiled by the local police in 1941. The document, which contains various inaccuracies, is discussed

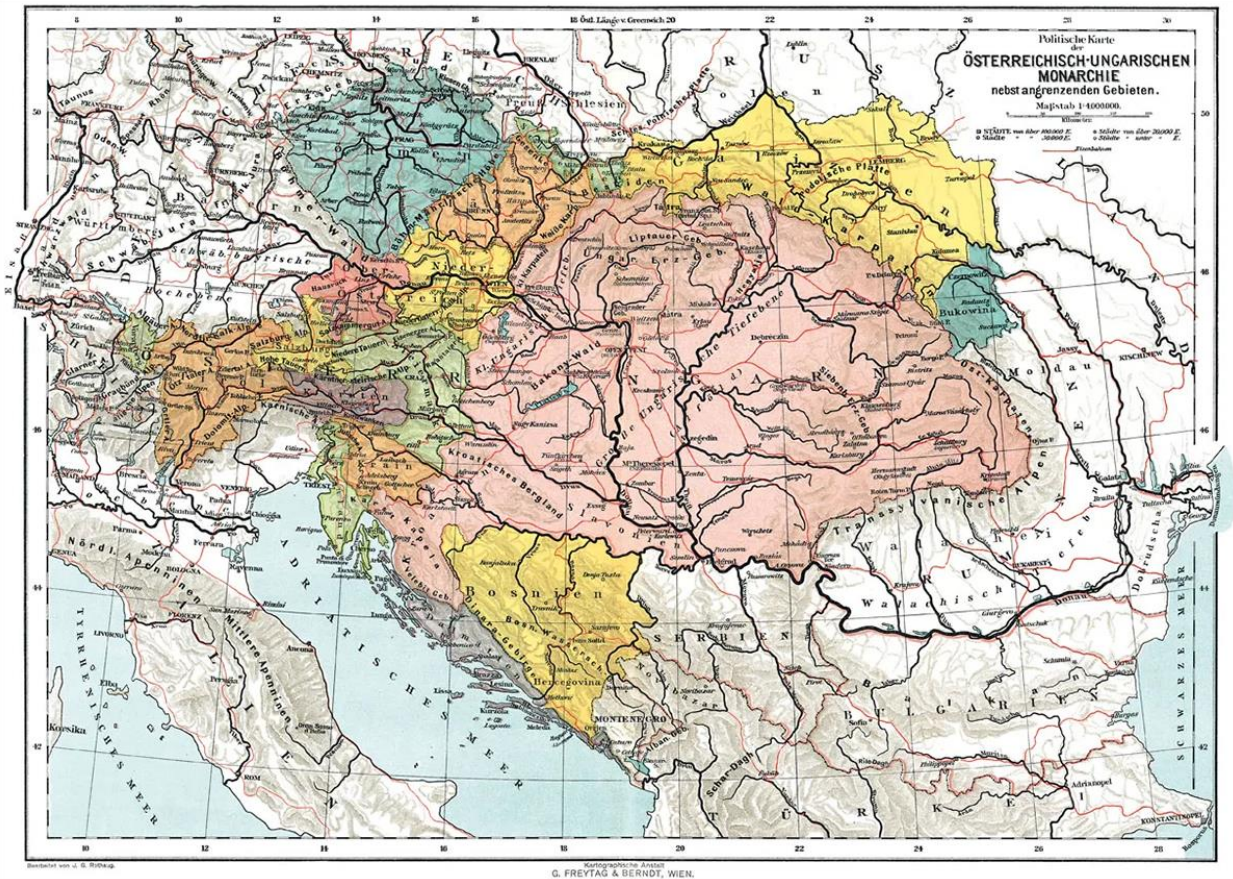


Figure 11. Political map of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, 1911. The Crownland of Bukovina is to the far right, in blue. Source: See footnote 108.

Blanka's father, Josef Lebzelter (1877-1941), was a gendarme, one of the "elite" corps of the military responsible for keeping the peace and safeguarding the population in rural areas.¹⁰⁸ Born in Radautz, a market town in southern Bukovina, and from a traditional Jewish family, he was inscripted in 1898, became a gendarme in 1908, and served the Habsburg state until its fall in autumn of 1918. In 1911, at thirty-four, he married Chane (Anna) Windbeutel, then twenty-five years old, who came from an established Czernowitz family.¹⁰⁹ Anna's father, Bernard (also

in more detail later in this work. Вашківецький комісаріат поліції Сторожинецького повіту, м. Вашківці Comisariatul de poliție Vașcăuți, județul Storojineț fond 831, op. 2, folder 2, Chernivtsi State Archives, Chernivtsi.

¹⁰⁸ Again, I will discuss more extensively Josef Lebzelter's unusual career and the role of the gendarme in Bukovina in Chapter 5. The Habsburg gendarmerie is repeatedly described as an "Elitekorps" of the military by many, see Franz Neubauer, *Die Gendarmerie in Österreich: 1849 - 1924* (Gendarmerie-Jubiläumsfonds, 1925), 83. The map pictured in Figure 11 is *Politische Karte der Österreichisch-Ungarischen Monarchie nebst angrenzenden Gebieten* (Wien: G. Freytag & Berndt, 1910).

¹⁰⁹ Standesamtsbücher (Metrikbücher) des heutigen Czernowitzer Gebietes, Fond 1245, Geburts-, Ehe- und Sterbematrikel der jüdischen Gemeinde von Czernowitz, reg. 15/55, Trauungsmatrik 1910-1911, entry nr. 82/1911, Chernivtsi State Archives, Chernivtsi. Retrieved via familysearch: <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-CS9R-Y3J2-J?cat=1378569&i=928993> on 20 October 2022.

Berish) Windbeutel was a master tailor (*Schneidermeister*) with shop premises on the elegant Herrengasse.¹¹⁰ Josef and Anna were wed by Dr. Josef Rosenfeld, chief rabbi of Czernowitz, in her father's home at Töpfergasse 1, a simple, one-story house with a spacious garden and a well in the courtyard (see Figure 27 in Ch. 5).

The home was a multigenerational home, full and lively. Not only did Anna's three younger sisters live there, but her older sister Zirl, who married in 1903, also lived there together with her husband, Leon, and their first child, Babette, who was seven years old at the time of the Lebzelter/Windbeutel wedding in 1911.¹¹¹ The family associated with the German-speaking and assimilated Jewish middle class of Czernowitz. In the interwar period Edith Silbermann (née Horowitz), friends with Paul Antschel/Celan, lived across the street and described the Windbeutel/Chomed house in her memoirs:

Wer vom Haupteingang des Czernowitzer Volksgartens die Siebenbürgerstraße zur Kaserne des achten Jägerregiments überquerte, kam nach weniger Schritten zum steilen Töpferberg, der in die Bräuhausegasse mündete. Dort stand mein Elternhaus und gegenüber, im etwas baufälligen, ebenerdigen Hause, dessen eine Front zur Feldgasse hin sah und das noch keine Wasserleitung, sondern einen Ziehbrunnen hatte, wohnte der Herrensneider Chomed. Mit seinem Sohn Gustl, meinem Spielkameraden aus früher Kindheit, war Paul [Celan] als Schüler des Vierten Staatsgymnasiums eng befreundet.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Bernard Windbeutel's shop was located at Herrengasse 19. My gratitude goes to Edgar Hauster and the wonderful volunteers of the Czernowitz ehpes group, comprised of descendants of Czernowitzers, who made this address book and similar sources easily searchable. Retrieved via the chart compiled here: <http://czernowitz.ehpes.com/new/hauster/Cz1898TotalG.html> on 28. July 2021. The information in the chart is compiled from Oswald Isidor Nussbaum, *Allgemeiner Wohnungs-Anzeiger nebst Handels- und Gewerbe-Adressbuch für die Landeshauptstadt Czernowitz und Vorstädte mit dem neuesten Plane der Stadt* (Bukowinaer Vereinsdruckerei, 1898).

¹¹¹ These sisters, Zirl, Krenczie/Karoline, Berta/Bertha, and Klara will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5. Babette was born 20. May 1904. "Assistance file for Chomed Babette, refugee from Czernowitz, 1964-1989," Box SD2, Folder 5, Mediaș Jewish Community Collection, Mediaș Jewish Community Archives and Synagogue, Mediaș, Romania.

¹¹² Edith Silbermann, *Czernowitz - Stadt Der Dichter: Geschichte einer Jüdischen Familie aus der Bukowina (1900 - 1948)*, ed. Amy D. Colin (Fink, 2015), 85. At the time described by Edith, the Windbeutel grandparents, that is parents of Anna and Zirl, had passed away. English: "If one crossed the Siebenbürgerstrasse at the main entrance of the Czernowitz public gardens over to the barracks of the eighth *Jäger* regiment, one came after a few steps to the steep Töpferberg, which ended in the Bräuhausegasse. That is where my parents' house stood and across the street, in a somewhat ramshackle, one-story house, whose front faced the Feldgasse and which didn't have running water but rather a well, lived the gentlemen's tailor Chomed. As a pupil of the fourth state gymnasium Paul [Celan] was close friends with his son, Gustl, my playmate since early childhood."

Blanka's proclivities for theatre, languages, and literature can most likely be traced back to the influence of her mother and the Czernowitz side of the family. Babette Chomed, Blanka's cousin, studied at Czernowitz University's faculty of letters and philosophy from 1930-1933, completing courses at the pedagogic seminar with primary specialisations in French and German, and secondarily in Romanian. She was employed most of her life as a teacher but had also spent time abroad in France.¹¹³ Babette's much younger brother, Gustav (born in 1920), who was boyhood friends with Paul Antschel / Celan and corresponded with him until the latter's death in 1970, also attended gymnasium and university in Czernowitz.¹¹⁴ According to Gustav's daughter, the Chomed family was fully assimilated.¹¹⁵ Gustav was younger than Blanka by about four years and younger than Bruno by two. Nevertheless, the cousins must have spent time together. The letter Blanka wrote to Babette in 1947 (in the annex) is written with intimate familiarity, also in reference to "Gustl." Still, the degree to which Blanka was acquainted with Gustav's circle of friends, which included beyond Paul Antschel/Celan a number of young people later active in the literary arts, such as Immanuel Weissglas and Edith Silbermann (née Horowitz), is not clear.

¹¹³ "Assistance file for Chomed Babette, refugee from Czernowitz, 1964-1989," Box SD2, Folder 5, Mediaș Jewish Community Collection, Mediaș Jewish Community Archives and Synagogue, Mediaș, Romania. The sources contradict themselves somewhat as a paper in the Mediaș file states that her degree was from Czernowitz, while newspaper advertisements seem to indicate she had a diploma from Paris. Perhaps she held both. According to newspaper sources, Babette began offering French lessons in 1930 and regular advertisements for her offering private French lessons appear throughout the 1930s in two of the Czernowitz newspapers (*Czernowitzer Morgenblatt* and *Czernowitzer Allgemeine Zeitung*). With slight variations, they generally read "Lizenziatin Babette Chomed (Diplome supérieur d'études françaises modernes Paris), hat den französischen Sprachunterricht wieder aufgenommen. Konversation, Literatur, Grammatik. Vorbereitung auf Baccalaureat. Anmeldungen: Str. Olarilor 1". *Czernowitzer Morgenblatt*; 15.9.1937, p. 8. Strada Olarilor is the Romanian translation of Töpfergasse (they both mean "Potter's lane"). Babette also published a newspaper article commemorating her philosophy professor (probably meaning a teacher at a gymnasium) Dr. Emil Sigall. In this article she lauds the teaching and bearing of her former instructor, closing with the words "In der Erinnerung seiner Schüler und Schülerinnen lebt er aber fort, als Beispiel edlen Menschentums, zu welchem Ideal er bestrebt war, die Jugend heranzuziehen durch das schönste der Mittel, die Bildung." Babette Chomed, „Professor Dr. Emil Sigall zum Gedenken," in *Czernowitzer Tagblatt*, 13.10.1937, p. 3. Her article and this quote emphasise the high regard for education within the family.

¹¹⁴ Gustav Chomed was born 22 January 1920, thus his older sister Babette was seventeen years older, very unusual for siblings. His birthdate can be found in several publications. A brief biographical overview is in Silbermann, *Czernowitz – Stadt der Dichter*, 351. A longer essay on his life and his friendship with Paul Celan can be found in Celan and Chomed, "...ich brauche Deine Briefe...", 73-78. Chomed is also often cited in the biography of Celan's youth by Israel Chalfen, *Paul Celan. Eine Biographie seiner Jugend* (Insel Verlag, 1979).

¹¹⁵ According to his daughter, Rachel, when after the war, he found himself in Germany with the Red Army „wollte er, der in einer vollständig assimilierten Familie aufwuchs, in Deutschland bleiben; er fühlte sich als Deutscher..." He returned to Czernowitz after all upon learning that Babette had survived and was searching for him. Celan and Chomed, "...ich brauche Deine Briefe...", 75. I have tried multiple times over the years to establish contact with Gustav Chomed's daughter, Rachel Muchnik, including through various mutual acquaintances, but unfortunately she has never responded.

Indeed, though the connection, through Gustav, whose reminiscences are also relied on heavily in Israel Chalfen's salient biography of Celan's youth, to the Czernowitzer "luminaries" is intriguing, I have found no evidence of a personal connection between Blanka and this group. Nevertheless, the knowledge is important in that it solidly positions Blanka's mother's family within a certain milieu about which we do know a considerable amount.¹¹⁶ Gustav Chomed was known for his interest in and knowledge of art, literature, and music, and he was equally talented in languages, speaking seven, while Babette had studied in Paris.¹¹⁷ Whether through the direct influence of Blanka's mother, Anna, for whom the small towns to which she moved after marriage were likely experienced as extremely provincial, or whether Blanka spent significant school years in Czernowitz itself, by the time she was a young woman she had acquired beyond average knowledge of classical theatre, music, literature, and spoke besides her mother tongue of German, also Romanian, almost certainly Ukrainian (the majority language in Waschkoutz), Russian, English, and probably French. Most likely she understood Yiddish.¹¹⁸

Moreover, according to the Celan biographer and fellow Czernowitzer Israel Chalfen, the well in the Windbeutel/Chomed garden in the Töpfergasse, apparently beloved by Paul and Gustav as children, was used by Celan in several poems to evoke the sunken cultural and linguistic landscape of Jewish Czernowitz.¹¹⁹ In an article in *Die Stimme*, a German-language newspaper established

¹¹⁶ The literature on Celan and Jewish Czernowitz of the interwar period is far too extensive to cite here. Besides the Silbermann book already cited several times, Hirsch and Spitzer devote significant space to their parents' schooling and background in Czernowitz in Hirsch and Spitzer, *Ghosts of Home*; Fischer devotes a chapter to this background in "Being Bukovinian before 1945: German and Jewish Bukovinians in the Habsburg Empire, Romania and the Second World War," in *Resettlers and Survivors*. There are numerous anthologies of German and German-Jewish writers including Cécile Cordon and Helmut Kusdat, eds, *An der Zeiten Ränder: Czernowitz und die Bukowina. Geschichte, Literatur, Verfolgung, Exil* (Theodor-Kramer-Ges., 2002); Andrei Corbea-Hoisie, *Czernowitz: Jüdisches Städtebild* (Jüdischer Verlag, 1998); and most recently Andrei Corbea-Hoisie et al, *Handbuch der Literaturen aus Czernowitz und der Bukowina* (J. B. Metzler, 2024). Memoirs are numerous and many are cited elsewhere in this work.

¹¹⁷ Celand and Chomed, "...ich brauche Deine Briefe...", 76.

¹¹⁸ Blanka very much wanted a job at a publishing house which translated Russian works into Romanian, thus she must have been comfortable with Russian (see Chapter 4). She wrote to her American relatives in English, she also wrote a short note to Babette asking her to send her English book back to her via a mutual friend (1947, this postcard is not reproduced in the annex, it is only a few lines and regards only instructions for returning the book). Through Babette's influence and the interwar Romanian school system, Blanka almost certainly learned French in school. In contrast to Blanka's family, the majority of the Jewish population of Waschkoutz was traditional and observant and Yiddish would have been frequently spoken.

¹¹⁹ Chalfen based his biography primarily on interviews with Celan's family and friends. He interviewed Gustav Chomed on several occasions. Regarding this well Chalfen wrote "Im Elternhaus von Gustl [...] hatte man mehr Freiheit, und vor allem gab es da im großen Hof einen alten Ziehbrunnen, wo man sich mit Wassers schöpfen die Zeit vertreiben konnte. Es machte viel Spaß, das schwere Holzrad zu drehen, den hölzernen Eimer über den Brunnenrand zu heben, ihn aus dem Brunnenhaus herauszuholen und das Wasser in den bereitgestellten Kübel zu gießen. Dies alles gab es nur noch bei den Chomeds in der Töpfergasse...", Chalfen, *Paul Celan*, 54. The image of a "sunken landscape"

and operated by the Bukovina Jewish diaspora after World War II, Chalfen wrote “doch der ‘Brunnen’ evoziert noch ein Bild: das des ländlichen Ziehbrunnens, wie er in Celans Jugend in seiner Heimatstadt zu sehen war. In der Töpfergasse, bei seinem Freunde Gustl Chomed, bediente der junge Paul sehr gerne den Ziehbrunnen, wenn er dort zu Gast war.“ According to Chalfen, Celan invokes this well in the poem “Oben geräuschlos”:

(Erzähl von den Brunnen, erzähl
von Brunnenkranz, Brunnenrad, von
Brunnenstuben – erzähl.¹²⁰

and indeed uses the word “Brunnenland” (in the poem “So bist du denn geworden“) to evoke in general the pre-World War II world.¹²¹ In his postwar correspondence with Chomed, Celan refers nostalgically to the Chomed family, their home, and street: “Und wo ist Deine Schwester Babette? Ach weisst Du, ich wollte, ich wohnte noch dort – nicht nur die Töpfergasse war ... menschlich.“¹²²

is often used to refer to the prewar German-Jewish symbiosis and multicultural environment of Czernowitz and Bukovina. For an overview and survey of this concept see here especially Fisher, “‘Sunken Cultural Landscape’: Reimagining Bukovina through the Lens of Literature,” in *Resettlers and Survivors*. The idea of a “lost” world is frequently invoked, for example Helmut Braun, *Czernowitz: die Geschichte einer untergegangenen Kulturmetropole* (Links-Verl., 2005) or Francisca Solomon et al, eds., *Jüdische / Jiddische Kultur in der Bukowina – Diskursive Fragmente einer Untergegangenen Welt* (Hartung-Gorre Verlag, 2020).

¹²⁰ Paul Celan, „Oben, geräuschlos,“ in *Sprachgitter* (Fischer Verlag, 1959). English translation by Pierre Joris:

(Tell of the wells, tell
of the well-wreath, well-wheel, the
well-parlours–tell.

Paul Celan, *Memory Rose Into Threshold Speech: The Collected Earlier Poetry*, trans. Pierre Joris (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2020), 217.

¹²¹ Israel Chalfen, „Paul Celan – sieben Jahre später,“ in *Die Stimme*, 1.8.1977, p. 7. Chalfen closes this article with the statement that Celan’s poetry is not only of general importance, but also especially “für die ehemaligen Landsleute, die aus seinem ‚Brunnenland‘ kommen” because it evokes “jener Landschaft und jener Sprache, denen ihre Jugendliebe gehörte.” The word *Brunnenland* is from „So bist du denn geworden,“ *Mohn und Gedächtnis* (Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt GmbH, 1952). For the other references to *Brunnen* in Celan’s poetry, please see Chalfen’s article.

¹²² Paul Celan to Gustav Chomed, 28.I.1962, published in Celan and Chomed, “...*ich brauche Deine Briefe...*,” 17. Gustav, who still lived in Czernowitz at the time, responded soberly to Paul’s nostalgic concept of the Töpfergasse: “Die Töpfergasse, liebes Paulchen, mit all dem was in, auf und um ihr war – die gibt es schon lang nicht mehr. ‚Das ist schon lange her und nicht wahr‘ heisst es sehr treffend auf russisch. Es ist nur noch eine Erinnerung, die in – einigen – Herzen lebt. Du brauchst also nicht zu bedauern. Die Tragödie unseres Lebens ist nicht die, dass die Töpfergasse verschwunden ist. Die Tragödie liegt darin, dass es sie eigentlich gar nicht gegeben hat, ausser in unserer Vorstellung,“ Gustav Chomed to Paul Celan, 17.II 1962, in Celan and Chomed, “...*ich brauche Deine Briefe...*,” 21-22. Gustav Chomed fled to the Soviet interior when the Romanian army invaded in June 1941 and was in Swerdlowsk until 1944, when he returned to Ukraine and joined the Red Army. After six months on the front his German skills were recognised and he worked as a translator for the Red Army in various locations, including during the Nürnberg trials. At the end of 1946 he returned to Czernowitz but the border to Romania was already closed, so he could not join his sister,



Figure 12. The well in the garden of the former Windbeutel/Chomed home at Töpfergasse 1 still exists today. Source: Julie Dawson, Czernowitz, 2024.

While acknowledging this overlapping of space and social world to probably the most well-known child of Czernowitz, this work is consciously positioned outside the (still shifting and growing) “canon” of writing on Czernowitz. Doubtless, Blanka’s parents had a strong Czernowitz link, but it is the fact that she *did not* live in the bustling city, that she grew up in a rural landscape while coming from an assimilated background, which marks her story as singular in many ways. Indeed, this influenced her postwar fate, arguably in a negative fashion, as her network was simply much smaller than the many thousands of survivors displaced from Czernowitz who also crossed the border to Romania. The absence of any reference to Blanka and her brother, Bruno, in letters, photos, or memoirs by contemporary Czernowitzers both indicates and underscores the invisibility of the periphery, also in memory.

Indeed, Blanka’s story is primarily a story of the Bukovina periphery, a marginal space that has received little attention, perhaps as a result of the magnetism of Czernowitz itself. As referenced above, the culture efflorescence of multiethnic, interwar Czernowitz has been explored by scholars from a range of disciplines, while we know far less about the small towns and villages on the Bukovina margins. And yet, here too Jewish life flourished, though details are murky: how,

Babette, at that time in Bucharest. Celan’s lines in English: “And where is your sister, Babette? Ach, you know, I wish I still lived there – not only the Töpfergasse was ... humane.”

on a smaller scale did interethnic strife or cooperation play out? How did the many variations of Jewish existence, from assimilation to orthodox observance and everything in between, prominent in the early 20th century, appear on a small scale, how did individuals negotiate the microcosm? By seeking to understand Blanka's life and her family's position, I found myself confronted with these questions and I address them in more detail in the chapters below dedicated to her family and pre-World War II background.

After their marriage in 1911, Josef and Anna Lebzelter immediately left Czernowitz – at the time Josef was stationed in the tiny village of Uscie Putilla, over 100 km away and not even on a train line. By the interwar period the Lebzelters were closer, they could probably come to Czernowitz – now, as part of Romania, called Cernăuți – for a day trip, having settled in the small town and (at times) administrative centre of Waschkoutz/Vășcăuți, about thirty-five km to the west, on the Czeremosch River and just across the border from interwar Poland (the province of Galicia, during the Habsburg period). At the latest by 1921 Josef had been appointed communal secretary in Vășcăuți, a post he held throughout the interwar period until his retirement, probably in 1937. With them in Vășcăuți was Josef's brother, who in documents is called Chaim Heiss, but whom Blanka referred to as “Uncle Siegmund.” Chaim/Siegmund Heiss and his family played a crucial role in Blanka's life and they will be discussed in greater detail in Chapters 5 and 6.

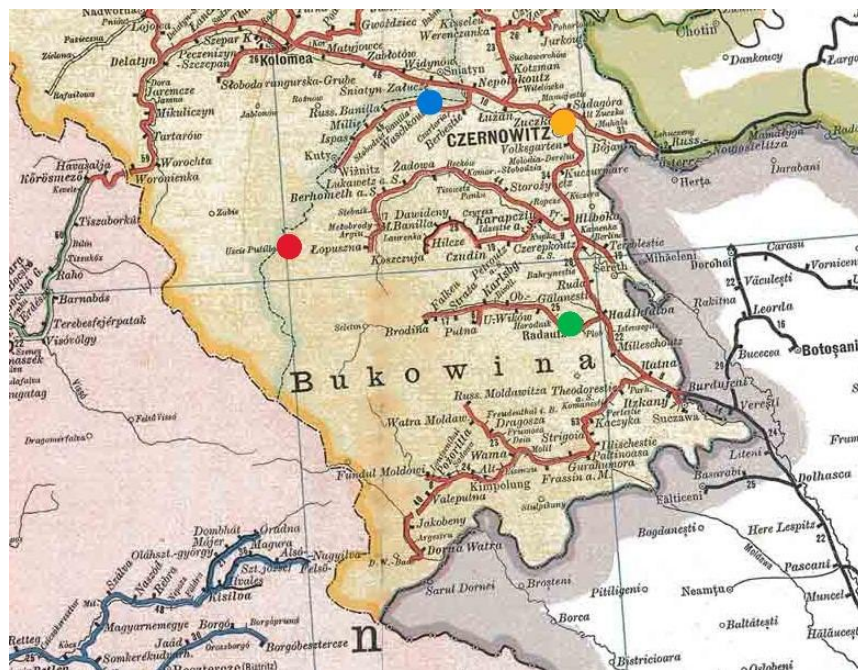


Figure 13. Map of train lines in Bukovina and part of Galicia. Towns relevant to this work are marked in colour. Source: See footnote 123.

In the map above, Czernowitz is marked in yellow, Waschkoutz/ Vășcăuți is blue, Uscie-Putilla is red, and Radautz/Rădăuți (the birthplace of Josef Lebzelter) is green.¹²³ Zamostie, the birthplace of Bruno and probably Blanka, is not depicted on the map but is ten km from Waschkoutz/ Vășcăuți. In Vășcăuți the children presumably visited the local elementary school. It seems likely that both attended gymnasium, though there was not one in Vășcăuți itself. By the mid-late 1930s Bruno was studying architecture and by 1941 he had completed his degree with distinction and returned home to Vășcăuți, where Blanka still lived with her parents.¹²⁴

Several potent details about Blanka's youth, her leisure interests, and even social and cultural convictions, are captured summarily in her emotional recounting of falling in love in the spring of 1941. Her brother had recently introduced her to Walter, a doctor and acquaintance of his who had studied in Prague. In a letter she wrote in 1955 to Walter, who was killed in 1941, Blanka reminisced:

1. Mai 1941. Ein Tag den ich niemals vergessen werde. Es war ein schöner, sonniger, warmer Frühlingstag. Unser Obstgarten stand in voller Blütenpracht. Ich hielt mich an diesem Nachmittag zum ersten Mal länger im Garten auf, entzückt von seiner Pracht und dem herrlichen Duft. Plötzlich erschienst Du. Ich freute mich über Dein Kommen denn ich war so recht in Stimmung mich mit einem netten Menschen zu unterhalten. Und wir unterhielten uns, merkten gar nicht wie die Stunden vergingen. Als wir auf meine Markensammlung zu sprechen kamen, wolltest Du sie sehen. Es war inzwischen kühl geworden und ich bat Dich ins Haus. Wir saßen in meinem Zimmer und Du besahst Dir meine Markensammlung, das Album mit den Filmstars, die Bücher. Dann erzähltest Du mir einige Episoden aus Deiner Studienzeit in Prag. Von Deiner „Statistenlaufbahn“ in Oper und Theater. Viele Studenten gaben sich dazu her um ein paar Kronen zu verdienen, doch Du hast es getan um die Theaterwelt hinter

¹²³ “Artaria's Eisenbahnkarte von Österreich-Ungarn und den Balkanländern,” Artaria & Comp, 1911. The map is in the public domain and was retrieved via https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Austro-Hungarian_railway_map.jpg on 3. April 2024.

¹²⁴ According to Blanka, in the letter she wrote in 1955 to Bruno: „Hattest Du nicht alle Prüfungen mit „vorzüglich“ bestanden, suchte man nicht Deine Mitarbeit zu Grossbauten schon während Deiner Studienzeit, und waren nicht alle Professoren und Ingenieure sich darin einig dass Du es in der Architektur weit bringen wirst?“ English: “Had you not passed all your tests with “excellent,” were you not already sought out, even while you were still studying, to work with on [projects of] large buildings, and were not all professors and engineers in agreement that you would go far in architecture?”

den Kulissen kennenzulernen. Während Du einen drolligen Zwischenfall erzähltest und ich herzlich lachtest rissst Du mich plötzlich in Deine Arme und küsstest mich. Von diesem Tag an waren wir unzertrennlich. Du kamst zu mir ins Büro so oft Du konntest, auch wenn es nur für wenige Minuten war; und die ganze freie Zeit verbrachten wir zusammen.¹²⁵

From this short excerpt we learn that at twenty-five Blanka worked in an office, she collected stamps and cards of film stars, she treasured her books, thought highly of those who appreciated theatre and opera, and was charming and attractive in the eyes of her brother's friend, a doctor.

Walter, whose last name I have not discovered, is the only (somewhat) major figure in Blanka's story, about whom I have been unable to discover information.¹²⁶ He and Blanka became quickly engaged, but before they could finalise plans to wed, he was notified of transfer. In spring of 1941 northern Bukovina had been occupied by the Soviets for close to one year; public and private institutes and structures were rapidly Sovietised. It is not clear whether Walter had selected a position in Vășcăuți (under the Soviets, technically now called Vashkivtsi or Vashkovtsy) or been appointed there. As a doctor now within the Soviet system, Walter was to be transferred to a village without medical facilities and establish a practice there. Serving to underline the circumscribed world in which Blanka was raised, as well as her (and presumably her family's) conviction of the progressive civilised character of Bukovina (and indicating a shared cultural background between herself and Walter), his transfer to an "entferntes bessarabisches Dorf das nie einen Arzt gesehen hatte"¹²⁷ is interpreted by both Blanka and Walter as a banishment (*Verbannung*). Walter questioned whether he could ask such a sacrifice of Blanka, who, according to her letter, in true Hollywood style, assured him she would "follow him to the Sahara." His transfer took immediate effect. They planned for him to soon take a brief leave, return to Vășcăuți for the wedding, and then move together to the "far-off Bessarabian village." The two never saw one another again.

¹²⁵ This letter is transcribed and translated in its entirety in the annex.

¹²⁶ During the process of research, perhaps due to her elusiveness in traditional archives – and especially digitised fonds – more than one person has questioned whether Blanka herself in fact existed, suggesting she might have been a construct of another person. I do not doubt that Blanka existed, I have found in the years of research enough evidence. The only figure about whom I sometimes questioned whether he could be a construct is Walter. However, Blanka also mentions him in passing in one diary entry and I believe that the fact that I cannot find his trace is due to my lacking his last name, rather than that he was a fantasy of Blanka's imagination.

¹²⁷ English: "a distant Bessarabian village which had never seen a doctor."

Several weeks after Walter's departure, Operation Barbarossa began and the Romanian army invaded northern Bukovina, reclaiming territory which the Soviets had occupied under the Hitler-Stalin pact. Pogroms took place in countless villages and towns in rural Bukovina, as well as in Czernowitz. Blanka's father and brother, Josef and Bruno Lebzelter, were killed in these bloody days, together with twenty other men from Vășcăuți. The Lebzelter's home was plundered and soon afterwards the women, Anna and Blanka, were deported to Transnistria. With the aid of a friend of her father's Blanka learned that Walter had been killed as well.

Transnistria, literally "beyond the Nister [River]," was an arbitrarily created territory between the Dniester and southern Bug rivers ceded by the Germans to Romania in the summer of 1941. The region had belonged to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic but had not existed as a unified territory as such.¹²⁸ The region became a dumping ground of sorts for Jews deported by the Romanians from Bessarabia, Bukovina, and Dorohoi (administratively joined to Bukovina in the interwar period, but not a part of historic Bukovina). Herded into hundreds of makeshift "camps" which could denote anything from abandoned (or occupied) homes to shacks, shelters intended for animals, or empty terrain surrounded by fencing, thousands would perish from starvation, disease, and exposure. What has come to be known as the "Romanian Holocaust" or the "Transnistrian Holocaust" saw the deaths of between 250,000 and 300,000 Jews at the hands of the Romanian state.¹²⁹

¹²⁸ I will not rehash the administrative details of the territory here, which has been done by others: see Vladimir Solonari, *A Satellite Empire*; Jeffrey Veidlinger, "Life beyond the River: Transnistria," in *In the Shadow of the Shtetl: Small-Town Jewish Life in Soviet Ukraine* (Indiana University Press, 2013), esp. 186–189; and Dumitru, "Jews and Their Neighbors in Occupied Transnistria," *The State, Antisemitism, and Collaboration in the Holocaust*, esp. 176–181. The Jewish population in the region of Transnistria before the war was approximately 300,000, with 180,000 of those being in the only major city, Odessa. Veidlinger, *In the Shadow of the Shtetl*, 187.

¹²⁹ That the deaths followed an antisemitic ideology of the "purification" of the state has been proven by scholars. For a concise overview of numbers, dates, and administrative orders, see Dennis Deletant, "Transnistria and the Romanian Solution to the 'Jewish Problem,'" in *The Shoah in Ukraine: History, Testimony, Memorialization*, eds. Wendy Lower and Ray Brandon (Indiana University Press, 2008), 156–189. The exact numbers of the dead are disputed and difficult to verify completely. I use the figures quoted by Deletant: he cites 147,000 deported Bukovinian and Bessarabian Jews, of which 90,000 perished and 57,000 survived. In addition, an estimated 130,000 to 170,000 local Ukrainian Jews were killed or died of starvation, disease, or exposure. Deletant, "Transnistria," in *Shoah in Ukraine*, 157, fns. 4 and 5. The numbers for Transnistria in general are also complex. Hilberg's figures differ somewhat: he estimates that, of the 160,000 deportees from Bukovina and Bessarabia, approximately 51,000 were alive (so 109,000 had died) in September 1943. Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Yale University Press, 2003), 847–848. Regardless of the precise figures, experts generally agree that more or less one-third of the deportees survived. I discuss Transnistria in greater detail in Chapter 6. Portions of the text above as well as Chapter 6 on Transnistria have been previously published in my article, Dawson, "Survival in the Ghetto of Moghilev-Podolsky."

Blanka and her mother were in the large ghetto of Moghilev-Podolsky, a town on the Nistru river and a transit hub in Romanian-administrated Transnistria. She refers to these years and associated privations with extreme rarity and provides almost no details of how she and her mother survived. Chapter six addresses the context of Moghilev and goes into more detail about what aspects of their experience may have held.

In March 1944 they were freed by the Soviet army and made their way overland back to Czernowitz. If she did not know before, here Anna would have learned that her sister, Zirl, was also killed in Transnistria.¹³⁰ By August 1944 at the latest Anna and Blanka had returned to Waschkoutz. Here Anna submitted a form stating her damages in the war, she listed 85,500 rubles of damages, including food stuffs, watches, furniture, kitchenware, and clothing.¹³¹

In 1945, Romania's fate did not seem sealed, whereas Czernowitz and the rest of northern Bukovina was in the certain process of being formally annexed to the Ukrainian SSR. Along with thousands of other Bukovina Jews, Anna and Blanka were given the choice: to remain in Soviet Czernowitz or cross the border to Romania, which since August 1944, when King Michael returned, was a partial monarchy. As citizens of interwar Romania, they were permitted to make this choice, but only within a certain time period.¹³² Joining many thousands of others, Anna and

¹³⁰ Celan and Chomed, “*...ich brauche Deine Briefe...*,” 74. I have not found any details about Zirl Chomed's presence in Transnistria or any details about her death. However, Babette Chomed was in Bershad (one of the many deportation sites in Transnistria) and most likely Zirl Chomed was with her and died there or during the deportation. Babette Chomed's name is on “List of inmates in the Berșad Ghetto who were sent to various forced labor, 01/09/1943,” item ID 10862285, digitised by Yad Vashem, retrieved 28. Feb. 2025. The original document is held by the State Archive of Odessa. She is also listed on the document “List of Jews from Romania deported to Berșad, October 30, 1942,” item ID 8154783, digitised by Yad Vashem, with the original again located at the State Archive of Odessa, retrieved 28. Feb. 2025. Please note that the latter document is mistranslated. It is in fact a list of Jews in Bershad who received transfers of money from outside parties. This document was also available on request via the USHMM under the correct title “Tabel de remiterile făcute evreilor din țară evacuați în Transnistria,” ID 9782 (also partially inaccurate as there is no reference to Bershad). The USHMM states the document is from the collection “Odessa Oblast Archives records.” There is no information from Yad Vashem or USHMM regarding the original fond numbers for these documents or location within collections (folder number). I received the digital version of the page with Babette Chomed's name on it from the USHMM on 2 July 2024. The accompanying email from the USHMM stated that this document was from “RG-31.004M.” This illustrates the advantages and disadvantages of digitisation: a wealth of documents are available to the researcher, but the digitising institutions often fail to provide full citation of provenance. Additional details on World War II and Transnistria will be discussed in a later chapter.

¹³¹ “Report no. 160, 11. August 1944, Lebtzelter, Anna,” item ID 6543318, source collection “Documentation regarding damage to property and human life in Vashkovtsy district, collected by the Soviet Extraordinary State Commission, 08/1944,” Yad Vashem, Jerusalem. The original document was retrieved here <https://collections.yadvashem.org/en/names/6543318> on 27. May 2022. At the time of completion of the present work, the document no longer appears there, rather only the name of Anna Lebtzelter appears. In May 2022 I saved the document and had it translated. I am very grateful to Asia Fruman for translation from the Russian. The Yad Vashem record does not note where the original documents are stored.

¹³² On this migration, see Vadim Altskan, “The Closing Chapter: Northern Bukovinian Jews 1944-1946,” *Yad Vashem Studies* 43, no. 2 (2015): 51-81.

Blanka chose to leave Soviet Bukovina, they crossed the border at Siret on 26 March 1946.¹³³ Families became separated once more. Babette Chomed crossed the border even earlier, on 15 March 1946 but her brother, Gustav was serving with the Red Army and did not return to Czernowitz until the end of 1946, when it was no longer permitted to cross the border to Romania.

Displaced persons or “repatriates” as they were called within the Romanian system, were flooding Romania. Sometimes entire communities relocated together, but a degree of agency seemed also to exist, perhaps due to the sheer chaos of thousands crossing at the border within a manner of days. In later years, Blanka wrote as if she were able to choose where to go and that, as a woman attracted to foreign languages and peoples and with a romantic idea of the sea, she was actively involved in their relocating to the harbour town of Constanța: “Ich dachte ans Meer, an den Hafen und dass es eine grosse interessante Stadt sein müsse”¹³⁴ she wrote in 1955, by which time she had decided, however, that her choice had been ill-made.

From their arrival in April 1946 to the start of the first recovered diary in January 1948, we know little of how the two women established themselves. Probably they went immediately to the Jewish community, out of which the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), a Jewish welfare organisation founded in 1914, active around the world and up until the present time, would have operated. Here, at the least, they could receive a daily meal from the community canteen, they may also have received a place to sleep, that is, a common room. Their first flat was shared with two other families, but in January 1947 they were able to move to a room of their own in the town centre described by Blanka as “very lovely.” This solution, however, lasted only a few months, in spring 1947, they were forced to relocate to a small room with a single window looking onto a narrow courtyard, but the location, in the town centre, was “not to be underestimated” according to Blanka.¹³⁵

It is upon this backdrop that the diaries open, with the two women living in a cramped and poorly ventilated space, subsisting on a precarious income comprised of Anna’s meagre pension

¹³³ “Tabel-Nominal de repatriații din U.R.S.S. veniți prin punctul de frontieră Tereblecea/Siret,” Prefectura județului Rădăuți, fond nr. 101, inv. 231, folder 48/1946, Arhivele Naționale Suceava, Suceava. My gratitude again goes to the Edgar Hauser who compiled this list into several Excel sheets for easy searching of names, they are retrievable here <https://radauti.blogspot.com/2009/12/repatriates-at-ussrromanian-border.html>. In the original documents one learns that Anna and Blanka remained at the border for three days and were given 1,000 Lei per day for food. This money was most likely provided by the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), an international Jewish welfare organisation.

¹³⁴ English: “I thought of the sea, the harbour, and that it must be a large, interesting city.” This letter is transcribed in full prior to Chapter 6.

¹³⁵ These details are recounted in the earliest ego-document from Blanka, the letter to Babette Chomed written 22 June 1947 (in the annex). At that time Babette lived in Bucharest.

and Blanka's unpredictable earnings as a cinema technician.¹³⁶ The main themes of the following years until her emigration in 1961 will be covered in detail in the following chapters, as a frame of reference, however, I provide below a basic overview.

From 1948 to 1949 Blanka was primarily occupied with activities and incidents related to a Zionist organisation which she joined in early 1948. The Romanian King Michael had abdicated in December 1947, thus the year of 1948 was the first year of full communist power. State policies, attitudes, and expectations shifted drastically and without notice during these twelve months. At this point there was still an expectation that a large *aliyah* (emigration to Palestine) would be permitted and Zionist organisations put forth that only members of organisations who had absolved a training regime (*hachshara*) would be permitted to emigrate. In truth, no one knew who would be permitted to leave and least of all those without government influence. At the insistence of the Zionist organisation, Blanka also participated in a training programme in the town of Piatra Neamţ, but by January 1949 Zionist organisations were made illegal across the country. Her group was disbanded and she returned to Constanţa. 1949 passed in a state of anticipation and spiralling poverty as it became clear that emigration was anything but certain. Finally, bitter but resigned to the reality, by the summer of 1949 Blanka began searching for a job and a larger flat. In October the women finally secured a two-room apartment and on 15. November 1949 Blanka began working at the Cooperative "Plugul" (the plow).

The years 1950–1951 saw a large emigration wave and Blanka and Anna joined hundreds of thousands of others in applying for exit visas, expecting to leave. During this period Anna was in and out of the hospital for a variety of reasons. Blanka continued to work for the cooperative, but her focus for most of 1950 and 1951 was anticipating emigration. In June 1950, however, her application for emigration was rejected, while Anna's was approved. The women decided not to separate, not least due to Anna's health issues and until the beginning of 1952, much of Blanka's energy was devoted to submitting petitions and memorandums to the authorities appealing her denied emigration application.

1952 saw her focus jolted elsewhere as Anna's health problems became graver. At the end of February Anna was admitted to a hospital and a few days later had received a diagnosis of tuberculosis. In March the doctors instructed Blanka to transfer her mother to a T.B. sanatorium in

¹³⁶ It is unclear whether the pension Anna received was due to her status as a widow of a state official or as a victim of wartime persecution, most likely the former.

the small village, Păulești, just outside the industrial centre of Ploiești, northwest of Bucharest. Grudgingly, but trusting the doctor's orders, Blanka and her mother, severely ill by this time, undertook the almost twenty-hour journey by train and bus. On 29 April 1952 Anna was admitted to the sanatorium in Păulești and two weeks later, on 13 May 1952, she died and was buried on 16 May in the Ploiești Jewish cemetery. Her mother's death and the way in which it occurred—in a foreign space amongst strangers far from her daughter—served to retraumatise Blanka. The following years she repeatedly described the events and circumstances leading to her mother's death, chastening herself for perceived mistakes. Her helplessness, grief, and lack of agency in the face of her mother's suffering and death imprinted itself enduringly upon her sense of identity. Moreover, her new permanent state of complete isolation, that is, of living in an environment with no living family members nor indeed any close communal network, shattered any vestiges of optimism.

In February 1953 she was laid off at the Cooperative Plugul, but in less than a month had secured a new position at "Universal."¹³⁷ However, in September 1953 here too she was laid off. After several months of searching and applying for positions, in early December 1953 she secured a trial position in accounting at the beauty care cooperative "Higiena." At all three places of employment she worked in the administrative section, generally in accounting, and was loath to assume duties associated with positions requiring less qualification (such as cashiers). Blanka was to retain her position at Higiena until the end of 1958, when she resigned from her administrative position out of protest due to antisemitic colleagues and chose to assume a cashier's position at a smaller branch of the beauty care cooperative. However, by this time Blanka was herself suffering from severe health issues. For the first months of 1959 she was too ill to work, by June she had applied for and received approval for temporary pensioning (six months) due to illness. In fact, she was not to return to full employment. Her last years in Constanța she was wracked with illness, almost certainly caused in part by severe anxiety and depression. In addition to her antisemitic environment at work, her neighbours, with whom she shared a hallway, harassed her verbally and emotionally daily and even assaulted her physically. Her numerous complaints to authorities received no active response. Then, in 1959 her former employer sued her and others in the accounting department for mismanagement of funds and she, along with the others, were taken to

¹³⁷ Blanka described "Universal" as a *Handelsunternehmen*, a generic term for a commercial establishment, i.e. a store.

court. Her entries in 1960 and 1961 are few, the writing is cramped, and she appears on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

Though her place of employment, her abusive neighbours, and the various intrigues and frustrations associated with these influenced her life greatly, both financially and emotionally, Blanka's life during these years did not consist only of work and conflict. She participated in the cultural life in Constanța, especially in the mid-late 1950s, regularly attending the theatre, opera, and especially any performances by international troupes. She attended literary readings, wrote to well-known authors, and wrote and submitted a screen play to the state film studio. Throughout the 1950s she maintained a close friendship with another young woman, also an accountant, whose mother-tongue was also German and whose mother was Jewish, but who was not affiliated with the Jewish community—just as Blanka did not affiliate. In 1956 she reconnected with her cousin Bertha, the daughter of her Uncle Siegmund (Chaim Heiss), her father's brother. She visited both Bertha and Siegmund, both of whom were still living in Bukovina, in the southern part which belonged to Romania. Her relationship to Bertha became very important to her and they began a regular correspondence. Blanka did not marry though she had numerous proposed suitors, generally arranged through acquaintances. With few exceptions, she was the party who rejected the proposals, commenting "Eines weiss ich, statt einen Mann zu heiraten der mir nicht gefällt, für den ich gar keine Neigung empfinde, ziehe ich vor allein zu bleiben."¹³⁸

In the late 1950s emigration again became permitted. Blanka applied and watched as her friends and family received exit visas and departed. Her cousin Bertha left with her husband in January 1959 but it would be over two years before Blanka's own visa was granted.

The Postwar Stage¹³⁹

The Jewish population in postwar Romania was unlike any other in Europe. Approximately half of the Jewish population had survived the war, making it second only to the Soviet Union in size.

¹³⁸ 22. Nov. 1953. English: "I know one thing, rather than marrying a man whom I don't like, for whom I feel absolutely no affection, I prefer to remain alone." I do not discuss these proposals in greater detail, though they are interesting for what they reveal about her shifting attitude, from a romantic view to pragmatism, towards partnership, love, and solitude. Late in the diaries she regretted not having married as it would have, she believed, offered an escape from loneliness. But earlier on she wrote she would not marry if she did not love the man. She also laments the death of her fiancé, Walter, in this context.

¹³⁹ Portions of this section and Chapter 3 were published in my article: Julie Dawson, "'As to my emotional anguish, there are days when I feel endlessly miserable...': Hachsharot in Early Post-War Romania and the Limits of Belonging," in "Training for Aliyah: Young Jews in Hachsharot across Europe between the 1930s and late 1940s," eds. Verena Buser and Chiara Renzo, *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History* 21, no.1 (2022): 155-184.

Numbering between 350,000 and 400,000, this group was fundamentally diverse, not only in their prewar background, linguistic, and cultural affiliations, but also, and of great significance, their wartime fate.¹⁴⁰

Some of those from northern Transylvania, the few survivors of Auschwitz and other Nazi camps, returned to their Transylvanian homes. Frequently, they returned initially, perhaps to seek for family and friends, but then moved elsewhere. Many remained, at least for a time, within the country.¹⁴¹ Survivors of the Romanian-run Transnistrian camps and ghettos, generally from Bukovina or the interwar territory of Bessarabia, began returning in 1944 and in 1946 many thousands crossed from northern Bukovina, now part of the U.S.S.R., into Romania. Meanwhile, the Jewish populations of Wallachia, southern Transylvania, and other southern regions had survived relatively unscathed, though antisemitic legislation, regional excesses, and killings traumatised certain areas more than others.¹⁴² Almost certainly everyone had somewhere lost relatives or friends, but personal experiences varied dramatically. This diverse group of survivors claimed mother tongues of Romanian, Hungarian, German, Yiddish, and Russian; there were moreover, refugees from other parts of Europe in transit, drawn to the Black Sea port where there was always the hope—and sometimes the genuine possibility—that a ship would leave for Palestine.

¹⁴⁰ From 1946 to 1948 population estimates range between 372,000 and 428,000 according to various sources in Table 1, Hildrun Glass, *Minderheit zwischen zwei Diktaturen: Zur Geschichte der Juden in Rumänien 1944-1949* (Oldenbourg Verlag, 2002), 311. A 1949 Securitate report gives the population as 350,000. “Problema Evreeasca, 18. Feb. 1949,” p. 1, Fond documentar Constanța, CNSAS D002873, vol. 4, Consiliul Național pentru Studierea Arhivelor Securității, Bucharest.

¹⁴¹ See “Registers I and II: Jews from Sighet who returned from work detachments and deportation camps,” Box R1, Sighetu Marmăției Jewish Community Collection, Sighetu Marmăției Jewish Community Archives, Sighetu Marmăției, Romania. According to these registers, within a relatively short period many returned deportees moved away from Sighet but stayed within Romania (most eventually did emigrate).

¹⁴² Particularly brutal killings took place in Bucharest and Iași. On Iași see Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania*, 63-90 and on Bucharest, *ibid.*, 57-60.



Figure 14. Romania in 1941, depicting northern Transylvania annexed by Hungary and Bessarabia and northern Bukovina annexed by the Soviet Union. Source: See footnote 145.

The years immediately after the war were chaotic and little has been written about the reestablishment of the Jewish community.¹⁴³ According to contemporary testimonies, such as rabbi Alexander Safran's memoirs, the early years were marked by pernicious and venomous infighting, caused by clashing ideologies regarding the future of Jewish life after the Shoah and base power struggles.¹⁴⁴ The leadership was taxed primarily with attempting to provide welfare and relief to the destitute and broken survivors of Transnistria and the German camps, while also negotiating policies with the shifting regimes.¹⁴⁵ Refugees from both, though especially the former, streamed into virtually all intact communities country-wide. These local communities established their own various methods and means for providing for the survivors, relying on donations and assistance

¹⁴³ A notable exception is Glass, *Minderheit zwischen zwei Diktaturen*. The volume deals primarily with the elites and leadership of the community. See also Ancel, "She'erit Hapletah in Romania." Ancel provides a useful synthesis of this precarious period, while also focusing primarily on community leadership. Stefan Ionescu's new book (2024) fills a big gap in this regard, Ionescu, *Justice and Restitution in Post-Nazi Romania*.

¹⁴⁴ Safran, *Resisting the Storm*, especially chapter 10 "Conflicts and Rivalries," 189-206.

¹⁴⁵ Figure 14 citation: *USHMM Holocaust Encyclopedia*, retrieved here <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/map/romania-1941> on 19 March 2025.

from within the local community as well as aid from international organisations, such as the Joint Distribution Committee.¹⁴⁶



Figure 15. Romania after World War II, with Bessarabia and northern Bukovina lost to the Soviet Union. Source: See footnote 147.

Despite assistance, most survivors were, as a group, in shambles.¹⁴⁷ Thousands were displaced, suffering from illness, malnourishment, grief, dispossession, trauma, and dire poverty.¹⁴⁸ For many, if not most of the young, one idea consumed their thoughts: to leave Romania and begin anew elsewhere. Those with the physical, financial, or personal prowess—as well as a bout of good fortune—fled however they could, as soon as they could. These included the later well-known Bukovina authors Aharon Appelfeld, Edgar Hilsenrath, and Paul Celan, unattached young men at the time, all of whom managed to get out by 1947 at the latest.¹⁴⁹ Young and unattached young

¹⁴⁶ Many post-war community archives contain lists of those who received welfare and notes on whether aid was provided by outside organisations. See, for example, “Welfare lists. 1946”, Box R2, Sighetu Marmăției Jewish Community Collection, Sighetu Marmăției Jewish Community Archives, Sighetu Marmăției, Romania or “Chart of individuals receiving assistance (1946)”, Box SA44, Folder F1, Mediaș Jewish Community Collection, Mediaș Jewish Community Archives, Mediaș, Romania. Blanka explicitly mentions applying for medical assistance for her mother through the Joint (4 February 1949). Ancel argues that despite certain fundamental missteps, the Joint was responsible for saving “over half of Romania’s Jews from starvation and possible death” during the initial years after the war. Ancel, “She’erit Hapletah in Romania,” 157.

¹⁴⁷ Figure 15 citation: Wikipedia, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=34041> retrieved on 19 March 2025.

¹⁴⁸ See Ancel, “The New Jewish Invasion,” 231-256.

¹⁴⁹ Paul Celan (1920-1970) was smuggled over the Hungarian border in 1947 after a short period in Bucharest. Edgar Hilsenrath (1926-2018), who survived the same ghetto as Blanka, made his way overland to Bucharest in 1944, where he made contact with a Zionist organisation who organised false passports for him and several others, he was in Constantinople by the end of 1944, he asserts. Edgar Hilsenrath, HVT 3726, Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies (FVA), Yale University, New Haven, CT.

women also left, if they found the means.¹⁵⁰ However, notwithstanding the isolated tales of those who later published memoirs, the vast majority of survivors remained within the country with neither the physical, financial, nor legal means to depart. This applied in particular to the most vulnerable, to whom Blanka and her mother, as impoverished and physically frail female survivors lacking male protectors, must be counted. Blanka was, moreover, tasked with the responsibility of caring for her ill mother, a grave concern of which she was constantly aware.

Likewise, though many were interested in departing, during those initial years the urgency to emigrate that characterised the atmosphere beginning around 1948 was lacking. What or who precisely the new regime would be and how it would operate was not clear. People were preoccupied with rebuilding their lives—and understanding to what extent this was possible. The writer Petre Solomon recorded an artistically, intellectually, and socially vibrant setting for young Jews in 1947 Bucharest, complicating the (standard) narrative of Jews desperate to get out; similarly Pearl Fichman cited the “sudden burst of artistic creativity” in Bucharest in the years 1945-1947.¹⁵¹ In interviews and writings, other Czernowitz survivors of Blanka’s generation suggest that immediately after the war a collective feeling of guilt amongst the Romanians could be perceived and, according to one, it took “three to four years [for them] to realise that they are still the masters [...] and then [to] start being antisemit[ic].”¹⁵² Blanka herself noted in early 1948

¹⁵⁰ Testimonies from orphans or the very young (under twenty) indicate that this social group was eager to leave as quickly as possible. In a text “Leaving Home,” written in 1949 shortly after arriving in Israel, Chana Koffler recounts her departure in 1947 at the age of sixteen or seventeen (the text is in the private collection of Howard Wiesenthal). Also a survivor of Transnistria, she left her parents and sisters behind in Romania because she felt she was a financial burden to them and was desperate to begin learning or acquiring a skill, having had her schooling interrupted consistently since the age of ten. Ruth Glasberg-Gold (b. 1930, Czernowitz) left with a group of other orphans, see Glasberg-Gold, *Ruth’s Journey*, 161. Another example is Pearl Fichman (b. 1920, Czernowitz), who likewise left alone in 1947. Her case, however, was privileged in that her brothers were American citizens, who greatly facilitated the departure process. Her parents were first permitted to leave legally in June 1947 on a ship from Constanța. Pearl had acquired a legally valid student visa to study in America but transit visas and exit visas were also required; she was eventually granted both and departed Bucharest Sept. 1947. Pearl Fichman, *Before Memories Fade*, 118-120. Gerhard Schreiber (b. 1928, Czernowitz) specified the reluctance of the older generation to flee in a clandestine manner: “My father refused to join those who left illegally, he said he no longer has the stamina, to walk again with a knapsack, and to be on the run. I was a student at the Polytechnic, I was tempted to go, but I stayed with the lame excuse, that I’d rather finish my studies first.” Gerhard Bobby Schreiber, *A Tale of Survival (Or If Stalin Could Have Swallowed Hitler and Choked on It)*, (unpublished, no date), 37. http://czernowitz.ehpes.com/stories/schreiber/schreiber_memoirs2.pdf. Retrieved 26 August 2021.

¹⁵⁰ Fichman, *Before Memories Fade*, 123.

¹⁵¹ Fichman, *Before Memories Fade*, 123. For descriptions of Bucharest in these years see Petre Solomon, *Paul Celan: The Romanian Dimension* (Syracuse University Press, 2019).

¹⁵² Norbert Nadler, HVT 0536, Fortunoff Archive, Yale University, New Haven, CT. This sentiment is also expressed in the unpublished memoirs of another Czernowitzer, Gerhard Schreiber (also quoted above), who noted that in the immediate postwar years there was “great optimism all around” and regarding his Romanian teachers that “they were

that she was only “just beginning to mull emigration,” a wording that hardly lends the impression of a long-harboured plan to depart.

Two incidents caused a shift in the initial ambivalence amongst the Jewish population. One was the devastating currency reform of August 1947, which caused the evaporation of any savings or cash. Blanka refers to this reform multiple times over the years as one of the most crushing postwar events. Czernowitzer Pearl Fichman, in Bucharest at the time, wrote:

...the Communist Regime let the inflation run its course and then, devalued the currency. They issued a new kind of lei. Everybody could exchange 80,000 lei for 20 neu lei. The day before the exchange, I had 2 million lei. For that amount, I bought two pairs of hand crocheted summer gloves; there was nothing else available. I would have preferred to purchase a kilo meat, but that was out of the question, unrealistic thinking.¹⁵³

The second event was the rigged election and subsequent abdication of King Michael in December 1947, which brought the communist party to full power. In his recollections, Gerhard Schreiber, a Czernowitzer of Blanka’s generation, described his optimism prior to these events and asserted that by mid-1947 his family experienced their lives as “back to almost normal,” but after the currency reform and the election “the desire to leave became very strong.”¹⁵⁴

Zionist Organisations in Romania

Providing a desperate outlet for the postwar energies, frustrations, and aspirations of the youth and young people were numerous Zionist organisations active in every part of the country. Very little has been written about the activities and operations of Zionist organisations in Romania, at any point in time.¹⁵⁵ During the interwar period activity and participation differed from region to region

really sorry for what had happened to us, and in some way were trying to repair the terrible injustice that had befallen us.” Schreiber, *A Tale of Survival*, 36.

¹⁵³ Pearl Fichman, *Before Memories Fade*, 120. Schreiber also noted the “reform” as being the first of two “signs” that circumstances were deteriorating and it was time to begin thinking of departure. Schreiber, *A Tale of Survival*, 37.

¹⁵⁴ Schreiber, *A Tale of Survival*, 37.

¹⁵⁵ There are two articles on activities during the World War II period, these draw primarily on anecdotal accounts and documents available in Israeli archives. See Arie Steinberg, “Underground Activity of the Halutz Youth Movements in Romania” in *Zionist Youth Movements during the Shoah*, eds. Asher Cohen and Yehoyakim Cochavi (Peter Land, 1995), 309-320 and Shmuel Ben-Zion, “Youth Movements in Romania 1937-1942” in *ibid*, 301-308. For a chapter on the reconstruction of organisations in the postwar period, see Natalia Lazăr, “Organizațiile sioniste din România după 23 August 1944: Reconstrucție și dizolvare” in *Istorie și Memorie Evreiască*, eds. Anca Ciuciu and Camelia Crăciun

depending on the varied socio-economic circumstances and degree of assimilation of the Jewish population in former Habsburg territories versus the Russian and Old Kingdom regions.¹⁵⁶ Memoirs by Bukovina Jews often recall involvement in various Zionist groups, but there are no concrete figures and the evidence is anecdotal, often written by those who later successfully made *aliyah*, confirming a Zionist narrative, and of course, by those who survived the wartime atrocities.¹⁵⁷

(Hasefer, 2011), 172-188 and several pages by Hary Kuller, “Sionismul în anii tranziției spre comunism – studiu de caz” in *Buletinul Centrului, Muzeului și Arhivei istorice a evreilor din România*, ed. Hary Kuller (CSIER, 2008), 24-30. Glass writes a helpful overview on the issues of re-establishing structures and the internal ideological power struggles after the war: Glass, “Zionistische Organisationen” in *Minderheit*, 34-42. She also comments on the “multitude” of the groups and their many splinterings, noting “especially in the area of youth work, new [organisations] were constantly being created, others united only to, not infrequently, break up into separate groups again a short time later.” Indicative of the lack of overview in scholarship of the convoluted situation is her omission of Gordonia and Busselia, the organisations in which Blanka took part, in a list of groups (Busselia was the “mature youth” arm of Gordonia), Glass, *Minderheit*, 39 (Gordonia is mentioned in the Lazăr chapter and Kuller cites both of them). One of the few sources dedicated to developments in a specific place is Hugo Gold’s *Geschichte der Juden in der Bukowina*, which contains entries or chapters on the general history of the Zionist movement in Bukovina, specific histories of several Zionist fraternities (*Verbindung*), and the Hashomer Hazair movement: Hugo Gold, ed., *Geschichte der Juden in der Bukowina*, vol. 1 (Olamenu Press, 1958). One of the only memoirs devoting significant space to the Zionist movement and activities is Bernard Politzer, *Walachian years: Politico-cultural chronicle of a youth, 1940-1960* (Balaban Publishers, 2001). This lacuna is being filled by Anca Filipovici, who recently published an article on the interwar situation, Anca Filipovici, “Alternative identities at the periphery of a national state. Hashomer Hatzair and the Zionist youth from Romania,” in *Jüdische Jugend im Übergang – Jewish Youth in Transit: Selbstverständnis und Ideen in Zeiten des Wandels*, eds. Knut Bergbauer, Nora M. Kissling, Beate Lehmann, Ulrike Pilarczyk and Ofer Ashkenazi (De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2024), 251-270. Filipovici recently presented on the postwar period with her lecture “Rebuilding life: Zionist youth movements’ revival in post-Holocaust Romania,” at a workshop in Nov. 2024 hosted by the Institute for Habsburg and Balkan Studies of the Austrian Academy of Sciences.

¹⁵⁶ For a summary of these differences, see Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews in East Central Europe between the Wars* (Indiana University Press, 1983), 192-194. He describes the situation as “highly fragmented” (193). Glass summarises the interwar situation in two sentences, providing further sources on the movements in individual regions. Glass, *Minderheit*, 34. The only detailed study on participation in Zionist organisations during the interwar period is the recent article by Anca Filipovici, “Alternative identities.”

¹⁵⁷ The two-volume tome, *Geschichte der Juden in der Bukowina* contains detailed information on the establishment, members, leaders, and activities of Zionist organisations in Czernowitz, but despite the many names and dates, it is difficult to ascertain what percentage of the Jewish population was actually involved in the reported activities. As noted by Gaëlle Fisher, the explicit Zionist dimension of the publication “served to inscribe the history of Bukovinian Jews in a decidedly Zionist tradition,” with other experiences being underrepresented or not mentioned at all. Fisher, *Resettlers and Survivors*, 141. Dr. Leon Arie Schmelzer, “Geschichte des Zionismus in der Bukowina” in *Geschichte der Juden in der Bukowina*, 91-112. Certainly, Zionism had a strong following in Czernowitz but like all central and eastern European cities with significant Jewish populations, Czernowitz (and Bukovina) youth participated in the breadth of Jewish social-political movements, from far-left communism to rightwing Zionism. Prive Friedjung describes the leftist communist milieu in “‘Wir wollten nur das Paradies auf Erden’. Die Erinnerungen einer jüdischen Kommunistin aus der Bukowina (Böhlau Verlag, 1995). She links the leftwing political atmosphere amongst craftsmen specifically to Yiddish: “For me, Czernowitz means the symbiosis of Yiddishism and revolutionary thinking,” Friedjung, 132. According to one biographer, poet Paul Celan explicitly rejected the “petite bourgeois Zionism of his [father]” and instead was active in the non-Zionist leftwing antifascist movement, see Chalfen, *Paul Celan*, 60-64. References in memoirs or testimonies to participation in Zionist youth groups in Bukovina are too great to list, see for example *Zwischen Pruth und Jordan: Lebenserinnerungen Czernowitzer Juden*, eds. Gaby Coldewey et al (Böhlau Verlag, 2003).

Amongst the Romanian interwar regions, Bukovina and Bessarabia claimed the strongest *aliyah*-oriented Zionist movements, yet many personal reminiscences indicate that participation in Zionist groups amongst the youth was primarily a social enterprise, delineating identity in a multiethnic space, made more urgent by the Romanian antisemitism of the interwar years.¹⁵⁸ Czernowitzer Zvi Yavetz (1925-2013), later professor of ancient history in Tel Aviv, was little impressed with his first Zionist youth meeting in 1938, where the leaders spoke poor Hebrew and members seemed more interested in socialising rather than in any pragmatic preparations: “In our “ken” [literally “nest”] the good dancers were more appreciated than those who had mastered Hebrew grammar,”¹⁵⁹ he recalled. Though the Ha-Shomer Ha-Tza’ir movement was established after World War I by young people returning from Vienna (where they had fled during the war), there is little evidence that significant numbers of young people, even members of this highly ideological movement, in fact intended to emigrate to Palestine.¹⁶⁰ For the poor especially, *aliyah* and the costs associated with it, was completely out of reach. Yavetz wrote that regardless of how well the poor teachers of Hebrew might have mastered the language, “in their opinion Zionism was only a solution for rich Jews, those who could afford to pay 1,000 pounds sterling for a certificate [...]. Poor Jews would have to (in an emergency) depend on the Red Army, this was the only way for Romanian Jews to save themselves from the Nazis.”¹⁶¹ His own family, some of whom were relatively earnest about the Zionist movement, quickly renounced any serious emigration intent after the fall of the particularly antisemitic Cuza regime in 1938.¹⁶²

This situation of relative ambivalence towards Zionism changed dramatically after the war, as the Jewish population began to mobilise to leave en masse, and the key to departure was often believed to be held by Zionist organisations. In any case, the organisations asserted or encouraged such belief. Where prewar there may have been various options for operating or integrating in Romanian society, not least within established Jewish circles, the realities of the war had convinced many that there was little place in contemporary Romanian society for a fulfilling Jewish life.

¹⁵⁸ On Bessarabia and Bukovina as Zionist centres in relation to the rest of Romania, see Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe*, 193.

¹⁵⁹ Zvi Yavetz, *Erinnerungen an Czernowitz. Wo Menschen und Büchter lebten* (C.H. Beck, 2008), 123. For more on Zionist organisations specifically, see also 70-73, 101-102, 121-123.

¹⁶⁰ For details on the Ha-Shomer Ha-Tza’ir movement in Bukovina see Jaakow Polesiuk-Padan, “Die Geschichte der „Haschomer Hazair“ in der Bukowina“ in *Geschichte der Juden in der Bukowina*, 145-152. The first *hachshara* was established in 1924.

¹⁶¹ Yavetz, *Erinnerungen*, 176.

¹⁶² Yavetz, *Erinnerungen*, 48-74.

Aliyah seemed a reasonable bet for “starting a new life” as Blanka and countless others wrote. Whether one remained in Palestine long-term or not was beside the point, the desire to leave the space of the perpetrators was overpowering.¹⁶³ It is at this moment of Zionist effervescence, that the diaries open.

¹⁶³ On 1 August 1948 Blanka wrote “Nie habe ich so aufrichtig gewünscht nach Palestina zu fahren wie jetzt; nie habe so gewünscht ein neues Leben zu beginnen, wieder von vorne anzufangen wie jetzt.“ English: “Never have I so sincerely wished to go to Palestine as now; never have I so wished to start a new life, to start again at the beginning, as now.”

Diary excerpts: 28. Januar – 23. April 1948¹⁶⁴

Konstanza Mittwoch 28/I 1948

Habe am 1/I mein altes Tagebuch beendet und wollte gleich das neue anfangen, bin aber bis heute nicht dazu gekommen. Erstens hatte ich keine Zeit. Ich war vom 1/I bis 26/I permanent in „Capitol“ beschäftigt. Diese Woche bin ich nun arbeitslos, auf weitere Beschäftigung in meinem Fache, habe ich schwache Aussichten.

Da ich mich seit einigen Wochen mit dem Gedanken nach Palestina zu fahren herumtrage, bin vorigen Monat einer hiesigen zionistischen Organisation beigetreten. Doch leider fühle ich mich in letzter Zeit so elend, dass mein Mut erheblich gesunken ist.

Nachdem ich die Adresse von meinen Kousin Max in Palestina erfahren hatte, schrieb ich ihm einen Brief (es ist genau ein Monat seit damals) in welchem ich meinen Plan nach Palestina zu fahren mitteilte und um seine Ansicht bat. Einige Tage nach Abgang meines Briefes, kam ein Brief von Max. Er war nur kurz; er schrieb dass ihm durch Radio Jerusalem Grüße von mir übersendet wurden und er einen ausführlichen Brief erwarte. Dieser wird er hoffentlich bald haben, doch wie wird die Antwort lauten???

Habe vor einigen Tagen bei der hiesigen Vama¹⁶⁵ ein Paket aus Amerika ausgelöst. Den Avis hatte vor 6 Wochen von der Bukarester Vama Poștei erhalten. Ich beeilte mich nicht es wie gewöhnlich von Bukarest abzuholen. Inzwischen ist eine Änderung vor sich gegangen, die Pakete werden nun direkt nach Constanța geschickt. Ich erhielt für das gleiche Paket einen zweiten Avis von der hiesigen Vama und habe es dann gleich ausgelöst. Es ist ein sehr gutes Paket von netto 8 kg. Doch hatte ich dabei auch grossen Ärger. Die Vama Beamten haben mir 2 Schachteln Sacharin weggenommen.

Habe Samstag zu meinen amerikanischen Verwandten einen Brief geschrieben mich bedankt, und von meinem Palestina-Projekt gesprochen. Hoffentlich wird man mir antworten, sehe dieser Antwort mit neugieriger Spannung entgegen.

¹⁶⁴ All German-language original texts quoted here are translated into English in the annexes under the same heading, i.e. “Diary excerpts: 28. January – 23. April 1948.” Extended quotations within the following chapters are found in the annex corresponding to that chapter, i.e. “Chapter 3 – diary excerpt translations.”

¹⁶⁵ Romanian: customs office.

Ich war gestern bei dem rus. Film „Neînfrînții.“¹⁶⁶ Er spielt während der deutschen Okupation in der Ukraina und eine Episode zeigt eine Massenhinrichtung der jüdischen Bevölkerung. Diese Szenen haben alle meine noch nicht vernarbten Wunden aufgerissen, habe sehr geweint und stehe noch heute unter dem Eindruck des Geschauten.

Konstanza Samstag 7/II 1948

Bin von der zionistischen Organisation in welcher ich eingetragen war, in die zionistische Jugendorganisation „Buselia“ übertreten. In ersterer habe nur mit Namen am Papier figuriert, habe meinen Mitgliedsbeitrag bezahlt und sonst nichts mehr.

In die org. „Busselia“ komme ich oft. Nehme am hebräischen Unterricht teil, welcher 3 Mal wöchentlich stattfindet. Habe mir schon lange gewünscht die hebräische Sprache zu lernen und bin froh dass ich endlich Gelegenheit dazu habe. – Habe mich dieser Bewegung angeschlossen weil ich nichts zu verlieren habe und nicht aus Überzeugung. Ich wollte ich könnte mit dem Herzen bei dieser Sache sein, doch ist es leider nicht der Fall. Bald können Pflichten an mich herantreten, über kurz oder lang kann man mich auf „Hachscharah“ schicken und in meinem Innern wankt und schwankt es. Allerdings wenn ich Antwort aus Palestina und Amerika haben werde, so werde ich wissen woran ich bin.

Konstanța, Sonntag 22/II 48

Heute ist mein Geburtstag. Wieder einmal ein verlorenes Jahr abgeschlossen. Ein neues Glied an der Kette meiner leeren verlorenen Jahre. Ich bin ein sehr unglücklicher Mensch. Von meiner Geburt an haben stets unglückliche Umstände mein Leben beschattet. Die Natur war nicht gerade ungnädig mit mir, sie hat mir ein hübsches Gesicht und eine gute Figur gegeben und wenn ich nicht klug bin, so bin ich auch nicht ausgesprochen dumm und ziemlich intelligent. Wohl hatte und habe ich Mängel aber ich weiss genau dass diese infolge meines verunglückten Lebens entstanden

¹⁶⁶ The film, *Nepokorennye* (Kiev Studios, 1945) [*The Unvanquished*], by Mark Donskoi was filmed in 1944. The execution scene she described was filmed upon Babi Yar itself. The film, released in the Soviet Union in 1945, is generally considered by scholars to be the first feature film depicting the Shoah. The movie quickly disappeared from theatres in the Soviet Union, was screened in Poland in 1946, and ran for a short time in a handful of western countries. It appears to have played around the country in 1948, according to Romanian newspaper advertisements. A review appears in the regional Iași newspaper, “Neînfrînții” in *Lupta Moldovei*, 24 January 1948, p. 1-2. See Jeremy Hicks, *First Films of the Holocaust: Soviet Cinema and The Genocide of the Jews, 1938-1946* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), especially 134-156 and Olga Gershenson, “How a Soviet Novel turned into a Jewish Film: The First Depiction of the Holocaust on Soviet Screens, *The Unvanquished* (1945),” in *Phantom Holocaust: Soviet Cinema and Jewish Catastrophe* (Rutgers University Press, 2019), 40-56.

sind. – Doch das Schicksal war grausam mit mir; schon im Augenblick meiner Geburt, denn es gab mir Eltern die die Gabe Eltern zu sein niemals besaßen. Sie waren nicht schlechte Menschen, bloss schlechte Eltern, ganz verkehrt wie es sonst im Leben vorkommt, dass schlechte Menschen oft die besten Eltern sind. Dann musste ich leben in einem kleinen schäbigen Städtchen dass ich hasste und in dem ich immer zu ersticken glaubte. Doch am grausamsten verfuhr das Schicksal mit mir als es mir auf so furchtbare Weise meinen einzigen teuren Bruder entriss. Meinen treuen Bruder der mit all seinen glänzenden Eigenschaften auch für meine Zukunft Bürge gewesen wäre. Was waren die 3 Jahre Transnistria Lager mit ihren Martern und alle übrigen Verluste gegenüber diesen einen unersetzlichen Verlust, diesem wahnsinnigen Schmerz. Und dieser Schmerz hat meiner Person den Stempel aufgedrückt der mich zur Einsiedlerin gemacht. – Mag auch an meiner Person die Schuld liegen wenn mein Leben noch keine bessere Wendung genommen hat und noch nicht in ruhigem Fahrwasser fließt, die Hauptschuld liegt nicht bei mir sondern bei meinem Unglücksstern. Ein Unglücksstern verfolgt mich auf Schritt und Tritt und zeigt keine Lust seinen Platz einem mildern Stern zu überlassen.

Immer an Geburts- und Neujahrstagen pflegte ich heimlich Wünsche zum Himmel emporschicken. Nie hat sich auch nur einer erfüllt. Letztes Neujahr und heute habe mir nichts gewünscht. Bin nun vernünftiger. Schlechtes brauche mir nicht zu wünschen, das kommt schon alleine, und Gutes auch nicht denn es kommt sowieso nicht.

Konstanza 28/II 48 Samstag

Habe von Criterion-Film keine Beschäftigung mehr zu erwarten. Bekanntlich rollen keine amerikanischen oder englischen Filme mehr bei uns. (Bis auf seltene Ausnahmen) Diese Woche rollt ein Film von Criterion im Capitol. Habe gerechnet man werde mich mit der Kontrolle¹⁶⁷ beauftragen, doch habe ich mich getäuscht. Und so ist es um meinen Verdienst geschehen, bin darob sehr geärgert.

Habe diese Woche zufällig für 3 Tage Beschäftigung bekommen; Kontrolle im Kino "Victoria." Von diesen 3 Tagen ist heute der letzte und trifft es sich gerade ungelegen, denn heute gibt unsere

¹⁶⁷ It is not entirely clear what her job (*Kontrollarbeit*, monitoring work) at the cinema entailed, but in light of the fact that she seemed to have been called in explicitly for English or Russian-language films, it seems likely she was responsible for monitoring the running of the film itself, perhaps specifically ensuring that the translations, presumably done via subtitles, remained correctly aligned with the images.

Organisation in der Comunitate¹⁶⁸ eine Vorstellung, ich hätte im Chor singen sollen, wohl bin ich nicht unentbehrlich aber sie werden mir dort mein Fehlen übelnehmen.

Constanța Dienstag 2/III 1948

Habe heute einen Avis für ein Paket bekommen, bin gegangen der Mamas Pension holen und mit dem Gelde dann auf die Vama.

Es war ein Kleiderpaket. Zoll für Kleider ist unverschämt hoch. Dazu waren da 20 paar Seidenstrümpfe, und obwohl sie defekt waren manchen sogar sehr defekt habe für jedes Paar 75 lei bezahlen müssen. Die ganze Pension hat für den Zoll kaum gereicht und ausserdem habe noch Posttaxen bezahlt. Unerhört wie sie da die Haut herunterreissen, bekommt einer hier Unterstützung aus Amerika ist der erste Profitant der Staat.

Was unsere edlen Helfer anbetrifft ist mein Herz voll Dankbarkeit. Sie haben uns seit wir hier sind viel geholfen, ich weiss nicht was aus uns ohne diese Hilfe geworden wäre.

– Unsere Organisation hat die Veranstaltung am Sonntag wiederholt und so konnte ich diesmal teilnehmen. Die Veranstaltung ist sehr gut ausgefallen und auch der Kassaerfolg war ein ungewöhnlich guter.

Konstanza Dienstag 9/III 1948

Bin sehr geärgert dass ich weder aus Amerika noch aus Palestina Antwort auf meine Briefe habe. Habe in beiden das Tema erörtert welches jetzt am meisten meine Gedanken beschäftigt: Mein Emigrations Projekt nach Palestina. Ich wartete mit Ungeduld und Spannung auf die Antwort, doch bis nun vergebens.

– In der Organisation habe eine Mission erhalten; ich wurde von Seite der „Busselia“ in die Jugendorganisation „Gordonia“ delegiert um dort ideologische Vorträge zu halten. Leider fühle ich mich dieser Mission ganz und gar nicht gewachsen. Habe nicht abgesagt dies wäre mir zu peinlich und ich möchte gerne aktivieren und die von mir verlangte Arbeit leisten. Doch wie gesagt ich fühle mich dazu nicht fähig und habe keine Ahnung was aus dieser Sache werden wird. Mögen mir alle guten Geister beistehen dass ich mich nicht blamiere. Bin seit einiger Zeit erkältet und huste furchtbar.

¹⁶⁸ Romanian: “community,” indicating the official Jewish community, an administrative organ.

Konstanza Freitag 12/III 1948

Liege heute den dritten Tag im Bett. Bin ernst erkältet. Habe einen sehr heftigen trockenen Husten der mich sehr quält. Ganze Nächte huste ich ohne Pause, bin ganz erschöpft. Habe zahlreiche häusliche Mittel angewendet, hilft alles nichts, statt besser wird mir täglich ärger. Doch will ich für alle Fälle morgen aufstehen.

Habe wieder einen Avis erhalten. Hoffentlich sind es Lebensmittel und keine Sachen.

Konstanza Dienstag 16/III 1948

Leider waren es keine Lebensmittel sondern wieder Sachen und keine guten Sachen. 6 Paar alte abgetragene Schuhe, davon 1 Paar ganz zerissen und 2 Paar aus Leinen. Zoll habe für jedes Paar 200 lei zahlen müssen. Ich war natürlich sehr enttäuscht.

Mit dem Husten ist mir schon Gottseidank besser. Ich war beim Arzt und habe eine Medizin genommen. Dieser Husten hat mich sehr hergenommen; bin ganz entkräftet und habe abgenommen. Habe auch den Appetit eingebüßt. Gut dass mir endlich besser geworden ist.

Konstanza Freitag 19/III 1948

Ich war gestern nach 10 Tägiger Abwesenheit wieder in der Organisation. Die Chaverim¹⁶⁹ haben mich nach dem Grund meines Ausbleibens gefragt und Chaver Rudi der Kopf unserer Organisation hat gesagt er freue sich mich wiederzusehen.

Noch immer keine Antwort aus Amerika und Palestina. Ich weiss nicht ob ich mir noch Hoffnung auf eine Antwort machen darf. Es schmerzt mich sehr und bin ich sehr erbittert. Habe heute einen Flugpostbrief für Amerika aufgegeben um die letzten 2 Pakete zu bestätigen.

Konstanza Freitag 26/III 1948

Ich habe bis nun von Palestina nur im Zusammenhang mit meinen persönlichen Interessen gesprochen, aber noch keinmal über das Palestina-Problem also solches ein Wort fallen lassen.

¹⁶⁹ Hebrew and Yiddish: Friends (chaver/haver – male; chavera/havera – female). Zionist organisations used this term to refer to members. The word was, however, also used in Yiddish as well as by the German-speaking population (including non-Jews) across the Austro-Hungarian empire, at least within urban areas (it is still understood and used in today's Vienna). In the diaries Blanka adopted the vocabulary used by the leaders of the Zionist organisation for members and thus she employs it consciously and exclusively to describe her colleagues at the *hachshara* or within the organisation. In other words in this context it means "fellow members" and does not necessarily denote personal friendship.

Jetzt möchte ich ein Paar Worte über dieses Problem sagen.¹⁷⁰ Palestina ist das Urvaterland der Juden. Über die Geschichte des jüdischen Volkes will ich da nicht reden nur soviel sagen dass die Juden vor 2000 Jahren von den Römern, den Horden des Titus, aus ihrem Heimatlande vertrieben wurden und seither über die ganze Erde zerstreut leben. Die letzten Judenverfolgungen die Mit Hitlers Machtantritt in Deutschland begannen, erweckten erst in den Juden das Bedürfnis, zeigte ihnen erst klar die Notwendigkeit, ein eigenes Land zu haben. Es begann eine rege Emigration nach Palestina und eine emsige aufopferungsvolle Arbeit für den Aufbau des Landes. Doch da begann England die Mandatarmacht Palestinas der jüdischen Einwanderung Hindernisse in den Weg zu legen. Die Einwanderung vollzog sich nur noch unter grössten Schwierigkeiten und Verzögerungen. Nun brach dieser unseligste aller Kriege aus. Über 6 Millionen Juden wurden auf das bestialischste niedergemordet. Über 6 Millionen unschuldiger Menschen, kostbarer Menschenleben wurden von den hitleristischen Banden auf die grauenhafteste Weise umgebracht. Als der Frieden im Frühjahr 1945 endlich kam, fand er von den europäischen Juden nur einen kleinen Bruchteil. Und dieser Rest kannte nur noch ein Ziel: In das Land seiner Väter zurückkehren.

K-za Samstag 27/III 48

Nun will ich fortsetzen wo ich gestern unterbrochen.

Doch England liess es nicht zu. England liess die Schiffe mit jüdischen Emigranten nicht in Palestina landen. Englische Schiffe eskortierten die jüdischen Emigranten-Schiffe nach der Insel Cypru wo ihre Insassen in Lagern untergebracht wurden. Von hier gehen monatlich 1500 Personen nach Palestina ab. Die Erbitterung der Juden war gross. Nach all den namenlos schwerer Leiden, solch eine Behandlung. Die jüdischen Vertreter protestierten in aller Welt. Die jüdische Sache wurde von mehreren Ländern unterstützt, eine Zeitlang zeigte Amerika grosse Teilnahme und Wohlwollen. Das Palestina Problem wurde hin und her diskutiert und kam vor den Völkerbund (O.N.U.). Es wurde einer Teilung Palestinas in einen Judenstaat und einen

¹⁷⁰ It is beyond the scope of the present project to discuss Blanka's interpretation of the creation of the state of Israel and the 1948 war. Her entries here are naturally based on the news available to Romanians and the ideological material she received in the framework of the Zionist organisation. As will be discussed in the following chapter, Zionism played little or no role in her family or upbringing. Publications on the Palestine/Israel conflict are too numerous to cite and this topic falls outside the sphere of my research. For a recent publication on specifically 1948 which employs ego documents alongside other archival material, please see Shay Hazkani, *Dear Palestine. A Social History of the 1948 War* (Stanford University Press, 2021).

Araberstaat vorgeschlagen. Am 29 November 1947 entschied die Generalversammlung des Völkerbundes die Teilung. Die jüdischen Gebiete mit Negeß, das ist etwas mehr als die Hälfte des Landes, sollte den Juden zufallen und den künftigen selbstständigen Judenstaat bilden, der Rest für den Araberstaat. England sollte bis zum 15 Mai seine Truppen aus Palestina zurückziehen und das Mandat niederlegen.

Die Juden haben vorher von einer Teilung nie hören wollen, nun es keine günstigere Lösung zu geben schien, willigten sie ein. Die Araber waren unzufrieden, am unzufriedensten war England. – Es dauerte nicht lange und in Palestina brachen Unruhen aus. Blutige Kämpfe zwischen Arabern und Juden und Attentate. Die Araber die an diesen Kämpfen teilnehmen kommen meistens von jenseits der Grenzen, aus Sirien, Liban, Transjordanien. Es besteht kein Zweifel dass England diese kriegerrische Stimmung unter der Arabern heraufbeschworen hat und sie unterhält. Die englische Politik braucht dieses Blutvergiessen damit sie Palestina nicht verliert. Die Engländer können jetzt Palestina nicht verlassen, sie müssen bleiben um „die Ruhe aufrechtzuerhalten.“ Sie lassen Schiffe mit jüdischen Emigranten nicht in Palestina landen, dagegen aber lassen sie bewaffnete arabische Banden ungehindert über die Grenzen ins Land eindringen. – Und nun vor Kurzem, ist eine Änderung in der Haltung Amerikas dem Palestina Problem gegenüber eingetreten. Amerika hat Interessen in Palestina und den arabischen Staaten, Petroleum, und das ist wichtiger als Gerechtigkeit. Inzwischen fliesst noch immer Blut in Palestina, fallen junge jüdische Menschen von den wenigen die uns geblieben sind, und mein Schmerz wie der des gesamten jüdischen Volkes, ist namenlos.

K-za Donnerstag 1/IV 1948

Wir haben 3 Lebensmittelpakete aus Amerika bekommen. Leider sind sie in sehr schlechtem Zustande angekommen; in jedem Paket war eine Schachtel von 2 ½ kg Mehlzucker, aber nur die zerdrückten leeren Schachteln kamen in unsern Besitz, ihr Inhalt war verschüttet und verloren. Und gerade Zucker haben wir sehnsüchtig erwartet, es ist sehr verdriesslich dass von einer so grossen Quantität wie man uns jetzt geschickt hat wir ohne nichts geblieben sind. Das vorletzte Mal hat man mir den Sacharin konfisziert und jetzt dieses Pech, alles Süsses scheint sich gegen uns verschworen zu haben.

Nach langer Pause hatte ich vergangene Woche Kontrollarbeit bei einen Sovromfilm in Majestic.

In der Organisation ist wieder von meiner Mission die Rede. Jetzt ist erst die Sache richtig aktuell geworden. Was soll ich machen? Ich fühle mich wie schon gesagt dieser Aufgabe nicht gewachsen und entbehre jetzt mehr denn je die dazu nötigen Eigenschaften.

K-za Freitag 16/IV 1948

Gestern habe zum ersten Mal in unserer Organisation vor den versammelten Mitgliedern ein Referat gehalten. Das Tema war „Beitrag der Juden in der Zivilisation.“ Ich hatte nur unzureichendes Material, trotzdem habe ein gutes Referat mit aktuellem Abschluss ausgearbeitet. Vor dem Vortrag hatte ich Angst, ich fürchtete unsicher und schlecht zu sprechen, es war doch das erste Mal. Doch dies traf nicht ein, ich sprach gut. Die darauf folgende kurze Debatte zwischen 2-3 Haverim war vollkommen falsch. Ich bedauere heute sehr dass ich nicht das Wort ergriffen habe um den Unsinn zu widerlegen. Ich bin eben zu sehr an das Schweigen gewöhnt, vielleicht jetzt da der erste Schritt getan, werde diesem Übel abhelfen können. Welchen Eindruck mein Referat bei den Leitern gemacht hat wusste ich nicht, erfuhr es am Ende der „Sicha,“¹⁷¹ einen sehr guten. Rudi reichte mir die Hand mit den Worten: Das hast Du sehr schön gemacht. Und auch die übrigen drückten mir ihre Zufriedenheit aus. Das hat mich sehr gefreut.

K-za Freitag 23/IV 1948

Gestern früh platzte eine Chavera zu mir hinein mit der Nachricht dass ich nach Radautz auf Hachscharah geschickt werde. Ich war wie aus allen Himmeln gefallen, habe das noch nicht erwartet und bin in jeder Beziehung darauf unvorbereitet, vor allem in seelischer. Habe ohne auch nur einen Augenblick zu überlegen abgesagt. Ich weiss nicht ob ich gut gemacht habe. Am Nachmittag erfuhr ich dass ausser mir und noch einem Chaver auch Rudi hinfahren sollte. Nun wurde an meiner Stelle eine andere Chavera bestimmt. Dass Rudi hingeht ist ein Zeichen dass es ein guter Kibuz ist, auch hätte ich an ihn dort einen moralischen Halt gehabt. Doch verfallen, ich kann nicht bedauern weil wie gesagt ich noch in keiner Beziehung vorbereitet bin. Jedenfalls hat mich die Sache durchgerüttelt. Was fern schien ist auf einmal nahe, was ein unbestimmter Traum war will Wirklichkeit werden. Wie nun die Organisation ohne Rudi werden soll kann ich mir nicht

¹⁷¹ Lecture/presentation.

*denken. Er war der Kopf und die Seele des Ganzen. Es ist jetzt Erev Pessach, morgen beginnen die Osterfeiertage.*¹⁷²

¹⁷² Blanka generally refers to the eight-day Pessach holiday (Passover) as Easter, as was and is customary in some Jewish circles. In Romania today the holiday is often referred to as “Easter” or “Jewish Easter” (paște, paște evreiască).

Chapter 3. Experiments with Zionism and “Pioneer” Labour in the “Jerusalem of Moldova”

...und neben mir, da sind sie gelegen, die andern, die wie ich waren, die andern, die anders waren als ich und genauso, die Geschwisterkinder; [...] und sie liebten mich nicht und ich liebte sie nicht, denn ich war einer, und wer will Einen lieben, und sie waren viele ...

- Paul Celan, *Gespräch im Gebirg*¹⁷³

The events of 1948, the first year of the recovered diaries, stand out from the following years by way of numerous factors. Most noticeably, Blanka actively participated in a community structure, namely the Zionist youth organisation “Busselia.”¹⁷⁴ This was also the only year she regularly and socially engaged with the Constanța Jewish community. On a day-to-day level, her responsibilities were far less than what was to come—she did not yet feel the weight of being the sole financial provider for her mother and herself. She worked at a cinema, sporadically, and eventually not at all. The loss of this position was a disappointment, but did not signal a transition to dire financial precarity, as later job loss and unemployment would. The emotional tone in which she narrated this year, as reflected in the entries above, indicate a certain ambivalence—to the group in which she was participating and its members, to the “project” on which she was embarking of possible emigration, to her theoretical “duties” vis-à-vis Busselia about which she was apprehensive. But a thread of hope and anticipation is diffused throughout her writing: though uncertain and nervous about the future, she expected events to proceed eventually in a beneficial way. She left this unwritten, but a cautious excitement underlies her tension.

Her voice is also less mature here. Particularly when referring to her parents and her youth, her somewhat resentful and plaintive tone is reminiscent of a teenager or young adult, rather than

¹⁷³ Paul Celan, *Gespräch im Gebirg mit einem Kommentar von Theo Buck* (Rimbaud, 2002), 11. English “... and next to me, they were lying there, the others, who were like me, the others, who were different from me and just the same, the cousins; [...] and they did not love me and I did not love them, because I was just one, and who wants to love just one, and they were many...” Paul Celan, “Conversation in the Mountains” in *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, trans. by John Felstiner (W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 399. Much of this chapter appears in my article: Dawson, “As to my emotional anguish, there are days when I feel endlessly miserable...”

¹⁷⁴ The organisation Busselia is described in a 1947 pamphlet, discussed in more detail below, as an organisation for “mature youth,” one passage specifies twenty- to twenty-five-year-olds but it is not clear whether there were any set guidelines on membership age. Regardless, Blanka would presumably have been one of the older members. Busselia was named after Yosef Busel (also Josef or Joseph Bussel), part of the Second Aliyah to Palestine. For a brief biography see <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/busel-joseph>, retrieved 21 March 2025. Busselia was closely affiliated with the larger Gordonia Zionist organisation, whose members were younger.

a mature woman now in her early thirties. Indeed, she may have experienced a degree of arrested emotional development as a result of the trauma encountered at twenty-five years of age, when her father, brother, and fiancé were murdered. Even her position at a cinema evokes youth or a degree of frivolity: a job at a cinema is transitional, not meant to be a career, and it is difficult to imagine that it would have been viewed as such by the two cultured and educated Lebzelter women. Significant in light of her youthful or sometimes apparently immature behaviour, may be the fact that near the beginning of the war Blanka had assumed a younger age by five years, a not inconsequential span of time.¹⁷⁵ She introduced and maintained this age revision even in her own private writings and we will never know what this discrepancy meant to her day-to-day life.¹⁷⁶ Posing as a woman five years younger than one actually is can potentially be a fraught undertaking, arousing suspicion or distrust with whom one interacts. I have often wondered whether some of her insecurities and social discomfort were related to posturing, or trying to do so, as a woman five-years younger than she was in actuality.

The town of Constanța itself is hardly a presence in the entries from this year, rather the world she recorded consisted largely of players moving outside of or parallel to Constanța: packages arrive from relatives in the United States, she corresponds with a cousin in Palestine, her meetings at Busselia, exchanges with administrative personnel of Zionist organisations, and participation on a *hachshara* (vocational training or collective farm, this will be discussed below), are specifically Jewish worlds existing parallel to the Romanian context. This would later change dramatically.

The present chapter focuses on this earliest phase of the diaries, one which lasted little more than a year during which her membership in a Zionist organisation and participation in a *hachshara* form the crux of the action. In the context of the diaries' span this "Zionist period" is brief, yet the year was one of tumult and fevered emotion as Blanka sought to overcome various fears and hesitations, deriving from the traumatic experiences of the Shoah and nervous anticipation, believing herself to be on the eve of "beginning anew." Her experience reflected the

¹⁷⁵ This age is written on her Transnistrian identity cards. I will discuss the discrepancies around her birth in more detail in Ch. 5. It was not until the very end of my research that I was able to conclusively establish her birthyear as 1916.

¹⁷⁶ She introduced her age into her letter to her fiancé, in which she wrote that in 1941, when they met, she was twenty-years old. In fact, she was twenty-five, but she used a birthyear of 1921 in wartime and postwar documents.

unpredictable nature of the first year of complete communist rule, during which the population in general sought to understand the new political framework in which they found themselves.

From Ambivalence to Conviction

In her writings, Blanka gave no indication that Zionism ever played a noticeable part in her family's life prior to the war. During the interwar period, the social circle of her first-cousin Gustav Chomed explicitly refused to associate with Zionist youth movements, supporting instead the Soviet cause.¹⁷⁷ Several of Blanka's relatives, including her father, are listed in interwar newspapers as donors to Zionist fundraising campaigns, but such donations were typical and expected of the Jewish bourgeois; her father and uncle also donated to both German and Romanian cultural associations.¹⁷⁸ When, above, Blanka wrote of joining a youth organisation with departure in mind, emigrating to Palestine is framed as a novel idea, rather than one long harboured. Her ambivalence, whether on ideological grounds or other, is explicit: she did not join "out of conviction" (*aus Überzeugung*). The participation of many was probably similarly motivated, in any case one contemporary report on the situation of the Jewish population in Romania noted that the Transnistrian survivors wanted not to go to Palestine per se but simply to get out of Romania.¹⁷⁹

The diary entries cited above present a hesitant woman, uncertain of what to do, where to go, and craving guidance. Though the fact that she and her mother made their way to Constanța

¹⁷⁷ Gustav Chomed left Czernowitz for the Soviet Union in summer of 1941 when the Red Army retreated. Silbermann, *Czernowitz*, 351; for details on the non-Zionist left-leaning activities of this youth circle, see *ibid.*, 93-98.

¹⁷⁸ For example, in 1920 on the occasion of a large Chanukah celebration, Josef Lebzelter and Chaim Heiss made donations (along with close to 100 local men) which were dedicated to the local Zionist association, a "soon-to-be-established" Hebrew school, and the Zionist *Landeskomitee* ("Chanukahfeier in Waschkoutz," *Ostjüdische Zeitung*, 10.1.1920, p. 4). Blanka's uncle and Gustav's father, Leon Chomed, made donations in 1926 and 1929 (in 1926 listed together with "Windbeutel"), "Büchse Lei," *Ostjüdische Zeitung*, 16. 3. 1926, p. 4; "Notstandsaktion für Erez Israel," *Ostjüdische Zeitung*, 24.9.1929, p. 4. Josef Lebzelter as well as Sigmund Hait (most likely indicating Chaim Heiss, who also went by Sigmund) are both named in a list of Waschkoutz donations to the Deutscher Kulturverein 1931, "Die Notstandsaktion. 23. Spendenausweis des deutschen Kulturvereins," *Czernowitzer Deutsche Tagespost*, 11.6.1931, p. 3. "Dela societatea 'Principele Mircea', Filiala Vășcăuți p/C," *Glasul Bucovinei*, 08.07.1925 no. 1868, p. 3. Because the search function cannot always be relied upon due to misspellings of names and other conditions, these examples are meant to indicate charitable habits rather than represent a fixed quantitative analysis. A 1926 newspaper notice announced two guest speakers who would discuss Palestine and noted that this was the first time such an event occurred in Vășcăuți, underscoring the impression that the town, at least in the mid-1920s, did not have a noticeable Zionist contingent. "Vășcăuți. Volksversammlung," *Ostjüdische Zeitung*, 27. 6. 1924, p. 3.

¹⁷⁹ According to Jean Ancel, one operative assisting Romanian Jews to leave asserted regarding the impoverished Transnistrian survivors: "Those Jews are not going to The Land of Israel – they are running away from Romania." Ancel, "The New Jewish Invasion," footnote 81, 255 and in a similar vein Ancel, "She'erit Hapletah in Romania," 160-161.

might indicate that their thoughts, whether entirely conscious or not, tended towards departure, Blanka herself denied this, explaining in the 1955 letter to her dead brother that she chose the city due to a romantic vision of living by the sea and the hope it might offer a cosmopolitan experience. Many Jews had made their way to Constanța specifically due to its port status, churning with tangible prospects of departure. Yet she herself appeared to have given little concrete thought to that venture. Her hesitancy may have had much to do with the expectation of hard physical labour in Palestine and difficult living conditions, widely reported on in the newspapers. She also balked before the prospect of the obligatory *hachshara*, a period of farm or industrial labour required by the local Zionist organisations in order to be considered for *aliyah*. Her bourgeois background is discernible in this distaste for physical discomfort, though this may also be attributed to a weariness of mind and body following the war years. Moreover, the knowledge that she would be forced to leave her sickly mother alone fuelled her doubts.

Nevertheless, as the entries above plainly demonstrate, her political ambivalence shifted as she became socially involved in Busselia and began to mobilise her thoughts regarding Palestine. The Zionist organisations were nothing if not excellent purveyors of propaganda and Blanka was an eager consumer, as the entries summarising the political situation and providing an ideological defence of Palestine as the homeland of the Jews, illustrate. Those entries, which read as the digestion and internalisation of propaganda material, may well have been her script for the ideological lecture she was directed to give. As she became increasingly involved with Busselia, her determination and sense of community and identity grew.¹⁸⁰ The response from her cousin, referred to above, eventually came, but he was loath to advise her one way or the other due to the disturbances and uncertain political situation. She must decide herself, he wrote, to which Blanka responded in her diary “und ich bin entschlossen zu fahren.”¹⁸¹ A few months later and after the founding of the state of Israel, she proudly bought herself a gold Star-of-David pendant and necklace chain, calling it a “star of Zion.”¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ Citation for Figures 16 and 17 is: *Gordonia, Macabi Ha-zair, Busselia of Romania: The Proceedings of the Third Convention in the Year 5707*, [ספר ועידה ג' תש"ז / גורדוניה, מכבי הצעיר, בוסליה ברומניה], 1947 (publisher, author unknown). Held by the National Library of Israel.

¹⁸¹ 12 May 1948. English: “and I am determined to go.”

¹⁸² 18 June 1948.



Figure 16. Cover of 1947 activities and conference report for the Gordonia and Busselia movements in Romania.
Source: See footnote 180.

“No *aliyah* without *hachshara*”

No amount, however, of determination, allowed one simply to depart. Besides the formal legal conditions regulating emigration, which will be addressed in the following chapter, the Zionist organisations themselves erected a number of hurdles which they insisted must be crossed in order for them to approve individuals for *aliyah*. We now know that the ability to grant *aliyah* was not in the hands of these organisations in any case; it is difficult or impossible to understand if they genuinely believed at that time that their lists would count for something in the eyes of the Romanian authorities. Whatever their motivation, they were persuasive and Blanka was confronted with the mandate of going on *hachshara*.

In the initial years after the war, and especially by 1948, the Zionist organisations, particularly those of the He-Halutz or pioneering movement, fomented for action amongst the youth, the Jewish leadership, and political authorities. Gearing their activities towards the practical and the immediate, they established *hachshara* centres across the country, placing trainees in both agricultural and factory work. *Hachsharot* had existed in parts of Europe since before the war, but they were not common in Romania.¹⁸³ This changed after the war, as membership in Zionist organisations skyrocketed and participation in these vocational training centres was put forth as mandatory to be considered for emigration. It is not possible to reliably reconstruct membership numbers across the many Zionist organisations, some sources cite numbers as high as 100,000 in 1947, jumping to 200,000 in 1949, which would have been over half of the Jewish population nationwide.¹⁸⁴ The number of youth participating in *hachshara* work in early 1949 is given as 7,000 in one report (see Figure 17 for numbers related to the organisation in which Blanka was a member).¹⁸⁵ Precise numbers aside, it is certain that during these years thousands of Jewish young people were crisscrossing the country to live on communal collectives, training as farmers or factory workers, and preparing for a new life.

¹⁸³ For an overview on *hachsharot* with an emphasis on the 1930s and 1940s, see the introduction to the special issue of the journal *Quest*, Verena Buser and Chiara Renzo, “Introduction,” in “Training for Aliyah: Young Jews in Hachsharot across Europe between the 1930s and late 1940s,” eds. Verena Buser and Chiara Renzo, *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of the Fondazione CDEC*, n. 21, n.1 (2022): VII-XVII.

¹⁸⁴ Glass, *Minderheit*, 39 and 42.

¹⁸⁵ Glass, *Minderheit*, 42. In Figure 17 the Hebrew words are transcribed using Romanian orthography.

*GORDONIA MAKABI-HAZAIR ^{RP} ROMANIA
20 ani de existență

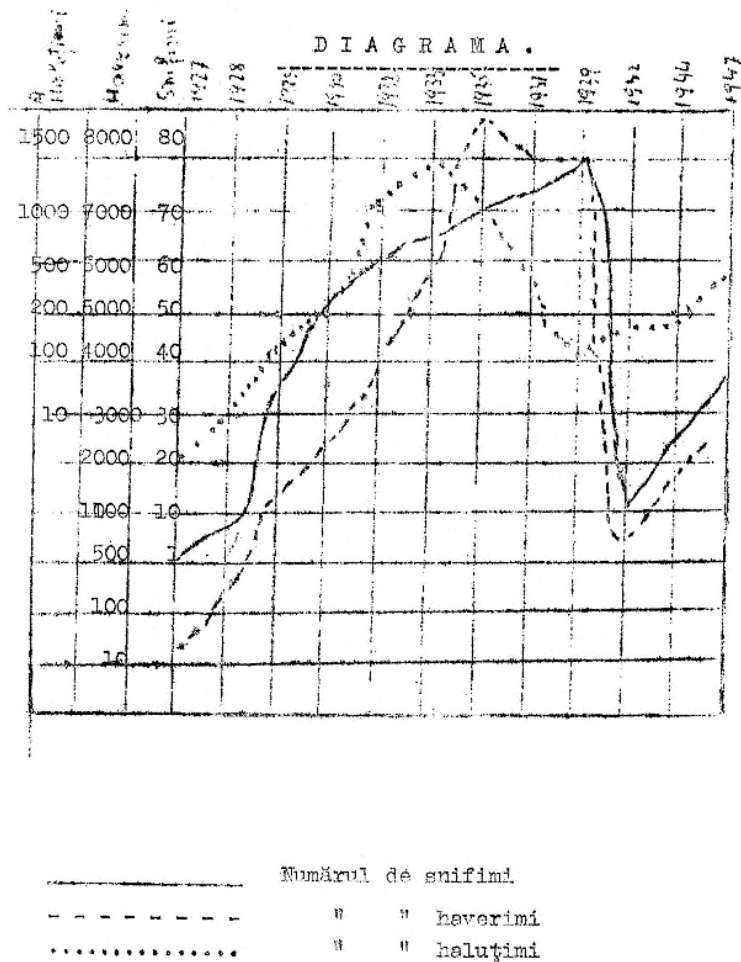


Figure 17. Hand-drawn chart of Gordonia branches (snifimi), membership (Haverimi), and pioneers (haluțimi) 1927-1947 in Romania. Source: See footnote 180.

On *Hachshara* in Piatra Neamț

In the aftermath of World War II, *hachsharot* were established across Europe but especially by and for Displaced Persons (DPs) in Germany, Austria, and Italy. These have been lauded by scholars as locations of social and physical rehabilitation and training, where participants were able to positively assert themselves and their will, to mark out lives contrasting not only with those of the concentration camps, but also the DP camps.¹⁸⁶ *Hachsharot* here were filled by displaced persons:

¹⁸⁶ The present project is not intended to provide a comprehensive overview of literature on *hachsharot* farther west, which have in general been far more extensively researched than those to the east, nor to compare and contrast

camp survivors, the stateless, or those who refused to return to their former state of citizenship. Participating was a choice, an act of agency and empowerment, to take part in a way of living that set itself up in opposition to camp life. According to descriptions of the Italian camps, it was in particular the daily rhythms of cooking your own food and living in and caring for your own lodgings, which appealed to camp survivors, desperate to leave behind anything reminiscent of life in the concentration camps.¹⁸⁷ In his book *Finding Home and Homeland: Jewish Youth and Zionism in the Aftermath of the Holocaust*, Avinoam Patt repeatedly refers to the physical and psychological benefits life on a *hachshara* or kibbutz offered to survivors. The environment “could provide a sort of replacement family while offering its members shelter, security, and education.”¹⁸⁸ But whereas the *hachsharot* in central Europe have been recognised as spaces of empowerment and agency for displaced persons, the contrasting Romanian wartime experience, precarious political postwar reality, and divergent social structures called these very features into question in the Romanian context.

Despite the poverty and though a significant part of the Jewish population was technically displaced (without any of the benefits being recognised as such might bring), by 1948 most had some sort of home or shelter of their own (sometimes provided to refugees by the local community) and, unless they were orphans, people generally lived with surviving family members. Thus, participating in *hachshara* was not a choice between (DP) camp-life and a life with increased comfort or freedom, indeed for some it had the opposite affect—diminished spheres of agency in an already fragile construct. For many, if not most, it meant leaving behind family members and a home and joining a group of semi-strangers in a communal lifestyle with little privacy, a lifestyle partially reminiscent, for those who had survived Transnistria, of the war. For some the collective lifestyle may also have been morally suspect. Blanka’s reference in the final entry quoted above to the leader ensuring a “moral foothold” likely indicated an unease towards or even fear of mixed-sex domesticity.

experiences with those in Romania. See for example, Patt, *Finding Home and Homeland*; Arturo Marzano, “Relief and Rehabilitation of Jewish DPs after the Shoah: The Hachsharot in Italy (1945-48),” *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 18, no. 3 (2019): 314-329; Judith Tydor Baumel, *Kibbutz Buchenwald: Survivors and Pioneers* (Rutgers University Press, 1997). In general, the experience of participants, at least as reported in these studies, was positive: they constructed surrogate families, fashioned “homes,” found relief in the social environment and training opportunities.

¹⁸⁷ Marzano, “Relief,” 320.

¹⁸⁸ Patt, *Finding Home*, 89.

Not all were so sceptical. Orphans or unattached youth saw the matter differently: After growing weary of being shuttled between relatives, Ruth Glasberg-Gold, an orphan whose parents died in Transnistria, decided that joining a Zionist organisation and participating in a *hachshara*, would procure her independence and cement a supportive social-structure, all while facilitating her departure from Romania.¹⁸⁹ For Glasberg-Gold, participation came as a relief, a welcome escape from unpleasant relatives. For Blanka, however, participation meant separating from her ill mother. Beyond the emotional burden, it meant knowingly putting her mother's well-being in danger, thus it engendered feelings of guilt as well. And participation was, furthermore, not offered as a choice to those ideologically attracted. Instead, it was mandated as obligatory to be considered for *aliyah*. Her words indicate that she felt coerced into participating in a venture to which she was little attracted ideologically and as a consequence of which, her mother's very life could be imperilled. She was cognizant of her complex circumstances and felt that they differed from those of other members, not all of whom had suffered deportation, deprivation, displacement, and the pressures of caring alone for an ill parent. She believed her situation merited special consideration and exemption and argued for this status.

In September 1948, the same day on which she wrote of nursing her mother who had lain two weeks in bed, she noted "Habe heute eine Karte in Central-Snif¹⁹⁰ geschrieben und angefragt ob in meinem Falle Hachschara unbedingt notwendig ist, oder eine Ausnahme gemacht werden kann."¹⁹¹ She had written once before asking similarly, and commented bitterly that the answer received was "Sehr unfreundschaftlich. Eine Moralpredigt; das beliebte Schlagwort die Organisation sei kein Emigrationsbureau, und ohne Hachschara sei Alia unmöglich."¹⁹² Her

¹⁸⁹ Beyond brief mentions in memoirs or oral histories, we know remarkably little about daily life and individual experience on Romanian *hachscharot*. One exception is Ruth Glasberg-Gold's memoir in which she wrote several pages about her experience on a Romanian *hachshara* in 1946. Beyond the significant difference in form of a diary versus memoir, her social circumstances differed from Blanka's considerably: Glasberg-Gold was an orphan and ten to fifteen years younger than Lebzelter. Despite this, some of her impressions and experience overlap with Blanka's. I will highlight these differences and consistencies in my text above. For Glasberg-Gold's *hachshara* experience, see the chapter "From Communism to Zionism" in *Ruth's Journey*, 154-161, regarding her relief to be on her own see *ibid.*, 157. Oral histories sometimes briefly mention *hachshara* experiences, but generally the focus tends to be on the wartime period.

¹⁹⁰ Branch or office.

¹⁹¹ 4 Sept. 1948. English: "Today I wrote a letter to the central branch and asked whether in my case *hachshara* is absolutely necessary or whether an exception can be made."

¹⁹² 13 August 1948. English: "Very unfriendly. A preachy sermon, the beloved slogan being that the organisation is not an emigration office and without *hachshara aliyah* is impossible."

second inquiry elicited the same response: “ohne Hahschara keine Alia.”¹⁹³ The answer from the head office left her in a familiar state of powerlessness vis-à-vis an authority claiming influence over her fate. And yet, the organisations did not hold the power to grant *aliyah*, as would later become distressingly clear.

After refusing several *hachshara* slots, Blanka finally promised herself to take the next one offered.¹⁹⁴ Early October 1948 she and twelve others from her Constanța branch were assigned to a new group in Piatra Neamț, a small Romanian market town in the region of Moldova. The night before departure she agonised once more about the physical repercussions of leaving her frail mother without a caretaker, intimating the emotional strain on both of them at being separated:

C-ța Mittwoch 6/X 1948

Es ist ½ 7 abends. Meine Sachen liegen auf dem Bett aufgehäuft. Ich muss sie jetzt in den Koffer packen. Mein Herz ist sehr schwer. Ich lasse die Mama allein. Seit 7 Jahren seit ich und die Mama allein geblieben sind ist es das erste Mal dass ich sie verlasse. Morgen s.G.w. um ½ 7 früh fahren wir.

Blanka spent the next three months in Piatra Neamț, recording twenty entries in which she described her daily work, social interactions, worries about her mother and her own precarious health, and increasingly depressed spirits. Piatra Neamț differed from towns she knew. The Jewish community, primarily Yiddish- and Romanian-speaking, was significant, making up about half of the population and the town was colloquially known as the “Jerusalem of Moldova.”¹⁹⁵ It was

¹⁹³ 12 Sept 1948. English: “without *hachshara*, no *aliyah*.” Blanka spells *hachshara* in a variety of ways, sometimes using Romanian diacritics, sometimes retaining a German spelling (*hahșara*, *hahschara*, and other variants).

¹⁹⁴ As noted in the entry above, the first slot offered was in Rădăuți, the southern Bukovina birthplace of her father and home of his family. Her surviving uncle, Chaim Heiss, may have even dwelt there at that time, though she did not know this. Her emotional rejection towards being offered this site: “bin in jeder Beziehung darauf unvorbereitet, vor allem in seelischer” (English: “I am unprepared for this in all respects, especially emotionally,”) may refer to a reluctance or even dread of revisiting places to which she was emotionally connected. It is not clear whether she ever visited Rădăuți as a child, but she certainly would have been intimately familiar with the cultural environment.

¹⁹⁵ In 1895 the population counted 15,112 with more than half Jewish. In 1905 the population had increased to 17,391 but the Jewish percentile was less, at just below 50%. I do not have statistics for 1948, but until the large emigration waves began around 1950, the Jewish population remained high. Only by the mid/late-1950s had it dropped precipitously to 10%. Mihail Apăvăloae, *Piatra Neamț. Studio Monografic* (Editura Cetatea Doamnei, 2005), 217. For a brief overview of the Jewish history see YIVO Encyclopedia’s entry “Piatra Neamț,” <https://encyclopedia.yivo.org/article/932> retrieved on 13 March 2025. Regarding the title “Jerusalem of Moldova,” it was casually used in various contexts, for example in a letter dated 9. March 1947 sent to the Piatra Neamț Jewish community, “Domnule Preșidentel,” 9. March 1947, Fond Comunitatea Evreiască Piatra Neamț, inv. 1461, folder 1, sheet 291, Arhivele Naționale ale României, Direcția Județeană Neamț, Piatra Neamț.

settled on the eastern edge of the heavily forested Carpathian mountains where, due to its location on the Bistrița river, logs roped together could be rafted all the way to Galați, a port in the south. Thus, the town had a long-established lumber industry, in which Jews played a prominent role.¹⁹⁶ With its numerous synagogues and prayer houses, the Jewish community was a highly visible presence in the very centre of town. Both the living quarters of the *hachshara* group as well as the work itself at one of the town's many lumber factories were almost certainly arranged via members of the local Jewish community.



Figure 18. Piatra Neamț, interwar period. Source: *Colecția de fotografii Institutul N. Teodorescu–Piatra Neamț*, inv. 92, vol. IV, *SJAN Neamț*

Blanka's group was the vanguard of a new *hachshara*, which eventually counted six *plugot* (groups), numbering between thirty to fifty members each. They slept two to a bed; her blanket, brought from home, she wrapped beneath and then around her to sleep. There was no running water or place to wash. Her work for the first six weeks, until she fell too ill to continue, was in a

¹⁹⁶ In the late 19th century, 12,000 rafts of logs travelled annually down the river, there were fifteen logging factories. In 1912 the number was forty, counting 4,000 employees. Apăvăloae, *Piatra Neamț*, 228-229.

lumber factory or sawmill. The factory was a two kilometre walk from their lodging, they rose at 5:30 in the morning and she spent nine hours on her feet hammering nails into casket lids.¹⁹⁷ Evenings were occupied with meetings and they went to sleep after midnight. About two weeks after her arrival, she described:

Piatra Neamț Dienstag 25/X [1948]

Einiges über unsere Plugă. Wir sind augenblicklich einige und dreissig Chaverim. Die Mehrzahl sind nette junge Leute. Wir haben 6 Zimmer und Küche. Meine Arbeit habe bereits geschildert, auch bemerkt dass sie schwer ist und mich sehr anstrengt. Der dichte Staub und das gewaltige Getöse der Maschinen, der weite Weg, das frühe Aufstehen und späte Schlafengehen wirken verheerend auf mich. Wenigstens habe ich dieses Gefühl. Zu essen Gottseidank ist da. Ich esse mehr als ich zuhause gegessen habe. Die Papiere und fotografien habe schon abgeliefert und hat man sie nach Bukarest expediert. Es heisst wenn eine grosse Alia gehen wird, gehen wir alle mit; wenn eine Kleine dann eben nicht. Wir haben hier Chalușim¹⁹⁸ welche schon 1 Jahr auf Hachshara sind. – Wie ich mich hier fühle darüber habe noch kein Wort gesagt. Leider kann ich nicht sagen dass gut denn dass wäre eine Lüge. Es ist hier Kollektivleben, ich stehe auf freundschaftlichem Fuss mit allen Chaverim, besonders mit den intelligenteren unter ihnen. Aber ich habe keine richtige Freundin, und überhaupt keinen Anschluss. Unter diesem Mangel an Anschluss leide ich. Manchmal bin ich darüber sehr betrübt. Mehr als einmal habe deshalb geweint. Trotzdem

¹⁹⁷ She worked at the “Foresta” factory, which was an Italian-Romanian firm with headquarters in Bucharest. It was nationalised (apparently folded along with other lumber factories into the conglomerate SovRomLemn (SovRom Wood) along with most private firms in the course of 1948. This process may have contributed to the closure and instability of her particular *hachshara*—or perhaps the *hachsharot* at large—as it is difficult to imagine how a nationalised firm would respond to their employees being organised, and at least partially overseen, by outside parties. The exact course of nationalisation is not possible to follow in the archival material, but in January 1948 the salary registers called the company Foresta Italo-Română, located at Col. Roznovanu Nr. 161 and by April 1948 the name is entered as Sovromlemn Foresta Italo-Română, located at I. Stalin Nr. 161. Interestingly, the material related to employee payments (*state de plata*) for the Foresta factory is missing precisely for the months when the *hachshara* took place, it exists for 1948 up until the end of September. Prior to this a not insignificant number of employee names, especially those in administrative roles, were Jewish. It is not clear whether the *hachshara* workers took the place of the former employees or worked alongside them. Folder “Foresta,” (24/1948), Fond Sovromlemn S.A.M. – unități de exploatare, inv. 1472, SJAN Neamț, Piatra Neamț. The factory was located on Str. Col. Roznovanu, known for a time as Stalin and today, as Decebal or Luceafărului, which are separated by a block, so perhaps the street course was altered. Roznovanu is listed as both having been Stalin/(now) Decebal and Luceafărului. Neither the county archive nor the municipal library holds any historic maps of the town. See the helpful chart on street names altered over the course of the twentieth century in Apăvăloae, *Piatra Neamț*, 45-57. Apăvăloae writes that the Foresta factory was located on what is today Luceafărului. Apăvăloae, *Piatra Neamț*, 229.

¹⁹⁸ Hebrew: pioneers, meaning those being trained for work on the *hachshara*.

habe noch keinen Augenblick bedauert dass ich hergekommen bin. Dass war jetzt die letzte Möglichkeit, und folglich die letzte Möglichkeit für mich ein Recht auf Alia zu erringen. Meine grösste Sorge ist dass der Brief welchen ich nach Amerika geschrieben habe sein Ziel erreicht und eine günstige Antwort kommt. Davon hängt Sein oder Nichtsein für mich ab.

habe heute Post von der Mama bekommen. Sie schreibt sie ist wohlauf, Gott beschütze sie, denn ich bin sehr besorgt um sie.

The entry touches on the quintessential features of her experience: her struggles with her work tasks, the concrete link between *hachshara* participation and promises of *aliyah*, and especially her difficulties connecting socially. Here and elsewhere her descriptions of the profound social disconnect she experiences within the group appear to stem from a mixture of her reserved personality, probably perceived in the collective context as aloofness, genuine feelings of superiority, and bitterness at her own hard fate—her “*Schicksal*”—as she calls it, which she feels that others were not made to suffer.

There is no way of knowing what percentage of the participants were survivors of Transnistria or Auschwitz,¹⁹⁹ but it does seem that Blanka, as opposed to the experience of *hachshara* participants farther west, did not perceive in the other members a shared wartime experience. Glasberg-Gold also noted that she was one of only a few members who had survived a harrowing ordeal: “I was also one of the few with a grim past. I later learned that two other members of our group were also survivors of the camps, but we never spoke of it. We were too busy creating new lives, filling every minute with activities and dreams.”²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁹ Jewish survivors of camps in Romania after the war would generally have been in either Auschwitz (if from the northern part of Transylvania annexed to Hungary in 1940) or Transnistria (if originally from Bukovina or the neighbouring Dorohoi region).

²⁰⁰ Glasberg-Gold, *Ruth's Journey*, 158. A Transnistrian survivor who made her way to Poland and with her mother joined a kibbutz there also noted the unofficial injunction on discussing recent horrors. She recalled “No, they did not want to talk to us about it. Because we were very heartbroken. [...] They tried to make us happy or give us security, they did not speak to us about it. [...] I don't remember talking to anyone about my experiences.” Pearl T., HVT 2639, Fortunoff Archive, Yale University, New Haven, CT.



Figure 19. Timber factory in Piatra Neamț, interwar period. Source: Colecția de fotografii Institutul N. Teodorescu–Piatra Neamț, inv.92, vol. II, SJAN Neamț.

Unlike Glasberg-Gold, Blanka's social isolation grew and climaxed one evening, when two girls refused to make room for her at the Sabbath table:

P. Neamț 7/XI 1948 Sontag

Heute ist ein Monat dass ich hier bin. Ein sehr schwerer Monat voll schwerer ungewohnter Arbeit, physischen und seelischen Qualen. Ich weiss nicht wie es weiter werden soll denn es wird immer kälter und der Luftzug in der Fabrik immer stärker. Zu beiden Seiten sind offene breite Türen und ein heftiger kalter Luftzug bläst mich wie die andern Arbeiter und Arbeiterinnen durch und durch. Die letzten Tage habe nicht mehr bei Küstendeckel²⁰¹

²⁰¹ It is not clear what exactly the *hachshara* members built at this wood factory. *Küste* may refer to an antiquated or dialect form of *Kiste*, which could mean an unspecific wooden box or indicate a casket or even coffin. My thanks go to German Studies professor Dr. Astrid Lembke for assistance with the German *Küste*. In the diaries, Blanka does not comment on the work besides the physical strain.

gearbeitet sondern verschiedene andere Arbeit leisten müssen wie Bretter tragen, Bei einer Maschine Bretter im Empfang nehmen und sortieren u.s.w. Alles Dinge für eine starke Bauernkonstitution nicht für ein schwaches Geschöpf wie ich bin. Die Fabrik ist eine Hölle die mich vernichtet. Momentan sehe ich keine Hoffnung zu entrinnen, in Gegenteil wir bekommen immer zu hören dass die Fabrik „Foresta“ die Basis unserer Existenz ist. Es gibt eine Serie anderer Chaverim die in einer andern Fabrik bei weit leichter Arbeit sind und in Wärme. Warum muss ich mich opfern, warum habe ich immer nur Pech.

Was meine seelischen Qualen anbetrifft gibt es für mich Tage wo ich mich unendlich unglücklich fühle. Vorgestern Abend hatte ich folgende Affäre. Ich kam in den Essraum zum Nachtmahl nachdem schon alle Chaverim an den Tischen Platz genommen hatten. Ich bat eine Chavera sich ein wenig zu schieben damit auch ich mich setze. Sie sagte dass kein Platz da sei. Ich versuchte an einer andern Stelle Platz zu finden doch dasselbe. Dies erfüllte mich mit Bitterkeit, umsomehr weil es Freitag Abend und ein Festessen war. Ich verliess den Essraum ging in den Schlafrum warf mich auf mein Bett und bekam einen fürchterlichen Weinkrampf. Kein Mensch kam um nach mir zu sehen, jeder verzehrte fröhlich sein Nachtmahl ohne mein Fehlen zu bemerken. Nach dem Nachtmahl fand man mich dann weinend und jeder fragte nach der Ursache. Ich wollte es niemand sagen, nur einem Chaver zu dem ich Vertrauen habe, vertraute ich es an. Nach dem Nachtmahl war noch ein Oneg Schabat, und Sitzung des „Rats.“ Ich weinte unaufhaltsam weiter. Ich weinte unaufhörlich über 2 Stunden, es hatte mich gefasst und liess mich nicht los. Als dann gegen 11 Uhr nachts die „Aseifa“²⁰² begann kam man mich rufen. Awadik vom Mechlekat-hachschara²⁰³ welcher in Bikurim²⁰⁴ bei uns weilte reichte mir galant den Arm um mich zur Aseifa wie zu einen Hofdiner zu führen. Ich lehnte höflich den Arm ab und ging zur Aseifa mit 2 ganz geschwollenen roten Augen. Nachdem einige Probleme erörtert wurden, ergriff Misu unser Maskir²⁰⁵ abermals das Wort und sagte dass einige Chaverim bei uns an einer Ueberlegenheitsmanie leiden und so eine havera heute verhinderten am Tische Platz zu nehmen. Awadik fragte mich wie es war; ich schilderte den Vorfall doch ohne Namen zu nennen. Awadik wollte die Namen wissen. Ich weigerte mich sie zu nennen.

²⁰² Assembly.

²⁰³ It is not clear what this signifies, it may refer to an associated *hachshara* group.

²⁰⁴ That is, he or the *hachshara* group (it is not entirely clear from the sentence), were visiting.

²⁰⁵ Leader.

Nicht so weil ich die Betreffenden schonen wollte wie darum weil es mir nicht passte wer da sich nicht schieben wollte um mir Platz zu machen. Awadik fragte 2 Mal und das 3te Mal drohte er wenn ich nicht die Namen nenne mich aus der Aseifa zu verweisen und zum „Mişmar“ (Nachtwache) hinauszuschicken. Ich weigerte mich selbstverständlich auch diesmal. „Verlasse die Aseifa“ rief Awadik. Ich erhob mich, holte meinen Mantel und ging hinaus. Mein Kopf schmerzte zum Verrücktwerden, die frische Nachtluft tat mir gut. Ich weiss nicht wie lange ich mich draussen aufhielt ob eine Stunde oder mehr als mich ein Chaver riefen kam. Man verkündete gerade dass man mich zum Mitglied in „Waada Tarbut“ ernannt hatte. W.T. das ist übersetzt Kulturrat. Dieser besteht aus 3-4 Mitgliedern und hat für das kulturelle Leben unserer Pluga zu sorgen. Nach der Aseifa hielten wir noch eine kurze kulturelle Sitzung und gegen 3 uhr Morgens gingen wir schlafen um um ½ 6 wieder aufzustehen und zur schweren Arbeit zu gehen.

The leaders were wise to attempt to remedy her social isolation by appointing her to the cultural committee. Their step underscores what was presumably her outward persona within the group: cultured and educated, but shy and withdrawn. A few weeks later she was selected to attend a conference in Bucharest and report the contents back to the group. Despite her complaints of the physical strain entailed by the long journey and her insecurity as to fulfilling the Bucharest mission satisfactorily, the experience seemed to improve her confidence. Physically, however, she continued to weaken. After three months of hard labour she was ill, suffering from debilitating migraines daily. The local doctor ordered that she be removed from factory labour.

In mid-January 1949 the Piatra Neamţ *hachshara* groups were suddenly shut down by the local police, all participants were immediately sent home with assurances from the leaders of either an imminent *aliyah* or placement in a different *hachshara*. Neither took place. Blanka's diaries never again mention her *hachshara* time or the organisation, she gave no indication that any of the skills learned there were of use, nor that she benefitted emotionally or intellectually from membership within the group. With the exception of a few of the leaders, she did not record a single member by name. Ultimately, the year she spent involved in Busselia and time she spent on *hachshara*, rather than forming an anticipatory coda to her ruptured youth, composed an incongruous prelude to the next twelve years of unwilling confinement within the communist state.

Diary Excerpts: 1. März – 28. April 1949

Konstanța Dienstag 1/III 1949

Meine Lage wird mir immer unerträglicher. Ich bin auf Hachschara gegangen um nach Eretz zu fahren, und bin weder auf Hachschara noch fahre ich nach Eretz. Die Zeit vergeht, meine Kräfte und meine Geduld nehmen immer mehr ab und meine Nervosität nimmt zu. Hin oder her, biegen oder brechen, nur wenn dieser Situation schon ein Ende gemacht werde. Doch ist von einem Ende noch nichts zu sehen, und ich kann mich nicht mehr so viel quälen. Mich erfasst oft tiefste Verzweiflung, ich habe hier nichts mehr was zu beginnen, und wenn fahren dann jetzt, denn es hat schon 12 bei mir geschlagen. Doch von Fahren ist noch keine Spur. Die Optimisten sagen: Eh, man man wird doch fahren, man verhandelt. Wer mit wem verhandelt, das weiss niemand zu sagen. Einige von den aus Piatra nachhause gefahrenen Haverim haben sich in die ihnen zugewiesenen Plugot begeben. Ausser mir sind noch genug Haverim zuhause, trotzdem frage ich mich oft ob es nicht besser wäre wenn auch ich mich in die mir zugewiesene Pluga (Brașov) begäbe. Andererseits sagen Briefe die aus manchen Plugot kommen z.B. Galați dass sie vor Auflösung nicht sicher sind. Eine Lage zum Verrücktwerden. Dazu kommt noch unsere economische Lage. Kein Geld, keine Lebensmittel, gar keine Aussichten mehr auf Besserung, auf Hilfe. So hoffnungslos wie jetzt war es noch nicht bei uns seit wir in Constanța sind.

- Vor einigen Tagen am 24/II sind auf der Insel Rhodes die Verhandlungen zwischen Israel und Aegypten zu Ende geführt worden. Es wurde ein Waffenstillstand unterzeichnet. Doch bleiben beide Teile auf den Positionen. Die Juden sollen welche Konzessionen gemacht haben im Bezug auf Neghev und kleine Rückzüge doch ist mir Genaues noch nicht bekannt.

C-ța Samstag 5/III 1949

Es ist mir schauerlich zu Mute. Ich ertrage dieses Dasein nicht länger und habe keine Aussichten auf eine Änderung. Der Tod wäre nur eine Erlösung für mich, doch auch zum Sterben muss man Glück haben.

C-ța Dienstag 15/III 1949

Immer die gleiche Lage, oder vielleicht noch ärger. Noch nie war mir das Zuhausesitzen so unerträglich. Ich fühle in mir Wünsche, Bedürfnisse aufsteigen, doch sehe ich nichts als Aussichtslosigkeit und nie hat mich dies so gequält wie jetzt.

Man hat im ganzen Lande alle Plugot aufgelöst; hat sich also meine Voraussagung leider doch bewahrheitet. – Die antizionistische Propaganda wird mit Heftigkeit getrieben, und von einer Alia reden nicht einmal die verblendetsten Optimisten.

Wenn keine Alia so gibt es nichts mehr auf dieser Welt für mich. Ich kann augenblicklich noch nicht die ganze Hoffnung auf eine Alia aus meinem Herzen bannen.

C-ța Samstag 19/3 1949

Ich habe dieses Buch aufgeschlagen nicht weil ich etwas neues einzutragen hätte, sondern weil mir das Herz so schwarz belastet ist und ich nicht vor wem es auszuschütten habe. – Befinde mich in der gleichen Depression. Ich war auf Besuch bei einem befreundeten Mädchen die mit mir zusammen auf Hachschara war. Sie hat die Absicht sich um eine Anstellung zu bewerben und scheint sich mit dem Nichtfahrenkönnen abgefunden zu haben. Das Gleiche habe auch von andern jungen Leuten die auf Hachschara waren erfahren. Ich kann mich mit diesem Ende unmöglich abfinden. Ich habe hier gar keine Aussichten normal leben zu können. Und das Zusammenleben mit meiner Mutter ist auch auf die Dauer unmöglich. Hierbleiben nicht – Wegfahren nicht erlaubt – also was kann ich noch machen, mich hinlegen und sterben, der Tod kommt aber nie auf Wunsch nur wenn unerwünscht, ich kann nicht mehr aushalten, fürchte Wahnsinn.

C-ța 25/3 1949 Freitag

Wir haben jetzt eine fürchterliche Sorge: Bis vor 2 Monaten bezog meine Mama ihre Pension ganz und pünktlich. Die letzten 2 Monate bekam sie nur $\frac{3}{4}$ von der Pension und diesen Monat noch nichts obwohl schon eine Woche nach dem Auszahlungstermin verstrichen ist. Es sind jetzt Neuerungen im Pensionsgesetz eingetreten die mir zwar nicht bekannt sind, aber schlimmes befürchten lassen weil Neuerungen immer nachteilig sind besonders für solche Menschen die nicht „werktätig“ sind. Nun quält uns diese schwere Sorge bei Tag und Nacht. Die Pension war klein und wir haben jeden Monat etwas von den amerikanischen Sachen verkaufen müssen um nicht hungern zu müssen. Ausserdem hatten wir noch im Hause die verschiedensten amerikanischen Lebensmittel. Jetzt haben wir nichts mehr zum Verkaufen, keine Lebensmittel und nun noch das mit der Pension. Es sieht so aus als würde das Schicksal dass uns in Transnistria mit knapper Not dem Hungertod entgehen liess diesen doch noch für uns in Bereitschaft halten. Ich hoffe die Mama wird doch noch Pension bekommen, es wäre zu ungeheuerlich, nur möglich nicht mehr die Frühere

sondern eine Kleinere. Ich denke bis zum 1ten wird sich das entscheiden. – Nun fragt sich wie wir doch noch leben, denn tot sind wir ja noch nicht und ohne Essen kann man bekanntlich nicht leben. Die Sache ist folgende: Seit 2 Wochen nimmt die Mama „Mittagessen“ in der Kantine von der Comunitate. In dieser Küche nehmen viele Leute seit ihrem Bestand (mehrere Monate) Essen und sind meistens nicht sehr bedürftig. Wir haben zu diesem Mittel erst gegriffen nachdem der letzte Leu verbraucht war. Man hat uns nur 1ne Portion bestätigt nämlich für die Mama, aber diese Portion reicht für uns beide. So wandert die Mama täglich (ausser Samstag) mit dem Korb in die Comunitate und bringt das bischen Essen von welchem wir Beide unser Mittagmahl bestreiten. Manchmal sind so schlechte Suppen dass ich sie nur mit Müh und Not hinunterwürge. Manchmal ist das Essen erträglich. Was Frühstück und Nachtmahl anbetrifft hatten wir bis nun Kaffee; Kaffee hätten wir noch für ein Paar Tage aber der Zucker ist uns ausgegangen. Auch das Brotmehl dass von verkauften Sachen herrührt nähert sich dem Ende. In der Nachbarschaft haben wir kleine Schulden. So, das wäre das traurige Bild unserer Existenz. – Was meine Gesundheit anbetrifft, ich habe mich diesbezüglich mehrere Mal beklagt, besonders über anhaltende Kopfschmerzen, dieses Leiden bin ich schon losgeworden, nur von den dauernden Aergerissen tut mir der Kopf oft genug weh. Waren es nicht genug bis jetzt, hat noch das mit der Pension dazukommen müssen. In den nächsten Tagen glaube ich muss die Entscheidung kommen, wie wird sie ausfallen?

C-ța Dienstag 30/III 1949

Es hat sich noch nichts entschieden, von der Pension ist noch immer keine Spur. Der letzte Tropfen Zucker ist verbraucht, die Mama ist eben ein Glass Zucker zu einer Nachbarin borgen gegangen. Dabei gibt es jetzt gar nicht Zucker zum kaufen. Auch ist das Öl uns ausgegangen und gerade jetzt ist Öl vom Markt verschwunden nachdem es letzters sich verteuert hatte. Das Wasser hat man bei uns im Hause abgesperrt, schon seit mehrern Tagen weil eine Riesensumme zu bezahlen war (wie kann man für Wasser so viel verlangen?) und niemand sie bezahlen konnte. Nun heisst es dass man jetzt bezahlen muss weil man sonst gepfändet wird ausserdem wachsen die Zinsen (!). Unsere Hausmitbewohner sind materiell besser dran und werden bezahlen können, woher sollen wir nehmen? Die Suppe von der Kantine können wir nicht mehr hinunterschlucken sie geht zurück und wir müssen sie ausschütten. Trotzdem läuft die Mama den für sie weiten Weg täglich bei Wind und Wetter weil wir sonst nichts zum verzerren haben. Seit einigen Tagen sind heftige eisige Winde und der Himmel ist in einem eintönigen dunklen Grau. Wie im Herzen so auch das Wetter.

C-ța 10/4 49 Sonntag

Gestern hat die Mama die „Pension“ bekommen, 1400 lei. Sie hat vorher 2640 lei bezogen von welchen sie ohne Steuern und diverse Taxen kaum 10 Tage knapp leben konnte. Jetzt hat man ihr 1400 lei gebracht, nicht genug um die von ihr augenblicklich geforderten Taxen für Front²⁰⁶ (unser Fensterchen führt in ein kleines enges Höfchen mit dem Klo), Mistabfuhr (Wir können einmal in 3-4 Wochen eine Schüssel Mist zustande bringen) und letzte Mahnung für Feuerwehr (!) bezahlen zu können. Mit dem Wasser sind wir noch glimpflich davongekommen. Alle Nachbarn haben gezahlt, wir konnten natürlich nicht zahlen, man hat das Wasser geöffnet und ich weiss nicht ob man uns noch diese Summe mahnen wird oder nicht. Ohnedem sind aber wie gesagt noch Zahlforderungen da, 1400 lei, gerade der Mamas Pension und bald werden noch andere Forderungen kommen, Perceptia²⁰⁷ etc. Also was lässt sich dazu sagen? Gibt es überhaupt Worte für so eine Sache? Das Zimmer ist auf der Mamas Namen alle Forderungen werden an sie gerichtet der Einwand dass sie Pensionistin ist, ausser der Pension keine Einnahmen hat und auch sonst nichts besitzt, werden nicht beachtet, zahl oder wir pfänden. Wenn ich über diese Sache hier so eingehend schreibe, so darum, weil mich diese Sorgen sehr bedrücken. Das Gespenst des Steuerexekutors plagt mich; was wenn er eines Tages erscheint und sich an meine Paar Habseligkeiten vergreift. Wenn wir wenigstens eine anständige Wohnung hätten, und nicht nur ein kleines Kämmerchen ohne Luft. Wie ist das zu verstehen? Alle Menschen beklagen sich und jeder sagt es sind schreckliche unmögliche Zustände, in den Zeitungen aber und im Radio sind nur Lobeshymnen.

Gestern wie die Mama diese verstümmelte sogenannte Pension bekommen hat, hat sie sehr zu weinen angefangen und hat sich lange nicht beruhigen können. Die Situation ist auch wirklich eine zu verzweifelte. Sie will essen, sie kann nicht mehr darben und nun heisst es erst recht darben. Alte Menschen wie kleine Kinder können aber nicht darben.

– Habe mich entschlossen einen Hilferuf nach Amerika zu schicken. Habe den Brief gestern nachmittag geschrieben und heute vormittag per Flugpost aufgegeben. Ich hatte gehofft wegzufahren und nicht mehr solche Briefe nach Amerika schreiben zu müssen. Seit dem ersten

²⁰⁶ Taxes for the maintenance of the building's facade and front-facing windows.

²⁰⁷ The *Perceptia* was the local fiscal authority (tax collectors). Here the term most likely refers to assorted fees and taxes. My thanks go to Stefan Ionescu for his help contextualising this term.

Herbst + Winter unseres Hierseins (1946) habe keine solche Hilferufe schreiben müssen nun war ich aber dazu gezwungen. Damals aber waren Möglichkeiten leicht zu helfen, jetzt sind solche leider nicht vorhanden. Die Art und Weise auf welche man noch etwas schicken kann habe dem Kousin mitgeteilt, hoffentlich kommt der Brief bald in seine Hände und findet Echo in seinem Herzen. Habe auch gebeten unbedingt zu antworten, damit wir wissen was wir erwarten dürfen.
– *Heute Mittag war ich bei Foleşteanu um mich wegen einen Posten zu interessieren. Sie können jetzt in dieser Richtung nichts mehr für mich tun. Die Frau F. hat mir geraten mich an die C.D.E.²⁰⁸ zu wenden. Eine liebe Adresse. Wenn nicht der Wunsch wegzufahren mich ganz ausfüllte, hätte ich schon längst nach einem Posten gesucht. Jetzt habe ich aber einen Posten furchtbar nötig. Wie kann ich aber mit diesem Anliegen zur CDE gehen?*

C-ța Donnerstag 21/IV 49

Heute ist der letzte Tag von der Osterwoche.²⁰⁹ Weil die Ernährungsfrage nun einmal ein brennendes Problem bei uns ist, will ich hier verzeichnen dass wir diese 8 Tage sehr anständig gegessen haben. Heute mittag haben wir nun das letzte von der Gans verzehrt. Ab morgen beginnt wieder Ebbe. Geld ist nichts mehr da und an Lebensmitteln haben wir momentan noch ein bisschen Öl und Zucker. Doch vom Milchpulver den wir von der Comunitate zu Ostern bekommen haben wird in wenigen Tagen nichts mehr sein und vom amerikanischen Kaffee haben wir nur noch ¼ kg. Aus Kaffee besteht gewöhnlich unser Frühstück und Nachtmahl (solange noch vorhanden). Die eine Portion aus der Kantine ist unser Mittag, doch 3 x in der Woche ist eine so schlechte Suppe (wenigstens ist es unsere Meinung) dass wir sie nicht essen können und wegschütten müssen. – Jetzt nimmt mich sehr in Anspruch die Frage ob ich zur CDE wegen einen Posten gehen soll. Ich kann mich dazu so schwer entschliessen obwohl mich die Not zwingt. Heute war ich in der Bibliothek (CDE) das Buch eintauschen und hatte auch vor bei der CDE (Nächste Türe) wegen dieser Sache vorzusprechen. Ich konnte mich nicht entschliessen. Das ist aber vielleicht nicht richtig und vielleicht werde ich morgen doch noch gehen. Warum nur um Gottes Willen kann man

²⁰⁸ Comitetul Democrat Evreiesc, Jewish Democratic Committee, a Jewish communist entity now operating in every town and gradually assuming certain responsibilities formerly carried out by the Jewish community. The CDE was vocally anti-Zionist but the motives behind those who participated was complex; this will be discussed in more detail below.

²⁰⁹ Again, Blanka means here the eight-day Pessach holiday. The women likely received food via the Jewish community, which in turn may have received food or money from the J.D.C. to help the impoverished celebrate according to ritual and law, i.e. with matzah (unleavened bread) and a festive meal.

nicht nach Eretz Israel fahren, das ist das Einzige was ich noch vom Leben erwarte, und nur die Hoffnung dass es vielleicht doch noch dazu kommt hält mich am Leben. Ich leide so viel und habe mich so in mein Leid hineingefressen dass ich nicht weiss ob ich noch zu etwas taue. Komme aus den Kopfschmerzen nicht heraus und das Leid hat mit unbarmherziger Hand Verheerungen sowohl in meinem ganzen Innern wie auch im Ausseren angerichtet. Werde wahnsinnig bei dem Gedanken ob es den nicht schon zu spät sei und ich schon alles verspielt habe.

C-ța Samstag 23 / IV 1949

Nach langer Pause sind jetzt wieder einmal Alia-Gerüchte im Umlauf. Wie viele Mal schon hat man von einer Alia gesprochen, sogar genaues Datum angegeben und nichts hat sich bewahrheitet. Jetzt hat man lange nichts mehr davon gesprochen und es schien schwärtzester Pessimismus in dieser Sache zu herrschen. Und jetzt wieder Gerüchte und Optimismus. Ich verhalte mich skeptisch, die Erfahrungen sind daran Schuld.

C-ța Donnerstag 28 / IV 1949

Auch dieses Gerücht war nichts als leeres Gerede.

Ich war heute vormittag in der Comunitate um mich auf die Liste der Arbeitsuchenden setzten zu lassen. Ich bin nicht die einzige gestrandete Chaluza welche in dieser Liste eingetragen ist, aber die letzte. Nur ich habe solange gezögert mich von der Fata Morgana abzuwenden und der Wirklichkeit zuzuwenden.

Chapter 4. Erecting an Existence in Liminal Space

“Aber,” unterbrach sich hier der Vorsteher, als sei er im Eifer des Erzählens zu weit gegangen oder als sei es wenigstens möglich daß er zu weit gegangen sei, „langweilt Sie die Geschichte nicht?“

„Nein,“ sagte K., „sie unterhält mich.“

Darauf der Vorsteher: „Ich erzähle es Ihnen nicht zur Unterhaltung.“

„Es unterhält mich nur dadurch,“ sagte K., „daß ich einen Einblick in das lächerliche Gewirre bekomme, welches unter Umständen über die Existenz eines Menschen entscheidet.“

„Sie haben noch keinen Einblick bekommen,“ sagte ernst der Vorsteher, „und ich kann Ihnen weitererzählen.“

- Frank Kafka, *Das Schloss*²¹⁰

Two of Blanka's personality traits come across strongly in the excerpts above: one is her indecisiveness and uncertainty, which at times in the course of the diaries is so crushing as to render her in a state of paralysis. The other is her stubbornness; here and in other instances, she is loath to accept her circumstances. In this case, her stubbornness in clinging to a hope and expectation revealed to have been without substance, had physical consequences for the wellbeing of herself and her mother. Other times, as I will illustrate, her stubbornness—in particular her tenacity in the workplace—preserved a degree of financial security. I interpret her stubbornness as agency: she wanted desperately to maintain control over her actions and to act in such a way as would improve her living conditions, both materially and emotionally. As time passed, this ability to act in a way beneficial to her own wellbeing was impeded and curtailed, and this inability chafed at her, gnawing particularly into her emotional state.

The primary locus of her frustration was the state's power over her freedom of movement: “wegfahren nicht erlaubt”²¹¹ as she succinctly phrased it. But the communist authorities did not

²¹⁰ Franz Kafka, *Das Schloss* (Schocken Verlag, 1935; repr., Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1994), 80. Citation refers to Fischer Taschenbuch edition. English: “‘But,’ – at this point the mayor broke off as if he had been carried away by his own account and had gone on for too long, or as if it were at least possible that he had gone on too long, ‘don’t you find this story boring?’ ‘No,’ said K., ‘I find it entertaining.’ To which the mayor replied: ‘I’m not telling it to entertain you.’ ‘I only find it entertaining,’ said K., ‘because it gives me an insight into the absurd confusion that can sometimes determine a person’s existence.’ ‘You have had no insight yet,’ said the mayor gravely, ‘and I can tell you more.’” Franz Kafka, *The Castle*, trans. Tim Griffith (Wordsworth Editions, 2012), 39.

²¹¹ English: leaving not permitted.

only prevent departure from the state, they also impeded—or forced—movement within it, sometimes dictating place of residence within the country depending on the needs of the new economy.²¹² While in 1949 Blanka and her mother might have viewed their lives in Constanța as transitory, by the mid-late 1950s Blanka would have welcomed relocating. Movement within the country, however, had to be approved by authorities. On a smaller scale, when Blanka sought to move to a different flat in the 1950s, she was unsuccessful: by this time housing had been nationalised and was regulated by the government and there was, moreover, a dire housing shortage; moving was possible only if two parties agreed to exchange flats. Though she kept her rooms in pristine condition, the slovenliness and unpleasant behaviour of her neighbours—grounds for her own desire to move—meant she found no one interested in an exchange. Thus, the authorities bound her to a flat with hostile neighbours, to a city in which she had no personal connection, and to a country which had done her injury. Over the course of the diary, she thrashed against this situation in myriad ways. In 1949, she was determined to see through departure from Romania, but the bleak reality forced her to consider how she and her mother would survive until the hour of departure arrived. In some way, for the first time since her arrival in Constanța in 1946, she raised her head and mustered her surroundings.

²¹² There is to date little literature on forced resettlement under communism, though anecdotally it is frequently mentioned in Romania today, often in the course of a critique of current-day population make-up of towns. In this context it is lamented that the “new” population that arrived during communism had no personal connection to the history of the town, this in turn is offered as the cause for poor condition of historical buildings or other sites, that is, because the “new” population does not have deep local roots, no personal attachment to the place, and therefore feels little or no responsibility for local cultural or historical heritage. I found no in-depth studies on internal migration within Romania under communism. Kligman and Verdery briefly discuss non-coercive internal migration and temporary migration for work among peasants, Kligman and Verdery, *Peasants under Siege*, 410-418. See also a study on the forced resettlement of a village in the 1970s: Iuliana Bora and Mircea Voiculescu, “Resettlement, Intergenerational Memory, Place Attachment, and Place Identity in Roșia Jiu Coal Mine - Gorj County, Romania,” in *Journal of Rural Studies* 86 (2021): 578–86. The phenomenon in the U.S.S.R. has been explored in more depth: Pavel Polian, *Against Their Will: The History and Geography of Forced Migrations in the USSR* (Central European University Press, 2003).



Figure 20. Constanța centre, circa 1940s. Source: Private Archive, Julie Dawson.

Constanța

Constanța was and is a multiethnic town, in some ways similar to Czernowitz in that the town was not historically Romanian in population. Even in 1896, almost twenty years after Romania's independence from the Ottoman Empire, Constanța remained a town heavily influenced by its Black Sea identity: at that time, with just over 10,000 inhabitants, only 24% of the small town's population was Romanian, with the Greek and Muslim (Turkish) population making up over 20% each, with 10% Bulgarian and 8.2% Jewish populations (see table below). But this situation altered drastically by the turn of the century. By 1905 the town had grown by 50% to over 15,000, now the Romanian population alone numbered 9,000 and comprised 58% of the town's residents. This trend continued and by the time Blanka and her mother arrived in 1946, the town's population had grown to over 80,000 and was more than 80% Romanian, with the Greeks, Turks, and Armenians hovering around 4% and the Jewish population comprising just over 3% or 2,700 people.

Table 3. Population breakdown of Constanța by nationality: 1896, 1905, 1916, 1928

1896 ²¹³		%	1905 ²¹⁴		%	1916 ²¹⁵	%	1928 ²¹⁶		%
Romanian	2,519	24%	Romanian	9,165	58%	21,971	64.8%	Romanian	28,700	70%
Greek	2,416	23%	Greek	2,327	14.7%	3,326	9.8%	Greek	3,130	7.7%
Muslim	2,202	21%	Muslim	1,315	8.3%	2,815	8.3%	Armenian	2,015	5%
Bulgarian	1,060	10%	Bulgarian	831	5.3%	1,728	5.1%	Turks & Tatar	2,003	4.9%
Jews	855	8.2%	Jews	812	5.1%	1,092	3.2%	Jews	1,050	2.6%
Armenians	559	5.4%	Armenians	601	3.8%	1,002	3%	Bulgarians	1,037	2.5%
Germans	512	5%	Germans	309	2%	642	1.9%	Albanians	460	1.1%
Italians	109	1%	Italians	217	1.4%	518	1.5%	Germans	403	1%
French	51	.5%	French	95	.6%	175	.5%	Hungarians	340	<1%
British	45	.4%	British & other	105	.7%	649	1.9%	Russians	325	
Russian & other	47	.5%						Italians	282	
Total	10,419	99%	Total	15,777	99.9%	33,918	100%	Yugo-slavians	185	
								Austrians	168	
								Poles	148	
								Czecho-slovaks	125	
								French	71	
								British	62	
								Spanish	38	
								Americans	23	
								Other	368	
								Total	40,933	

²¹³ Ionescu M. Dobrogiu, *Tomi-Constanța: Monografie Alcătuită* (Lucrătorii Asociați, 1931), 78.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 79.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 83.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 97.

Table 4. Population breakdown of Constanța by nationality: 1939, 1946

1939²¹⁷		%	1946	%
Romanians	63,478	81%	66,565	81.8%
Jews	2,850	3.6%	2,700	3.3%
Armenians	3,375	4.3%	3,400	4.2%
Greeks	3,120	4%	3,550	4.4%
Albanians	1,085	1.4%	1,200	1.5%
Turks	3,870	4.9%	3,375	4.1%
Other	650	.8%	550	.7%
Total	78,428	100%	81,340	100%

In the interwar period the town was known for its seaside and multiethnic flair, with postcards frequently framing the glamorous casino building, built in 1910, or the dense historic centre, constructed on a peninsula and prominently displaying the turret of a mosque. Blanka almost certainly read articles, published both in German-language Czernowitz-based newspapers as well as Romanian-language illustrated magazines, promoting the beaches and laid-back lifestyle, which would have felt a world away from the small-town village atmosphere in which she was raised. A 1937 article from a prominent Czernowitz newspaper positively glowed in its report:

Constanța ist nicht nur Hafenstadt und Handelszentrum, es ist auch das Zentrum aller Seebäder an der Schwarzen Meer-Küste [...] In der Stadt selbst herrscht immer ein lebhaftes und mondaines Leben und Treiben. Das Wetter war auch heuer herrlich. Nebel oder Regen gab es seit Wochen nicht mehr und alles war eitel Sonne.

Man tut sich in Constanța keinen Zwang an. Man speist im luftigen Strandkostüm oder im Pyjama, fährt darin durch die Stadt nach Mamaia²¹⁸ oder sonstwohin und sitzt spät nachts genau so leger in den Restaurants und Cafés. Das kurze Höschen

²¹⁷ The table is compiled from figures in “Situția mișcării populației în Municipiul Constanța pe categorii,” page 3 of a semi-bound manuscript “Istoricul Municipiului Constanța 1947” (no author, no exact date), which is together with several other sheets in the folder “Statistice diferite,” (27/1947), Fond Primaria Constanța, fond nr. 34, inv. 16, SJAN Constanța, Constanța.

²¹⁸ A neighbouring beach.

oder Röckchen, die rückenfreie Bluse, das ist das „Kleid“ der Dame, das weiße Hemd und die helle Hose das Habit des Herrn. [...] Man hört englisch und französisch und russisch und ungarisch und deutsch und hört Sprachen, von denen man nicht weiß, welche Völker sie sprechen. Man sieht Menschen aus aller Welt. Junge, kräftige Gestalten, sportgestählt und sonngebräunt. Man sieht blondes Haar und aschblondes, rotblondes und tiefschwarzes und alle dazwischenliegenden Nuancen.

[...] Der Corso geht über den asphaltierten Hauptplatz, wo sich die Statue Ovidiu Nasos und die Primaria²¹⁹ befinden. Heiter und belebt ist die „Kurpromenade“ am Quai beim Kasino. Man spaziert in leichten Badetoiletten längs des Meeresufers bis spät in die Nacht und fühlt hier so recht, dass man alle Sorgen daheim gelassen hat. Es gibt kein grösseres Vergnügen, als auf einer Bank zu sitzen und zu beobachten, wie sich die Farben des Meeres verändern, hellblau und dunkelblau und grasgrün und, allmählich verblassend, eins mit dem Blau des Himmels werden.²²⁰

²¹⁹ Romanian: town hall.

²²⁰ “Das schöne Rumänien. Constanța Mamaia,” in *Czernowitzer Allgemeine Zeitung*, nr. 9707, 15. August 1937, p. 9. Interwar newspaper articles promoting Constanța appeared too frequently to review in their entirety, but two other examples include a profile in the *Allgemeiner Bäder Courier* (a Sunday insert) of the *Czernowitzer Allgemeine Zeitung* titled “Die Perle des Schwarzen Meeres. Constanța. Das berühmte Seebad und der bedeutendste Luftkurort Südost Europas,” nr. 52, 15. Juni 1930, p. 1 and a profile in the *Czernowitzer Deutsche Tagespost* (less likely to be read by Blanka’s family for its German-nationalist tendencies but still indicative of the general attitude towards the Black Sea coast), “Constanța und die Silberküste,” *Czernowitzer Deutsche Tagespost*, nr. 4342, 8. September 1938, p. 3. This article included an extensive historical sketch and images of the famous Casino.

English: “Constanța is not only a port town and centre of trade, it is also the centre of all the seaside resorts on the Black Sea Coast. [...] In the city itself a vibrant and glamorous lifestyle and hustle and bustle is always holding sway. This year the weather was again magnificent. For weeks there had been no more fog or rain and everything was glorious sunshine. In Constanța there are no constraints. You eat in a breezy beach getup or in pyjamas, drive through the city in the same thing to Mamaia [a neighbouring beach] or somewhere else and sit around just as casually, late into the night at the restaurants and cafés. Shorts or a short skirt, an open-backed blouse, that is the “dress” of the lady, the white shirt and a light-coloured pants, the clothing of the gentleman. [...] You hear English and French and Russian and Hungarian and German and you hear languages about which you do not know who speaks them. You see people from all over the world. Young, strong figures, athletic and tan. You see blond hair and ash-blond, red-blond and deep black and all the nuances in between. [...] The promenade runs past the asphalted main square, where the statue of Ovidius Naso and the town hall are located. The “spa promenade” on the quay by the Casino is carefree and lively. You ramble in a light bathing suit along the shore of sea until late in the night and feel absolutely that you have left all your worries at home. There is no greater pleasure than sitting on a bench and watching how the colours of the ocean change, light blue and dark blue and grass green and then, gradually fading, become one with the blue of the sky.”

The interwar newspapers carried numerous such reportages, photo montages of people happily bathing or sunning on the beaches, reports on leisure or sporting events in the harbour, and so forth. As Blanka claimed, it was this reputation, a combination of a more exotic multiculturalism than Bukovina—or anywhere in Romania—could offer and a romantic seaside atmosphere, which drew her to the city.²²¹



Figure 21. 1937 illustrated magazine image of Constanța: “In Constanța, on the beach.” Source: *Ilustrațiunea Română*, nr. 29, 14 July 1937.

Jews in Constanța

The Jewish communities in Romania were heterogenous entities, in particular in the postwar period when refugees and survivors from other regions were resettled or settled in older communities. Some towns and cities had Ashkenazi and Sephardic communities, pre-World War II these were generally permitted to oversee their own matters, in the postwar communist period this changed and officially all communities came under one umbrella, which was then partially overseen by Bucharest. Beginning in 1948, the community leadership was gradually (or sometimes

²²¹ I quote her comment on this in the introduction, the letter to her brother is cited in full prior to Chapter 6. She wrote “I thought of the sea, the harbour, and that it must be a large, interesting city.”

suddenly) assumed by the communist-established *Comitetul Democrat Evreiesc* (Jewish Democratic Committee, CDE).²²² The community of Constanța had both Sephardic and Ashkenazi communities, both with large synagogues in the historic centre. The Transnistrian survivors, euphemistically called “repatriates” for the most part adhered to the Ashkenazi community, which organised and distributed welfare aid.²²³

One of the insights provided by Blanka’s diaries which is otherwise difficult or impossible to apprehend from surviving archival material or other sources, is the degree to which Jews in the town were informed about one another—regardless of religious observance or even the degree of social participation. As we will see in this chapter, before the large waves of emigration took place in the early 1950s, the community was deeply interconnected through social networks but also administrative papers, lists, and so forth. Blanka and her mother “partook” in these networks, especially utilising the social and welfare services offered in terms of food and medicine provisions. In line with their assimilated background, they seem not to have been involved in any aspects of ritual or religious life. However, they remained socially connected, if, I posit, emotionally removed. Nevertheless, once large numbers of people had emigrated and the community became more firmly in control of communist sympathisers (and after Blanka’s mother died, as will be discussed in the next chapter), Blanka withdrew almost entirely from everything related to the Jewish community. Thus, though I have provided sources in the footnotes regarding the history of the local community, in fact the Jewish community of Constanța itself played little to no role in Blanka’s postwar life, especially after the years described here. This fact is one reason why Blanka’s story is unique: she represents a voice that disassociated from public but also private Jewish networks, unlike the Bukovina Jewish diaspora elsewhere in Romania.²²⁴

²²² For more on the CDE, see the chapter “Comitetul Democrat Evreiesc,” in Rotman, *Evreii din România în perioada comunistă*.

²²³ For a basic overview of the history of the Jewish population of Constanța see the YIVO Encyclopedia entry “Constanța” by Lucian-Zeev Herșcovici, here: <https://encyclopedia.yivo.org/article/916> retrieved on 21 March 2025. There is very little literature on local Jewish history. See Nicoleta Doina Teodorescu and Corina Lucescu, “The Architectural Heritage of the Jews in Constanța,” *Anale Arhitectura Spiru Haret*, 1 (2012): no page numbers provided. Accessible here https://anale-arhitectura.spiruharet.ro/index4_6.html retrieved on 19 March 2025; Florin Stan, “Evreii din Constanța,” in *Revista Cumidava Muzeul Istorie Brașov XXIX*, 2007: 229-241; Natalia Midvichi, “A Few Considerations on the Jews in Dobruja Province During the Ottoman Rule,” in *Peuce (Serie Nouă) - Studii și cercetări de istorie și arheologie* 7/2009: 425-432.

²²⁴ On the one hand, many of the so-called “repatriates” from northern Bukovina settled in southern Bukovina towns, where the environment was culturally and linguistically familiar, even if they had no familial or other personal connections (though many did). On the other hand, larger cities such as Bucharest (and others, Timișoara, Cluj) had significant Bukovina Jewish populations that remained closely interconnected. Anecdotes and testimonies regarding both of these scenarios abound in oral histories and memoirs. For example, one of Blanka’s cousins, with whom she

When Blanka finally accepted that emigration was not imminent and took stock of the grim reality of their material condition, it was summer 1949. In July she conceded, “Ich habe seit einiger Zeit den Glauben an Alia verloren. So habe ich mir vorgenommen einen Posten zu suchen und mich um eine Wohnung zu kümmern.”²²⁵ Since 1947 the women had housed together in one modest room with a small window facing a musty courtyard. Tension between mother and daughter probably owed to the cramped living quarters as much as to the material precarity and psychological uncertainty. Improved living space was a detail, however, which Blanka knew could be improved upon, though it would take effort. It took her three months to finally find a larger flat. After a period fraught with procuring the proper paperwork and doubt, she and her mother moved into the rooms of a Jewish family preparing to emigrate, but not yet gone. Blanka explained „Die Familie Gutterman benötigt noch die ganze Wohnung und bin nur deshalb schon herüber gekommen weil ich befürchtete ein Anderer könnte mir die Wohnung vor der Nase wegschnappen. So ist es momentan noch höchst ungemütlich. Doch das wäre Nebensache, Hauptsache man soll uns keine Schwierigkeiten machen.“²²⁶ Though it was many weeks before they had the space to themselves, the new quarters—two rooms, one for use as sleeping and living space and one used for the kitchen—were an immense improvement over the dank chamber she and her mother had been sharing. But her search for a job was fruitless and the women had next to nothing to live on, once more eating once a day at the Jewish community soup kitchen:

C-ța Dienstag 11/10 1949

Heute habe einen bittern Tag. Wieder eine Absage. – Vor mehrern Tagen habe auf eine Empfehlung des Dr. Diner hin, ein Gesuch und die Autobiographie²²⁷ bei der „Cartea

will later reunite (I discuss this in Chapter 7) relocated to southern Bukovina and even from the few entries Blanka recorded while visiting, it is clear that the social network is tight, for example an old school friend of Blanka’s tries to arrange a marriage match, etc. Such connections appear to have been mostly absent in Constanța and they certainly were after the early 1950s.

²²⁵ 6 July 1949. English: “For some time I have ceased to believe in *aliyah*. Thus, I have resolved to seek a job and look for an apartment.” Portions of the following text appear in my chapter Julie Dawson, “‘What meaning can the keeping of a diary have for a person like me’: Spaces of Survivor Agency under Postwar Oppression,” in *European Holocaust Studies Vol. 3: Places, Spaces and Voids in the Holocaust*, ed. Natalia Aleksion and Hana Kubátová (Wallstein Verlag, 2021), 299-311.

²²⁶ 9 Oct. 1949. English: “The Gutterman family still needs the entire flat and I only came over here already because I feared someone else could snatch the flat from under my nose. Thus, at the moment it is extremely uncomfortable. But that is a minor matter, the main thing is that no one causes us difficulties.”

²²⁷ With “autobiography” she refers to her curriculum vitae.

Rusă“ eingereicht.²²⁸ Man hat mir Hoffnungen gemacht. Habe einige Mal nachgefragt, war noch nichts entschieden. Heute hat man mir schon die Entscheidung mitgeteilt: Nichts. Ein Dolchstich in mein Herz. Habe dann noch bei einem Herrn der mir versprochen hat sich um einen Posten für mich im Port zu interessieren, nachgefragt, Resultat: Nichts. Ein kategorisches Nichts. Bin wieder ins Arbeitsamt gegangen. Bin in der Reihe gestanden und habe das Weinen nicht zurückhalten können. An die Reihe gekommen, was bekomme ich zu hören: Nichts. Wie gewöhnlich nichts.

Wir können nicht mehr existieren. Wir hungern und können nicht mehr den Hunger ertragen. Von der Küche²²⁹ eine einzige Portion, klein und mager; im Hause kein Mehl, kein Fett, kein Bani.²³⁰ Kein Holz, kein Petroleum. Draussen eisige Kälte. – In solch einer Situation bin in eine grössere Wohnung übersiedelt, mit viel grösserer Miete, und 100 neuen Abgaben. Zum wahnsinnig werden.

A few weeks later, on 15 November 1949 Blanka finally secured a position at a cooperative.²³¹ Not long afterwards, government policy shifted and the emigration gates so long barred were opened. Even as Blanka was applying for positions and securing better housing for herself and her mother, her thoughts dwelt on emigration. The improved housing situation and the job, though essential for the short-term, were temporary solutions to what she was determined to believe was a temporary problem. Now with more dignified living quarters and a monthly income, however meagre, she trained her thoughts and efforts once more on emigration.²³²

²²⁸ A publishing house of Russian works in Romanian translation. Immediately after the war, Paul Celan/Antschel worked at the Bucharest branch of Cartea Rusă.

²²⁹ This indicates the Jewish community's "soup kitchen" where the poor were permitted to receive a soup once a day.

²³⁰ Romanian: money, literally pennies.

²³¹ 18 November 1949.

²³² The map pictured (cropped from the original) in Figure 22 was created by the Direcția Topografică Militară (Military Topographic Department) and bears a date of 1956. The map reads however that it was "reprinted" at that time and the original date is not indicated. It is available via the Polish website Mapster: <http://igrek.amzp.pl/maplist.php?cat=ROMLCH020K&listsort=sortoption3&listtype=mapywig>, retrieved on 9 December 2024. This website states that their maps are held by Polish institutes and other cooperating institutions. The information regarding the original holder/location/provenance of the Romanian map is not transparent, a source is provided of <https://www.geo-spatial.org/#despre>, but there are no details on this website and I could not locate the map pictured above. Both of the main synagogues were located in the historic centre or "old city," on the peninsula. It is almost certain that Blanka and her mother also lived in this central neighbourhood. The train station at that time was also located in the centre (it has since been moved) and from several entries it is evident that Blanka's home was only a short distance by foot from the station. A local historian and purveyor of antiques in the old city likewise shared with me his opinion that if one lived in the "centre" in the 1950s (as Blanka wrote), this certainly indicated the peninsula neighbourhood of the city. Unfortunately, I did not find Blanka's address in any archival material. The return

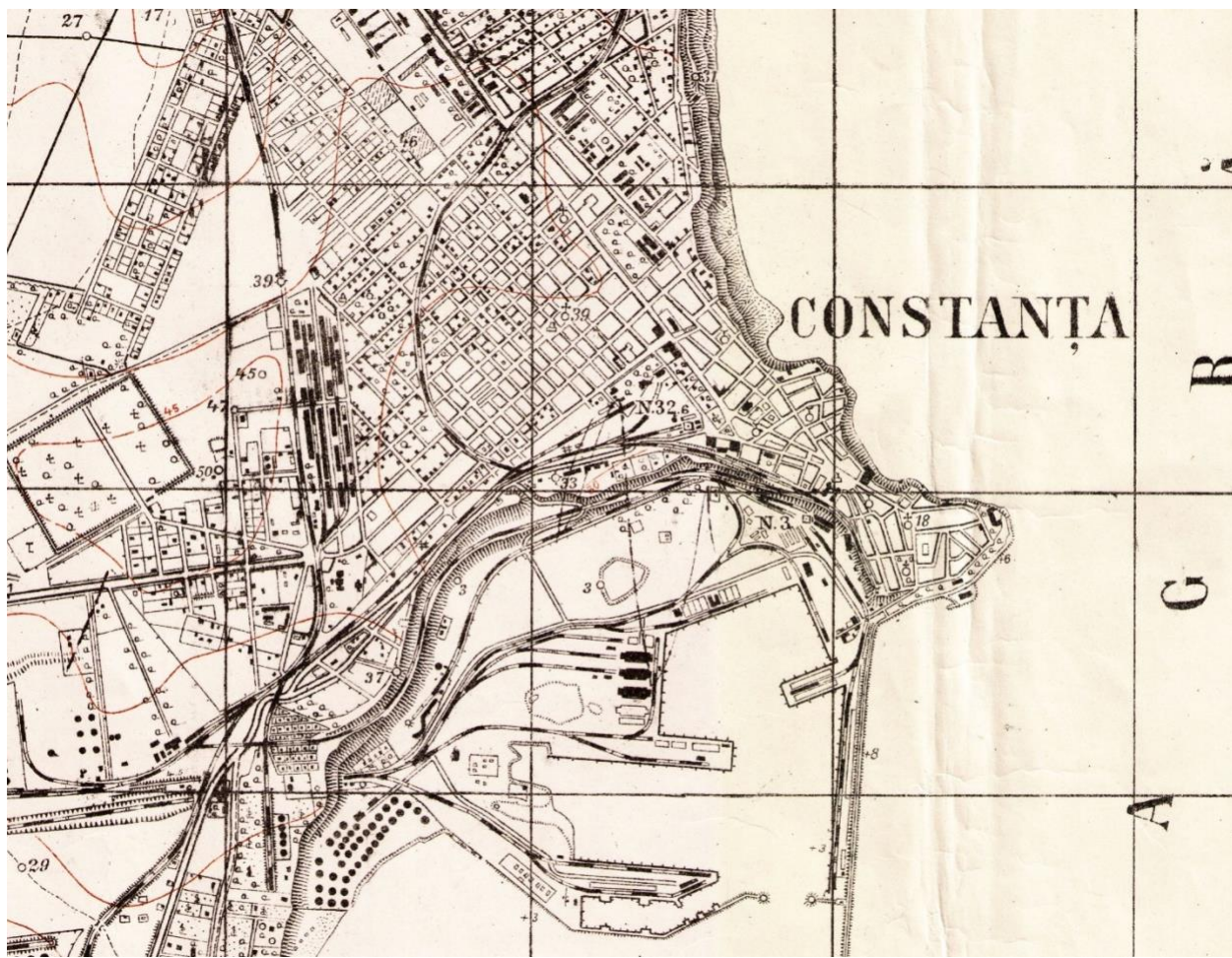


Figure 22. Map of Constanța, 1956. Source: See footnote 232 for full citation.

Emigration Policy in Early Communist Romania

The emigration of Romanian Jews in the postwar period has been discussed in detail by several scholars.²³³ In general, however, the academic focus has been on the *powers* facilitating or impeding the emigration, as well as on the numbers themselves, which were considerable as compared to other countries.²³⁴ Scholars have provided overviews and summaries, concentrating

address she provided on the 1947 letter to Babette is the address of the Jewish community offices, which at that time were near the Sephardic synagogue.

²³³ See especially Ioanid, *Ransom of the Jews*; Robert Levy, “Ana Pauker and the Mass Emigration of Romanian Jewry, 1950–1952,” *East European Jewish Affairs* 28, no 1 (1998): 69–86. Much of this article is reproduced in his book, Levy, *Ana Pauker*.

²³⁴ The most clear and succinct summary of the political developments that influenced emigration policy during the period in question here, especially 1948–1951 is provided by Robert Levy in his chapter “Jewish Emigration” in Levy, *Ana Pauker* and in his article on the subject cited above. For numbers across Europe, see the charts provided in Bernard Wasserstein, *Vanishing Diaspora: The Jews in Europe since 1945* (Harvard University Press, 1996), viii and 92. Numbers between scholars do not always align. Wasserman cites 117,950 Romanian Jews immigrating to Israel from 1948–1951 and 108,478 from 1952–1966. Dvora Hachohen provides the following figures: 17,678 in 1948; 13,595 in

by and large on political developments and positioning of leadership, that is focusing on various aspects of the ebb and flow of emigration policy from 1945-1951, especially however, during the fledgling years of the communist government 1948-1951.²³⁵ What has not been investigated from a scholarly perspective is how individuals experienced this period and perceived their own role in the process.²³⁶ We have little information on the formalities of the application process, how and why individuals of similar background were approved for emigration while others denied, and on the emotional response of individuals to swiftly shifting policies, unexplained requirements, and baffling responses.

As new governments crystallized (in 1948, this meant both Israel and communist Romania), there was bewilderment as to what authority could, in fact, grant permission to leave—or, permission to enter. Considerable confusion existed regarding the challenges and hurdles confronting the hundreds of thousands of individuals who wished in the early postwar years to depart Romania. Though today we understand more of what happened behind closed government doors, the individual's experience of this unsettled period has not been examined.

Blanka's diary conveys the frustrations, mixed messages, red tape, and bureaucratic chaos of the time. Her writing is at the same time steeped in general paranoia and deep-seated anxiety which resulted from the ongoing state of inscrutable uncertainty characterising the daily life of

1949; 47,041 in 1950; 40,625 in 1951; 3,712 in 1952; 61 in 1953. Dvora HaCohen, *Immigrants in Turmoil: Mass Immigration to Israel and its Repercussions in the 1950s and After*, trans. Gila Brand (Syracuse University Press: 2003), 267. Ioanid's and Levy's figures coincide with these for the most part or differ by marginal amounts. Ioanid, *Ransom*, 185; Levy, "Ana Pauker and the Mass Emigration of Romanian Jewry," 85, footnote 97.

²³⁵ Other examples include Adina Babeș, "Aliyah [sic] of Romanian Jews – socio-statistical facts (historical approach)" *Sfera Politicii* XII, no. 180–81 (2014): 247-254; Anca Oltean, "The Jews of Romania and their Immigration to Israel. 1948-1953," *Eurolimes* 11 (2011): 41-55; and the chapter dedicated to *aliyah* in Rotman, *Evreii în perioada comunistă*.

²³⁶ An exception is Raluca Mateoc, "The Aliyah of 1949: Unpublished Migration Requests of Jews from Romania as Vehicles of Memory," *Martor. Journal of the Romanian Peasant Anthropology Museum* 24 (2019): 97-108. Mateoc surveyed the contents of petitions to emigrate made to the Israel Legation in Bucharest in 1949. The material, consisting of approximately 2,000 petitions, ended up at the Center for Research on Romanian Jewry at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem (Mateoc, *ibid.*, 100). Mateoc analyses the language of the petitioner, which must, however, be understood within the context of the petitioning purpose. Blanka addressed similar petitions to the Ministry of the Interior (I have yet to locate where such petitions may be filed within archival fonds). I found a folder of 200 statements ("declarație") of Jews applying to emigrate at the central branch of the National Archives (ANIC) in Bucharest. A label on the front of this folder and accompanying note said it was Vol. 15D, but no other volumes were in the collection. This demonstrates the highly fragmented state of material related to Jewish emigration from this period. In the inventory this folder is titled "Declarații ale diferitelor persoane care au cerut acte de calatorie în israel," folder 415 (1951), Fond Directia Generala a Miliției 1949-1952, inv. 2204, ANIC, Bucharest. The original title of the folder (written on the folder itself) is "Plecări în statul Israel." Almost all of these 200 applicants for emigration were approved.

many Jews who wished to depart communist Romania. She explicitly articulated the psychological strain of this undefined liminal state in 1951:

C-ța Sontag 20/V 1951

So vergehen die Tage, einer wie der andere. Leer und qualvoll. Trostlos in ihrer Aussichtslosigkeit. Eine kleine magere Hoffnung habe ich noch: Vielleicht werde ich doch noch nach Eretz Israel fahren. 'Vielleicht.' immer dieser Zweifel, banges Hoffen, Ungewissheit. Ungewissheit ist eine Folter die man lange nicht ertragen kann. Mich foltert sie schon seit Jahren, und mein Nerven und Seelen Zustand verschlechtert sich täglich.“²³⁷

In an interdisciplinary book on concept(s) of liminality, scholars Horvath, Thomassen, and Wydra define liminality as “captur[ing] in-between situations and conditions characterised by the dislocation of established structures, the reversal of hierarchies, and uncertainty about the continuity of tradition and future outcomes,”²³⁸ describing with great accuracy the postwar world par excellence for most of those who inhabited the central and eastern European sphere. This held true especially for survivors of the Shoah for whom virtually all aspects of the future seemed unclear and past assurances had been made obsolete. Art historian Rachel Perry, in an article on postwar art, asks of the war’s immediate aftermath “When did the Holocaust end for the survivors? And when did the “return to life” begin?” Perry argues that this time be recognised as a period apart and defines it as “(post)war period—a period in flux, caught between a traumatic past and an uncertain future: a liminal “‘time between time.””²³⁹ Perry’s article focuses on art created in the first several years after the war, whereas Blanka’s writings, however, reveal a lengthening of this liminality into perceived endlessness. As Blanka asserted and her writings demonstrate, such an ongoing state of open-ended in-betweenness created profound emotional insecurity.

²³⁷ English: “Thus the days pass, one after another. Empty and agonising. Bleak in their hopelessness. One small slender hope remains: Maybe I will leave for Eretz Israel after all. ‘Maybe.’ Always this doubt, anxious hoping, uncertainty. Uncertainty is a torture one cannot bear for long. It has been torturing me for years and the state of my nerves and soul deteriorate daily.”

²³⁸ Agnes Horvath, Bjørn Thomassen, Harald Wydra, “Introduction: Liminality and the Search for Boundaries,” in *Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of Liminality*, ed. Agnes Horvath, Bjørn Thomassen, Harald Wydra (Berghahn Books, 2015), 2. I discussed the concept of liminality as a useful tool for exploring Jewish spaces in the context of the history of the Mediaș Jewish community, Dawson, “The Burdocks of Klettengasse.” My discussion in that context did not relate to the postwar period, but rather social and topographical spaces of the pre-World War II town.

²³⁹ Rachel Perry, “Making Holocaust Mementos: Early Postwar Graphic Albums as Awkward Objects of the Holocaust Archive” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* (forthcoming), 7-8. Perry attributes the phrase “time between time” to Carol Zemel in an unpublished paper “Time Between Time: Early Visual Accounts/Narratives of the Shoah,” paper given at *Contested Memories and the Contours of the Past*, Bildner Center, Rutgers University, 2014.

Caught in the Cogs

Government policy had transitioned over the course of 1949 from an almost complete block of Jewish emigration to a thaw beginning in November 1949 that would eventually lead to a full-fledged opening of emigration to almost anyone by the end of March 1950.²⁴⁰ The March set of criteria approved “the departure of *all applicants* for emigration to Israel”²⁴¹ with the exception of those deemed problematic in the secret police files or those wanted by the police. The resulting flood took everyone by surprise, over 200,000 applications inundated the authorities over a short period of time.²⁴² Blanka and her mother also applied. After muddling through frustrating red tape, she submitted their papers on 23 March 1950 and began anxiously to wait. She was well aware of the auspicious changes in policy, reporting on 10 June 1950, “Es findet jetzt eine Massenauswanderung statt. Noch vor einige Monaten konnten nur fremde Staatsbürger und Greise fahren, jetzt fährt alles ausnahmslos. Alle 10 Tage fährt die Transilvania²⁴³ mit Emigranten aus allen Ecken des Landes vom Hafen ab.”²⁴⁴

²⁴⁰ Only sixteen exit visas were granted in the month of February. Levy, *Ana Pauker*, 171.

²⁴¹ Levy, *Ana Pauker*, 173. Emphasis is in the original.

²⁴² Levy, *Ana Pauker*, 173.

²⁴³ The Transilvania/Transylvania was the primary ship that transported emigrants to Israel from Constanța. The photo is from the Constanța newspaper *Ziua de Constanța*: <https://www.ziuaconstanta.ro/in-constanta/lumea-marinarilor/mesagerele-mariei-uniri-i-pe-dunare-si-marea-neagra-galerie-foto-679824.html> retrieved on 1 Nov. 2019. For more on the history of the Transilvania and additional photos see the article on the online Romanian history website *Historia*: Dan-Eugen Sambra, „Transilvania’ și ‘Basarabia’, ‘lebedele Mediteranei’ (1938-1979),” <https://historia.ro/sectiune/general/transilvania-si-basarabia-lebedele-571889.html> retrieved 21 March 2025.

²⁴⁴ 10 June 1950. English: “A mass emigration is now taking place. Just a few months ago only foreign citizens and the elderly were allowed to go, now all are going without exception. Every ten days the Transilvania sails from the harbour with emigrants from every corner of the country.”

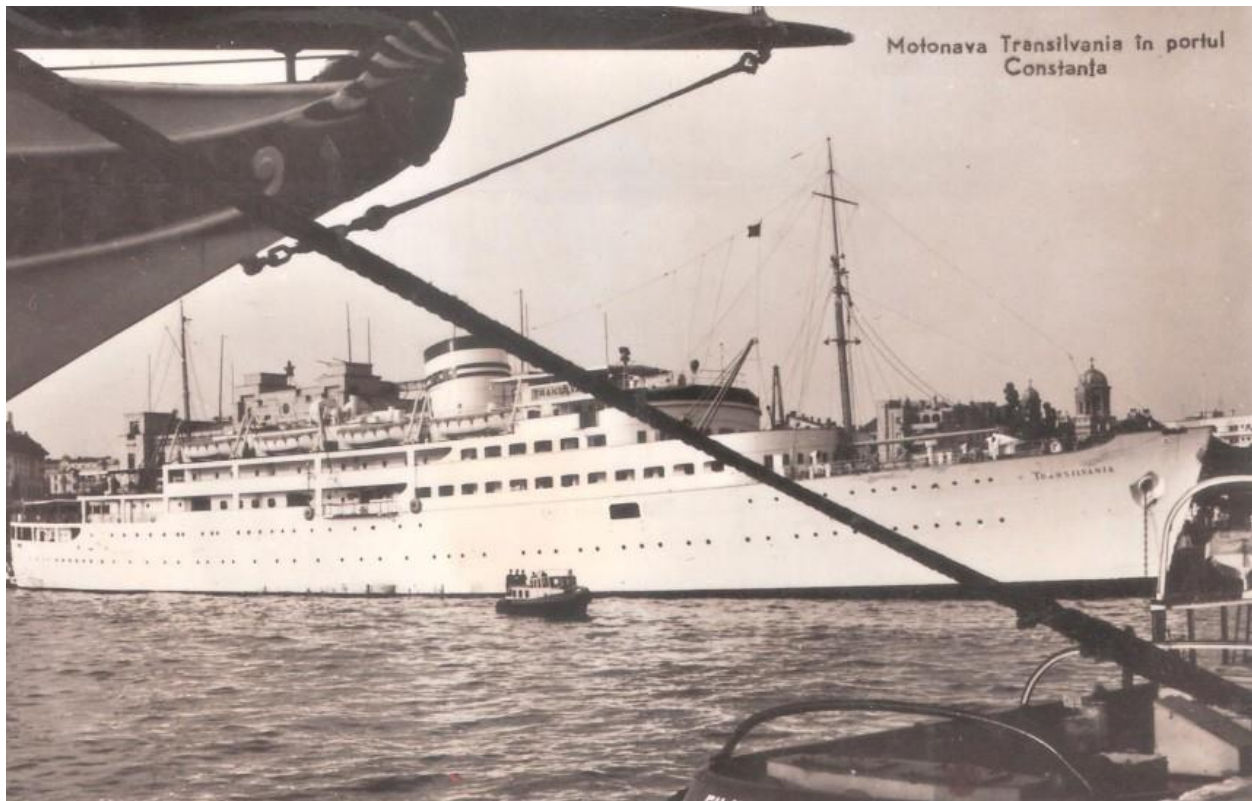


Figure 23. The Transilvania ship which transported thousands of Romanian Jews from Constanța to Israel in the early 1950s.
Source: See footnote 243 for citation.

The open policy should have ensured the approval of Blanka's application, but somehow it did not. After awaiting the approval papers daily and watching thousands set sail, she wrote:

C-ța 28/VI 1950 Mittwoch

Mit so einem Unglück habe nicht gerechnet; man hat mir die Akte zurückgewiesen. Habe angefangen da der 4te Monat seit Einreichung der Akte begonnen hat, täglich die Aprobare²⁴⁵ zu erwarten und auf einmal wie ein Blitz aus heiterem Himmel diese furchtbare Nachricht, ich war einem Schlaganfall nahe. Ich kann unmöglich meine Gemütsverfassung beschreiben. Vorgestern ist diese Hiobsbotschaft eingetroffen, habe heute ein Gesuch an das Innenministerium gerichtet und dies ist jetzt meine einzige Hoffnung. Meine Pein wird dadurch unerträglich dass ich jetzt befürchten muss es kann für die Mama die Aprobare kommen. Nur über meine Leiche wird man die Mama allein zur Abreise zwingen können.

²⁴⁵ Romanian: approval.

The fledgling communist government had been shocked by the sheer numbers of applicants and backpedalled its open policy. Beginning 29 May 1950, new applications were restricted to “the elderly, non-professionals, private functionaries, small food sellers and small handicraftsmen.” Crucial for Blanka, technicians and employees of the state would not be allowed to leave.²⁴⁶ It is not clear why her initial application was, it seems, reviewed under the later, more restrictive criteria, rather than the open policy. In later years she ascribed it to the delay caused by red tape—the official forms which were required for submitting the request had run out and she was forced to wait weeks for new ones to arrive.²⁴⁷ In any case, after the change in policy her undoing may have been her level of education, her apparently innocuous experience as a cinema technician, or, most likely, her present employment in a cooperative.

After receiving her rejection in late June 1950, Blanka faced the possibility that her mother, Anna, *would* be granted permission to depart. This would introduce the previously inconceivable idea that the women would be separated. Upon her rejection, Blanka submitted a petition to the ministry of the interior, probably elucidating her mother’s fragile physical state and the fact that they had no other immediate family members.²⁴⁸ Blanka’s fears materialised and in September 1950 Anna received notification that her exit visa was approved. But Anna (sixty-five years old at the time) was regularly ill, most recently she had been hospitalised for over two weeks in early June. Beyond the emotional strain of being separated from her sole surviving family member during such a momentous undertaking, Blanka doubted that her mother would survive the physical strain of travel without her daughter to care for her.²⁴⁹ The women were confronted with a choice—to separate and hope for an uncertain reunion or for Anna to forfeit her visa, an action with

²⁴⁶ Levy, *Ana Pauker*, 175.

²⁴⁷ She reviewed what had happened in entries from 1955.

²⁴⁸ I have not been able to locate these petitions, though there must have been thousands of them. Under Romania’s restrictive archival policy, they might not be open to researchers due to the contents referring to “private” individuals. For a brief analysis on petition writing under communism, specifically during the period in question, see Kligman and Verdery, *Peasants under Siege*, 264-266. Blanka would certainly have been familiar with the practice of petitioning to authorities also as a result of her father’s position of authority both during the Habsburg monarchy and the Romanian regime.

²⁴⁹ These very real concerns echo choices also confronting Jews who wished to emigrate (legally or illegally) during the Holocaust. For more on this see Michaela Raggam-Blesch, “Two Streets in Vienna as a Focal Point of Jewish Care for the Elderly: Between Dissolution, Concentration, and Deportation,” *Yad Vashem Studies* 50, no. 2 (2022): 113–139 and on caring for elderly survivors after the war see Dan Stone, “‘Somehow the Pathetic Dumb Suffering of These Elderly People Moves Me More than Anything’: Caring for Elderly Holocaust Survivors in the Immediate Postwar Years,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 32, no. 3 (2018): 384–403.

unknown consequences, but which they suspected could prevent her from reapplying or receiving a visa in the future:

C-ța Dienstag 19/IX 1950

[....] Seit der Pass für die Mama da ist, ist in mir ein derartiger Aufruhr, dass ich nicht weiss wie ich noch meine 5 Sinne beisammen habe. Unmöglich kann die Mama allein fahren, es könnte ihr Tod sein, und wenn mich der blosse Gedanke an diese Eventualität derart aufregt, was wäre dann mit der Tatsache. Jetzt aber, wenn ihre Fahrfrist abgelaufen ist und sie nicht fährt, ist alles verfallen. Wenn später für mich kommt, kann ich dann fahren und die Mama allein mit ihren Schmerzen zurücklassen – auch nicht. Ist also alles umsonst gewesen. Wie grausam, wie erbarmungslos ist das Schicksal mit mir. Andere Familien, Eltern und erwachsene Kinder, haben zusammen bekommen. [....]

On 25 September 1950 Anna received a notification that the date for her departure was set: 12 October. Blanka described her visit to the police (*Miliz*, responsible for distributing passports), in tears, and their cold assurance that her efforts were in vain: a rejection was final. The entries from September 1950 were written in cramped, small handwriting, as Blanka tried to crowd as much as possible onto what was the final page of the notebook she was using as a diary. The last entry is 26 September 1950 and she concluded this first book defeated: “Vernichtet der Wunschtraum von Jahren, umsonst ist alle Plage gewesen, umsonst alles Hoffen. Habe nichts mehr in diesem Leben zu erhoffen, nichts mehr zu erwarten als den Erlöser Tod.”²⁵⁰

One month later she began writing again. The second notebook opened pragmatically. As she herself wrote, she had “calmed down” and her handwriting again took on its firm, concise style. As she often did in the first entry of a new notebook,²⁵¹ she provided a formal summary and description of recent events and ruminated on the act of writing and the meaning of her diary keeping:

²⁵⁰ 25 Sept. 1950. English: “My great wish, dreamt about for years, is destroyed, all the worries [were] in vain, all hoping in vain. I have nothing else to hope for in this life, nothing else to await except the redeemer, death.”

²⁵¹ This notebook contains entries until March 1955.

Konstanza Donnerstag 26/X 1950

Vor genau einen Monat habe den Schlusspunkt auf der letzten Seite meines vorigen Tagebuches gesetzt und sehr gezögert ein neues zu beginnen. Was für einen Sinn kann für einen Menschen wie ich das Führen eines Tagebuches haben. Ein verpfushtes verlorenes Leben, seit Jahren trage ich nichts weiter ein als Pech, Misserfolg und Leid. Doch ist für mich dieses Eintragen im Tagebuch so zur Gewohnheit geworden dass ich es nicht entbehren kann. Und so fange ich heute wieder an und beginne dort wo ich das letzte Mal aufgehört habe.

Die Mama ist also nicht gefahren, bei unserer Lage, unserem Gesundheits- und Nervenzustand, hätte dies keine von uns überlebt. Alle unsere Bekannte haben uns einstimmig zugeredet die Mama soll fahren damit sie den Pass nicht verliert, ich werde später bestimmt auch den Pass bekommen und nachfahren. Ich habe der Mamas Pass behoben in der Hoffnung dass bis zu ihrem Abreisetermin auch für mich der Pass kommen könne, doch leider hat sich diese Hoffnung nicht bewahrheitet und so konnten wir uns nicht entschliessen die Mama solle allein abreisen. Bis dieser Entschluss unwiderruflich gefasst war, war in mir ein Aufruhr zum Verrücktwerden. Nun habe mich beruhigt, doch ein tiefer bodenloser Schmerz über den verlorenen Wunschtraum, ist zurückgeblieben. – Im Junie wurde ich verständigt dass meine Papiere abgewiesen wurden, habe ein Memorium gemacht und vor einigen Tagen erhielt ich die Antwort: Negativ. Wie gut dass ich die Leute nicht gehört und die Mama nicht habe fahren lassen. – Habe als die Mama den Pass bekam ein sehr beredtes Memorium an das Ministerium durch die Miliz geschickt, und als mein zweites Negativ eintraf wieder Eines. Dem zweiten habe eine Bestätigung vom Spital beigelegt, dass die Mama dort seit dem 11/X interniert ist. In beiden Gesuchen lief ich auf das Eine hinaus: Wünsche mit meiner Mama zusammen zu fahren. Habe auch um eine Audienz gebeten. Habe dies getan um einen Hoffnungsschimmer zu behalten, wenn mir auch die Vernunft dem Sachverhalt gemäss sagt dass es aussichtslos ist.

Gestern waren 2 Wochen seit die Mama im Spital ist. Es war mir äusserst schwer während dieser Zeit. Morgen oder übermorgen kommt sie nachhause und ich kann es schon kaum erwarten sie zuhause zu sehen.

Over the next year and a half, from autumn 1950 until early 1952, when her attention and fears were severely shifted by other events, Blanka perceived herself in a particularly liminal space. Emigration was ongoing and the possibility of submitting petitions to the authorities—which she regularly undertook—kept her emotionally preoccupied with the eventuality of departure. Indeed, the topic of emigration occupied the minds and mouths of virtually the entire Jewish population and the government was not pleased.

The CDE (*Comitetul Democrat Evreiesc*, Jewish Democrat Committee),²⁵² the communist-established organisation which in 1948 assumed leadership of local Jewish communities, was tasked with convincing Jews to renounce emigration. Though the official government position oscillated between open and closed policies, the ebullition of the Jewish community towards departure was aggravating: besides fears of losing skilled technicians and workers, the rapture displayed at getting out was bad for morale. Justifying or accounting for the excitement by means of nationalist excuses, technically contrary to communist philosophy, left leaders in an uncomfortably contradictory position. Thus in 1950, at the height of the emigration wave, the CDE was instructed to curtail the enthusiasm and the numbers. This was hardly the first time the CDE and the Jewish communities had butt heads. Prior to Zionist organisations being made outright illegal, clashes were common and even violent. Indeed, the conflicts between the CDE and Zionists or observant Jews nationwide are recorded in numerous sources. These sources generally outline disputes, threats, and actions undertaken by leadership figures, for the most part all men.

During her period in Piatra Neamț in 1948 Blanka described several such conflicts, both between members of her *hachshara* and the local CDE branch in Piatra Neamț as well as during her trip to Bucharest. The question of how these conflicts were perceived and received on an individual level has not been explored. Blanka's diaries and related primary sources from the archives and local newspapers once more offer a case study to explore how this debate and vacillating events and policies was understood by and impacted individuals far less privileged and powerful than those in the leadership positions and whose concerns and priorities related to their day-to-day existence. Though there are archival gaps in retelling this story, by overlapping the

²⁵² Please note I refer to the CDE with its Romanian abbreviation (rather than the English translation JDC as some colleagues have done) throughout this work to prevent confusion with the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), which also plays a role in the narrative.

private ego documents provided by Blanka, with contemporary newspapers and associated archival material created by the local CDE in Constanța, a snapshot emerges, outlining individuals acting in a specific place (Constanța) during a specific period (the early 1950s) each with their own agenda.

Though the customary narrative tends to pit the CDE against “Zionists,” it is more accurate to assert that the CDE positioned itself against Jews who chose not to affiliate with the CDE and especially, by 1950, against those who desired to emigrate. Not all Romanian Jews who were not communist party members were Zionists (though many, by 1950, did want to leave Romania), just as not all Jewish communist party members were part of the CDE. Moreover, people shifted their allegiances, whether out of conviction, opportunism, or on the basis of practical grounds. There were certainly others like Blanka, who was not religiously observant and kept the official Jewish community at a distance—while at the same time, being fully known to the community as Jewish. Looking closely at these affiliations and relationships creates a more nuanced picture of Jewish life and identity in Romania in the postwar period and makes room for narratives of individuals whose affiliations with religious or national identity were sometimes ambivalent.²⁵³

As described above, by early 1950 emigration policy had opened up and there were no longer delusions about who had the power to issue an exit visa: this power lay in the hands of one entity, the state. Applicants needed neither affiliation with a Zionist organisation nor with the CDE, which for a brief and dissonant moment, asserted that its own members would be allowed to emigrate first.²⁵⁴ On the contrary, now the latter was taxed with reigning in the numbers of those who wanted to leave. Locally this seems to have been undertaken primarily on two fronts, through the press and personal intervention. Not all Jews in the period were as resolute as Blanka, who by mid-1948 had determined to (try to) leave and who never relinquished this aim. Others were more ambivalent whether due to genuine conviction of belief in the new government, fear of the

²⁵³ On this see Tara Zahra, “Imagined Noncommunities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis,” *Slavic Review* 69, no. 1 (2010): 93-119. Indeed, Blanka’s Jewish identity is complex and difficult to penetrate from her writing. On the one hand, due to the persecution suffered she undoubtedly felt bound to the group, she expressed this in several diary entries related to victimhood. But a significant ambivalence is also evident, not just in her indifference towards religious practice but also her social choices. This may be related to her youth, upbringing, and educational and class background, as will be discussed in later chapters.

²⁵⁴ This did in fact happen for a short time, causing, once more, people to suddenly switch allegiances with the hope of being granted permission to emigrate. The argument behind it was that Israel wanted to recruit communists to the new land. On this “red *aliyah*” see Levy, *Ana Pauker*, 169.

unknown, or attachment to home or family. Some were convinced by the anti-Zionist campaign launched on multiple fronts in the course of 1949 and 1950. This campaign sought to discourage emigration applicants by inciting fear of poor living conditions or even possible death as a result of battle in the newly-minted state. The campaign employed letters purportedly written by local Jews renouncing their decision to emigrate on ideological or practical grounds as well as letters from Israel describing miserable living conditions.

Antizionist Propaganda in the Local Press

The newspapers of Constanța recorded this battle prominently and indeed, the Jews of Constanța held an advantageous position in terms of their concrete understanding of the emigration process: they saw the ship filled with Jews departing regularly with their own eyes. Talk of mass emigration was impossible to dismiss only as “rumours.” In any case, the campaign to “reveal” the “true” and “devastating” nature of life in Israel in the Constanța newspapers was vicious and the CDE was hard at work to convince local Jews to renounce their intent to emigrate.²⁵⁵

In March 1950 the local newspaper *Dobrogea Nouă* printed an article entitled “In Israel Jewish workers replaced by American ‘experts’;”²⁵⁶ in April there was a piece blasting disagreement amongst the Israeli left-wing socialist parties;²⁵⁷ in May a few sentences well-placed warned of an epidemic of infant paralysis which was especially “ravaging new immigrants for whom housing and food conditions are miserable.”²⁵⁸ Then, in June, less than two weeks after Blanka recorded the “mass emigration” taking place, in the course of one week an onslaught of “open letters” to the editor were published. Alongside these was one article announcing that “bourgeois Jews” in Israel were illegally transferring their money in Israel to external countries (thus harming the worker); this was situated beside a prominent advertisement for a performance

²⁵⁵ It was beyond the scope of this project to consult multiple newspapers in this regard, but it would certainly be a worthwhile undertaking to explore whether all local papers carried such articles and letters and whether there were discrepancies in the local versus national press in addressing the issue. When I was doing this research, the newspapers cited below were not digitised and I consulted the originals at the county library in Constanța, Biblioteca Județeană „Ioan N. Roman” Constanța. In the meantime, I have learned that at least some of *Dobrogea Nouă* has been digitised by Arcanum.

²⁵⁶ “In Israel, muncitorii evrei sunt înlocuiți cu ,experți’ americani,” *Dobrogea Nouă*, 30 March 1950.

²⁵⁷ “In Israel se opune rezistentă hotărâta împotriva scizionistilor din conducerea Histadrut-ului,” *Dobrogea Nouă*, 27 April 1950.

²⁵⁸ “Epidemie de paralizie infantilă în Israel,” *Dobrogea Nouă*, 14 May 1950.

of the Jewish Bucharest State Theatre in Constanța, as if to juxtapose the two situations and emphasise that the state not only sanctioned but fostered Jewish culture within the country.²⁵⁹

The articles listed above could, theoretically, be considered standard reporting on international events, the three letters to the editor, however, left no doubt of their motive. They were almost certainly deliberately obtained and not, as the editorial office claimed, simply some of the “countless” such letters received “daily” by the newspaper.²⁶⁰ The first letter titled “I will not let myself be deceived by Zionist propaganda” appeared on 23 June 1950 and was written by Martin Zilbermann. According to the signature of the article, Zilbermann was the assistant director of the state store “Constanța,” but he was also a prominent member of the local CDE.²⁶¹ Over three paragraphs he laments that Zionist propaganda had caught a part of the Jewish workers “of our country and of our city” in their networks with the goal of throwing the workers “into the arms of misery and unemployment which reigns in Israel, governed by the clique of Ben Gurion, slave to the dollar.”²⁶² Three days later another article appeared, this one under the explicit rubric “Letters from Jewish Working People who Refuse to Emigrate to Israel.” This letter presumably carried more weight. It was written by Isac Bercovici, the secretary of the Constanța Jewish community and rather than attacking Zionist propaganda, it announced the author’s change of heart. In it, he declared that he had renounced his decision to emigrate. This was the ultimate aim of the CDE, to spur renunciations and withdrawals of the emigration applications and the letter reflects the argumentation being used at the time:

Following a mature examination, I have renounced emigration to Israel

Comrade Editor,

I was born and raised here, I suffered misery and exploitation along with all the other workers, both from the Jewish bourgeoisie and those of other nationalities. Lately, captured by the false and dangerous propaganda brought by Zionist elements hostile to the unity of the working class, I also picked up the [emigration application] form with the thought that when I make up my mind, I will desert the camp of the workers, emigrating to Israel.

²⁵⁹ “Burghezia din Israel isi tranfera averile in strainitate,” *Dobrogea Nouă*, 23 June 1950.

²⁶⁰ The newspaper asserts this above the letter from Bercovici dated 26 June 1950 (see below).

²⁶¹ Martin Zilbermann is listed as a CDE office member on “Tabel de împuterniciți a C.D.E. ca delegați etc,” (no date), sheet 80 in the folder titled “Diferite situații, tabele și declarații de renunțare la plecare în Israel,” folder no. 6/1951, Fond Comitetul Democrat Evreiesc, inv. 531, SJAN Constanța, Constanța.

²⁶² Martin Zilbermann, „Nu ma las amăgit de propoganda sionista,” *Dobrogea Nouă*, 23 June 1950.

However, having been enlightened by the CDE activists into what abyss I [would] fall, having done an examination of my conscience, I realised that only here where I was born and raised can I ensure my existence and that of my loved ones, here in our People's Republic. A country in full progress of building socialism, where life is getting better day by day, thanks to the example and help of our great neighbour the Soviet Union, only here is my place, and not to throw myself into the arms of misery in a country in fiefdom of Anglo-American imperialism, where working people live a life of misery and cruel exploitation.

After this mature examination I gave up emigrating to Israel and I advise those who are aware, for their own good and that of their family, for the happiness of their children and the peace of their homes, to follow my example.²⁶³

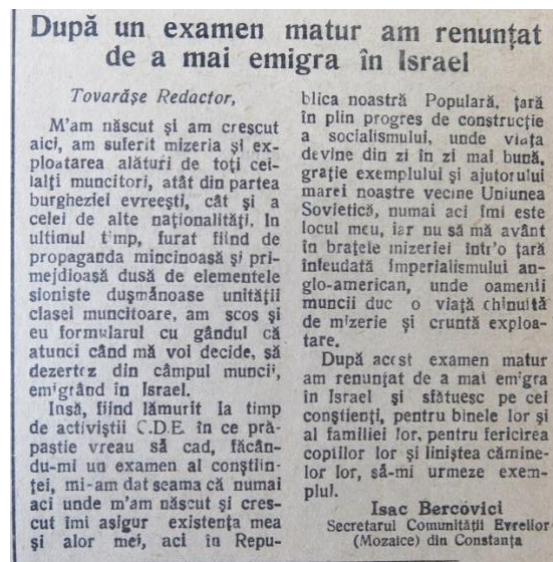


Figure 24. Article translated above. Source: *Dobrogea Nouă*, 26. June 1950

The final letter of this trio was printed only two days later on 28 June 1950. It was written by Eugen Foleșteanu, possibly the son of Anna Foleșteanu, a woman to whom Blanka had turned in the past for employment and emigration advice. At that time Blanka mentioned that Anna Foleșteanu was a member of the party and for this reason she hoped Mrs. Foleșteanu would be able to influence her emigration request. Sometime in 1950 or 1951 however Anna Foleșteanu had

²⁶³ Isaac Bercovici, „După un examen matur am renunțat de a mai emigra în Israel,” *Dobrogea Nouă*, 26 June 1950.

joined the CDE branch of Constanța. By 1951 at the latest, she held a position of leadership as the secretary.²⁶⁴ In light of this, it seems probable that Eugen was her son, the letter may have been encouraged or even penned by herself. The column, entitled “A letter from a young Jewish worker. In these days I received certification as router technician”²⁶⁵ contains similar stock phrasing as found in Bercovici’s letter above, with an emphasis on the opportunities for youth and his pride in his occupation.

These letters were published at the height of the emigration wave but the CDE continued to collect similar statements for several years, an entire sheath of them is part of the CDE collection at the Constanța county national archives branch.²⁶⁶ Alongside declarations of renunciation of emigration, some lengthy and some succinct, there are also letters from family members who had emigrated to Israel and which report poor living conditions. Possibly these were circulated internally, possibly excerpts were reprinted in other media. The declarations may also have served to reinstate individuals in their place of work. Numerous memoir writers recall loss of employment as a direct result of submitting emigration applications. Blanka, however, never referred to this, neither as a fear nor as grounds for dismissal, once more placing her story outside of the ordinary or expected. Though she frequently writes of fearing being laid-off—and she is indeed dismissed from her initial place of employment early on—changes in personnel are ascribed to budget cuts or restructuring. She never links precarity in her employment position to her application for emigration. It is not clear whether this is due to naivety on her part or whether her skills were of such genuine value that her employer would not consider terminating her for “pedagogic” motives.²⁶⁷

²⁶⁴ One Isac Foleșteanu is also listed as an active CDE member on the same document cited above listing Martin Zilbermann as a CDE member. Isac may have been Anna’s husband and Eugen’s father. “Tabel de împuterniciți a C.D.E. ca delegați etc,” (no date), sheet 80 in the folder titled “Diferite situații, tabele și declarații de renunțare la plecare în Israel,” folder no. 6/1951, Fond Comitetul Democrat Evreiesc, inv. 531, SJAN Constanța, Constanța. In August 1949 Blanka referred to “Mr. Foleșteanu” as “my former protector” when she went to him for help in seeking employment and received a letter of recommendation (diary entry 26 August 1949). The family clearly held a position of power within the community and the town and seems to have maintained their position of power for at least several years, despite political changes.

²⁶⁵ Eugen Foleșteanu, „O scrisoare de la un tânăr muncitor evreu. Zilele acestea m’am calificat în meseria de frezor,” *Dobrogea Nouă*, 28 May 1950.

²⁶⁶ These are found in the same folder cited above: “Diferite situații, tabele și declarații de renunțare la plecare în Israel,” folder no. 6/1951, Fond Comitetul Democrat Evreiesc, inv. 531, SJAN Constanța, Constanța.

²⁶⁷ Both these memoirs cite parents whose employment was terminated or curtailed after applying for emigration, see Vlasopolos, *No Return Address* and Molnar, *Under a Red Sky*.

Personal Interventions

In addition to their printing of anti-emigration propaganda, the CDE was also proactive on an individual level, creating lists and making phone calls, pressuring individuals to withdraw their emigration requests. In order to do this, they would have needed to know who had applied and the individual's personal contact information—which, as it turns out, they did.

Despite Blanka's ambivalence towards participating in communal Jewish life, the community's administration and individual Jews therein remained well aware of Blanka. The CDE was precisely informed about who had applied to emigrate and their place of employment. One CDE file with documents from 1949 to 1951 contains numerous revealing lists: lists of Jewish employees at businesses, lists of party members who submitted emigration application forms, lists of those who renounced emigration, lists of workers who submitted application forms, lists of party members who have not applied to emigrate, etc.²⁶⁸ Blanka's name is found twice, on the list of Jewish employees at businesses and those who had submitted applications to emigrate, with work telephone number notated. At the cooperative where she was employed at this time, Blanka was one of two women out of a total of ten Jewish employees.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁸ These lists are in the same folder cited above, which has a total of 240 sheets and, contrary to its description on the folder cover and in the inventory, contains documents from prior to 1951 as well. "Diferite situații, tabele și declarații de renunțare la plecare în Israel," folder no. 6/1951, Fond Comitetul Democrat Evreiesc, inv. 531, SJAN Constanța, Constanța.

²⁶⁹ The lists are in the folder cited above, Blanka appears on the document "Tabel de oameni ai muncii evrei pe Întreprinderi," sheets 84-88 (Chart of Jewish workers at businesses (these were not always cooperatives)) and "Tabel de oameni ai muncii evrei, care și-au înaintat actele de plecare în Israel," sheets 184-188 (Chart of Jewish workers who submitted forms for leaving to Israel), both documents are in the folder "Diferite situații, tabele și declarații de renunțare la plecare în Israel," folder no. 6/1951, Fond Comitetul Democrat Evreiesc, inv. 531, SJAN Constanța, Constanța. Her name is misspelled on both lists: Leibselter and Lebsenter.

ROMÂNIA ♦ ARHIVELE NAȚIONALE ♦ CONSTANTA

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COOP. "MIHAI DUMITRU" tel. 12-38 93. Stössel Adalbert <i>gest. Luca</i> 94. Oliver Luca <i>1675</i> 95. Weber Stefania 96. Grünberg Carol 97. Pincu Herman - <i>gest.</i> 98. Serail M. 100. Freimovici Mihai - <i>Schlichter</i> 101. Leibschelter Blanka <i>Ref. Adm.</i> 102. Leibovici Steia - <i>va. infector</i> <i>Spiegel Eli.</i> 103. Weiss Lazar	EXPORT-LEHM tel. 24-57 126. Alculusbre I. 127. Brimer Mezes 128. Davidovici Teobald 129. Flighelmann Idel 130. Foghelmann Nathan 131. Grünberg S. 132. Gold Israf 133. Leker Herman 134. Necht Clara 135. Neffer Earl 136. Serben Samuel 137. Kraus Herman 138. Lazarevici Albert 139. Necht I.

PROCENTUL PL. CĂRELOR

Figure 25. Excerpt from CDE "Chart of Jewish workers at businesses," Blanka is no. 101. Source: See footnote 269.

On Saturday, 23 Dec. 1950, after Blanka had already received her first emigration application rejection and submitted an appeal, she received a phone call from Anna Foleșteanu in her office:

C-ța Sontag 24/XII 50

Gestern ruft mich Frau Foleșteanu im Büro an, und nach einigen konventionellen Worten geht sie aufs Ziel los und fragt mich was man mit meiner Israel-Reise hört. Es zeigt sich dass sie über alles informiert ist, und ich sage dass die Mama ohne mich nicht fahren konnte und ebenso könnte ich ohne die Mama nicht fahren. Sie beginnt mir sehr zuzureden das Reiseprojekt aufzugeben und dazubleiben. Dann auf einmal sagt sie: Du hattest Negativ und jetzt ist Dir Positiv gekommen.

Ich war im Passbüro, der Schef war nicht da, die Untergebenen wussten von Nichts und jetzt ist Samstag und morgen u. übermorgen Weihnachten. Ich bin sehr neugierig was es mit diesem "Positiv" auf sich hat, gleichzeitig ist eine grosse Unruhe in mir dieses Weib soll mir nicht schaden.

Blanka did not manage to speak with Mrs. Foleșteanu until the second week of January 1951, after which she wrote: „Ich war gestern bei Frau Foleșteanu, sie hat sich herausgeredet, sie habe damals gehört ich hätte den Pass bekommen, es sei eben ein falsches Gerücht gewesen, mehr wisse sie nicht. Ich weiss nicht ob sie aufrichtig war. Natürlich hat sie mir zugeredet den Reiseplan

aufzuheben, immer wieder dasselbe unnütze Gerede. Dass ich es mir überlegen könnte ist ganz ausgeschlossen.”²⁷⁰ With her references to internal rumours regarding the passport of any one certain individual and Blanka’s own doubts regarding Foleşteanu’s honesty, the remarks suggest an atmosphere of suspicion and tension between individuals and institutes within a communal framework.

For the next space of time, however, Blanka was distracted by problems in her workplace. On a practical, day-to-day level, her employment security had begun to falter. Already in October 1950, a few days after she had started her new notebook, she recorded that her cooperative had been dissolved: three cooperatives were being merged and one administrative department was to oversee their work. Though she feared the worst, her position was not terminated at the time. Of the thirteen entries made over the next five months, close to half (six) reveal insecurity in the workplace, with regular rampant rumours of mass layoffs and administrative reorganisation. Finally, on 12 April 1951 she recorded one sentence: “Die Bombe ist geplatzt: Ich bin entlassen, brotlos.”²⁷¹

Blanka displayed, however, a dogged determination to wrest her position—or a position—back. For the next two months she relentlessly sought out the former president of the cooperative (with whom she had always been on good terms), as well as the current president, pleading with notable tenacity for them to reemploy her. In her words, both men were inclined to help her, though they also dragged their feet and put her off. Possibly they were powerless to actually create new positions. We know little of Blanka’s demeanour outside of her home. Her voice in the diaries is predominantly low-spirited—defeated, depressed, and paranoid. Nevertheless publicly, at numerous points over the course of the years recorded, she succeeded in persuading numerous individuals to assist her. Whether this was due to her tenacity, a certain social grace or charm, physical beauty, cleverness, or a mixture of all, she obtained promises from local men in power to “never abandon her” and “do everything possible” to secure her a position. By the beginning of July, two and a half months after she had been laid off, her efforts had paid off and she resumed a position, once more in bookkeeping, with her former employer.

²⁷⁰ 12 January 1951. English: “Yesterday I want to Mrs Foleşteanu’s, she made the excuse that back then she had heard that I had received the passport, but it was just a false rumour after all, she does not know anything else. I do not know if she was being candid. Of course, she tried to convince me to give up my travel plans, always the same useless chit-chat. That I could even consider it is entirely ruled out.”

²⁷¹ English: The bomb has dropped: “I have been laid off, [am] unemployed.”

Her entries for the remainder of 1951 returned to recording her efforts to appeal to the emigration authorities and her pervasive psychological discomfort due to her ongoing position of liminality. In September 1951 she lamented: “Was soll ich jetzt tun? Sitze seit Jahren in einer unbequemen provisorischen Lage und es nimmt kein Ende.”²⁷² A few months earlier, in July 1951, she had submitted another petition requesting she be allowed to depart with her mother. The rejection arrived at the end of August. In September she travelled to Bucharest, intending to request a personal audience at the interior ministry; such audiences ceased the day she arrived (this entry is quoted in the introduction). At the end of October she submitted her fourth appeal. The handful of entries from July to December 1951 (there are nine in total) address only these appeals, her new working conditions, and, to a degree, preparations for the winter, which she was reluctant to undertake, still hoping to depart. She closed the year with a remark on her mother, „Die Mama ist seit diesem Herbst gesundheitlich äusserst heruntergekommen. Sie kann nicht bis auf die Strasse gehen, und hält sich nur mit Mühe aufrecht auf den Beinen. Immer hat sie Schmerzen, ich kann ihr nicht helfen und bin sehr traurig.“²⁷³ In 1952 her mental and emotional occupation with departure swiftly lost ground to her mother’s condition.

²⁷² 23 September 1951. English: “What should I do now? For years I have been sitting in an uncomfortable provisional position and there is no end in sight.”

²⁷³ 26 December 1951. English: “Since this autumn Mama has declined greatly in terms of health. She cannot even make it to the street and can only stand with great effort. She has constant pain, I cannot help her and am very sad.”

Diary Excerpts: 25. Januar – 21. September 1952

C-ța Freitag 25/I 52

Der Mamas Zustand hat sich verschlechtert. Vor einer Woche hat sie ein heftiges Stechen erfasst, habe einen Arzt geholt, doch hat dieser keine bestimmte Diagnose feststellen können. Vorgestern war bei ihr ein anderer Arzt und dieser hat "congestie pulmonara" festgestellt. Das ist eine Art Lungenentzündung, genau was das bedeutet weiss ich nicht. Das Fieber ist beständig das gleiche. Wer weiss ob sie nicht schon bevor der Arzt das erste mal kam fieberte ohne dass wir es wussten, und darum nicht vorsichtig waren. Befinde mich in einer Situation die ich nur meinem ärgsten Todfeind wünsche. Bin um die Mama sehr besorgt und finde keinen Augenblick Ruhe. Die Mama braucht Pflege und habe weder womit noch Zeit sie zu pflegen. Letzteres ist besonders schlimm. Habe bis nun mich zu bischen vom Dienst fortgeschlichen um Besorgungen zu machen, oder der Mama etwas zum Essen zu bereiten. Nun ist dies aufgefallen, man hat es mir ernst vorgeworfen und ich darf mir keinen Seitensprung mehr erlauben, sonst kann es mich noch den Posten kosten. Was soll aber mit meiner schwerkranken Mutter geschehen wenn sie allein so viele Stunden im kalten Zimmer liegen muss. So viel Unglück ist über mich gekommen. Dazu habe heute noch eine andere Aufregung. Der heutige Tag trug alle Anzeichen dass eine Entwertung des Geldes zu erwarten sei. Alle Geschäfte gesperrt, die Leute laufen wir rasend umher etwas kaufen zu können, doch nichts kann man kaufen. Besitze auch etwas Geld, weggelegt für den Fall der Abreise. Bin darum auch in grosser Sorge. Doch weit grösser ist die Sorge um die Mama, habe ihr wieder das Fieber gemessen und es ist gestiegen. So hoch war es noch nicht bis nun. Bin so unglücklich so verzweifelt dass ich laut schreien möchte.

C-ța Mittwoch 6/II 52

Alles Unglück ist auf einmal über mich gekommen. Der Mama wird nicht besser, sie schwebt noch immer in Gefahr und das macht mich wahnsinnig.

Dazu die Entwertung des Geldes. So ganz plötzlich ist das gekommen. Ich hatte eine nicht unbedeutende Summe Geld an der ich nicht rührte. Sie war bestimmt für den Fall einer Ausreise nach Eretz Israel. Sollte diese Hoffnung ins Wasser fallen, wollte ich für dieses Geld Möbel kaufen und mich einrichten. Habe nur vom Gehalt gelebt, was nicht leicht war, um diese Summe seinen geplanten Zweck nicht zu entziehen. Auf einmal diese Katastrophe, mein Geld ist Staub geworden.

Und das gerade in einen Augenblick wann ich wie nie zuvor in meinem Leben Geld brauche. Ich muss die Mama retten, ich brauche Penicilin, das ist sehr teuer und ich bin ohne einen Bani.²⁷⁴ Man hat eine Angabe auf das Gehalt in neuem Geld gegeben doch habe ich dieses verwendet um Nahrung einzukaufen Doch was das schrecklichste ist die Mama isst so wenig, fast nichts. Sie ist so grauenhaft abgemagert, besteht nur noch aus dem Gerippe. Befinde mich seit Wochen in einer Gemütsverfassung die sich nicht beschreiben lässt. Warum soviel Unglück immer nur für den Einen und denselben Menschen. Wie kann ich das aushalten ohne den Verstand zu verlieren.

C-ța Donnerstag 14/II 52

Vorgestern und heute hat der Doktor der Mama Penicilin gemacht. Nach der ersten Tour ergab sich leider noch kein günstiges Resultat, hoffentlich wird es nach der heutigen nicht ausbleiben. Habe mein ganzes Gehalt in die Penicilin hineingesteckt und den Doktor nur eine Angabe auf das Honorar gegeben. Habe keinen Bani und Schulden. Dazu bin ich jetzt schwer erkältet. Habe einen äusserst heftigen Husten, so habe noch niemals gehustet und niemand husten gehört. Bin ganz erschöpft und zerrüttet, alles tut mir weh.

C-ța Montag 18/II 52

Habe einen schrecklichen Keuchhusten der mir keine Ruhepause lässt. Keine Nacht schlafe ich und huste unaufhörlich. Ich war 2 Mal in der Poliklinik, doch beide Medikamente haben nichts genützt.

Der Mama ist nur sehr wenig besser, sie fiebert noch immer. Heute war ich wieder nicht bei der Arbeit, die Tage die ich fehle werden mir natürlich abgezogen. Draussen stürmt ein Schneegestöber und wir sind beide krank und ohne jede Hilfe. Es ist zum tollwerden.

C-ța Freitag 22/II 52

Heute ist der traurigste aller meiner traurigen Geburtstage. Der Mama ist wieder sehr schlecht, das Fieber ist stark gestiegen.

C-ța Donnerstag 28/II 52

Heute habe mein Mütterchen ins Spital überführt.

²⁷⁴ Romanian for “money,” but literally “penny.”

C-ța Freitag 29/II 52

Sehne mich sehr nach der Mama. Bin sehr besorgt um sie. Die Wohnung ist so leer und traurig ohne der Mama, so unsagbar traurig.

C-ța Freitag 21/III 52

Seit meiner letzten Eintragung, bis heute, habe Schreckliches mitgemacht. Habe das letzte Mal der Mamas Ueberführung ins Spital verzeichnet. Am folgenden Tag ruft mich die Aerztin an und teilt mir zu meinem namenlosen Schmerz mit, die Röntgenaufnahme habe ein schweres Lungenleiden ergeben und man könne sie nicht weiter im Spital behalten ich solle sie ins T.B.C. Spital überführen. Ein fürchterlichen Schmerz und eine gewaltige Unruhe begannen in mir zu toben. Ich will nicht alle Einzelheiten beschreiben, also kurz: Habe mich um einen Platz im T.B.C. Spital interessiert, doch war keiner frei. Inzwischen will man dort die Mama absolut nicht länger halten. Also muss ich meine schwerkranke Mutter bei schlechtem Winterwetter wieder nachhause nehmen. - Mittwoch waren 2 Wochen seit sie sich im T.B.C. Spital befindet. Habe in den ersten Tagen ihrer Internierung im T.B.C. Spital mit ihrer behandelnden Aerztin gesprochen, und diese hat mir offen gesagt dass die Mama ernst krank sei. Ich kann nicht beschreiben was in mir vorgeht. Bin sehr geärgert dass man der Mama keine Streptomacin²⁷⁵ macht, nehme an sie findet es zu teuer für ihr fortgeschrittenes alter; dass mir meine Mutter, der einzige Mensch den ich auf Erden habe, teuer ist, das interessiert nicht. Wenn ich geahnt hätte, als ich diesen Sommer Streptomacine hatte, dass ich es selber brauchen werde! Der Erlös davon ist in seinem ganzen Umfang zum Teufel gegangen. (Letzte Geldreform) Und nun sagt mir vor einigen Tagen der Schefarzt ich solle die Mama ins Sanatorium Paulești befördern man habe hier nichts was zu tun mit ihr. Hätte er mir lieber mit einem Kolben eins in den Kopf versetzt. Hatte soviel Hoffnung in dieses Spital gesetzt und nun sagt man mir man könne nichts tun. Und was Paulești anbetrifft wo kann die Mama in ihrem Zustand im Winter eine lange Reise unternehmen. Ausserdem woher soviel Geld hernehmen, denn ich müsste sie begleiten. Genug für heute, ich kann nicht mehr schreiben.

C-ța 30/III 52 Sonntag

²⁷⁵ Streptomycin, a drug administered to treat tuberculosis.

Komme eben vom Spital. Es geht der Mama wieder schlechter. - Es war ihr schon etwas besser, das Fieber hatte nachgelassen und der Appetit sich gebessert. Jetzt ist das Fieber wieder gestiegen, und wieder kein Appetit nur Durst.

Habe seinerzeit von meinen furchtbaren Husten geschrieben, und dann wegen der Aufregungen mit der Mamas Krankheit, nichts mehr davon erwähnt. Nach der dritten Flasche Medizin, hat der Keuchhusten sich gelegt und ein gewöhnliches Husten ist geblieben den ich noch heute habe und der nicht weichen will. Ausserdem habe Stechen im Rücken und habe sehr abgenommen.

C-ța Mitwoch 2 /IV 52

Gestern hatte eine große Aufregung. Habe einen Zettel zugestellt bekommen dass ich in ein Geschäft als Kassiererin versetzt wurde. Nach mehrjähriger Bürotätigkeit solch eine Ohrfeige. Bin in die Direktion gegangen und habe protestiert. Mir wurde geantwortet mein Posten sei aufgelöst. Ich hatte einen grossen Schmerz umsomehr weil ich meine Vermutungen hatte, konnte das Weinen nicht zurückhalten und habe schrecklich geweint. Umsonst, die blieben fest bei ihren Entschluss. Daraufhin bin ich zum Ariton gegangen doch der war in einer Sitzung. Meine Vermutungen sind folgende: Ich habe eine Kollegin ein ganz unausstehliches Exemplar, ich kann sie nicht leiden und zwischen uns besteht eine alte Antipatie. Samstag hatten wir einen Konflikt den sie heraufbeschworen hat. Daraufhin ist sie zu unserm Dienstschef gegangen und hat mich verleumdet. Dieser ist in die Direktion gegangen und hat gesagt dass er für mich keine Verwendung mehr habe. Darauf erfolgte die Versetzung. Am Vorabend konnte ich glücklicherweise den Ariton sprechen. Er empfing mich freundlich und hörte mich aufmerksam an. Daraufsetzte er das Telefon in Bewegung doch keiner meiner Vorgesetzten war zu jener Stunde zu erreichen. Doch sagte er mir ich solle mir keine Sorgen mache und mich heute morgen wieder auf meiner alten Stelle einfinden, er werde schon alles arrangieren. Und so geschah es auch. Möge diejenigen welche mir in meiner jetzigen Verfassung noch diese Aufregung beschert haben, ein schwerer Fluch treffen.

Trotz der Aufregungen des gestrigen Tages, habe mir eine Lungenröntgenaufnahme gemacht; ich war nämlich für gestern nachmittag programmiert. Das Resultat ist gut, ich habe nichts, normal.

C-ța 6 Mai 52 Dienstag

Heute ist eine Woche seit die Mama im Sanatorium T.B.C. Paulești weilt. Habe sie montag abend direkt vom Spital zur Bahn gebracht und sind wir die ganze Nacht gefahren. Am Morgen waren wir im Bukarest sind ausgestiegen und noch einer Weile umgestiegen und nach Ploiești²⁷⁶ weiter gefahren. Die Mama war ganz erschöpft. In Ploiești musste man um aus dem Bahnhof herauszukommen eine Menge Stiegen herunter und auf der anderen Seite wieder heraufgehen. Für die Mama in ihrem Zustand schien es eine unmögliche Sache. Mit schwerer Mühe und Not gelangten wir oben an. Die Mama war unfähig auch nur einen Schritt weiter zu gehen und wir mussten noch ein Stück gehen um vor das Bahnhofsgebäude zu gelangen. Nachdem die Mama eine Weile ausgeruht hatte legte sie auch noch dieses Stück mit Mühe zurück. Ich nahm einen Wagen und wir fuhren ins Zentrum um hier auf das Auto vom Sanatorium zu warten. Die Sonne brannte wie im Juli und dieses Warten war sehr schwierig. Jede Viertel Stunde war eine Ewigkeit und die Mama konnte sich kaum noch halten. Mir war zum heulen. Nach 11 Uhr begann ich unruhig zu werden, und was wenn das Auto überhaupt nicht kommt? Zum Verrücktwerden. Gegen 12 Uhr ging ich in ein Büro und telefonierte ins Sanatorium fragte ob das Auto nach Ploiești gefahren sei. Man bejahte. Das brachte mir schon Erleichterung und wie ich von da wegging und mich wieder dem Platze zuwandte wo die Autos hielten, sah ich es auch schon. Ein gewöhnliches Lastauto. Ich lud die Mama auf und wir fuhren ab. Das Sanatorium ist 10 km von Ploiești in einem Wald gelegen. Als wir ausstiegen und bis ich sie im Bett sah drohte sie mir gänzlich zusammenzubrechen. – Als ich sie verliess ging das mühsam zurückgehaltene heulen los. So richtig erst als ich schon draussen war. Ich war todmüde und die Füße begannen anzuschwellen. Ich musste einen Kilometer zurücklegen um auf die Chaussee zu gelangen. Ich heilt ein Lastauto auf das mich in die Stadt brachte. Ich fuhr mit dem Autobus dann zum Bahnhof, fuhr nach Bukarest. Die Füße schmerzten mich derart dass ich nicht mehr auftreten konnte. Von Bukarest nach Constanța hatte ich nur noch den Personenzug um 11 Uhr abends. Musste einige Stunden warten und dann wieder eine ganze Nacht fahren.

Heute habe die erste Postkarte von der Mama bekommen. Sie schreibt dass sie noch keinen Arzt zu Gesicht bekommen hat, dass man sich Milch selber kaufen muss und zwar ganz früh am Morgen. Das gefällt mir nicht das sind keine Zustände für schwer kranke Menschen. Wie sie hier im Spital war habe sie mit allem Nötigen versorgt, jetzt ist sie weit von mir, krank und hilflos und ich kann nicht für sie sorgen.

²⁷⁶ This is an antiquated spelling of the town Ploiești.

C-ța 21. V 1952²⁷⁷

Seit dem 13. V habe keine Mutter mehr. Heute eine Woche wurde meine Mama, der einzige Mensch den ich auf dieser Erde hatte, mein Lebensinhalt, mein Alles, am isr. Friedhof in Ploești beerdigt.

C-ța 10. VI 52

Wieso tragen mich noch meine 2 Füße auf dieser verfluchten Erde herum, wieso, wozu, ich kann das nicht begreifen.

Heute ist ein Monat dass ich meine teure Mama zum letzten Mal gesehen habe. Am 8.V rief mich ein Telegram zu ihr. Zwei Tage vorher erhielt ich die erste Karte von ihr. Sie klagte über nichts, und ich nahm an ihr Zustand sei unverändert. Dürfte auch so gewesen sein. Erwartete mit Ungeduld die nächste Nachricht, hoffte auf etwas Günstigem zumindest ein Wachsen des Appetits der Luftveränderung wegen. Und plötzlich dieses Telegram welches mich schlimmstes ahnen liess. Ich hatte kein Geld für die Reise bei mir, es war schon nach 8 abends. Bin wie eine rasende durch die Gassen gelaufen den Schefbuchhalter suchen welcher sehr weit wohnt und dann mit einem Zettel von ihm ins Zentrum in eines unserer Restaurants wo man mir auf mein Gehaltkonto das nötige Reisegeld gab, und von da zur Bahn. Der Schweiss goss von mir in Strömen.

Am andern Morgen gegen 10 uhr setzte mich ein Gelegenheitsauto auf der Landstrasse vor dem Weg der nach Paulești führt, ab. Zuerst ging ich raschen Schrittes und dann begann ich zu rennen. Vor ihrer Türe, dem unseligen No. 13, blieb ich stehen, dann riess ich die Türe auf und starrte in der Richtung nach ihrem Bett. Das war nicht mehr das Gesicht meiner Mutter, wie ich es vor wenigen Tagen verlassen hatte, ein Totenkopf; aus 2 schwarzen Höhlen starrten mir ihre Mutteraugen entgegen. Da brach mein verzweifelter Schmerz schrankenlos aus mir heraus. Auf ihre Ermahnungen, auf ihre mit fremder schwacher Stimme geäusserte Aufforderung mich zu beruhigen, zwang ich mich zur Mässigung.

11. VI 52

Und dann erzählte sie. Nach dem ersten Erscheinen des Arztes machte man ihr eine Injektion. Einige Stunden später bekam sie im ganzen Körper Schmerzen welche immer heftiger wurden. Die

²⁷⁷ The handwriting for this entry is much darker and thicker than her usual entries, the pencil was ground into the paper, with commas (which she normally leaves out) and diacritics written with emphasis.

ganze Nacht schrie sie vor Schmerzen und rief nach mir. Sie bat die Schwester mich telegrafisch zu rufen. Gepeinigt von den furchtbaren physischen und seelischen Schmerzen sah sie nach der Türe bis ich kam. Ich suchte den Doktor und fragte was mit meiner Mutter geschehen sei. Er erklärte mir ihren Zustand als äusserst ernst und hoffnungslos. Ich weinte fassungslos. Warum nur, warum hatte man sie so weit weggeschickt, warum nach diesen fürchterlichen Ort geschickt. Wie hätte ich das ahnen sollen, habe Vertrauen zu den Ärzten gehabt. Als ich wieder an ihr Bett trat, war mein Herz eine einzige grosse Wunde in der tausend Feinde mit Dolchen herumwühlten und Salz schüttelten. In dieser fürchterlichsten Pein verging der Tag und die Nacht kam. Ich hatte bereits eine schlaflose Nacht im Zug verbracht und nun sass ich diese Nacht gemartert auf ihrem Bettrand. 6 Schwindsüchtige husteten die ganze Nacht und ich sass in diesem Ozean von Bakterien. Doch nicht an mich dachte ich. Ich dachte nur an dieses namenlose Unglück dass mich getroffen hatte und an diese Stätte des Grauens wohin ich mein Teuerstes gebracht hatte in der Hoffnung wenn nicht Heilung so doch eine bedeutende Besserung zu finden und statt dessen ein Lager des Grauens und des Todes gefunden habe. Und dann kam der Tag und sie sprach fast nichts schrie nur ab und zu auf vor Schmerzen, sagte einmal sie könne es nicht mehr aushalten zu liegen so sehr schmerzten sie die Knochen, und dann sagte sie einmal als ich mich über sie beugte, „ich werde wahnsinnig.“ Ich sagte ihr es sei eine Krise die vorbeigehen werde und ich werde kommen sie nachhause nehmen. Sie sagte, „ach, ich soll mich noch in meinem Bett sehen“ und die Dolche bohrten ohne Erbarmen in meiner Herzwunde. Ich begann zu fühlen dass ich den Verstand verliere und zusammenbreche, so wusste ich nichts als wegzufahren. Hätte ich gewusst wie nahe ihr Ende, wäre ich nicht nach Constanța gefahren, ich weiss nicht was ich in jener Verfassung getan hätte, aber eins ist sicher, nach Constanța wäre ich nicht gefahren. Und so kam die Stunde des Abschiedes, Abschied von meiner todkranken teuren Mutter und ich musste mir sagen, vielleicht ein Abschied für immer. Die schwerste Stunde meines an Schicksalsschlägen nicht armen Lebens, die schwerste Qual die je ein menschliches Herz auf dieser Erde gelitten. „Gib mir einen Kuss, Mama“ und sie küsste mich 3 Mal auf die Stirne. Die letzten Küsse inniger treuer Mutterliebe. Von der Türe sah ich mich noch einmal um und winkte, sie hob den abgezehrten Arm und winkte zurück. Nun stürzte ich davon. Die Erinnerung hat mich nicht schreiben lassen, ich habe viel Zeit gebraucht diese paar Zeilen zu schreiben. Die Augen sind mir wund vom Weinen, ich will versuchen die Tränen zurückzuhalten, aber dem tobenden Jammer in meinem Innern Einhalt zu gebieten das ist unmöglich.

20. VI 52

Ich verliess meine Mutter in jener fürchterlichen Lage, weil ich dem Wahnsinn nahe war und man mir dazu riet. Doch als ich fort war, da ging es mir nicht besser. Ich dachte nur an ihre Leiden und meine Qualen stiegen ins Namenlose. Ich wollte wieder zu ihr hatte aber kein Geld und suchte etwas zu verkaufen. Mittwoch den 14 Mai am nachmittag verkaufte ich eine Sache und beschloss am nächsten Abend zu fahren. Doch noch am selben Nachmittag erhielt ich das Telegram mit der Todesanzeige. Mein erster Gedanke war nur: sie leidet nicht mehr. Doch nur ein Augenblick, dann begann die fürchterliche Tatsache dass ich meine Mutter verloren habe in mein Bewusstsein zu dringen. Woher Worte nehmen um diesen Schmerz-Orkan zu beschreiben und wozu. Und ganz allein mit diesem Schmerz und sollte von nun an immer allein sein, allein mit meinem Schmerz.

21. VI 52

Bin am gleichen Abend nach Ploëști gefahren. Angekommen in dieser fremden verhassten Stadt die ich lieber nie gesehen hätte, wohin gehen, was tun. In meinem verworrenen Gehirn war ein Gedanke klar: ich muss sie her auf den jüdischen Friedhof von Ploëști bringen. Ich suchte die Comunitate auf und stiess auf Schwierigkeiten. Ich hatte nicht ausreichend Geld und die Comunitate verfügt heutzutage über gar keine Mittel. Gerührt durch meinen Zustand beschloss die Beamtin von der Comunitate mir das fehlende Geld vorzustrecken und nahm auch die Initiative zu den Besorgungen. Vor allem verschaffte sie mir den Menschen der sich um die Ueberführung und die damit verbundenen Formalitäten kümmern sollte. Dann fuhr ich nach Paulești. Ich sass auf einer Bank blickte zur Totenkammer und weinte fassungslos. Ich ging nicht sie zu sehen, meine Nerven hätten es nicht durchgehalten. Ich fragte die Schwestern nach ihren letzten Stunden und was ich befürchtet vernahmen meine Ohren: Sie habe die ganze Zeit nach mir gerufen und gewusst dass ihr Tod nahe sei. Am letzten Tag ihres Lebens habe sie die Brille und die 2 Postkarten die sie von mir hatte verlangt und diese noch einmal gelesen. (Wie soll ich mit dem Gedanken an diese grausamen Qualen meiner teuren über alles geliebten Mutter leben können, und wozu? für wen?) Ich ging jenseits des „Sanatoriums“ im Walde umher und schrie, der Himmel musste meine Anklage, meine Mutter mein Flehen um Verzeihung hören. Und dann fuhr ich mit meiner Mutter im Sarge (konnte das möglich sein) den selben Weg zurück welchen ich nur vor ein paar Tagen mit ihr an meiner Seite, voll Hoffnung und einige baldige Besserung, gefahren war. Es war schon

zu spät um sie noch am selben Tag beerdigen zu können. Am andern Tag stand ich an ihrer Bahre bis der Rabiner und der Kantor kamen. Dann wurde sie zu Grabe getragen. Meine gute, teure, goldene Mama wurde in die Erde versenkt.

C-ța Sontag 21/IX 52

Ich hätte nie gedacht dass ich imstande wäre meine Mama zu überleben. 4 Monate sind vorbei seit meine Mama tot ist und ich lebe noch. Gestern war Jom Kipur, habe eine Lampe und Kerzen brennen lassen – das war der Feiertag im Kreise meiner Familie.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁸ Presumably with “Lampe” Blanka refers to the Yahrzeit candle lit on Yom Kippur in memory of deceased family members.

Chapter 5. Seeking Anna

Whatever I do write, it is my story I am telling, my version of the past. If [my mother] were to tell her own story other landscapes would be revealed.

- Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*²⁷⁹

Alle Christen haben verständliche europäische Namen. Juden haben unverständliche und jüdische. Nicht genug daran: sie haben zwei und drei durch ein „false“ oder ein „recte“ verbundene Familiennamen. Man weiß niemals, wie sie heißen. Ihre Eltern sind nur vom Rabbiner getraut worden. Diese Ehe hat keine gesetzliche Gültigkeit. Hieß der Mann: Weinstock und die Frau: Abramofsky, so hießen die Kinder dieser Ehe: Weinstock recte Abramofsky oder auch Abramofsky false Weinstock. Der Sohn wurde auf den jüdischen Vornamen: Leib Nachman getauft. Weil dieser Name aber schwierig ist und einen aufreizenden Klang haben konnte, nennt sich der Sohn: Leo. Er heißt also: Leib Nachmann genannt Leo Abramofsky, false Weinstock.

- Joseph Roth, *Juden auf Wanderschaft*²⁸⁰

The first time my focus on Blanka as the central protagonist of the narrative shifted severely was in May of 2011. While researching for my master's thesis about the Transylvanian Jewish community of Mediaș, I used my relative proximity to Bukovina to visit the National Archives in Czernowitz and go to Waschkoutz (now Vashkivtsi, Ukraine), Blanka's hometown.²⁸¹ I had learned that the birth book for the Jewish community of Waschkoutz for the years 1918-1928 was held by the regional state archives and I hoped to learn something about her birthdate and family, about which at the time I knew nothing. Though Blanka and her diaries were not then my primary

²⁷⁹ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (W.W. Norton, 1976, repr. W.W. Norton, Tenth Anniversary Edition 1986), 221.

²⁸⁰ Joseph Roth, *Juden auf Wanderschaft* (Verlag der Schmiede, 1927), 55-56. Thank you to Edgar Hauster for bringing this passage to my attention. English: "All Christians have sensible, European names. Jewish names are mad and Jewish. Nor is that all: They have two or three surnames, qualified by false or recte. You never know what to call them. Their parents were married by a rabbi. The marriage has no legal standing. If the father's name is Weinstock, and the mother's Abramovsky, then the children of their union will be called Weinstock recte Abramovsky, or perhaps Abramovsky false Weinstock. The boy, for example, is given the Jewish first name of Leib Nachman. Because the name is difficult and might sound provocative to others' ears, the son styles himself Leo. So his name is: Leib Nachman, styled Leo Abramovsky false Weinstock." Joseph Roth, *The Wandering Jews*, trans. Michael Hoffmann (Granta Books, 2001).

²⁸¹ At this point in time the diaries were an ongoing point of interest for me but not the focus of an official academic project. I was at the time employed by Leo Baeck Institute and preparing to begin what would develop into a six-year archival survey of Jewish-history related material in Transylvania and southern Bukovina.

scholarly focus, her story and its unknowns (at that time almost everything) often left me restless and impatient.

I arranged to visit the State Archives of the Chernivtsi Oblast and was eagerly anticipating viewing the birth records book, it seemed a small miracle that the one extant volume was for precisely the decade during which I thought Blanka must have been born, 1918-1928. My assumption was based on the age given on her Transnistrian identity cards (more on these later): twenty-two years old in 1942. Thus, even if she had fibbed during the war a few years on her age, a commonplace occurrence, I thought my chances were good for pinning down her birth date and biographical details about her parents. I turned through the pages and was thrilled to immediately see the name of Bruno, her brother. Now I had his birthdate: 14 July 1918 and his birthplace, the village of Zamostie (now Zamostya, Ukraine), about 10 kilometres southwest of Waschkoutz. I also had the full names and professions of the parents: The father, referred to in later documents as Josef, was registered under his given name at birth, Jossel Nute, his official title was *k.u.k. Gendarme Titular Wachtmeister*. At the time, I latched onto the “k.u.k.” prefix, ascribed to him a civil servant or other representative position, which aligned with Blanka’s writings indicating an educated, middle-class background. I did not, at the time, give heed to the remainder of his title.²⁸² The mother, whom I knew as Anna, was recorded here as Chane, she was the daughter of a Czernowitz family, which also fit into the image portrayed in the pages of the diaries of a bourgeois, cultured, educated family, not *truly* from the countryside.

I continued to turn the pages, searching now for Blanka’s birth entry. In the diaries she often wrote life summaries of sorts on her birthday, the 22nd of February, but did not provide a year. Besides the Transnistrian identity card, she referred in one of the letters to her “twenty years of life” in 1941. Thus, according to those two sources, I believed she was most probably born in 1920 or 1921. There were not many births in this small town and the ledger was clearly kept and legible; I quickly skimmed the handful of births in 1920 and 1921. And there, indeed, were Josef and Anna Lebzelter, listed as parents in 1921, when Anna gave birth to a boy, Maximilian.²⁸³ I was surprised, but reminded myself it was common to fudge on age by a few years during wartime, making oneself older or younger depending on what extraordinary circumstance would have

²⁸² “Bruno Lebzelter,” entry 10/1918, Birth records book for the Jewish community of Waschkoutz (Geburtsmatrikenbuch; м.Вашківці Сторожинецького повіту), fond 1245, reg. 1, nr. 932, State Archives of the Chernivtsi Oblast (SACO), Chernivtsi.

²⁸³ They were now living in Waschkoutz/Vășcăuți and Josef Lebzelter was the *Gemeindesekretär* (municipal clerk).

favoured. I continued turning the pages. In 1922, Josef and Anna had a third child, another boy. The infant died eleven days later on 24 September, prior to the circumcision and the giving of a name.²⁸⁴ I ruffled through the remaining pages. There were no more entries for children to Josef and Anna Lebzelter.

This left me with a grainier image of Blanka, but my first response to the information was to reconsider Anna. Blanka retreated into the background while her parents, especially her mother, were foregrounded. Anna, who appeared to be the only woman in the entire book of births born and raised in the bustling cultural capital of Czernowitz, was married to one of the town's lower elite, a rural representative of the Habsburg monarchy. In the diaries and in my imagination, Anna had assumed a grim and pitiable shadowy shape, clinging feebly to Blanka's efforts. Now I reconsidered her: a cultured young woman from the busy town of Czernowitz, replanted in a sleepy provincial backwater. She was a mother, not to one surviving daughter and one son, murdered at twenty-three, but rather she had given birth to two other sons (at least). Bruno was not the first child she lost. Her life as a mother had been marked with sorrow. She had lost a baby, presumably carried to term. And mysteriously, she also had another son, about the age of what I thought Blanka had been—what had happened to Maximilian? His birth entry did not record a death in the notes column, as is common when the individual died young and Blanka consistently referred to Bruno as her “only brother.”

The tragedy of Anna's life, which I saw as beginning in 1941 with the killing of her adult son and husband, followed by the years of deprivation in the ghetto with her daughter, and extending to her death in solitude, far from her home and any caring hand, was lengthened retroactively by twenty years with the births and death(s?) of two additional children. And then there was the silence vis-à-vis Blanka. Did Anna speak of these children to Blanka? Did Blanka know something of these events, was she witness to them, but chose not to write of them? Did she resolve, indeed, why drag up tragedies of the past, when present ones suffice. Or had she not been there, but if not, when and where was she then born? For the moment, I put aside the fact that Blanka herself did not fit into these birth records and turned instead to Anna's life, seeking to

²⁸⁴ Traditionally the circumcision and name-giving would have taken place eight days after the birth. Presumably it was clear the baby would not survive and they decided against the circumcision. “Maximilian Lebzelter,” entry 15/1921, and “unnamed,” entry nr. 46/1922, Birth records book for the Jewish community of Waschkoutz (Geburtsmatrikenbuch; м.Вашківці Сторожинецького повіту), fond 1245, reg. 1, nr. 932, SACO.

discover more of this woman whose main role, in the diaries, is one of illness and death. What had been her life?

The Windbeutel

Anna was born on 2 October 1885 to Bernhard and Henie Windbeutel née Gries. Their home and the place of her birth was none other than the elegant Herrengasse Nr. 39 (Figure 26), on the fashionable shopping promenade in the centre of Czernowitz.²⁸⁵ Her father, Bernhard, also referred to as Berish Baruch or Berl in record books, was a master tailer, and a successful one, with shop quarters on the city's most sought-out street and living quarters presumably above or behind his customer reception area and workshop.²⁸⁶ Anna was their second child; their first daughter, Zirl, was born in 1884.²⁸⁷ One year after Anna, in 1886, another girl, Krenczie, who also went by Karoline, was born.²⁸⁸ In 1891 and 1893 there followed two more daughters, Berta and Klara, respectively.²⁸⁹

²⁸⁵ "Chane Windbeutel," entry nr. 444/1885, Standesamtsbücher (Metrikbücher) des heutigen Czernowitzer Gebietes, Fond 1245, Geburts-, Ehe- und Sterbematrikel der jüdischen Gemeinde von Czernowitz, reg. 15/6, Geburtsmatrik 1883-1886, SACO. Retrieved via familysearch at <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-CS9R-1PQ2?cat=1378569&i=490&lang=en> on 29 May 2024.

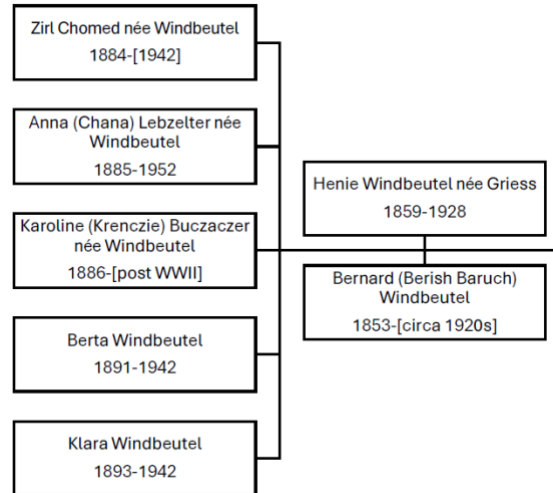
²⁸⁶ He is found as both Berl and Berisch/Berish Baruch in record books. Henceforth I refer to Anna's father as Bernhard because this is the name on his gravestone and was most likely the name by which he was known to his family and friends. Image of gravestone for "Windbeutel, Bernhard" retrieved via JewishGen Online Worldwide Burial Registry – Bucovina at https://www.jewishgen.org/databases/cemetery/jowbr.php?rec=J_BUCOVINA_0047552 on 5 June 2024. Please note website addresses for JewishGen records are sometimes altered over time. Bernhard Windbeutel's record can be found by searching for "Windbeutel" in the JewishGen Burial Registry – Bucovina. I have not been able to decipher the date of death on the stone, nor does he appear in the indexed databases for the registers of death.

²⁸⁷ Zirl was born on 20 March 1884. "Zirl Windbeutel," entry nr. 123/1884, Standesamtsbücher (Metrikbücher) des heutigen Czernowitzer Gebietes, Fond 1245, Geburts-, Ehe- und Sterbematrikel der jüdischen Gemeinde von Czernowitz, reg. 15/6, Geburtsmatrik 1883-1886, SACO. Retrieved via familysearch at <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-CS9R-1PYP?cat=1378569&i=332&lang=en> on 29 May 2024.

²⁸⁸ Krenczie/Krenzie Windbeutel was born on 16 October 1886. "Krenzie Windbeutel," entry nr. 516/1886, Standesamtsbücher (Metrikbücher) des heutigen Czernowitzer Gebietes, Fond 1245, Geburts-, Ehe- und Sterbematrikel der jüdischen Gemeinde von Czernowitz, reg. 15/6, Geburtsmatrik 1883-1886, SACO. Retrieved via familysearch at <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-CS9R-1GV8?cat=1378569&i=601&lang=en> on 29 May 2024.

²⁸⁹ Berta Windbeutel was born on 14 December 1891 and Clara/Klara Windbeutel was born on 5 March 1893. "Berta Windbeutel," entry nr. 616/1891 and „Klara Windbeutel," entry nr. 127/1893, Standesamtsbücher (Metrikbücher) des heutigen Czernowitzer Gebietes, Fond 1245, Geburts-, Ehe- und Sterbematrikel der jüdischen Gemeinde von Czernowitz, reg. 15/8, Geburtsmatrik 1889-1894, SACO. Retrieved via familysearch at <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-CSM9-HSGW-H?cat=1378569&i=375&lang=en> and via familysearch at <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-CSM9-HSPL-P?cat=1378569&i=512&lang=en> on 5 June 2024.

Table 5. Children of Bernard and Henie Windbeutel of Czernowitz



Five daughters were a difficult fate for a tailor, no matter how successful. In the 1898 address book for Czernowitz, Bernhard still maintained his business in the Herrengasse, now at Nr. 19, but the family had moved their home to a small side street, the Töpfergasse, closer to what was then considered the outskirts of town.²⁹⁰ Bernhard is listed as the owner at both addresses and the relocation was not necessarily a move down: the new home, a one-story free-standing house, may

²⁹⁰ Pinpointing the exact location of their homes is possible thanks to the map (cropped in Figure 27) “Plan von Czernowitz mit der neuen Strassenbenennung, den Hausnummern, und Höhenzahlen,” by Ludwig West. An excellent high-resolution version is available via the Center for Urban History of Lviv, Ukraine: <https://uma.lvivcenter.org/en/maps/34436> (retrieved 16 June 2022). They state that the map is undated, but also provide a date of 1911. The publication Kurt Scharf, *Die Gegenwart des Vergangenen im urbanen Raum Czernowitz-Innsbruck: Projektergebnisse eines gemeinsamen Studierendenprogrammes der Universitäten Czernowitz und Innsbruck über das kulturelle Erbe im öffentlichen Raum* (Innsbruck University Press, 2019) uses crops of the same map and dates the map to 1909. Windbeutel’s business address, cited also in Chapter 2, was retrieved via the chart compiled here <http://czernowitz.ehpes.com/new/hauster/Cz1898TotalG.html> retrieved 20 June 2022 created on the basis of Nussbaum, *Allgemeiner Wohnungs-Anzeiger Czernowitz*. The 1909 and 1913 Czernowitz address books provide the address Herrengasse 15 rather than 19. Windbeutel may have moved his shop premises or, possibly, one of the two (19 or 15) is an error. Nr. 15 shares a building with Nr. 17 and these are adjacent to Nr. 19. The charts created based on the address books are retrievable here: <https://czernowitz.ehpes.com/new/hauster/dir.html> retrieved 20 June 2022. I viewed the original 1909 address book which is held by the Universität Wien Bibliothek: *Adressbuch von Czernowitz samt Vorstädten sowie der Städte Radautz und Suczawa; Schematismus sämtlicher Behörden und Privatanstalten der Bukowina, Ortschaftsverzeichnis der Bukowina, Verzeichnis der protokollierten Firmen etc. ; Kalender mit Termin- und Vormerkbuch* (Czernowitz, 1909). The whereabouts of the original 1913/1914 address book are unknown (private communication to the author from Edgar Hauster and Othmar Andree; 27 February 2025 and 25 February 2025 respectively). The reverse of the postcard in Figure 26 reads “Neue Kunstanstalt für moderne Fotografie JOHANN KRZANOWSKI, Kammerfotograf. Czernowitz, Herrengasse No. 39.” The card is stamped and was sent, unfortunately the date is illegible but the stamp dates from the monarchy period. There is a brief entry on this studio on the Museum of Family History website. It states the studio was located at Herrengasse 39 from 1908 to 1912: <https://www.museumoffamilyhistory.com/czernowitz-photo-studios.htm> retrieved 25 February 2025. The studio also figures prominently in the advertisements of the 1909 Czernowitz address book. My gratitude goes to Edward Turkiewitch who shared with me the image of the photo atelier at Herrengasse 39.

have been more spacious and family-friendly than the flat in the Herrengasse, it was also surrounded by a garden, certainly used to grow vegetables and fruit. Though the move was away from the town's centre, it was still only a ten-minute walk to the new shop quarters, now in a larger building closer to the town hall square.



Figure 26. Herrengasse 39, birthplace of Anna Windbeutel, now a photo studio in the early 20th century. Source: Private Archive, Edward Turkiewitch.

The verdant and beloved public garden was a short five-minute walk up their steep street and behind an army barracks. Tellingly, the new quarters were nowhere near the historic Jewish quarter, whose slender, unpaved lanes ran down the hillside to the Pruth River and the train station and were rarely sought out by middle and upper-class Jewish Czernowitzers; even as late as the interwar period the neighbourhood was considered impoverished and possibly “morally suspect.”²⁹¹

²⁹¹ Several memoirs reference this, for example Edith Horowitz, who lived across the street from the Windbeutels/Chomeds in the interwar period, recalled venturing to the area prior to World War II, searching for a girlfriend whom she suspected would know how to help a mutual friend with an unwanted pregnancy. She wrote, “It was the first time that I had entered this quarter, located in the lower city, a jumble of narrow lanes, swarming with children, adults with sidelocks robed in caftans, and street venders, loudly calling out their wares. A world completely foreign to me.” See Silbermann, *Czernowitz*, 83. Similarly, Zvi Yavetz (1925-2013), who grew up in one of those “narrow lanes,” wrote repeatedly about the differences between “upper” and “lower” Czernowitz, and recalled being playfully ridiculed by other pupils due to his muddy, literally, address: “All of those who belonged to the Czernowitz ‘establishment’ lived in ‘upper Czernowitz,’ that is, above the Springbrunnenplatz. This area was considered a ‘garden city’ and differed completely from ‘lower Czernowitz,’ which lay in the Prut valley, where mostly poorer Jews lived.” See Yavetz, *Erinnerungen*, 155. Karl Emil Franzos, closer to a contemporary of the Windbeutel family, invokes the



Figure 27. Map of part of Czernewitz, early 20th century. Source: See footnote 290.

In the map above, Herrengasse 39, Anna’s birthplace and the Windbeutel home and tailoring premises from at least 1884 to 1893, is marked in yellow. The free-standing home, probably newly built in the late 1890s is marked in blue. Windbeutel’s new business premises from at least 1898 onwards are represented by the red dot. The old Jewish quarter lay near the train station and is not pictured. The corner of the beloved and extensive Volksgarten is barely visible at the end of the Töpfergasse and across from the army barracks (the black square), it was bordered by the Siebenbürgerstrasse on one side.

same impressions in his description of a Galician Jewish boy passing through the lower town to visit a theatre in Czernewitz, “der unheiligen Stadt, in welcher die Juden Hochdeutsch reden und Schweinefleisch essen.” Karl Emil Franzos, *Der Pojaz* (Athenäum, 1979 [1906]), 54. English: “[Czernewitz], the unholy city, in which the Jews spoke high-German and ate pork.” In fact, this theatre, which existed in real life, was located in the Hotel Moldavie, which was itself located rather on the border between the lower and upper town (Hauptstr. 27). As the oldest hotel in Czernewitz and the site of theatre and musical performances prior to separate halls being built, the Hotel Moldavie is relatively well-known, see for example <https://www.bukowina-portal.de/de/ct/336>, retrieved 3 March 2025. Like many historic addresses in Czernewitz, the building still stands today.

Bernhard himself was born circa 1853 in the small town of Radziechów, Galicia, about seventy km north of Lemberg (Lviv). By 1881 at the latest, he was working in Czernowitz.²⁹² His move from Galicia to Bukovina in the mid-19th century reflected a standard trajectory. From a Jewish population of 14,500 or 4% of the population in 1850, by 1910 the Jewish population of Bukovina had increased to 103,000 or 13% of the total.²⁹³ Bernhard's wife, Henie, was however a native Czernowitzer, born in the city circa 1859. The family was probably proud of these old Czernowitz roots, by the turn of the century, only a minority of Jewish families would be able to claim a parent born in Czernowitz. The assimilated names of their girls, the location of the shop in the Herrengasse, their free-standing home near the Volksgarten, and a far distance from the old Jewish quarter, their status as property owners, all indicate a family situated in a Germanising, middle-class Jewish milieu.

²⁹² Birthyears and places for Bernhard and Henie are taken from their 1891 marriage certificate. Since it was common at the time for Jewish couples to wed in a religious ceremony not registered with the civil authorities, their first three girls are listed as illegitimate (with, however, both parents in the record). By 1891, when Henie was heavily pregnant with their fourth daughter, they registered their marriage with the civil authorities on 18 November 1891 and the first three girls were declared legitimate retroactively. See "Berl Boruch Windbeutel and Henie Gries," entry nr. 242/1891, Standesamtsbücher (Metrikbücher) des heutigen Czernowitzer Gebietes, Fond 1245, Geburts-, Ehe- und Sterbematrikel der jüdischen Gemeinde von Czernowitz, reg. 15/51, Trauungsmatrik 1889-1891, SACO. Retrieved via familysearch at <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-CS9B-7Q6F-Z?cat=1378569&i=744&lang=en> on 5 June 2024. Berl Boruch (also Baruch) Windbeutel was born in "Radzeckow, Bez. Kamionka," he is listed as thirty-eight years old in 1891; Henie is listed as thirty-two years old. Bernhard had yet another daughter born in 1881 who died in 1882. This daughter was born to a different mother, Jüdess/Judith Metzger. It is not clear from the records what became of Bernhard's first wife. See birth entry of 16 March 1881 for "Feige (also Fani) Jached," entry nr. 125/1811, Standesamtsbücher (Metrikbücher) des heutigen Czernowitzer Gebietes, Fond 1245, Geburts-, Ehe- und Sterbematrikel der jüdischen Gemeinde von Czernowitz, reg. 15/5, Geburtsmatrik 1881-1883, SACO. Retrieved via familysearch at <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-CS9B-1RW9?cat=1378569&i=10&lang=en> on 29 May 2024. Feige/Fani died on 14 September 1882 of "Auszehrung" (consumption, indicating tuberculosis), Entry nr. 364/1882, Standesamtsbücher (Metrikbücher) des heutigen Czernowitzer Gebietes, Fond 1245, Geburts-, Ehe- und Sterbematrikel der jüdischen Gemeinde von Czernowitz, reg. 15/73, Sterbematrik 1882-1886, SACO. Retrieved via familysearch <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-CS9B-7SLY-D?cat=1378569&i=91&lang=en> on 26 February 2025. My gratitude goes to Martina Lelgemann who aided me here and elsewhere in deciphering particularly troublesome Kurrent German script. I have not uncovered any records related to Jüdess/Judith Metzger beyond the records related to her daughter's birth and death. A Czernowitz genealogy database (<https://czernowitz.geneasearch.net/>) maintained by volunteers records her birth as 1857 in Czernowitz, but no access to an original record is provided. Familysearch databases state that birth records from Czernowitz exist only from 1860. It seems most plausible that she died soon after her daughter, quite possibly also of tuberculosis, though it is also possible she and Bernard divorced and she moved away. When her daughter was born in 1881, Judith's own father was recorded to be living in Bucharest. At the time of writing, she does not appear in any death record databases, which are, however, often updated.

²⁹³ David Rechter, *Becoming Habsburg: The Jews of Austrian Bukovina, 1774-1918* (Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2013), 113 (Table 5.1). Rechter notes regarding this table that the numbers and percentages should act as a guide only due to the unreliable statistics in particular for the earlier year. For more on the Jewish immigration during this period see Rechter, *ibid.*, 109-141.

Zirl, the oldest daughter, was the first to marry. In August 1903 at nineteen years she wed Leon Chomed of Brody, a tailor's apprentice, presumably her father's (who was referred to as a "master tailor" in his daughter's marriage record). Indeed, if Leon Chomed was not already living in the Windbeutel home as part of his apprenticeship terms, he now moved in.²⁹⁴ The Chomed's first child, Babette, was born there almost exactly nine months later on 20 May 1904.



Figure 28. The Windbeutel / Chomed home from the end of the 19th century to World War II. Source: Julie Dawson, 2024.

Seven years later in April 1911, the next eldest daughter, Anna, now twenty-five, would wed Jossel Nute Wasserman (Josef Lebzelter),²⁹⁵ a well-ranked gendarme stationed in the tiny outpost of Uscie Putilla, at the foot of the mountains separating the Transcarpathian region from Bukovina. In contrast to the match between Leon and Zirl, the link of which—as probable apprentice to Zirl's father—is clear, there is nothing in the record books to indicate why Josef and Anna were engaged or how they met. Yet this marriage serves to confirm several speculations about the Windbeutel and, subsequently, the Lebzelter family.

²⁹⁴ All entries listing the Chomeds in Czernowitz records and newspapers list the Töpfergasse 1 as their address; this is also cited in later memoirs, when Paul Celan played with Gustav Chomed there as a boy.

²⁹⁵ Officially, Josef Lebzelter's name was Jossel Nute Wassermann. His military registration log lists him as Jossel Nute Lebzelter recte Wassermann. In the newspaper announcements from World War I he is listed as Nute Lebzelter. In the interwar period he is found only as Josef Lebzelter. For simplicity's sake and unless otherwise explained, I will refer to him as Josef Lebzelter in the main text henceforth.

First, as indicated by the business premises in the Herrengasse, the family was well-off. Though not of the ostentatiously wealthy class, Bernard Windbeutel's tailoring business was successful enough for them to afford the dowry required of the bride's family if a gendarme was to marry: 2,000 Kronen, a significant sum almost equivalent to two years of Josef Lebzelter's salary in 1911.²⁹⁶ The family of the bride was moreover expected to be of excellent reputation and marriages had to be individually applied for to the military authorities and approved.²⁹⁷ It seems likely theirs was a marriage of love, as the considerable dowry would be otherwise difficult to justify.²⁹⁸ Anna and Josef probably met sometime after he was conscripted in 1898 and moved from the town of Radautz in southern Bukovina to Czernowitz. Before becoming a gendarme in 1908, he had spent ten years in the Czernowitz military ranks, starting with the rest of the conscripts in the infantry and receiving regular promotions. Perhaps he resided in the barracks at the end of her street and they met strolling in the Volksgarten, a favourite pastime and flirting location. It is also possible Anna did not feel choosey: after Zirl's wedding and the birth of Babette, the Windbeutel/Chomed home housed eight adults and one child.²⁹⁹

The other characteristic demonstrated by this marriage is the unquestionable assimilationist bent of the Windbeutels (in agreeing to the marriage) and especially of Josef and Anna Lebzelter. A gendarme embodied imperial representation and authority in the countryside, this also meant embracing fully a degree of non-nationalism. It was an unusual profession, all the more so for a Jew. There was not a large number of gendarmes in general—in the years preceding World War I the entire Bukovina with a population of over 800,000 counted between 400 and 500 gendarmes

²⁹⁶ Josef Lebzelter received a salary of 1,040 Kronen in 1910. In 1911 he received a bonus (*Dienstzulage*) of 200 Kr; in 1913 his annual salary was 1,110 Kr. "Haupt-Grundbuchblatt Jossel Nute Lebzelter recte Wassermann," 1898-1920, Grundbuchblätter Landesgendarmeriekommando Nr. 13 Czernowitz, Box 3227: 1911-1920 Aktiv, Heft 1, Blatt 51, KA, Vienna.

²⁹⁷ Regarding the regulations surrounding gendarmes and marriage see Franz Heszlter, "Die sozialen Aspekte im Gendarmeriekorps bis 1918" in *Zwischen Gefahr und Berufung. Gendarmerie in Österreich*, ed. Fritz Hörmann and Gerald Heszlter (Museumsverein Werfen, Bundesministerium für Inneres, Gendarmeriezentralkommando, 1999), 38-47.

²⁹⁸ A large dowry might be considered in a more religious context where the groom came from a family of learning and it was expected that the groom would devote himself to studying after the marriage. This was certainly not the case for Anna and Josef and it seems, as will be discussed later, that his family was not well off and possibly even estranged.

²⁹⁹ On the other hand, given that she was twenty-five when she wed, while Zirl had married at nineteen, it seems conceivable that Anna had chosen to wait for Josef, waiting either until the dowry could be amassed, until he received a promotion, or until their union was approved by the authorities.

in any given year (during the period Josef served).³⁰⁰ Only 4.5% were Jewish, that is, there were only twenty-six active Jewish gendarmes in the entire crownland during the period 1911 to 1918 (see Tables 6 and 7). According to those who led the corps of gendarmes, only the “best” amongst the soldiers were selected to undertake the rigorous training and probational period, but it was, nevertheless a choice to become a gendarme, not an obligatory career path.³⁰¹ Josef Lebzelter, whose family will be discussed below, had been raised in an apparently poorer and more religious family. He deliberately embraced a path which led not simply away from these roots, but markedly so.

Table 6. Religion of “active” gendarmes in the Landesgendarmeriekommando No. 13 (Bukovina), 1911-1920³⁰²

Religion	Roman Catholic	Greek Orthodox	Protestant ³⁰³	Greek Catholic	Jewish	Other	Total
Number	228	211	68	41	26	3	577
Percentage	39.5%	36.6%	11.8%	7.1%	4.5%	.5%	100%

³⁰⁰ The numbers, which were close to 450 but varied due to regular changes, can be found in multiple documents from the daily logs and announcements pertaining to the gendarmerie in Bukovina. Grundbuchblätter Landesgendarmeriekommando Nr. 13 Czernowitz, 1905-1918 GB-Dokumente, box 3518, KA Vienna.

³⁰¹ To understand the training regiment for gendarmes and aspects of their daily life, responsibilities, and career paths, I consulted several publications: Neubauer, *Die Gendarmerie in Österreich 1849-1924*, especially the chapter “Die Ausbildung der Gendarmerie;” Leopold Kepler, ed., *Die Gendarmerie in Österreich 1849-1974* (Leykam Verlag, 1974); Franz Hesztera, *Die Kommandostrukturen der Gendarmerie von 1850 bis 1993* (LEIRO Verlag, 1994); Fritz Hörmann and Gerald Hesztera, eds, *Zwischen Gefahr und Berufung. Gendarmerie in Österreich* (Museumsverein Werfen, Bundesministerium für Inneres, Gendarmeriezentralkommando, 1999); Clive Emsley and Sabine Phillips, “The Habsburg Gendarmerie: A Research Agenda,” *German History* 17, no. 2 (1999): 241–50; Helmut Gebhardt, “The Gendarmerie of the Habsburg Empire During the First World War,” in *European Police Forces and Law Enforcement in the First World War*, ed. Guillaume Payen, Laurent López, and Jonas Campion (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 157–167.

³⁰² The table is compiled from the Grundbuchblätter for these men. There were also files on those who exited the regiment over the same period for various reasons (retirement, death, dishonourable discharge, illness, etc). The active number of gendarmes during this period for any given year was between 400 and 500, such that the total number here reflects approximately the composition at any given time. Grundbuchblätter Landesgendarmeriekommando Nr. 13 Czernowitz, Aktiv 1911-1920 Hefte 1-3, boxes 3227, 3228, KA. These figures differ so drastically from the make-up of the general population that they demand further analysis, but it is beyond the scope of this work to undertake a more detailed examination of the Bukovina gendarmerie in the early 20th century, as fascinating as it is.

³⁰³ When compiling these numbers I did not differentiate between the two Protestant confessions, the Augsburg (A.B.) and the Helvetian (H.B.) but grouped them together. The files should be consulted again in order to separate the two from one another, the Augsburg confession was in any case much more numerous. Those who were of the Helvetian confession were presumably from the Hungarian minority, which was very small in Bukovina, though certain villages had a majority population. In contrast, the next table separates the Augsburg from the Helvetian confessions, the difference is, however, .1%. I have grouped Helvetian in the next table in the “other” column for ease of comparing the two tables.

Table 7. Population of Bukovina according to religion, 1910³⁰⁴

Religion	Roman Catholic	Greek Orthodox	Protestant ³⁰⁵	Greek Catholic	Jewish	Other ³⁰⁶	Total
Number	98,565	547,603	20,029	26,182	102,919	4,800	800,098
Percentage	12.3%	68.4%	2.5%	3.3%	12.9%	.6%	100%

The wedding of Anna and Josef took place in April 1911 in the Windbeutel home and was officiated by the distinguished chief rabbi of Czernowitz, Dr. Josef Rosenfeld. At the time Josef Lebzelter was stationed at the edge of the crownland, in Uscie-Putilla, described in a 1907 tourist guide to Bukovina as a “small mountain village in a wild-romantic region.” It may have been romantic, but it was also twenty-seven kilometres from the nearest train station (Wiznitz) and the guide noted that for those who in any case enjoy nature, rafting down the river to Wiznitz was in fact faster than travelling on the notoriously poor road.³⁰⁷

³⁰⁴ The chart is based on “Table 1.5 Religions in Bukovina (1910, 1930) and Czernowitz (1910)” from Albert Lichtblau and Michael John, “Jewries in Galicia and Bukowina, in Lemberg and Czernowitz: Two Divergent Examples of Jewish Communities in the Far East of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy,” in *Jewries at the Frontier. Accommodation, Identity, Conflict*, ed. Sander L. Gilman and Milton Shain (University of Illinois Press, 1999), 46. Please note the percentage provided in the original for the Greek Orthodox population is incorrect, my chart reflects the correct percentage. The chart compiled by Lichtblau/John is in turn based on the 1910 census carried out by the Austro-Hungarian administration.

³⁰⁵ This reflects only the Augsburg Confession. The Helvetian confession comprised .1% and is grouped in “other” in this chart for ease of comparing with the previous chart.

³⁰⁶ Here are included: Lippowans, Armenian Catholics, Helvetian Confession, Armenian Orthodox, Old Catholic, Islam, Anglican, Mennonite, and those without religious affiliation.

³⁰⁷ Hermann Mittelman, ed., *Illustrierter Führer durch die Bukowina* (Romuald Schally, 1907/8), description of Uscie-Putilla p. 125; chart with distances of small towns and villages to nearest train stations p. 60-61; regarding the water routes recommended for leisure travellers though not businessmen, p. 55-56. The map in Figure 29 is cropped from “Nordöstliches Ungarn, Östliches Galizien und Bukowina,” in *Andrees Allgemeiner Handatlas*, ed. A. Scobel (Perles, 1912), Private Archive, Julie Dawson.



Figure 29. Close-up of part of northern Bukovina. Red lines are railways; Uscie-Putilla and Waschkoutz are marked red. Source: See footnote 307.

The gendarmerie records include no entry that Lebzelter was granted a holiday for the wedding and it appears that the newlyweds moved immediately to Uscie Putilla. For Anna, who had lived her entire life in the bustling centre of Czernowitz, it must have been a great adjustment. There is some indication that this was, incidentally, the case. Just a few weeks after their wedding, in May 1911 Josef Lebzelter received his first and only punishment. According to the Bukovina gendarmerie log of daily events, Lebzelter, who was the vice sergeant (*Titular Wachtmeister/Vizewachtmeister*) of his outpost “hat sich an zwei verschiedenen Tagen mit seinem Postenkommandanten, der ihn hierzu verleitet hat, ohne Erlaubnis zu Privatzwecken beziehungsweise zur Teilnahme an einer Tanzunterhaltung in benachbarte Stationen entfernt und ist je 23 Stunden ausgeblieben.”³⁰⁸ In light of his otherwise satisfactory performance and the fact that up until then he had no transgressions, he was sentenced to five days of “Zimmerarrest” (house arrest).

³⁰⁸ “Lebzelter Nute Gendarm. Titularwachtmeister – Bestrafung,” entry 84a, 14. May 1911, Grundbuchblätter Landesgendarmeriekommando Nr. 13 Czernowitz, 1905-1918 GB-Dokumente, box 3518, KA. English: “[Lebzelter] has, on two different days, together with his post commander who enticed him into doing this, went away without permission for private purposes and to participate in a dance in a neighbouring outpost and each time remained absent for twenty-three hours.”

The Lebzelters

Über Erlaß der buk. k.k. Landesregierung vom 28. Februar 1910 Zl. vom 28. Februar 1910 Zl 47471/09 wird hier eingetragen, dass die ledige Blüme Heiss an einem nicht mehr feststellbaren Tagen des Jahres 1871 im Radautz ein uneheliches Kind männlichen Geschlechts geboren hat, welcher bei der rituellen Beschneidung den Namen „Chaim“ erhalten hat.³⁰⁹

Thus reads the “official” birth entry for one Chaim Heiss, entered retroactively, almost forty years after the reported birth. Eventually I would determine that Chaim Heiss was the brother of Josef Lebzelter, but it took me many years to do so and without the diaries to confirm certain familial details, I may never have been able to establish this fact solely through archival records. Just as I had sought via her family background to understand the social setting in which Anna was raised, so also I turned to Josef Lebzelter’s family in Radautz to try to learn something of his upbringing—and was confronted with a very different set of circumstances.

From his children’s birth records in Waschkoutz and his marriage certificate, I knew that Josef Lebzelter was born to Mechel Lebzelter and Blime Wasserman of Radautz on 7 December 1877. But the Radautz record books, which have been carefully indexed by a dedicated group of volunteers, contained no birth records for children of Mechel Lebzelter and Blime Wassermann.³¹⁰ After careful searching, however, I found that Mechel Lebzelter and Blime had indeed born at least five children,³¹¹ four of whom reached adulthood and had children of their own: Ettel (1862-

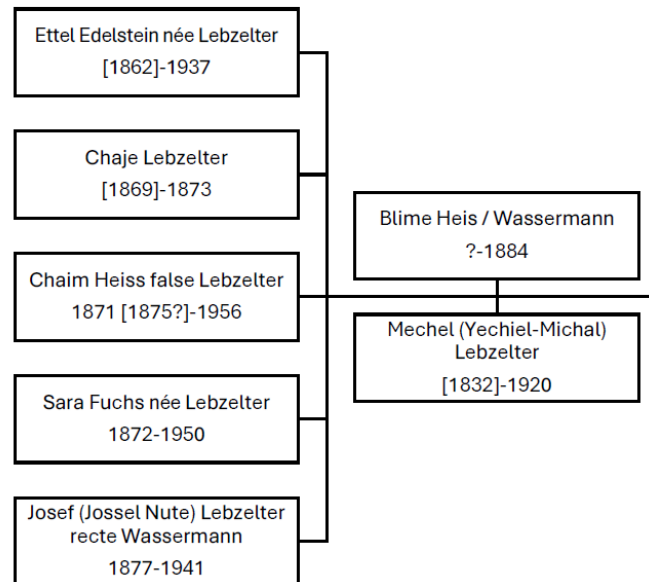
³⁰⁹ “Entry 203,” *Geburtsmatrik der israel. Gemeinde Radautz* vol. IX, 1909-1912, p. 342-343, Rădăuți Town Hall. The vast majority of the Radautz Jewish community record books are held by the Rădăuți town hall (rather than the county archives in Suceava, as would be customary) and were photographed and indexed by private volunteers. Please see this website for more information: <https://hauster.blogspot.com/2016/08/books-of-seven-seals-in-radauti-and.html> retrieved 3 May 2023; specific records can be requested via this website. I am extremely grateful to Edgar Hauster for swiftly sending original images for all individuals examined here. English: “By decree of the Bukovina royal and imperial state government on 28. February 1910 Zl. 47471/09 it is registered here that the unmarried Blüme Heiss bore an illegitimate child of male gender in 1871 on a date which can no longer be determined in Radautz, who received the name “Chaim” at the ritual circumcision.”

³¹⁰ Blime is found in records as Blime Heis / Heiss / Wasserman / Lebzelter / Lepzelter.

³¹¹ Mechel Lebzelter appears to have had at least another two children who died before they arrived in Radautz. See footnote 317 for more information. I do not include them in the main body of the text or chart because there is too little information available about these children, for example the mother is not listed.

1937),³¹² Chaje (1869/70-1873),³¹³ Chaim (1871-1956),³¹⁴ Sara (1872-1950),³¹⁵ and Jossel Nute (1877-1941).³¹⁶

Table 8. Children of Mechel Lebzelter and Blime Heiss/Wassermann/Lebzelter of Radautz



³¹² “Meier Edelstein and Ettel Lebzelter,” entry 130/1900, Trauungsmatrik der israel. Gemeinde Radautz vol. III, 1899-1907, p. 205-206, Rădăuți Town Hall. Please see footnote 309 for details regarding the accessibility of these records. I would like to again thank Edgar Hauster who has helped me secure photographs of these and other civil records countless times and otherwise provided valuable insight and suggestions regarding Bukovina Jewish civil records. Ettel Edelstein née Lebzelter’s tombstone in Rădăuți with year of death is indexed on JewishGen retrieved on 11 June 2024 https://www.jewishgen.org/databases/cemetery/jowbr.php?rec=J_BUCOVINA_0011514.

³¹³ “Chaje Lebzelter,” entry 99/1873, Todesmatrik der israel. Gemeinde Radautz vol. I, 1857-1877, page number illegible, Colecție de stare civilă, număr curent 53, fond nr. 12, inventar nr. 514, Comunitatea evreiască Rădăuți, Registru morți, Dosar nr. 1/1857-1877, SJAN Suceava, Suceava. Chaje died of burns at four years old. There is no birth entry recorded.

³¹⁴ See citation for retroactive entry of birth, cited above. On the tombstone of Chaim Heiss in Rădăuți, 1875 is provided as his year of birth. 1871 appears to be the correct date as it is listed in numerous other records, for example the original birth records of his children. This tombstone is certainly the Chaim Heiss in question as Blanka reunites with him in Rădăuți in 1956, shortly before his death and writes about it. This is described in Chapter 7.

³¹⁵ “Jankil Fuchs and Sara Lepzelter,” entry nr. 19/1898, Trauungsmatrik der israel. Gemeinde Radautz vol. II, 1877-1899, p. 228-229, Rădăuți Town Hall. Sara Fuchs née Lebzelter’s tombstone in New York with year of death is indexed on JewishGen, https://www.jewishgen.org/databases/cemetery/jowbr.php?rec=J_NY_0000476, retrieved on 11 June 2024. Her grave/tombstone was maintained by a Radautz society in NY and additional records cited below demonstrate that this was the same woman.

³¹⁶ “Jossel Nute Wasserman,” entry 67/1877, Geburtmatrik der israel. Gemeinde Radautz vol III, 1877-1884, p. 16-17, Colecție de stare civilă, număr curent 53, fond nr. 12, inventar nr. 514, Comunitatea evreiască Rădăuți, Registru născuți; Dosar nr. 3/1877-1884, SJAN Suceava, Suceava.

None of the girls' births are recorded in the Radautz birth books.³¹⁷ I learned about their births from their marriage records (which record parents of the bride and groom), while the record for Chaim, cited above, was entered retroactively in 1910 without mention of the father. Josef, the youngest, is the only child who appears in one of the official birth record books, but the entry is damaged: the section with the mother's information is missing entirely (ripped out or otherwise destroyed), he is registered as illegitimate and with no father (sometimes the child is registered as illegitimate but the father is still entered) and only the birth date is legible (making it possible to confirm this is the Josef Lebzelter in question).

This inconsistent and lackadaisical record-keeping most likely indicates several features. An absence of administrative information may indicate ignorance on the part of the individual and/or disregard for, but also by, secular authorities (as opposed to religious authorities), the latter applying for example, to individuals from a more marginalised social class. In contrast to the Windbeutel, Mechel and Blime never registered their marriage with the civil authorities, almost certainly indicating a more traditional way of life.³¹⁸ Indeed, from various records related to their children we know they spoke Yiddish at home³¹⁹ and they appear to have been religiously observant. Upon his death in 1920, purportedly at eighty-eight years, Mechel's occupation was given as "private teacher," indicating both a background in traditional, religious learning as well as a degree of financial precarity.³²⁰

³¹⁷ They were probably born in Kolomea, though their births are also not listed there, nor is Sara, who was born after the family lived in Radautz, listed in the Radautz birth book. Mechel is described as being from Kolomea and a Mechel Lebzelter is listed as the father (no mother is given) in the death entries for two children, both of whom died at two years of age, in Kolomea (Kalman Hersch Lebzelter died in 1866; Dwore Race Lebzelter died in 1869). By 1871 at the latest, when Chaim was born, the family was in Radautz. The Kolomea records were found using the Jewish Records Indexing (JRI)-Poland database. There is no information provided regarding the location of the original sources. Both records came from the record book for deaths in the Jewish community of Kolomea (*Sterb. Matrikenbuch der israel. Gemeinde Kolomea*). Kalman Hersch's entry is on page 60, entry nr. 1003 (1866) retrieved here https://legacy.jri-poland.org/databases/jridetail_2.php 03 March 2025 and Dwore Race's entry is on page 107, entry nr. 206 (1869) retrieved here https://legacy.jri-poland.org/databases/jridetail_2.php on 3 March 2025.

³¹⁸ This could also have been because Blime died young, in 1884, when Josef was just seven years old.

³¹⁹ This can be stated with certainty: Sara Fuchs née Lebzelter emigrated to the United States with her husband and first four children in the early 20th century. The family appears in multiple census records (1905, 1910, 1920, 1925) and their mother tongue is listed as Yiddish. In 1910 Sara is listed as speaking only Yiddish (as opposed to her husband and children, who learned English). Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910, Manhattan Ward 17, New York New York, Roll: T624_1032, page 12b, enumeration district: 0887, FHL microfilm: 1375045, Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29, National Archives, Washington DC. Retrieved on www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/7884/images/4449174_00063 on 2 April 2025.

³²⁰ "Mechel Lebzelter," entry nr. 7/1920, *Sterbematrik der israel. Gemeinde Radautz* vol. VII, 1915-1921, p. 465-466, Rădăuți Town Hall. When he died in 1920 he lived with his eldest daughter, Ettel, in the Badgasse, one of the main Jewish streets in Rădăuți. Even in 2024, when I was searching for the Badgasse, which is today no longer extant (one

Bolstering this impression is an unusual detail about Josef's birth: where virtually all other birth entries provide a house number as the birth address, Josef's birth record states he was born in the "Brennerei"—a distillery.³²¹ It is not clear what this indicates, perhaps Mechel (or Blime) was employed there and received a sort of employee housing. Whatever circumstances led to a baby being born in a distillery in 1877, a sense of stability or conventionality is not conveyed. They were also relative newcomers to Radautz, having arrived from Galicia (Kolomea) sometime between 1869 to 1871.³²² Adding to a sense of vulnerability, is the particularly tragic cause of death of Mechel and Blime's child, Chaje (b. 1869). Two years older than Chaim, she died when she was four, the cause of death was "burns" (*Verbrennung*).

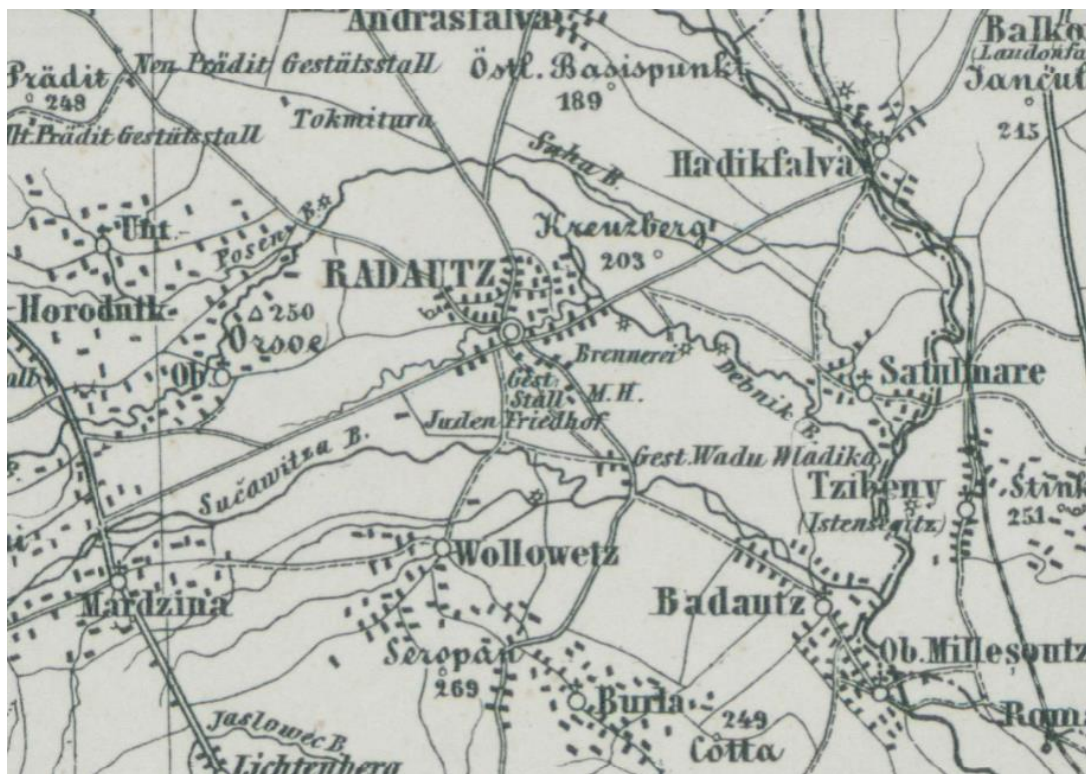


Figure 30. Map of Radautz and vicinity, 1873 with the distillery (Brennerei) where Josef was born. Source: See footnote 321.

Chaim, about whom I will write more below, and Josef left Radautz upon their conscription in the army, but the sisters remained there, married local men, and had many children to whom were

small remnant remains, the communists constructed blocs upon it), an older man who tried to assist me but could not quite recall where the street had run, said about it "that is where all the Jews had lived, before they left."

³²¹ The map in Figure 30 is cropped from "Umgebung von Radautz," in *Strassen-Karte des Königreiches Galizien und des Herzogthumes Bukowina* (Wien, 1868). Please note the publication is dated 1868 but the map is dated 1874; it is not clear which year is accurate. Digitised by the University of Vienna, <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:at:at-ubw:g-18697/fragment/page=1> and retrieved on 28 November 2024.

³²² Please see footnote 317 above regarding the children who died in Kolomea in 1866 and 1869.

given traditional, Yiddish names.³²³ Sara's trajectory is particularly revealing. Born in between Chaim and Josef, she emigrated with her husband and four children in the early 20th century to New York.³²⁴ There she gave birth to four more children. Her husband, Jacob (Jankel) Fuchs, whose profession was described as a "grocer" (*Greisler*) in Radautz, was employed as a rabbi in Brooklyn at an apparently Hassidic synagogue.³²⁵ It is difficult to imagine how these family members would have viewed each other. At the latest by accepting a position as a gendarme, Josef almost certainly had ceased observing most facets of traditional Jewish law with which he was presumably raised. There is, in fact, no record or indication that contact was maintained between these branches of the families, that is, the traditional, Yiddish-speaking sisters and the assimilating, German-speaking brothers.³²⁶ The names the boys gave their children serve to underscore the divide between the Yiddish, religious background from whence they came, and a Germanised, more secular future mapped out for their families: Josef named his children Bruno, Maximilian, and Blanka, whereas Chaim's four children, two of whom were born in Vienna, were Leopold, Berta Helene, Berthold, and Wilhelm Rudolf.³²⁷

Reflecting the frequent absence of women, and especially poorer women, in the archives, no details can be learned about Blime, Josef's mother, from the record books whatsoever. She nowhere features in a record of her own (only as the mother of a bride or groom or as the mother

³²³ Ettel Edelstein gave birth to eleven children, though several died young. Sara gave birth to eight.

³²⁴ Their exact arrival dates are not clear, but the family first appears in an American census in 1905. Sara gave birth to a child in 1902 in Radautz.

³²⁵ Obituary "Rev. Jacob Fuchs, Ex-Canarsie Rabbi," *Brooklyn Eagle*, 25 April 1940, p. 15. The article states that Fuchs was a rabbi at the Anshe Sfard synagogue, on this name indicating a Hassidic synagogue see Ira Robinson, "Anshe Sfard: The Creation of the First Hasidic Congregations in North America" in *Translating a Tradition. Studies in American Jewish History* (Academic Studies Press, 2019), 206–22.

³²⁶ It is impossible to speculate with certainty on these relationships, however in the logs of the Bukovina gendarmerie there are no requests from Josef Lebzelter to take holiday—as there often are for others, including Jewish gendarmes. These requests specify the sites to be visited, which are most commonly small Bukovina towns (or spas, in case the holiday was granted for reasons of health). From these records, it does not appear that Josef visited Radautz during the time he served as a gendarme (1908–1918). Two grandchildren of Chaim Heiss, now living in the United States and Chile and one of whom was born in the late 1930s, said they were unaware of their parents having cousins with the name of Fuchs in the United States, this was never spoken of or referred to. Personnel communication to author from Jonny Heiss and Shelley Hays, 2 and 3 April 2025.

³²⁷ The Lebzelter children were cited earlier in the Waschkoutz birth book. Records for Chaim Heiss's children are many, they are all listed with birth dates on the "Personalstandesausweis" document in his file "Avizul de calificare privitor pe oficiului Heiss vel. Lebzelter Haim," Апеляційний суд Буковини / Curtea de apel a Bucovinei, fond 126, inv. 1, folder 60, p. 9, SACO. I was only able to untangle the muddle of multiple names after realising that the *sandek* (the person who holds the baby during the circumcision ceremony, like a godfather) "k.u.k. court official Siegmund Heiss" recorded for the births of both Bruno and Maximilian was in fact Josef's brother, or "Uncle Sigmund," (Blanka spells the name like this) and by cross-referencing Blanka's entries about her reunion with Sigmund/Chaim Heiss in Radautz in 1956 and his death shortly thereafter with the indexing of the gravestones in the Radautz cemetery.

of a mother), there is no indication of her age, nor of her place of birth. Only from her tombstone, where she is described as Blime Lebzelter née Heis, can we pinpoint the year of death, 1884, and speculate on a link, possibly familial, to Waschkoutz, where she was buried.³²⁸ She is found in books under Blime Heis/s, Blime Wasserman/n, and Blime Lebzelter (also Lepzelter). Presumably Heiss and Wasserman were the last names of *her* mother and father (the Wassermann name was extremely common in the region³²⁹), though it is also possible Heiss was the name of one of Mechel's parents.³³⁰ Perhaps the name recorded depended on the scruples of the scribe on that particular day or was a result of Blime or Mechel's own inconsistencies.

The bureaucratic morass regarding names appeared to have been irksome enough for some families to have tried to proactively tidy things up administratively. A civil wedding is recorded for Chaim and Josef's sister, Ettel, in 1900 after she had been married (religiously) to Meier Edelstein since at least 1885 and already borne him nine children.³³¹ Josef's military registration log does not record an official petition to change his name from Jossel to Josef nor from Wassermann to Lebzelter, but by the interwar period he seems to have assumed his father's name permanently. Not so Chaim, who maintained the last name Heiss and is found as such on documents from the Austro-Hungarian and Romanian periods under the name Chaim Heiß, Karl Heiss, Chaim Heiß recte Lebzelter, Siegmund Heiss, and Chaim Heiß-Lebzelter, among others.³³²

³²⁸ Note the discrepancy, here she is recorded née Heis, in other records née Wasserman. Given the uniqueness of the name Lebzelter (and Heiss) in the region, it is almost certain that this woman was the Lebzelter mother. The tombstone most likely reads (the stone is worn) date of death 28 Tishre 5645 (corresponding to 17 Oct. 1884) and that she was the daughter of Chaim Pinchas. The tombstone is in the Waschkoutz (Vashkivtsi) Jewish Cemetery. I am grateful to Michael Rosen for deciphering the weathered Hebrew date for me.

³²⁹ Incidentally, the author Edgar Hilsenrath, who wrote several books describing Bukovina Jewish life in the interwar and war-time period, named one of his main protagonists, a quintessential Bukovina religious Jew, Jossel Wassermann—the birth name of Josef Lebzelter. Edgar Hilsenrath, *Jossel Wassermanns Heimkehr* (R. Piper GmbH, 1993).

³³⁰ In fact, the Hebrew on Chaim's tombstone reads that he was the son of Mechel Heiss, though Mechel is otherwise only found in record books as Mechel Lebzelter. It is possible that Chaim's children were not familiar with the naming discrepancies as Chaim throughout his life went by Chaim Heiss. It will be made clear in this work, however, that he was indeed the brother of Josef Lebzelter, for example his death date corresponds exactly with Blanka's diary entry regarding her uncle's death whom she refers to as "mein Vaters Bruder." He is also referred to in a newspaper article as Chaim Heiss-Lebzelter ("Tagesneuigkeiten," *Czernowitzer Morgenblatt*, 3. Jänner 1924); this is discussed in more detail later in the work. For more details on Jewish naming practice in Galicia (where both the elder Lebzelter and Windbeutel fathers were born) see Johannes Czakai, *Nochems neue Namen. Die Juden Galiziens und der Bukowina und die Einführung deutscher Vor- und Familiennamen 1772-1820* (Wallstein Verlag, 2021) and especially the final chapter "Nuchem Schranz recte Balstein," pp. 469-486.

³³¹ She bore two more in 1902 and 1910, thus at 48 years of age, if the birth year provided in her marriage record is accurate, which is questionable.

³³² In the Viennese residence registration documents alone he is alternatively registered as Karl Heiss, Chaim Heiss, Chaim Lebzelter (written in large letters across the registration form for Chaim Heiss), and Chaim Heiss recte Lebzelter. Historische Meldeunterlagen for "Karl Heiss, birth date 17. June 1871," 1904, 1905, date illegible, WStLA.

Adding to this, from Blanka's diaries we know that on the other hand, in family circles, he was "Uncle Sigmund." More than a few Jewish gendarmes went through official channels to Germanise their names, David Schloime becoming Siegfried or Abraham Selig Alpern vel. Spielmann becoming Adolf Alpern (see Figure 31).³³³ It may reflect their characters or a set of principles or an esteem for the religion of their fathers (even if they chose a less observant way of life) that neither Josef nor Chaim appear to have undertaken this formal step.³³⁴

Haupt-Grundbuchblatt.		Blatt-Nr.	
Affentjahrgang		1898	
Vor- und Zuname		Abraham Selig Alpern vel. Spielmann	
Geburts-	Ort	Orts-gemeinde	Geburts-jahr
	Bezirk	Bezirk	1877
	Comitat	Comitat	Religion
	Land	Land	Kunst, Gewerbe, sonstiger Lebensberuf
Geburts-		Geburts-jahr	
1873		1873	
Comitat		Comitat	
Land		Land	

Figure 31. Military registration for gendarme Abraham Selig Alpern vel. Spielmann, who formally changed his name to Adolf Alpern. Source: See footnote 333.

As I aim to have demonstrated in the discussion above, civil record books represent repositories of forgotten detail but also reveal the inherent voids in a historian's work. Their specificities are enticing—in 1921 Josef and Anna Lebzelter lived in house number 310 in Waschkoutz—while the discrepancies give one pause. What can one assert as "truth" when entries contradict or are absent entirely? On the one hand, these books provide a foundation upon which to build and a contextual frame to explore. On the other, they can never record the myriad details of private context, the countless intimate networks that connected families across space and time, social webs that were ephemeral and that remain imperceptible to contemporary historians.³³⁵ One can speculate due to given names and occupation on degrees of assimilation, but no entry can indicate whether

³³³ "Haupt-Grundbuchblatt Abraham Selig Alpern vel. Spielmann," Grundbuchblätter Landesgendarmeriekommando Nr. 13 Czernowitz, 1911-1910, Abgang, Heft 1, [sheet number unclear 1/127 or 3/558?], KA.

³³⁴ Of course unlike the name Chaim, "Josef Lebzelter" was not necessarily a Jewish name, there are several non-Jewish Josef Lebzelters found in Austrian archives and newspapers from the same period. In Romania, however, the name was immediately identifiable as Jewish.

³³⁵ For example, why was Blime buried in Waschkoutz rather than in Radautz, where her children were born and (apparently) living?

Bernhard Windbeutel was a gentle, loving father to his five daughters, whether he cursed his wife after each girl was born, or whether he accepted the many females in the household with comedic exasperation—all of these and everything in between is possible and no record book will provide a crumb of indication. Likewise, tragedies are removed of emotion, less than limned in the administrative entries of death. How did Chaje, the four-year old daughter of Mechel and Blime, come to die of burns in 1873, when Chaim was two years old? How did this experience mark the family and Chaje's siblings?

Brittleness of Birth Records

However fragmented, the details I was able to glean about Blanka's parents and their families from civil record books was enlightening. As time passed, it became more frustrating that besides a date of 22 February, I had no details regarding Blanka's own birth and this ambiguity was beginning to pose an issue. One genealogist, sceptical of her absence from digitised records (she is also absent from ghetto records), suggested to me that she may not have existed. I finally took up the issue again, many years after my first encounter with the Waschkoutz birth book and now with Blanka's diaries as my central project. In the meantime, I had children of my own and a newly acquired appreciation for the length, physical inconveniences, and temporal inflexibility of pregnancies.

I turned back to the Waschkoutz birth book and the Lebzelter birth records, this time noting the exact dates and months and calculated the pregnancies. If I took the day that Blanka provided as her birthday, 22 February, then according to gestation times, Blanka could not have been born in 1919 because Bruno was born in July 1918. If she had been born in February 1920, her mother would have had to become pregnant again within three months of giving birth, in order to once more give birth in February 1921, when Maximilian was born. Physically this is possible, in fact, Anna's mother gave birth to another daughter one year after Anna was born—still, it is rare and if this was the case, why was Blanka not recorded in the birth book, when her family was otherwise so fastidious about the entries? The baby who died before being named was born in September 1922, so Anna could not have given birth in Feb. 1922 nor in Feb. 1923. A birthyear of 1924 and certainly afterwards seemed unlikely in light of other information Blanka herself had provided

about her age.³³⁶ Moreover, given Anna's apparent fertility, I wondered why there were no children in the first seven years of marriage, though a break during the war years would have been conceivable. Were there other lost babies and children, the records for whom were destroyed or never recorded in the course of World War I?

I noted the birthdate discrepancy in a footnote in published articles but suggested no solution to the predicament because I was lacking any document whatsoever recording a birthplace and year. I sought, all the more urgently, a document that would provide this information and finally, in spring of 2023, on a research trip to Bucharest, I found a file from the Constanța police, with a document entitled "Chart of Repatriates from the USSR residing in the zone of the Constanța police headquarters."³³⁷ The chart included the first and last name, birth date and place, place of residence (in USSR), border crossing number and current address (all people were registered as living at the Jewish community, but this was only for administrative purposes). Blanka and Anna Lebzelter were on the list. Blanka's birthyear was listed as 1921, her birthplace Vășcăuți.

Anna	1907 - "	-
Lebzelter Jacob	1898-Lăpeni	-
" Etta	1892-Cernăuți	-
" Bena	1883- "	-
" Etta	1889- "	-
Leisner Izic	1888-Hotin	-
" Basia	1889- "	-
" Manea	1928- "	-
Lebzelter Blanca ✓	1921-Văscăuți	-
" Anna ✓	1885-Cernăuți	-
Leisner Mendel	1891-Polonia	-
Leisner Anna	1919- "	-
Leisner Efrem	1909-G-Humorului	-
" Frida	1903-Cernăuți	-
" Herbert	1935-idem	-
Leisner Frida ✓	1919-Hotin	-
" Hanna ✓	1928- "	-

Figure 32. Chart of "repatriates" in Constanța, with year and place of birth. Source: See footnote 337.

The year, 1921, corresponded with Blanka's description of her "twenty years of life" in summer 1941, which she wrote in a private document, a letter to her deceased fiancé, for which she had no motive to alter her age.³³⁸ However, I knew it was not possible for Blanka to have been born to

³³⁶ Not least a birth year of 1924 or afterwards would have meant she became engaged at seventeen (or younger), highly unlikely for a girl of her educational and class background, even her mother had not married until she was twenty-five.

³³⁷ "Tabel Nominal de repatriatii din URSS stabiliti pe raza chesturei politiei Constanta," (original without diacritics), folder "Mișcarea Evreiască," nr. 584/1945-1946, fond Direcția Generală a Poliției - Inspectoratele Regionale de Poliție 1919-1952, inv. 3322, ANIC, Bucharest. The letterhead of the chart indicates that it was created by the Siguranța (secret police body prior to communist-era Securitate).

³³⁸ This document is in the annex, "Dear Walter."

Anna Lebzelter in February 1921, since Anna gave birth to a boy, Maximilian, on 7 February 1921. Maximilian, however, was otherwise entirely absent from the records. Though I have found several traces of Bruno, I have never found any reference to Maximilian, nor is his death recorded in the birth book, as is customary when a child dies young.³³⁹ He simply disappears. Blanka never mentions him, citing Bruno as her “only magnificent brother.”³⁴⁰ If her birth year was indeed 1921, or if this is what she was told, then there was some deeper mystery to her birth. Was she adopted, I wondered, was she born intersex, was she transgender, such things, after all, occurred but have left virtually no trace in the archives.³⁴¹

For lack of any other evidence, I pondered for some time the possibilities and the impossibility of knowing: Had Maximilian been removed for some inconceivable reason and a baby girl taken his place? Was Blanka the child of one of Anna’s unwed sisters or other more distant relative? Was she the illegitimate child of her father? Her uncle? A neighbour? A servant? Or an orphan whom Anna had agreed to nurse, after Maximilian died (but why was there no record of his death)? Was she even Jewish, halachically? What if the foundations of the stories we tell are completely different from what we assume? What if our assumptions are mistaken in certain fundamental, unknowable ways? What if Blanka’s position as an outsider, which she tenaciously maintained in various environments over the course of the diaries, resulted not only from the trauma experienced during the Holocaust but also from an underlying consciousness of apartness? One can never know what transpired within the intimate spheres of a home. And did it matter?

For some time I dwelt with these thoughts, knowing they could never be resolved and unsure how to extract relevance for the present work. While pursuing other aspects of research for the project, I always kept an eye out for other sources which might augment the scant documents

³³⁹ A Max Lebzelter lived in the nearby town of Zadowa but he was an adult already in 1920, see “Spenden,” *Czernowitzer Morgenblatt* nr. 1431, 15 April 1923, p. 7, in which he is listed as a donor to a fund for Jewish orphans of Ukrainian pogroms. He and his brother, Adolf, owned a mill in Zadowa. They both appear in the local press several times and given the rarity of the name Lebzelter, they were probably distant relations. This Max is, however, without a doubt, not the boy born in 1921.

³⁴⁰ 5 February 1956.

³⁴¹ For example, a 1936 article described a transgender case from a town not far from Bukovina. See “A Reader of the Yiddish Forward Tells of Gender Transition in the Shtetl (New York 1936),” in *A Rainbow Thread. An Anthology of Queer Jewish Texts from the First Century to 1969*, ed. Noam Sienna (Print-O-Craft Press, 2019), 290-292. The title of the original 1936 article, which is reprinted in full is “At the Age of 23, the Girl Became a Boy. A Reader Tells an Interesting Event from their Shtetl in Ukraine.” The girl in question, who was described to have successfully transitioned to a boy, married a local girl in the shtetl, according to the article’s author. This topic has yet to be tackled by scholars. Natan M. Meir comes closest to the subject in his work on other “invisible” figures, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl: The Destitute, Disabled, and Mad of Jewish Eastern Europe, 1800-1939* (Stanford University Press, 2020).

I had on her birth. In spring 2024, I again visited the State Archives of Chernivtsi and found a list of Jewish residents in the Police Records for Vashkivtsi.³⁴² The Lebzelter family was there, all the birth years listed were significantly off, but still, I was startled. Blanka's birth year was given as 1916, that is, she was listed as *older* than Bruno. According to this record, she and Bruno both were born in Zamostie, a village a few kilometres from Waschkoutz. Her parents' birth years, for which I had accurate records, were off by three to five years, as hers would also be, if 1921 was accurate. But the switching of order of the children gave me pause. It seemed odd that the town police, who would almost certainly have known this locally prominent family, would confuse who the older child was. That night I revisited Blanka's writings regarding her brother. I always assumed Bruno was the elder child, Blanka wrote of him reverently, describing him as "beautiful as Apollo" and repeating how much she missed him and needed his support and strength, how capable he would have been to care for her and their mother. Her tone had always led me to believe she was the younger sister, now, rereading the passages, I saw that nowhere did she specify he was older. Neither had she explicitly written, however, that he was younger.

506	Lebzelter Josef	dis. cap	Rădăuți	1880
507	"	Ana soția	Bernăuți	1890
508	"	Blanka fiica	Zamoska	1916
509	"	Bruno fiul	"	1918

Figure 33. The Lebzelter family in the Vașcăuți police list of Jews, 1941. Source: See footnote 342.

With much other material to examine, I pushed aside the birth year problem, once again. 1916 was a significant shift in how I conceived of Blanka and placed her story in a different direction. That would mean she was a full five years older than what she presented in public during the time of the diaries. It was arguably a generational shift: if true, rather than having been born in interwar Romania, she was born in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, in the middle of the war, both temporally but also physically. She would have finished her schooling in the early/mid-thirties, it was even

³⁴² Вапшківецький комісаріат поліції Сторожинецького повіту, м. Вапшківці Comisariatul de poliție Vașcăuți, județul Sorojineț fond 831, op. 2, folder 2, SACO.

conceivable that, like her cousin Babette, she had attended the university in Czernowitz, a contingency I had assumed was unlikely due to the timing. It would mean she left Romania at the age of forty-five, rather than forty, for a woman a not insignificant difference due to falling fertility rates in one's early forties. It would mean that on *hachshara* with the Busselia youth organisation, she would have been thirty-two, significantly older than the other “mature youths” to whom the organisation was geared. The thought muddled the image of her I had in my mind and confused the narrative. And in the end, I still had sources competing for supremacy in terms of “truth:” both documents, the one stating 1916 and the one stating 1921 were lists compiled by local police, their source of information was obscure.

Over the next year I had almost come to terms with never knowing and writing into this project a sizeable unknown. Then, while in the midst of undertaking my final revisions, I learned that the military registration forms for the gendarmes of the monarchy were stored in Vienna, rather than with other such military paperwork related to individuals from Bukovina, which I had been told were, for the most part, in repositories in Ukraine. At the archive in Vienna I found Josef Lebzelter's form relatively quickly and though I was eager to take in the many details provided, from his hair and eye colour (black and brown respectively) to his education (he completed one year of gymnasium), I skipped immediately to the war years and scanned the entries logging promotions, salary increases, decorations, bonuses, and changes to his civil status. His marriage to Anna was correctly logged and stamped, then at the bottom, scribbled in the margin—it was the war after all—was the note “Familienzuwachs 1916 22 / 2 dessen Tochter Blanka geboren.”³⁴³

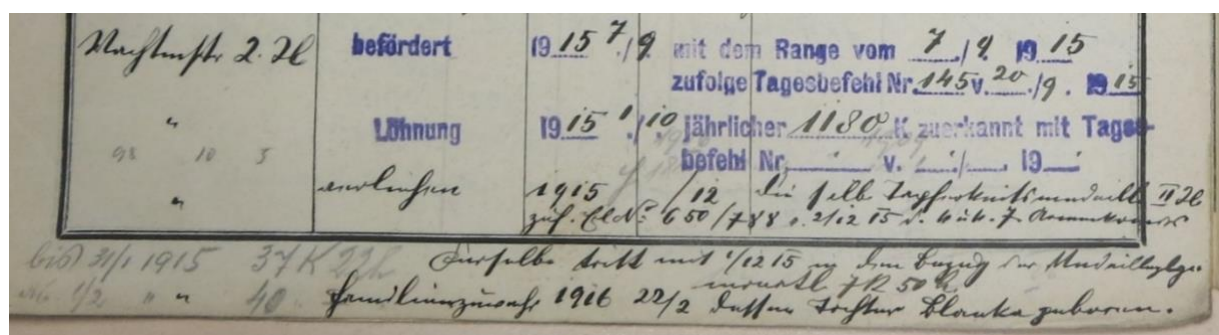


Figure 34. Crop of a page from gendarme Wachtmeister Josef Lebzelter's Grundbuchblatt recording his daughter's birth. Source: See footnote 343.

³⁴³ English: “Addition to the family, 1916 22 February his daughter Blanka born.” “Haupt-Grundbuchblatt Jossel Nute Lebzelter recte Wassermann,” 1898-1920, Grundbuchblätter Landesgendarmeriekommando Nr. 13 Czernowitz, Box 3227: 1911-1920 Aktiv, Heft 1, Blatt 51, KA. I am very grateful to Tobias Neubauer for encouraging me to continue searching for these records and assisting me in my search, even after one archivist claimed the records were no longer held in Vienna.

Establishing beyond a doubt her birth date was a relief, but a variety of questions remained. Why did Blanka decide to lie about her age by five years in the letter she wrote, a private document meant for no one to see, and certainly not any authorities? Whatever did happen to Maximilian? These were questions to which I will never know the answer. More critically for the present narrative, the fact led me once more back to Anna. What did it mean to give birth in the midst of World War I, with a husband in active service? What did it mean for the baby?



Figure 35. Building in Wijnitz destroyed by fighting on the front during World War I. Source: JDC Photo Collection NY_04539

World War I

World War I severely disrupted and rearranged the lives of everyone in this narrative, as was the case across Europe. The fighting swept directly through Bukovina. Czernowitz and the northern regions were particularly affected. Czernowitz and the surrounding area was occupied by the Russians from approximately mid-September 1914 until 20 October 1914,³⁴⁴ the city and

³⁴⁴ Because there was intense fighting in and around Czernowitz from August throughout this time, exact dates that would apply for the entire region are not always possible. The Habsburg army was commanded to leave the city 30 August 1914 but withdrew to nearby; Czernowitz was liberated on 20 October 1914. Precise details with exact

surrounding region, including Waschkoutz, was again occupied, from 24/27 November 1914 until 18 February 1915.³⁴⁵ During this second occupation, along with thousands of other refugees, Anna's younger sisters, the three unmarried Windbeutel girls fled to the capital of Vienna.³⁴⁶ In December 1914 Klara and Berta, now in their early twenties, were formally registered as residents in Vienna's sixth district; when one month later they moved a few buildings away, their sister, Karoline Windbeutel (Krenzia here) signed as their landlord.³⁴⁷ In 1917, in the midst of the war, Karoline married in Vienna a fellow Czernowitzer, Nathan Buczaczer, a widower with three children, of whom the youngest was only four years old.³⁴⁸ Karoline took up residence with Nathan and his children in the twentieth district, while Klara and Bertha continued to live together in the sixth and were employed as seamstresses, likely quite skilled ones, in light of their father's profession. Like many refugees from the eastern crownlands of Bukovina and Galicia, after the war these three sisters never returned to Czernowitz. In contrast, Anna, and perhaps Zirl, remained in Bukovina.³⁴⁹

locations of battle and individual gendarme names can be found in the Neubauer, "Die Gendarmerie im Weltkriege. Die Tätigkeit der Gendarmerie in der Bukowina," in *Die Gendarmerie in Österreich*, for this first period esp. 123-125. For details regarding Czernowitz see also Arie Leon Schmelzer, "Die Juden in der Bukowina (1914-1919)" in *Geschichte der Juden in der Bukowina*, vol. 1, 67-68.

³⁴⁵ Neubauer, *Die Gendarmerie in Österreich*, 127-131. Waschkoutz was occupied on 24, Czernowitz on 27 November.

³⁴⁶ See Beatrix Hoffmann-Holter, "Abreisendmachung." *Jüdische Kriegsflüchtlinge in Wien 1914 bis 1923* (Böhlau Verlag, 1995).

³⁴⁷ Prior to her marriage to Nathan Buczaczer in 1917 Karoline does not appear on a Meldezettel, except, ironically, as the landlord for her sisters; this would technically have been impossible (she should also be registered somewhere), but probably the wartime chaos created loose conditions. Historische Meldeunterlagen for "Klara Windbeutel, birth date 5 March 1893," 1 Dec. 1914 and 4 Jan. 1915; "Berta Windbeutel, birth date 14 Dec. 1891," 1 Dec. 1914 and 4 Jan. 1915, WStLA.

³⁴⁸ Nathan Buczaczer was also born in Brody, like Zirl's husband. Karoline and Nathan were acquainted from Czernowitz, I go into the details of their marriage in Chapter 7. I first learned Nathan Buczaczer's details because his wife, Karoline/Krenzie (whose registration papers I requested), is registered (as wife) on his Viennese residence registration papers. Historische Meldeunterlagen for "Krenzie Buczaczer née Windbeutel, birth date 16. Oct 1886," 1932, 1929, WStLA.

³⁴⁹ The information provided by the Vienna city historic registration archives has been of immense assistance piecing together the Viennese details. However, due to their fees, which are levied per inquiry whether or not information is found, it is unfortunately not possible to request the information for every individual I would wish. I know that Klara, Berta, and Karoline were in Vienna, but I did not submit a request for Zirl or her husband Leon, nor for the elder parents, Bernhard and Henie. Bernhard is buried in the Czernowitz cemetery, the date on his tombstone is illegible and I have not found his death in record books. Henie died in 1928 in Czernowitz and is listed as a widow. "Henie Windbeutel," entry nr. 364/1928, Standesamtsbücher (Metrikbücher) des heutigen Czernowitzer Gebietes, Fond 1245, Geburts-, Ehe- und Sterbematrikel der jüdischen Gemeinde von Czernowitz, reg. 15/90, Sterbematrik 1927-1929, SACO. Retrieved via familysearch <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-CS9B-79VK-J?cat=1378569&i=375&lang=en> on 26 February 2025. Anna and Josef Lebzelter were never registered by the Vienna authorities as having resided in the city.

The gendarmes of Bukovina were extremely active in the fighting, which occurred directly in the region where the Lebzelters were living.³⁵⁰ It seems improbable or even inconceivable that Anna would have remained alone while Josef was on active duty, which it appears he was: he decorated three times in 1915, 1916, and 1918.³⁵¹ When Blanka was born in February 1916, Bukovina had been retaken by the Austro-Hungarian army the preceding year. However, when she was only a few months old, in June 1916, Bukovina was again occupied, this time for almost a year. Retracing exact movements of the gendarmes at this time is complex, some of them were on active duty on the front, while others were responsible for continuing to maintain general public order. Lebzelter, it appears, was fighting actively at this time. He was almost certainly separated from Anna and his infant daughter for extended and indefinite periods. With the third and longest occupation one contemporary reported “im ganzen Lande gingen die Gendarmerieposten unmittelbar mit der Truppe vor dem heranrückenden Feinde zurück, wurden westlich des Bistritztales konzentriert.”³⁵² Thus, Lebzelter was obliged to leave his wife and newborn under Russian occupation and was presumably not reunited, nor had contact, with Anna until Bukovina was again liberated over a year later in August 1917.³⁵³ Where was Anna at this time? She may have been with Josef’s brother, Chaim, and his family, who were virtually neighbours, if we assume Josef’s post had been changed sometime between 1911 and 1916 to Zamostie, where Blanka was born.³⁵⁴

³⁵⁰ In fact the Gendarmerie regiment of Bukovina was somewhat of a legend for a brief while because of their fierce fighting. The general, a beloved Bukovina native, wrote a memoir describing in great detail the fighting and actions of “his” gendarmes. Eduard Fischer, *Krieg ohne Heer. Meine Verteidigung der Bukowina gegen die Russen* (Schubert [u.a.], 1935).

³⁵¹ This is recorded on his military registration documents but I received details from the Kriegsarchiv (one is not allowed to carry out this research oneself). Lebzelter received a Silberne Tapferkeitsmedaille II. Klasse on 7 December 1915; Silberne Tapferkeitsmedaille I. Klasse in Nov. 1916 awarded for a *Fanal (Waffentat)* – a military action; and a Silberne Zivil-Verdienstkreuz mit der Krone in July 1918. The personnel at the Kriegsarchiv provided me with the following document citations: AT-OeStA/KA BA NBA MBA AR 211.565 -> BA v. 18. November 1915; AT-OeStA/KA BA NBA MBA AR 1.066.507 -> BA v. 14. September 1916; AT-OeStA/KA BA NBA MBA AR 1.150.947 -> BA v. 7. Mai 1918, KA.

³⁵² Neubauer, *Die Gendarmerie in Österreich 1849-1924*, 132. English: “In the entire country the gendarmerie posts immediately retreated with the troupes before the advancing enemy and were concentrated to the west of the Bistritz valley.”

³⁵³ Markus Winkler, “Der Erste Weltkrieg: Wahrnehmung und Deutung aus der Perspektive deutschsprachiger Juden aus der Bukowina,” in *Jüdische Publizistik und Literatur im Zeichen des Ersten Weltkriegs*, ed. Petra Ernst and Eleonore Lappin-Eppel (Studienverlag, 2016), 71.

³⁵⁴ There are no references to a post change for Lebzelter within the Bukovina gendarmerie daily logs prior to 1914. Beginning with the war most of the daily logs are missing and/or they become highly fragmented. Either Josef was reassigned to a post in Zamostie or, as a result of the war, Anna for some reason moved there. Though there is only one document testifying to Blanka’s birthplace being Zamostie (the 1941 police list in Vașcăuți), we do know that by July 1918 the family lived there, due to Bruno’s properly recorded birth record. It is possible, of course, that Blanka

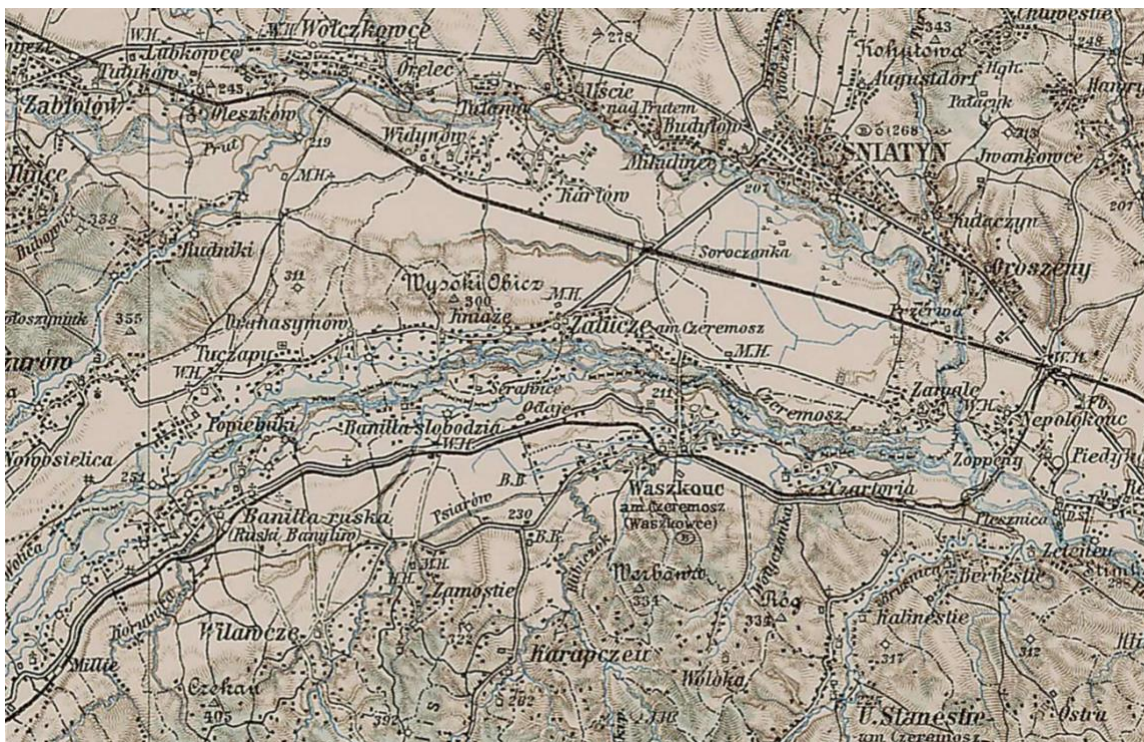


Figure 36. Detail of region around Waschkoutz, with Zamostie, Blanka's probable birthplace. Source: See footnote 354.

Chaim Heiss had been living since 1907 in Waschkoutz, which is less than ten kilometres from the village of Zamostie. After ten years of active service in the Habsburg army from 1893 to 1903, he became a non-commissioned officer holding the position of *Rechnungs-Unteroffizier*, or paymaster, the highest rank of non-commissioned officers.³⁵⁵ In Bukovina and Galicia, this position was frequently held by Jews, as excellent written and spoken German was required as well as knowledge of the other regional languages.³⁵⁶ According to his professional records, this was indeed the case, his papers record that he spoke German, Romanian, Ruthenian, and Polish.³⁵⁷ In July of 1907 he was appointed to Waschkoutz as clerk (*Kanzlist*) of the district court.³⁵⁸ He did

was born somewhere entirely different and if so, because of the destruction and administrative chaos caused by the fighting, the exact site is probably impossible to discover. The map in Figure 36 was cropped from the larger map retrieved here <https://czernowitz.ehpes.com/czernowitz3/ah-maps/200e/43-48.jpg> on 25 Feb. 2025. The maps were created for the Third Military Mapping Survey of Austro-Hungary (1910) and the active Czernowitz website group, which has a page of map resources (<https://czernowitz.ehpes.com/maps/index.htm>) collected them via this website <http://lazarus.elte.hu/hun/digkonyv/topo/3felmeres.htm>.

³⁵⁵ Tamara Scheer, "Habsburg Jews and the Imperial Army Before and During the First World War," in *Beyond Inclusion and Exclusion: Jewish Experiences of the First World War in Central Europe*, ed. Jason Crouthamel, Michael Geheran, Tim Grady, and Julia Köhne (Berghahn Books, 2019), 64.

³⁵⁶ Scheer, "Habsburg Jews," 64. Scheer discusses the role of Rechnungsoffizier in some detail.

³⁵⁷ "Personalstandesausweis," folder "Avizul de calificare privitor pe oficiului Heiss vel. Lebzelter Haim," Апеляційний суд Буковини / Curtea de apel a Bucovinei, fond 126, inv. 1, folder 60, p. 9, SACO.

³⁵⁸ "Ernennungen und Versetzungen bei Gericht," *Czernowitzer Allgemeine Zeitung*, 21 Juli 1907, p. 5.

not fight in World War I, there are documents related to his position at the court and salary throughout the wartime period.³⁵⁹ Perhaps Anna lived with Chaim and his wife, Sali, her brother- and sister-in-law, who by 1914 had four children ranging in age from four to twelve.

Whether she was with the Heiss family or other relatives such as her parents or her sister Zirl (that she lived alone while her husband fought and the region was repeatedly occupied seems inconceivable), she and the Heiss family would have been witness, at best, to acts of terrible violence. At worst, they could have been victims. Beyond military memoirs from the period immediately after the war, little has been written about the details of events in Bukovina, but recent research has begun to delve into the atrocities carried out especially by the Russian soldiers, but on occasion also by Habsburg soldiers or even Bukovina civilians, the neighbours.³⁶⁰ There were reports of rapes, rampant destruction of property, and gratuitous killings, even of children. Time and again reports note that the victims were overwhelmingly Jewish citizens. An internal

³⁵⁹ “Kanzlist Chaim Heiss vel Lebzelter,” Крайовий суд Буковини / K. k. Landesgericht in Czernowitz, fond 115, inv. 1, folder 3123, SACO. This file does not contain many documents, but Chaim does request and receive pay raises in 1914 and 1915 and another log, only partially complete, appears to contain dates of activity throughout the years of the war.

³⁶⁰ For example, the paper by Tobias Neubauer, “Frauenbilder und sexuelle Gewalt in der Bukowina im Ersten Weltkrieg,” given at the 2. Internationaler Bukowina-Tag Interdisziplinäre Nachwuchstagung zur Geschichte und Kultur der Bukowina am Bukowina-Institut an der Universität Augsburg (Nov 2024) and Tobias Neubauer, “Jüdische Erfahrungen in der Bukowina im Ersten Weltkrieg,” in *Danubiana Carpathica. Jahrbuch für die Geschichte und Kultur in den deutschen Siedlungsgebieten Südosteuropas* [forthcoming 2026]. Exemplary of growing recent interest is also the paper by Andrei Cușco given at a recent ÖAW workshop “Between Military Occupation, ‘Population Politics,’ and Uncertain Loyalties: War, Religion, and Ethnicity in Bukovina (1914-1917)” and Andrei Cușco, “Wartime Mobilization of Ethnicity, Shifting Loyalties, and Population Politics in the Borderlands of Nationalizing Empires: Reshaping Bessarabia and Bukovina, 1914–1919,” in *Imperial Designs, Postimperial Extremes: Studies in Interdisciplinary and Comparative History of Russia and Eastern Europe*, ed. Andrei Cușco and Victor Taki (Amsterdam University Press, 2023), 112-147. See also Winkler, “Der Erste Weltkrieg,” esp. 55-59. Galicia has come under the lens far more often but though some experiences overlapped the foundational ethnic context differed. For publications on Galicia see for example Alexander V. Prusin, “A ‘Zone of Violence.’ The Anti-Jewish Pogroms in Eastern Galicia in 1914-1915 and 1941,” in *Shatterzone of Empires: Coexistence and Violence in the German, Habsburg, Russian, and Ottoman Borderlands*, ed. Omer Bartov and Eric D Weitz (Indiana University Press, 2013); and the recent publication Kerstin Jobst, O. S Nagornaia, and Kerstin von Lingen, *The Great War and the Anthropocene: Empire and Environment, Soldiers and Civilians on the Eastern Front* (Brill, 2024). Most of the chapters in this fascinating volume relate to Galicia, none take Bukovina specifically as a subject. In the postwar period the destruction of the Shoah caused the preceding calamities of the first World War to recede, in memory and perceived importance. Jewish sources from those who survived both catastrophes sometimes place them side by side, see for example Arie Leon Schmelzer, “Die Juden in der Bukowina (1914-1919)” in *Geschichte der Juden in der Bukowina*, vol. 1, 67-68. Schmelzer writes “Die Epoche 1914/1918 ist die schwerste in der Geschichte der Bukowiner Juden und wird an Grausamkeit nur von der Epoche 1940/1942, die die endgültige Liquidierung bracht, übertroffen.” Schmelzer, „1914-1919,“ 67. English: “The period of 1914-1918 is the most difficult in the history of the Bukovina Jews and was only outdone in atrocity by the period of 1940-1942, which brought the final liquidation.” He also asserts that with the war „Die Vernichtung des Bukowiner Judentums hatte begonnen.“ Schmelzer, „1914-1919,“ 68. English: “The destruction of Bukovina Jewry had begun.”

government report dated 7 March 1915 records the damage done to the area between Czernowitz and Wijnitz, regarding Waschkoutz it reads:

Das ‘Propinationsgebäude’ haben die Russen gleich bei ihrem Einzuge in Waschkoutz niedergebrannt, die Häuser der Juden wurden total ausgeplündert, ~~die Bauern mehr geschont~~.³⁶¹ [...] Ein Jude wurde von den Russen angeblich wegen Spionage zu unseren Gunsten erschossen; ein kleines Kind wurde ohne ersichtliche Ursache mit Säbelhieben zerstückelt. [...] Bemerkt sei, dass Waschkoutz noch in der vom Feinde unmittelbar bedrohten Zone liegt.³⁶²

Another report gave further details.

Der Einfall der feindlichen Truppen in den Bezirk Waschkoutz ist am 24. November 1914 erfolgt. Die Invasion dauerte bis zum 13. Februar 1915. [...] Die Amtsgebäude der Bezirkshauptmannschaft und des Bezirksgerichts in Waschkoutz, die Amtsräume der Steuerämter in Waschkoutz und Stanestie wurden von den feindlichen Truppen durch Einquartierung beschädigt und die innere Einrichtung sowie das Aktenmaterial zum größten Teile vernichtet. [...] Durch Raub und Plünderung wurde der Großgrundbesitz und die jüdische Bevölkerung schwer heimgesucht. [...] Zahlreiche Frauenspersonen, insbesondere jüdische Frauen und Mädchen, wurden vergewaltigt und auch ältere Frauenspersonen nicht geschont.³⁶³

³⁶¹ Crossed out in original text.

³⁶² „Der k.k. Landespräsident im Herzogtume Bukowina an den k.k. Minister des Innern. Dorna-Watra, am 7. März 1915. Betreff: Situation in der Bukowina,“ [Abschrift] in HHStA, PA I, 816-1, Krieg 1b, Vorgänge in Czernowitz u[nd] der Bukowina: Anfang: Okt. 1914-Juni 1915, Fol. 142-148, hier Fol. 145f, OeStA. I am extremely indebted to Tobias Neubauer for generously sharing this source and others related to events in Bukovina during World War I with me and assisting with proper citation. English: “The Russians burned the tavern down immediately upon entering Waschkoutz, the homes of the Jews were entirely plundered, ~~the peasants were treated more gently~~. [...] One Jew was shot by the Russians supposedly due to espionage for our benefit; a small child was cut into pieces with a sabel without any apparent cause. [...] Note that Waschkoutz is still in the zone of immediate threat by the enemy.”

³⁶³ „Der k.k. Bezirkshauptmann in Waschkoutz a. Cz. an die k.k. Landesregierung in der Bukowina. Waschkoutz, 21. April 1915,“ [Ohne Betreff] in HHStA, PA I, 816-1, Krieg 1b, Vorgänge in Czernowitz u[nd] der Bukowina: Anfang: Okt. 1914-Juni 1915, [Dokumentensplitter zwischen Fol. 52 und Fol. 54.], OeStA. This and the document cited above appear also in the Allgemeines Verwaltungsarchiv (AVA). English: “The invasion of enemy troops in the district of Waschkoutz took place on 24 November 1914. The occupation lasted until 13 February 1915. [...] The official headquarters of the regional administration (*Bezirkshauptmannschaft*) and the district court in Waschkoutz and the official offices of the tax bureau in Waschkoutz und Stanestie were damaged by enemy troops due to their billeting [there] and the interior furnishings as well as documentary material were for the most part destroyed. [...] The large estates and Jewish population were seriously beleaguered due to robbery and plundering. [...] Numerous females, especially Jewish women and girls, were raped and even older women were not spared.”

The details of what transpired in the lives of Blanka's parents and the family of her aunt and uncle during World War I will never be known, but it is reasonable to assume that her birth and the first few years of her life (presumably for the most part with her father absent) were anything but peaceful and secure. She may not have known this as an adult, depending on about what her mother chose to remain silent and of what she spoke. Blanka several times references a bleak childhood: "a shadow lay over my childhood" she once wrote, and perhaps it was this, the shadow of being born into the midst of trauma and violence, the shadow of traumatised parents in an age and place where this would not be recognised and could not be treated.³⁶⁴

Interwar Văscăuți

With the end of the war, came the end of Josef's military title and Chaim's position as a court clerk of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Both men, however, successfully transitioned, moving from government representatives of the Habsburg regime to representatives of the Romanian state. In summer of 1918, the Lebzelters were still living in Zamostie, where Bruno was born in July. But by 1921 at the latest they had moved down the road to Waschkoutz, now Văscăuți, where Josef Lebzelter became employed as *Gemeindesekretär*, secretary of the town hall.³⁶⁵ Chaim Heiss appears to have maintained his position as court clerk throughout the regime change. By 1924 he

³⁶⁴ Much more could be written (and has been written) about the psychological effects of the collapse of the monarchy on those who had faithfully served the empire, embodied by such as Josef Lebzelter, but it is beyond the scope of the present work to discuss this further here. See, of course, Joseph Roth, *Radetzky marsch* (Gustav Kiepenheuer Verlag, 1932). In his short story "Die Büste des Kaisers" Roth employs the image of the gendarme to convey the lost empire/Heimat: "Was ist überhaupt Heimat? Ist die bestimmte Uniform des Gendarmen und des Zollwächters, der uns in unserer Kindheit begegnet ist, nicht ebenso Heimat wie die Fichte und die Tanne, der Sumpf und die Wiese, die Wolke und der Bach?" Joseph Roth, „Die Büste des Kaisers“ (1935), in *Die Erzählungen* (Verlag Kiepenhauer und Witsch, 2008), 294. English: "What is home, anyway? Is the certain uniform of the gendarme and the customs guard, which we encountered in our childhood, not home as much as the spruce and the fir, the marsh and the meadow, the cloud and the brook?" For other sources on specific Jewish members of the Habsburg military (the gendarmerie as a specific branch is hardly ever examined) see Erwin A. Schmidl, *Habsburgs Jüdische Soldaten: 1788-1918* (Böhlau Verlag, 2014); Erwin A. Schmidl with Birgit Wörnhör, *Juden in der k. (u.) k. Armee: 1788 - 1918 / Jews in the Habsburg Armed Forces*, *Studia Judaica Austriaca XI* (Österreichisches Jüdisches Museum, 1989); Peter C. Appelbaum, *Habsburg Sons: Jews in the Austro-Hungarian Army, 1788-1918* (Academic Studies Press, 2022). See also the war-time memoirs and postwar reflections of another Czernowitzer, Philipp Menczel, *Trügerische Lösungen. Erlebnisse und Betrachtungen eines Österreichers* (Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1932). The figure of the gendarme appears with some frequency in German-Jewish literature of Bukovina and could be further examined, especially alongside the rich material of the relevant collection at the Kriegsarchiv. Gendarmes figure prominently in such works as Leo Katz's adroit social satire set in the small town of Siret in 1907, Leo Katz, *Brennende Dörfer* (Verlag für Gesellschaftskritik, 1993) and numerous short stories of Karl Emil Franzos.

³⁶⁵ This is the occupation given on the birth record for Maximilian, Feb. 1921.

was promoted to *Oberoffizial* (senior clerk) at the Vășcăuți district court.³⁶⁶ Though the Romanian regime was intent on promoting a campaign of Romanianization, also in the ranks of the civil servants, to an extent their hands were tied in such locations as Vășcăuți, which had virtually no Romanian population. In 1907 there was just one Romanian speaker; by 1930, as a result of the push the “re-Romanianize” northern Bukovina, there were 144 making up just over 2% of the population.³⁶⁷

³⁶⁶ “Tagesneuigkeiten: Ernennung,” *Czernowitzer Morgenblatt*, 3 Jänner 1924, p. 2.

³⁶⁷ Regarding Romanianization in the new territories in the interwar period, see Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania*. Livezeanu focuses on the school system, I have not found studies specifically addressing Romanianization amongst civil servants. A new school for teachers was opened in 1921 in Vășcăuți with the express purpose of re-Romanianization” of the “old Romanian” population which had “lost its Romanian roots during the Austrian period.” Ovid Țopa, *Anuarul I și II al Școalei normale de învățători din Vășcăuți pe Ceremuș pe anii școlari 1921/22 și 1922/23* (Editura Propie, 1923). The book is held by the Chernivtsi University Library. The sentences above are on an unnumbered page (1).

Table 9. Population in Waschkoutz according to language in 1907 and 1930³⁶⁸

1907		%	1930		%
Ruthenian	3,419	67.8%	Ruthenian	4,435	70%
German	844	16.7%	Yiddish	845	13.3%
Other	780	15.5%	Polish	797	12.6%
Romanian	1	.02%	Romanian	144	2.3%
			German	83	1.3%
			Others	32	.5%
Total	5,044³⁶⁹		Total	6,336	

Table 10. Population in Waschkoutz according to religion (1907) and ethnicity (1930)

1907, religion		%	1930, ethnicity		%
Greek Orthodox	3,274	65%	Ruthenian	4,427	70%
Catholic	927	18%	Jews	856	13.5%
Israelite	836	17%	Poles	797	12.5%
Other	10	.2%	Romanian	168	2.6%
			Others (Germans, Hungarians, Serbs, Russians, Bulgarians, Roma, other)	88	1.4%
Total	5,047		Total	6,336	

The Romanian government needed people in the administration that understood the bureaucratic system but also spoke the local language(s) as well as Romanian. Probably there were few candidates in the Vășcăuți region as qualified as the brothers Lebzelter/Heiss for such tasks. The main language of Vășcăuți was Ruthenian (Ukrainian), followed by Yiddish and Polish. Despite the fact that the brothers turned away from the religious traditions of their parents, they grew up

³⁶⁸ Charts for Tables 9 and 10 were compiled from *Gemeindelexikon der Bukowina* (Druck und Verlag der K.K. Hof- und Staatsdruckerei, 1907), 92 and *Recensamentul Romaniei din 1930 vol. 2*, p. XL-XLI. The census document I accessed in 2023 is no longer available, presently the census is accessible here <https://archive.org/details/recensamentul-romaniei-din-1930-vol.-2/page/n43/mode/2up>, retrieved on 10 June 2025.

³⁶⁹ It is not clear why the total numbers of religion versus language differ by three in the 1907 census.

speaking Yiddish, which positioned them to serve as mediators between languages, peoples, and governments, throughout both regime changes. From his position at the court, Heiss was further promoted in 1926 to *Grundbuchdirektor*, director of the cadastral register.³⁷⁰ From that point on, however, his further professional career is unknown. Josef's path in the interwar years was more straight-forward, he remained secretary at the town hall until his retirement, probably in 1937.³⁷¹

Blanka rarely spoke endearingly of Vășcăuți. She seems to have yearned for a big city, and the few times that she wrote of Vășcăuți in her diaries it was generally with disdain. In the excerpts quoted at the start of this work, from early 1948, she described growing up "... in einem kleinen schäbigen Städtchen dass ich hasste und in dem ich immer zu ersticken glaubte."³⁷² On the other hand, and perhaps after several years had tempered her memory and perspective, she later recalled her youth more positively, stating that she had "lebte relativ sorgenlos in meinen komfortablen mit einem grossen Garten versehenes Elternhaus."³⁷³ In some ways these two very subjective and contradictory descriptions were my starting points into investigating the town in which she grew up and imagining what her experience as a Jewish girl there might have been.



Figure 37. Main buildings in Waschkoutz, including the *Bezirksgericht* (court) and *Gemeindeamt* (town hall) where Chaim and Josef were employed. Source: Private Archive, Edward Turkiewitch.

³⁷⁰ „Ernennung,“ *Ostjüdische Zeitung*, 30 May 1926, p. 5.

³⁷¹ Josef Lebzelter is described as the *Gemeindesekretär i.P.* (in Pension) in a 1937 article, “Nachrichten aus Vășcăuți,“ *Czernowitzer Morgenblatt*, 2 Dec. 1937, p. 6.

³⁷² 22 Feb. 1948 (her birthday), English: “in a small, shabby little town that I hated and in which I always felt I was suffocating.”

³⁷³ 5 Feb. 1956. English: “lived relatively without care in my parents’ comfortable home, surrounded by a spacious garden.”

Waschkoutz is underrepresented in historiography on all fronts. In the 148-page *Illustrated Guide to the Bukovina*, published in 1907, it is given a six-word description: „Waszkoutz a/Cz., Marktgemeinde, Sitz einer Bezirkshauptmannschaft, große Turbinenmühle“³⁷⁴ It was neither as populous nor as Jewish as many of the other smaller Bukovina towns about which more has been written. In trying to contextualise something of Blanka’s youth, I turned again to her family, examining the roles of her father and uncle within the town’s framework.

Though her father and uncle would have been counted by some as amongst the elite in the town, they were big fish in a small pond. Moreover, the interethnic tension was palpable. As representatives of two regimes, neither of which was nationalist Ukrainian, and with a more comfortable payroll than the vast majority of the peasant population, portions of the Ukrainian population probably viewed them with animosity.³⁷⁵ On the other hand, the new Romanian government, which quickly installed a Romanian mayor in the town, resented them as suspect remnants of the Austro-Hungarian regime. Furthermore, much of the local Jewish population, overwhelmingly religious, may have cast a disapproving eye on the somewhat secular families, who may not have kept kosher and certainly did not adhere strictly to religious law.³⁷⁶

This begs the question, in what social spaces did the families manoeuvre? Though there were certainly other families with similar backgrounds and values to hers, these were not numerous, unlike the situation in Czernowitz, for example. This suggests that some of the issues with which Blanka struggled in the postwar period regarding community and belonging were not new to her, rather these themes had marked her life. At first glance her sense of isolation and position of severe alienation in Constanța, would seem to arise primarily from the trauma of the war and result from loss and suffering. However, examining the social, cultural, and linguistic space of her youth, causes one to consider whether her sense of social alienation was in some way inherent, a quality with which she grew up. Taking into account the conditions of her youth allows access to the complicated facets which make up any individual, facilitating a more nuanced and complex picture of continuities between the interwar and postwar period.

The Lebzelter and Heiss families appear in the local newspapers numerous times in the interwar and pre-World War I period. Many entries cement their standing as middle-class citizens

³⁷⁴ Mittelman, *Führer durch die Bukowina*, 125. English: “Waschkoutz on the Czeremosch River, market town, seat of a regional administrative authority, large turbine mill.”

³⁷⁵ I will elaborate on this statement when I discuss the murder of Josef and Bruno in the following chapter.

³⁷⁶ Blanka comments several times on her family’s loose observance of Jewish ritual.

considered amongst the “lower” elite (the high elite were the wealthy businessmen and landowners as well as doctors and lawyers): they are listed as donating to the *Blinden- und Taubstummen Fürsorgeverein* (Heiss, 1910), *Erziehungsanstalt für verwahrloste Kinder* (Heiss, 1913), diverse Jewish organisations at a Hannukah celebration (Heiss and Lebzelter, 1920), a Romanian society (Heiss and Lebzelter, 1925), and a German cultural association (Lebzelter, 1931) and listed amongst the dignitaries attending the funeral of a local landowner (Lebzelter, 1928).³⁷⁷ They are active in the town’s Jewish cultural scene: in 1925, Chaim Heiss is mentioned as president of the local Talmud Torah association (which provided lessons in traditional Jewish learning)³⁷⁸ and in 1932 Bruno played in and was praised for a performance of the Faustian play *God, Man, and Devil* by modern Yiddish writer Jacob Gordin.³⁷⁹

By the mid-late 1930s, as the Lebzelter children became adults, the family dynamics had changed. Chaim presumably retired at some point in the 1930s. His oldest son, Leopold, emigrated in the 1920s to the United States, where he went by Paul Hays. As a twelve-year old when World War I began, he probably witnessed the widespread antisemitic violence and understood its far-reaching implications; this experience may have influenced his decision to depart.³⁸⁰ The youngest Heiss son, Wilhelm Rudolf, disappeared mysteriously and was never seen again.³⁸¹ Berthold Heiss

³⁷⁷ „Wohltätigkeitsbazar,” *Czernowitzer Tagblatt*, 2 Dec. 1910; “Die Förderung der *Erziehungsanstalt für verwahrloste Kinder* des Vereins ‚Kinderschutz und Jugendfürsorge,’” *Czernowitzer Allgemeine Zeitung* (Mittagsausgabe), 2 Aug. 1913, p. 2; “Chanukahfeier in Waschkoutz,” *Ostjüdische Zeitung*, 10 Jan. 1920, p. 4; “Dela societatea ‘Principele Mircea’, Filiala Vășcăuți p/C,” *Glasul Bucovinei*, 8 July 1925 no. 1868, p. 3; “Die Notstandsaktion. 23. Spendenausweis des deutschen Kulturvereins,” *Czernowitzer Deutsche Tagespost*, 11 June 1931, p. 3; „Das Leichenbegängnis des Großgrundbesitzers Maximilian Freitag,” *Czernowitzer Morgenblatt*, 22 Feb. 1928, p. 3.

³⁷⁸ „Vereinsnachricht,” *Czernowitzer Morgenblatt*, 3 July 1925.

³⁷⁹ The play is reported in “Dilettantenvorstellung in Waschkoutz,” *Czernowitzer Morgenblatt*, 10 May 1932. The newspaper description of the performance is in German, but the play was probably performed in Yiddish, signalling that Bruno and Blanka were also comfortable with this language. The author of the play, Jacob Gordin, wrote around the turn of the century; he was an intellectual writer and saw himself not only as an artist but also an educator, he wanted to reform Yiddish theatre and ensure its place amongst “high art.” According to Yiddishist Nachma Sandrow, many of his plays “became the first serious repertory in the Yiddish language.” Nachma Sandrow, ed. and trans., *God, Man, and Devil: Yiddish Plays in Translation* (Syracuse University Press, 1999), 7. *God, Man and Devil*, is based on the Faust story, thus the decision to perform this piece in small towns or even villages (it was performed in a village outside of Waschkoutz) and its positive reception by the audience as described in the newspaper, reflects a cultural finesse and awareness within even the most rural local population. That Josef and Anna permitted their teenage son (fourteen at the time) to participate in a modern Yiddish-language play, at performances outside of their own hometown, underscores the image of a cultured family, while also indicating a hunger for a richer cultural life than was available in their rural setting.

³⁸⁰ His daughter, Shelley Hays, also felt this to be the case. Personal communication Shelley Hays to the author, 3 February 2025.

³⁸¹ The daughter of Leopold Heiss wrote that “Teddy left the house on a motorcycle and never returned.” Private email to the author from Shelley Hays, 26 June 2024. The son of Berthold Heiss wrote that “Willy died in the first World War.” Private email to author from Jonny Heiss, 26 June 2024. However, there is a family photo dated most probably to 1922 or 1923 (prior to Leopold’s emigration in mid-1923) and Willy/Teddy is pictured, so the latter

moved to Berlin and then Prague to study medicine.³⁸² Berta married a doctor and moved to Boian, a small town on the other side of Czernowitz. In March 1937 their mother and Chaim's wife, Sali, died in the Jewish hospital of Czernowitz.³⁸³ The newspaper announcement stated that she was "from Waschkoutz," so presumably she and Chaim had still been living there in 1937, but Chaim himself does not appear in any further records until World War II. Sometime before summer of 1941 he left Vășcăuți, possibly he moved to Boian to live with his daughter, Berta. A wartime source indicates he may have moved back to his birthplace of Rădăuți.³⁸⁴



Figure 38. Chaim Heiss with his wife and children in interwar Vășcăuți. Source: Private Archive, Johnny Heiss.

statement is presumably a misunderstanding. Wilhelm Rudolf was born 3 March 1910, "Personalstandesausweis," folder "Avizul de calificare privitor pe oficiului Heiss vel. Lebzelter Haim," Апеляційний суд Буковини / Curtea de apel a Bucovinei, fond 126, inv. 1, folder 60, p. 9, SACO.

³⁸² Personal communication from Jonny Heiss to author, 5 July 2024. Berthold Heiss also wrote an article about studying in Berlin, Berthold Heiss, "Bukowinaer Studenten in Berlin. Ratschläge; Informationen und Winke," *Czernowitzer Morgenblatt*, 2 March 1930, p. 11.

³⁸³ Thank you to Shelley Heiss, granddaughter of Chaim and Sali, for sharing the information and her father's *yahrzeit* calendar for Sali Heiss with me. Sali Heiss (born Miriam Sura Apteker) death is also recorded in "Todesfälle," *Czernowitzer Tagblatt*, 12 March 1937, p. 3.

³⁸⁴ In ghetto paperwork listing employees of the state, Chaim Heiss appears as director of cadastral records in Rădăuți. The accuracy of this list is, however, questionable. I will return to Chaim Heiss in the following chapter.

The final newspaper articles in which Josef Lebzelter appear also imply change and a degree of unease and conflict. In two reports on 1937 meetings of the town hall council, Lebzelter, recently retired after almost twenty years serving the town, petitioned to be granted a permit to open a kiosk on the market square, vis-à-vis the town hall. The petition was summarily rejected both times, on the grounds that the town should first take care of other affairs before granting building permits. The justification for rejection reads as oddly nonsensical given that the building permit appeared to be a relatively simple administrative task with no connection to the other matters, which included improving rubbish services and levelling parts of the town's dikes.³⁸⁵ The request may indicate a new financial precarity for the Lebzelters, in conjunction with Josef's retirement, while the rapid rejection on dubious grounds suggests disregard by his peers and may have reflected an underlying antisemitic atmosphere amongst the town's leadership. The mayor at the time, Vasile Robu, was cited as the instigator of the war-time pillaging of the Lebzelters' belongings in Anna's 1944 report to the Soviet authorities on abuses suffered during the war.³⁸⁶

Displacement in Death

Anna and Blanka appear nowhere in these newspapers, underscoring once more the difficulty of finding women, and especially individual women, in the sources.³⁸⁷ But understanding the social position of their families in the Habsburg and interwar period, makes clear on the one hand the scale of loss they suffered—loss of male caretakers, belongings, financial stability, social standing and recognition, community—while also illustrating the degree of foreignness with which they must have encountered Constanța.

To return to Anna, as I learned more about her family, the children beyond Blanka and Bruno she bore and lost, her upbringing on the Herrengasse in Czernowitz, her three sisters in Vienna, her husband's position as a higher-ranking and decorated gendarme and then as one of the highest-ranking local civil servants in the interwar period, it was her solitary death in an odiously-

³⁸⁵ "Nachrichten aus Vașcăuți," *Czernowitzer Morgenblatt*, 2.12.1937, p. 6.; „Gemeinderatsitzung in Vașcăuți,” *Czernowitzer Morgenblatt*, 29 Sept. 1937, p. 4.

³⁸⁶ "Report no. 160, 11. August 1944, Lebtzelter, Anna," item ID 6543318, source collection "Documentation regarding damage to property and human life in Vashkovtsy district, collected by the Soviet Extraordinary State Commission, 08/1944," Yad Vashem, Jerusalem. The original document was retrieved here <https://collections.yadvashem.org/en/names/6543318> on 27. May 2022. See footnote 131 for more information on this source.

³⁸⁷ See Chaudhuri et al, *Contesting Archives*.

run sanatorium outside of industrial Ploiești that seemed in some ways of all the geographical displacements within the family, the most alienating and incongruous.

Blanka sensed this as well, she felt tremendous guilt at her mother's death in the sanatorium. In December 1954 she wrote a six-page letter to her mother, recounting in detail her mother's illness and trying to absolve herself of some degree of her guilt. This letter (printed in full in the annexes) provides some of the only fragments of Anna Lebzelter's private life, her personality and even appearance, which I have been able to recover. Blanka began the letter with regrets and imagined how they would live together differently, if her mother was alive:

Du dürftest vor allem nicht mehr arbeiten. Ich würde vor dem Dienst den Markt besorgen, und nach dem Dienst die gesamte Hausarbeit. Du dürftest nur soviel tun, als nötig zu Deiner persönlichen Bewirtung während meiner Abwesenheit. Ich würde mich mit schmalen Bissen begnügen, und alles für Deine gute Ernährung und Dein Wohl hergeben. Kein lautes oder schlimmes Wort kriegtest Du von mir zu hören, und keines Deiner harten Worte, einer Misstimmung entspringend, würde ich Dir übelnehmen. Eine Misstimmung würde ich gleich durch liebevolle Worte zu verscheuchen suchen, denn wir Beide, unserer Ernährer und Beschützer beraubt, in einer fremden Stadt sich selbst überlassen, müssen innig und fest zusammenhalten. Zu spät - zu spät. Vergebens lausche ich durch die Stille der Nacht, kein Atemzug, nicht der leiseste Laut dringt an mein Ohr, leere schwarze Dunkelheit gähnt rings um mich her.³⁸⁸

By explaining what she would do *differently*, we understand what they *did*: the relationship of the two women was emotional, loving, symbiotic, but each apparently had a temper and, at times, spout hurtful words. Besides the entries involving her death, in which Anna took centre stage and yet is without agency, she appeared frequently in her role as manager of the household. She stood in lines at the market, fetched their soup from the Jewish community soup kitchen, borrowed sugar from a neighbour, and so forth. In one entry, however, the tension between the two women—and Anna's own emotional life and frustrations—came to the fore in an act of astonishing agency on her part. In September 1949 the women quarrelled. This was the period after Blanka had bitterly accepted that they would not be departing anytime soon. They were suffering once more from

³⁸⁸ Mein Mütterchen.

extreme financial precarity, Blanka was searching desperately for both a job and a larger flat (they were sharing one small room with a single window to a little courtyard looking onto the outhouse) and experiencing migraines daily. She complained in her diary that during this time her mother did not have a kind word for her:

C-ța Donnerstag 29 / 9 1949

[...] In den letzten Tagen hat sich unser Verhältnis zueinander sehr verschlechtert. Gestern früh ist es zu einem Auftritt gekommen, habe sehr zu weinen angefangen, darauf hat sie sich angezogen und ist fort. Bin den ganzen Tag mit den schrecklichsten Kopfschmerzen und ohne etwas gegessen zu haben, gelegen. Habe gedacht bis zum Abend wird sie kommen. Doch ist sie nicht gekommen, jetzt ist der zweite Abend und sie ist immer noch nicht da. Habe keine Ahnung wo sie sein kann, bin sehr besorgt und ist mir entsetzlich zu Mute.³⁸⁹

The next day Blanka recorded one sentence: „Habe die Ausreisserin heute mittags zurückgebracht. Gott sei Dank.“³⁹⁰

I thought often about this episode. The diary narrates Blanka's position, but in my mind I pictured Anna, silent, watching her sobbing daughter. For reasons of her own, she could not bear the scene, threw on her coat and left. The act is at once a rejection of the ascribed maternal role (painful for Blanka to experience) and an assertion and expression of her own grief, frustration, and despair. I wondered whether she chaffed at the maternal trappings at other points in her life—Blanka insinuated several times, when angry, that her mother lacked a natural maternal touch. Or whether she continued to mourn, yet was unable to express her grief, the deaths of her two youngest boys (assuming Maximilian must have died). Or was she, like Blanka, fixated on the death of Bruno, who in the eyes of the two women, would have cared for them, and whether correspondingly, in an unspeakable way, she resented the survival of her daughter, whose place in a patriarchal world meant she was less capable than a man would have been. The incident also proves that Anna had

³⁸⁹ 29 Sept. 1949.

³⁹⁰ 30 Sept. 1949. English: "I brought the runaway back today midday. Thank God."

somewhere, with someone, established communal bonds. She stayed away for two nights and most certainly did not sleep on the streets, rather she went to someone, a friend, for comfort and solace.

The tension between the women, which reached its climax in the entry above, decreased after they moved to larger quarters and Blanka found a job. Despite the handful of acrimonious entries Blanka penned about her mother, there is no doubt that they loved one another and in one way their quarrels serve to demonstrate the “normality” of family relationships among survivors and how the physical stresses of precarity influence emotional reactions.

In the 1954 letter to her mother all acrimony is dispersed, as Blanka recounted the stages of her mother’s illness and what she believed were their missteps. One of these she gently ascribed to Anna’s initial refusal to check into a hospital. She quoted her, in one of the only instances of Anna’s voice that has survived: “‘Wisse’ sagtest Du mir, ‘bringst Du mich jetzt ins Spital, hollst Du mich von dort aus der Leichenkammer.’”³⁹¹ As her condition deteriorated she finally agreed to be admitted and when the order of transfer to a sanatorium was given, Blanka described her own misgivings and her mother’s enthusiasm:

Als kurz nach Deiner Überführung ins TBC Spital, die Ärzte Deine Internierung in einem TBS Sanatorium, einige hundert km. weit von hier entfernt, empfahlen, war ich dagegen. Nicht weil ich mir von dort keine Hilfe versprach, erhoffte sogar von einer Luftveränderung, und dann warum sollte nicht gut sein was die Ärzte dringend empfahlen. Ich war dagegen weil ich fürchtete Dich so weit weg von mir, und ohne meine Aufsicht zu lassen, und weil ich fürchtete die weite Reise wäre viel zu anstrengend für Dich, konnte mir überhaupt nicht denken, wie Du in Deinem vollkommen entkräfteten Zustand, diese Reise unternehmen könntest. Du, aber, Mama, Du warst gleich dafür, Du hattest vom Wort Sanatorium einen veralteten Begriff. Du hattest in Erinnerung das Sanatorium in Czernowitz wo Deine Mutter gepflegt wurde als sie erkrankte.³⁹² Elegante Räume mit 1-2

³⁹¹ Mein Mütterchen. English: “‘Listen’ you said to me, ‘if you take me to the hospital now, you will pick me up from the morgue.’” This was the attitude towards the hospital in the Moghilev ghetto where the women had lived for three years, it is difficult to know whether Anna’s belief was a posttraumatic reaction to that experience or whether the hospitals in Constanța themselves carried a poor reputation. Her sister-in-law Sali, Chaim’s wife, also died in the Czernowitz Jewish hospital.

³⁹² Anna’s mother, Henie, died of stomach cancer in 1928 (see footnote 349). She must have spent time at the Hera sanatorium near the Volksgarten in Czernowitz, newly opened in 1923. See “Das Sanatorium ‘Hera’,” *Czernowitzer Morgenblatt*, 13 June 1923, p. 5.

Betten, Ärzte die alle von der medizinischen Wissenschaft zur Verfügung gestellten Mittel anwandten, um den Patienten zu helfen, auserlesen Pflege und engelgleiche Pflegerinnen.

It is not clear what injection Anna received (described in the excerpts preceding this chapter) which caused her such pain, but the conditions at the sanatorium shocked both the women: “Als wir nach jener langen beschwerlichen Reise ans Ziel anlangten, fanden wir eine Stätte des Grauens. Baracken überfüllt mit schwerkranken Menschen, keine Medikamente, gleichgültiges, brutales Personal.”³⁹³ In her letter, Blanka is unable to narrate the events, quoted preceding this chapter, that she recorded in the diary, immediately after they took place. Her shock at her mother’s immensely deteriorated condition after only a few days and the accompanying knowledge that she would lose her mother, that her mother would die in that place—and that she, her daughter, left her there to die alone—are thoughts that haunted her but that she could not articulate:

Ich eilte zu Dir hier durchreisse ich den Faden der Erinnerungen, sie sind zu schrecklich ich ertrage sie nicht. Stets kämpfe ich gegen diese Gedanken, suche sie zu verdrängen, wenn sie mich aber doch übermannen dann empfinde ich einen so rasenden boden- und grenzenlosen Schmerz, wie ihn nie ein menschliches Wesen zwischen Himmel und Erde, je empfunden hat. “³⁹⁴

Indeed, her mother’s death and the circumstances surrounding it, her helplessness and lack of sound professional guidance, appear in her writings as a primary traumatic experience, akin to the killing of her brother and father in the pogrom. Her letter to her mother was on the one hand therapeutic, as she worked through and bore witness, so to speak, to the experience of trauma, but it also served her as an attempt at atonement and justification.³⁹⁵ It was a request for forgiveness,

³⁹³ Mein Mütterchen. English: “When after that long, arduous journey, we reached our goal, we found a place of horror. Barracks crammed with grievously ill people, no medicine, indifferent, brutal staff.”

³⁹⁴ Mein Mütterchen. English: “I hurried to you Here I must rip asunder the threads of memory, they are too horrid, I cannot bear them. I am struggling constantly against these thoughts, I seek to suppress them, and when, after all, they overcome me I experience such an excruciatingly bottomless and boundless pain such as no human creature has ever experienced between heaven and earth.”

³⁹⁵ On trauma see Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* and Cathy Caruth, ed., *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995). See also Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (Routledge, 1992).

and in its closing, a memorial to Anna, for whom there was no funeral nor communal mourning among family and friends:

Jetzt schliesse ich für einen Augenblick die Augen, und sehe Dich vor mir meine teure Mama. Ich sehe Dich auf dem Stuhl neben dem Ofen sitzen, in Deinem langen dicken Flanellschlafrock. Ich sehe Deine lieben Hände im Schosse ruhen, die Hände die zahllose schmackhafte Mahlzeiten für mich bereitet haben, die zahllose Mal für mich genäht und gestrickt haben, und die so sanft auf meiner Stirne ruhten wenn ich nicht wohl war. Ich sehe Deine Augen, Deine schönen dunklen langbewimperten Augen, deren Blick in treuer selbstloser Liebe so oft auf mir geruht. Ich drücke Dich fest an mein Herz.³⁹⁶

Ploiești

In April 2023 I returned to Ploiești to seek traces of Anna or traces of her death. One may call it irony, coincidence, or serendipity, but I was very familiar with Ploiești, having lived there for three months in 2007, when I first moved to Romania, and attended an intense and immersive Romanian language course. After the course and until 2010 I lived a three- to four-hour train ride away, in a small town in Transylvania, and had often visited a colleague in Ploiești who taught English at one of the local schools. In 2007 I lived with a family who spoke only Romanian, they lived in an interwar modernist building a few houses down from the synagogue, with the community office behind it on the premises. This was the same office Blanka sought out in 1952 to plead for assistance in arranging Anna's burial in the local Jewish cemetery.

During my months in Ploiești in 2007 I walked almost everywhere I needed to go, even if distances were long and the day was hot, avoiding the buses in lieu of exploring the streets. I still had a map of the town in my head, especially the trip from the train station to the centre and the locations of my former home, the synagogue, the main shops and hotels, and also the Jewish cemetery, which I had also explored when I lived there. Of course, there were plenty of blank spaces on my map: I was far from aware of the National Archives county branch at the time of my

³⁹⁶ Mein Mütterchen. English: "Now I close my eyes for a moment and see you before me, my dear mama. I see you sitting upon the chair beside the oven, in your long, thick flannel nightgown. I see your dear hands resting in your lap, the hands which prepared countless delicious meals for me, which countless times sewed and knitted for me, and which rested so softly on my forehead when I was unwell. I see your eyes, your beautiful, dark, long-lashed eyes, whose glance rested on me so often with faithful selfless love. I press you close to my heart."

first stay, neither had I ever sought out the local bus station on the edge of town, where one could find small buses traveling regularly to the surrounding villages.

The morning after my arrival in 2023 was an Orthodox holiday. I had decided to spend it searching for the sanatorium in Paulești, about which I had found no trace in online searches, nor did I see anything that could resemble it using Google maps. My past experience had taught me that the most efficient way to acquire information about a landmark in a place's past, which in Romania was generally not forthcoming via internet searches, was to ask the locals. Likewise, information regarding bus timetables from the internet was generally less reliable than asking someone, so I set off for the post-communist structure of the "mall," the only building that appeared open on Easter Monday. Built in the heady years after the fall of communism but filled, for the most part, with small shops and stands of the kind one could find in the marketplace of many towns, the mall had been one of the very few new buildings in 2007. Located on the centre drag, in between a crumbling but elegant 19th century hotel and communist blocs, the main draw to the public at that time was that it was the only public building with air conditioning in town. After two young saleswomen described to me how to get to the bus station on the edge of town where buses left for Păulești, I headed there and soon found myself on a small bus rumbling down the road from Ploiești to Păulești, the same road Blanka had taken with her mother in April 1952 and then returned on with her mother's coffin in May.³⁹⁷

³⁹⁷ My thanks go to the ATOM association of Ploiești, especially Alin Tomozei, who provided me with many hundreds of photos from the communist era in Ploiești. The photo pictured in Figure 39 is from Alin Tomozei, *Traversând Ploiești* (Editura ATOM, 2021), 95 (photo ID 219-VI, fototeca ATOM Ploiești fond 81, 1957).



Figure 39. Centre of Ploiești circa 1950s where Blanka and her mother most likely were met by the sanatorium truck. Source: See footnote 397.

New construction projects gave way to brilliant green fields, as I wondered what the landscape had looked like in 1952. Collectivization was going full force³⁹⁸ but I do not know what that meant for the fields in between the industrial town of Ploiești and the village of Păulești. The ten km separating them today, in early and cool spring of 2023, was covered in a mix of brilliant green grass, raps fields with the topmost flowers just beginning to open, transforming pale green fields golden, and recently ploughed fields of brown, wet earth. The bus suddenly veered onto an overpass and I was reminded of the frantic and fraught construction of new roads and highways of the past ten years. We descended immediately back onto the simpler roadway and began passing buildings signalling the start of Păulești. All the buildings were recently built and I wondered where the “centre” of the village was and how a sanatorium came to be placed there, why this village, and not another village? Why this area in general, which in my memory of frequent train rides in between Bucharest and Transylvania, was flat, agricultural, and generally unforested; it was hard to imagine widespread forests even prior to collectivization. To the right (east) wooded hills rose gently, marking the Prahova valley and hinting at the Carpathian mountains another 100 km to the north. To the left the land was completely flat.

I recalled Blanka’s description of arriving at the sanatorium: it was ten km from Ploiești and located in a forest. In order to return to Ploiești, she had to walk a kilometre on foot back to the main road. I had studied the Google map of Păulești and decided that my starting point of

³⁹⁸ See Kligman and Verdery, *Peasants under Siege*.

inquiry—beyond asking people on the street—should be the forest on the edge of the village, marked on the map and specified as a “forest” rather than simply a blank green space, so somehow officially recognised as such. In part of the forest there was a “holiday village” noted, which seemed a possible post-sanatorium usage for buildings needing repurposing. On the other hand, there were manmade-looking lakes between this “holiday village” and the forest, which seemed odd. I found no other photos or information. The only thing to do was go there, walk around, and ask.

The bus driver was friendly and let me off at the town hall. I hesitated, noticing a man not far ahead, standing absently beside a fence. As I approached I scanned him and the house in front of which he stood, he seemed middle-aged, a good sign, and the house was an older building, not one of the many new constructions, also a good sign. I greeted him and without segue, asked whether he was from here. When he nodded, I said I knew there had been a sanatorium for tuberculosis in Păulești, long ago, in the communist times, and I was looking for where it was.

“Oh that, yes,” he answered “I know because my grandparents are also from here and they told me. It was away over there, in the forest. But nothing exists anymore. Now there is a ‘holiday village’ around there, but it was not there before, they built that later. Over there was the military area—no one is allowed there—and the sanatorium.”

He explained how to get to the forest, which was as I recalled from the map.

“Were your grandparents there?” I asked, “No, no, but my mother,” he responded, with it not being clear whether he meant the sanatorium or the forest or something else entirely. I thanked him and walked on, coming eventually to the turn off into the forest. Today people use it as a public park of sorts, strolling up and down the road, divided into two lanes, with green islands in the centre and paved in crumbling asphalt.

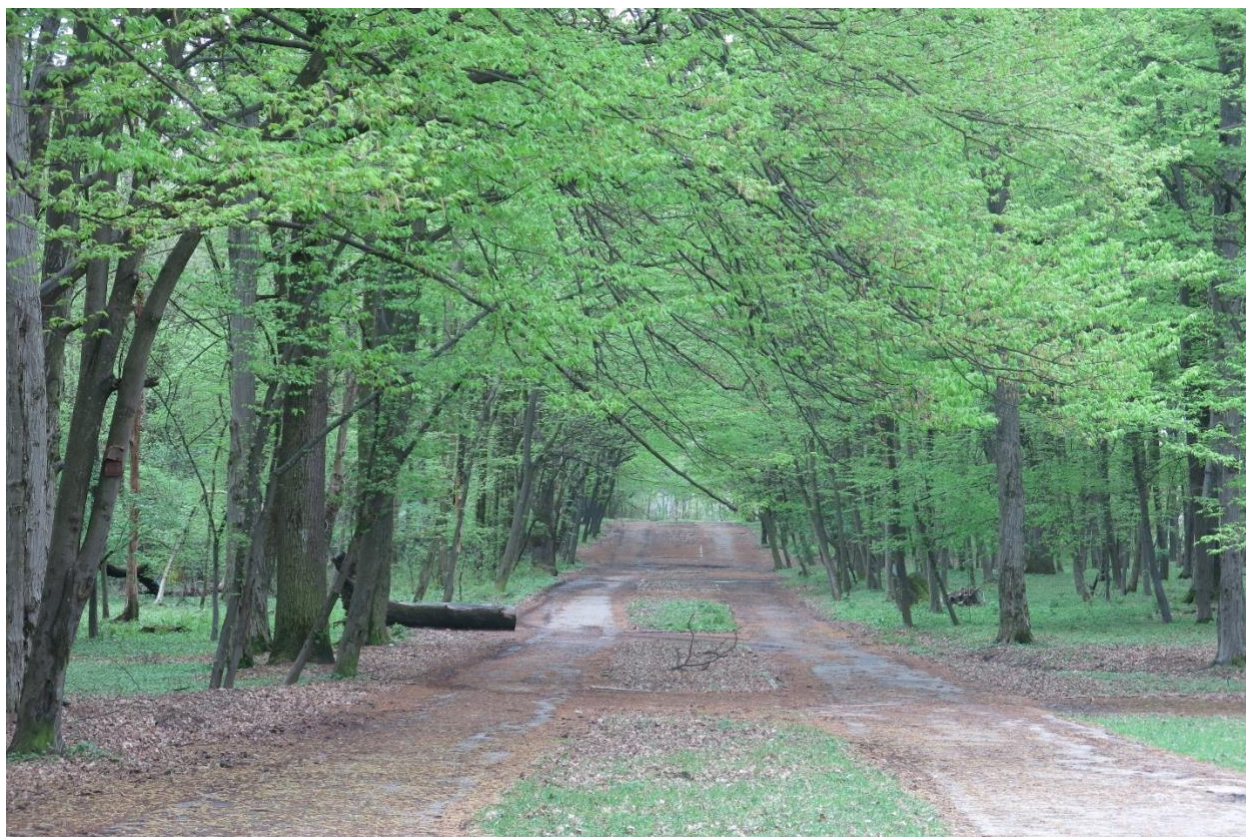


Figure 40. The road which once led to the Păulești TB sanatorium where Anna Lebzelter died. Source: Julie Dawson, 2023.

The next few hours I walked about the forest, looking for traces of buildings. There was nothing, absolutely no structure of any kind. The only place where a building could conceivably have stood, from the growth of the forest today, was a wide-open green lawn, with traces of cement foundations possibly marking the footprint of a building, or perhaps just a sidewalk. Nearby were a few pieces of crumbling bricks and tile. The path continued for perhaps a kilometre or two and dead-ended suddenly into a series of manmade lakes. I spoke with several other people in the forest and at the nearby restaurant, all of the younger generation. No one had ever heard of a sanatorium there, they assured me I was mistaken and should look elsewhere, I was thinking of somewhere else, some twenty-five km away, they said.

As I slowly made my way back to the centre of Păulești and eventually Ploiești, I reflected on the utter absence of the sanatorium, both physically and as a memory. Were it not for Blanka's detailed description of her journey there, it would be virtually impossible to know the institute had existed. The absence fell into the same category as my frequent searches—often in vain—for historic

maps of the cities in which Blanka lived or spent time.³⁹⁹ What does it indicate that so many towns, in their archives or elsewhere, have no historic maps prior to the communist restructuring of the city centres? Why were all traces of the sanatorium removed such that it is impossible to know buildings ever stood there? Was it simply to support forest regrowth, in an era during which that concept hardly existed? What do these voids of knowledge do to a community?



Figure 41. A clearing in the forest of Păulești, where the foundation lines of buildings are faintly visible in the grass. Source: Julie Dawson, 2023.

Several days later, via a series of fortuitous occurrences and the assistance of several friends, I met with Constantin Ilie, born in 1929, and the unofficial (or perhaps official) historian of Păulești. Mr. Ilie lived in an assisted living facility but was cognitively sharp. I told him I was trying to discover information about the TB sanatorium, which I knew had been in the forest, and he spoke immediately about it, explaining that it had been established in what were youth summer camp structures created by Ion Antonescu's wife during World War II. He did not know many details, however, and could not tell me when it ceased to operate. During my search in the forest, I had begun wondering about the cemetery and had kept my eyes open for decaying fences or tombstones. A TB sanatorium would almost certainly have had a cemetery on the premises and I

³⁹⁹ Neither the national archives nor the county library in Piatra Neamț held historical maps of the city, nor did I find any in Constanța. The historic map I eventually located of Constanța, which was, however, without street names, was from a Polish website (see previous chapter).

thought the graves might be the one thing that survived, since destroying a cemetery, such a recent one at that, seemed like an untouchable taboo. Before I could ask, Mr. Ilie volunteered: “And the cemetery,” he said, shaking his head, “it was there, where the lakes are today.”

In the end, I did find traces of the sanatorium, but mere bits and pieces, fragments from the archives and newspapers, that paint only a dim and blurry picture. Tuberculosis was a serious economical issue in Romania at the time, it was by far the leading cause of missed work, resulting for example in 1955 in 7,604 missed days of work and in 1956 11,210 in the Ploiești region alone.⁴⁰⁰ Cases, were however falling—from 447 in 1952 to ninety-four in 1956 (in the region).⁴⁰¹ According to records of the regional health authorities, the Păulești sanatorium began functioning as such in 1948, it had 250 beds, increased to 300 in 1956. It was one of two sanatoriums in the Ploiești raion, the other was in Tătărași with 70 beds (this began functioning in 1949).⁴⁰² Newspapers, however, report that the sanatorium was inaugurated already in 1945—presumably the advent of the communist government resulted in an administration change in 1948.⁴⁰³ The sanatorium appears in newspaper articles throughout the late 1940s and 1950s and somewhat into the 1960s. These articles record complaints, job vacancies, and physical changes—for example, new heaters or additional beds. There is no clear indication regarding when it ceased to function.

⁴⁰⁰ “Cauze noi cu incapacitate temperară de muncă și zile de scutire,” fond Sfatul Popular regiunea Ploiești, sect. Sanatate, inv. 1303, folder 16/1959, p. 100, SJAN Prahova, Ploiești. According to one newspaper article, in 1945 tuberculosis was responsible for 40,000 to 50,000 deaths a year in the country. “Inaugurarea Sanatoriului T.B.C., dela Păulești-Prahova,” *Scânteia*, 13 Sept. 1945.

⁴⁰¹ The disease was already on its way to being virtually eradicated in the West at this time, but it was still common in Romania. To understand the social and medical context of tuberculosis I consulted especially René Dubos and Jean Dubos, *The White Plague: Tuberculosis, Man, and Society* (2nd paperback pr. Rutgers University Press, 1992), which was originally published in 1952, the year Anna died of the disease. Most likely the women had long carried the disease dormant within them as the majority of city dwellers had the disease in the early 20th century, but it did not manifest itself in all. Blanka was almost certainly also infected. See also Thomas Dormand, *The White Death: A History of Tuberculosis* (Hambledon Press, 1999); Raymond Hurt, “Tuberculosis Sanatorium Regimen in the 1940s: A Patient’s Personal Diary,” *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 97, no. 7 (2004): 350–53; Jonathan Stillo, “Who Cares for the Caregivers? Romanian Women’s Experiences with Tuberculosis,” *Anthropology Now* 4, no. 1 (2012): 10–17. For an interesting study of Jewish literature and tuberculosis, see Sunny S. Yudkoff, *Tubercular Capital: Illness and the Conditions of Modern Jewish Writing* (Stanford University Press, 2019).

⁴⁰² “Situația Nominală a spitalelor, sanatoriilor și SMSurilor cu nr de paturi înființate între anii 1938/1957” [no date], fond Sfatul Popular regiunea Ploiești, sect. Sanatate, inv. 1303, folder 12/1958, p. 1, SJAN Prahova, Ploiești.

⁴⁰³ “Inaugurarea Sanatoriului T.B.C., dela Păulești-Prahova,” *Scânteia*, 13 Sept. 1945. This article notes that the buildings were barracks made of wood and that the sanatorium was outfitted with heaters, plumbing, electric lights, and an operation room. Incidentally, Mr. Ilie was correct about the sanatorium taking over the buildings of a camp established in World War II for girls. This detail is not relevant for the present work, but there are numerous articles regarding the camp established by Maria Antonescu and its being visited by the Queen Mother Elena during the war years. My thanks go to Bronwyn Cragg for assisting me with research on this topic.

Reading through the documents that I had found, I realised I was more interested in the physical traces of the space than anything else, after all what would administrative records change about Anna's death? But such papers in any case were not to be found in the county national archives and the local archivists assured me I was mistaken and such a sanatorium had never existed.

The cemetery

Jewish communities theoretically maintained burial registries, though in practice one never knows what state they will be in today: sometimes they were well kept, with indexes, other times they are lost entirely. Some communities also had a map of the cemetery, others did not. Sometimes there was a member with significant institutional knowledge, at other times the staff was younger or had moved to the town as adults, with little knowledge of local community history and tradition. The Ploiești community had one notebook, an index, copied in the last decade or two, from the original. The staff was unable to tell me what happened to the original, which could potentially have contained more details than the simple notebook proffered me. The notebook was an index, rather than a burial registry, and no one knew anything about the original registry. Number 163 in the index recorded "Lebșelter [sic] Ana," deceased 1952, with a section (C), row (4), and plot (1) of her grave.⁴⁰⁴ Unfortunately, however, there is no longer a map of the cemetery, nor does anyone know today where the sections begin or end.

At the cemetery I found one sign indicating "section C," but there was no way to know in which way section C ran (behind, in front, to the left or right of the sign), nor where it ended, neither was it clear where the rows begin or end. I searched the cemetery together with a woman from the community for many hours, but we failed to find Anna's grave. The stone may no longer be legible, it could have been damaged, fallen over, the carving may have weathered such that it is undecipherable today. In 1953 Blanka had returned to erect the tombstone, she certainly would not have had funds to invest in the sort of stone that would weather well over the decades. Sections of the cemetery are also completely overgrown with vines, sporting sharp thorns ten centimetres long, rivalling those of fairytales and making searching where they grow virtually impossible. In

⁴⁰⁴ Burial registry index for the Ploiești Jewish community, held by the Ploiești Jewish Community, Str. Basarabilor nr. 12, Ploiești, Romania.

the end, I left disappointed at having failed to commemorate Anna in this way. Presumably, beyond Blanka's visit to her grave in 1953, no one has sought the tombstone since then.

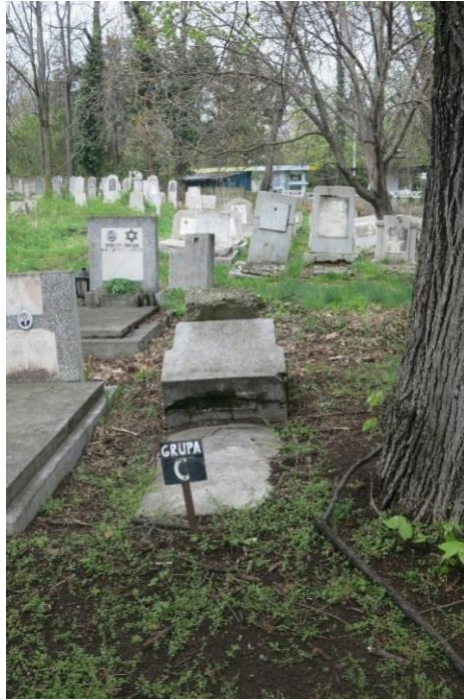


Figure 42. Ploiești Jewish cemetery, section C, where Anna Lebzelter is somewhere buried. Source: Julie Dawson, 2023.

Letter to Bruno (1955)

Mein Bruder

Du hättest mir eine Stütze, ein Trost, ein Zufluchtsort in bedrängten Stunden sein sollen, doch Du wurdest mir durch Mörderhand entrissen.

Warum?

23 Jahre warst Du alt, schön wie Apolo, gut und lieb, begabt, unser Stolz und unsere Freude. Trotz aller Unterdrückung unserer Volksgenossen bei uns im Lande in den Vorkriegsjahren, sagte man Dir eine glänzende Karriere voraus. Hattest Du nicht alle Prüfungen mit „vorzüglich“ bestanden, suchte man nicht Deine Mitarbeit zu Grossbauten schon während Deiner Studienzeit, und waren nicht alle Profesoren und Ingenieure sich darin einig dass Du es in der Arhitektur weit bringen wirst? Doch kaum war die Tinte auf Deinem Diplom getrocknet, musstest Du Dein junges kostbares Leben ~~lassen~~ unter grausamsten Qualen lassen. Warum??

Mein Bruder, seit 3 Jahren ist auch unsere Mama tot, und ich stehe ganz allein da in dieser bösen Welt. O, wie bitter ist mir, wie unerträglich mein Dasein. Wie fehlst Du mir mein treuer Bruder, wie dringend brauche ich Dich.

Während des Krieges haben Mama und ich 3 Jahre in den nazistischen⁴⁰⁵ Vernichtungslagern verbracht. Die furchtbarsten Qualen haben wir dort erdulden müssen, Hunger, Kälte, Ungeziefer, ein schmales hartes Brett als Nachtlager, und ausgeliefert Henkern, die uns zu jeder Stunde aufknüpfen oder in irgend einen grausamen Tod jagen konnten. Doch stärker als alle Qualen war der Schmerz um Dich. Dieser Schmerz war das schlimmste, das unerträglichste von Allem. Wenn wir trotz Allem mit dem Leben davongekommen sind, so vollbrachte dieses Wunder nur der starke Wille, das Ende unserer Peiniger zu erleben, Dich, Walter, Pappa, unsere Verwandten und Millionen Volksgenossen gerächt zu sehen.

Wir haben es erlebt. Ich stand auf einer Anhöhe und sah die sovietischen Tanks die uns abschliessenden Lagermauern niederrennen, wir waren frei, es gab nun keine Grenzen zwischen Jud und Christ, zwischen Mensch und Mensch. Ich sah die langen Kolonnen der deutschen Gefangenen, entwapnet, in schmutzigen zerfetzten Uniformen, mit gesenkten Häuption langsam

⁴⁰⁵ As I will describe in the following chapter, Blanka was not in a German-run camp but rather a ghetto under Romanian administration. In her writings she uses Nazi and fascist interchangeably and equates the Romanian allies of Hitler with the Nazis. She may also genuinely not have known who exactly was behind the establishment of the ghetto.

sich vorwärts wälzen. Und dann sah ich die siegreichen motorisierten Sowiet-Truppen und wusste dass sie ihr Marsch bis nach Berlin führen wird, und dass die nazistischen Verbrecher, Verbrecher wie sie das schwärzeste Mittelalter nicht gekannt hat, ihrer Strafe nicht entgehen werden.

Und nun die Befreiung erlebt, liess die Spannung nach, nun gab es für mich nichts mehr zu erwarten, das Leben so mühsam erhalten, verlor jeden Wert. Eine schreckliche Leere nahm Besitz von meiner Seele.

Du mein geliebter, vergötterter einziger Bruder, wie sollten wir nun ohne Dich weiterleben, was ohne Dich anfangen, wie den wahnsinnigen Schmerz um Deiner Verlust ertragen.

– Heimkehr. Ein schönes Wort, ein schöner Begriff. Doch für uns konnte es nichts schönes mehr bedeuten. Wir verliessen eine Stätte wo wir schreckliches ~~erlebt~~ mitgemacht haben, und sollten nun an einen Ort zurückkehren wo wir noch schrecklicheres erlebt hatten. Und ein Heim hatten wir natürlich nicht mehr–keine Familie, kein Heim. Die Reise war äusserst beschwerlich und mit zahlreichen Hindernissen verbunden. Einmal blieben wir in einer öden bessarabischen Bahnstation stecken und glaubten nicht mehr weiter zu kommen, bis es dann nach vielen trostlosen Tagen weiter ging und die Stunde kam wo wir in der Ferne die Türme der Czernowitzer erzbischöflichen Residenz auftauchen sahen. Ich blickte wie gebannt auf diese Türme und lauschte in mein Inneres auf ein freudiges Echo. Doch nichts dergleichen. Ich empfand nur mein wundes wehes Herz und Zukunftssorgen. Ich machte die Mama auf die Residenz aufmerksam. Sie richtete den Blick in die gewiesene Richtung, ihre Züge bekamen einen wehen Ausdruck und ihre Augen füllten sich mit Tränen.

Ich wusste woran sie dachte. Sie sah die Stadt wieder in der sie geboren, gelebt, und einst glücklich gewesen ist. In welcher Verfassung kehrte sie jetzt wieder, und was harrte ihrer. Ich wusste wie ihr Mutterherz aufschrie in unermesslichem Weh um ihren einzigen vergötterten Sohn, wie sie diesem sich die Schmerzensschreie um ihren Mann, ihre Geschwister, ihr schönes Heim, gesellten, welch verzweifelter Tumult in ihrem Herzen tobte.

Ich versuchte durch eine heitere Miene und einige optimistische Worte die Mama aufzumuntern. Doch mir war garnicht optimistisch zu Mute. Dunkel, ohne den geringsten Lichtschimmer sah ich die Zukunft vor mir. Es galt nun ein Nest herrichten, für Ernährung und Kleidung sorgen, uns, besonders die Mama, wieder auf die Beine zu stellen. Die Mama, unsere liebe schöne Mama, war nur ein gelbes Knochengerippe dass sich kaum noch auf den Füssen halten konnte. Ich fühlte mich verantwortlich für sie, doch fühlte ich mich meiner Aufgabe nicht gewachsen. Ich war nicht

ausgerüstet für den Kampf der mir bevorstand, und war ganz allein auf mich angewiesen, durfte mit keiner Hilfe, keinem Beistand rechnen.

Du lieber Bruno, Du hättest diese Aufgabe zu lösen verstanden. Du wärest fähig gewesen für die Mama gut zu sorgen, ein neues Heim, ein neues Leben aufzubauen. Du wärest da wunderbar Deinen Mann und Architekten gestanden.

Doch das eiserne „muss“ gab mir Kraft nicht ganz zu versagen. Ich will Dir lieber Bruder nicht alle Etappen unseres Leben seit der Rückkehr aus den Todeslagern schildern. Ich will Dir nur sagen dass ich gearbeitet und mich bemüht habe, Mama und mich mit dem nötigsten zu versorgen. Wie haben keine Not gelitten. Doch fühlten wir uns sehr schlecht in der alten Heimat, auf den Trümmern unseres Lebens, Tag und Nacht geplagt von qualvollsten Erinnerungen und untern Menschen die nicht schuldlos an unserer Tragödie waren.

Darum war ich sehr froh als wir fortkonnten. Wir sind fortgezogen, ins Ungewisse, und nach einer langen schwierigen Reise in der Hafenstadt Konstantza gelandet. Habe diese Stadt für unser neues Heim gewählt, doch meine Wahl war nicht gerade gut getroffen.

Ich wusste nichts über das ungünstige Klima und manche andere Nachteile. Ich dachte ans Meer, an den Hafen und dass es eine grosse interessante Stadt sein müsse. Ich hatte niemand mit dem ich beraten konnte. Trotzdem, der qualvollen Umklammerung der alten Heimat entronnen, fühlten wir uns in der Neuen bedeutend besser. Wir lebten uns rasch ein und ich fand die Mittel zur Existenz. Die Tage reichten sich aneinander, und die Jahre vergingen, Eines wie das Andere. Ich arbeitete und die Mama besorgte den Haushalt. Nach aussen schien unser Dasein zu Zweien friedlich, doch nach Innen kam keine von uns auch nur für eine kurze Weile zur Ruhe. Dein Verlust und die Art wie dies geschehen war, war weder zu verschmerzen noch zu vergessen. Dieser Schmerz bohrte ohne Unterlass und war der Hauptgrund warum die Mama sich nicht wieder erholen konnte. Im Lager hatte sie 30 kgr abgenommen und war zum Skelett geworden. Nach der Befreiung erholte sie sich nur wenig, und die wiederholten Versuche ihr Gewicht zu steigern blieben ohne Erfolg. Als sie im Winter 1952 an Lungenentzündung erkrankte, fand die Krankheit einen Boden wo sie ungehindert sich verbreiten und verheeren konnte. Gleichzeitig ereignete sich eine Geldreform die uns um den letzten Heller brachte und somit um die Medikamente die Mama dringend benötigte. Das schrecklichste geschah, ich verlor meine Mutter, die einzige Gefährtin meiner Einsamkeit. Nie hätte ich gedacht dass ich meine teure gute Mama auch nur eine Stunde würde überleben können. Nun sind es 3 Jahre geworden und ich lebe noch, aber wie lebe ich, ach,

wenn Du wüsstest lieber Bruder. Meine Sprache ist zu arm, bin nicht imstande Worte zu finden, um meine seelische Verfassung, mein Dasein, auch nur annähernd zu schildern. Auch glaube ich nicht dass überhaupt Worte dazu imstande wären.

Wie dringend nötig brauche ich Dich mein Bruder. Immer habe ich Dich gebraucht, immer bitter vermisst, doch seit der Mamas Ableben und dem unvermeidlichen Altern entbehre ich Dich immer schwerer und schmerzlicher.

So lange die Mama lebte, trugen wir gemeinsam unseren grossen Schmerz. Obwohl nie ausgesprochen war es zwischen uns vereinbart nie über Dich zu sprechen. Doch kreisten unsere Gedanken beständig um Dich, die Jahre brachten unserem gewaltigen Schmerz nicht nur keine Linderung, sondern schienen ihn noch zu steigern, soweit Steigerung noch möglich war. – Ich erkannte gewöhnlich wenn die Mama in ihren traurigen Gedanken vertieft war und versuchte durch verschiedene Mittel, ohne das heikle Tema zu berühren, sie aufzuheitern. Ich hatte den Eindruck dass es mir gelang, doch möglich dass ich mich täuschte, dass wir uns in diesen Dingen gegenseitig täuschten. Und doch, auf diese Weise, die Eine immer bemüht dass sich die Andere nicht ganz ihrem Leid überlasse, halfen wir einander unsere Schmerzen und das Dasein ertragen. Und dann auf einmal jene schrecklichen Tage, wo ich ohnmächtig zusehen musste wie eine unbarmherzige Krankheit meine Mama verzehrte, dann wie ein schlechter Sarg der mein Alles barg, in die Erde versenkt wurde–und ich blieb allein.

Mache mir viele Selbstvorwürfe, ich muss es Dir gestehen mein Bruder. Die Mama war mir so unendlich teuer, doch habe ich sie nicht entsprechend geschont. Sie war so mager und schwach, von Leiden, seelischen wie körperlichen, zermürbt, und ich kann heute nicht verstehen wie ich es zuliess dass sie sich mit dem Haushalt über ihre Kräfte plagte. Den Unterhalt verdienen, Wäsche waschen und grosses Reinemachen, das besorgte ich, alles Übrige die Mama.

Sie ging fast täglich auf den Markt und ich erinnere mich dass sie sich nicht einmal beklagte, dass sie diese Wege und das Schlange-Stehen sehr anstrengen. Was habe ich getan um ihr zu helfen? Garnichts.

Hätte ich einen Ausweg gesucht, so hätte ich schon Einen gefunden, doch habe mir diese Mühe nicht genommen. Heute bereue bitter. Und das ist nicht alles was ich zu bereuen habe, wenn ich nachdenke (oft genug) erinnere ich mich an das Eine und das Andere was ich in meinem Gedächtnis lieber missen möchte, und brennendes Weh zerfleischt mein Herz. Warum war ich damals nicht sehend, warum bin ich es heute wo es zu spät ist.

Mein Bruder, fast 14 Jahre sind es her seit ich Dich das letzte Mal sah. Du standst vor mir, jung, schön, gesund, tadellos angezogen, und ich blickte auf Dich wie gewöhnlich voll zärtlicher inniger Schwesterliebe. Wohl waren damals abnormale, bewegte Tage, ein irrsinniger Drache regierte Europa, doch ich ahnte nicht dass ich Dich zum letzten Mal sah, dass das schwärzeste Unglück uns auf den Fersen war, das grausamste Ende unserer friedlichen Familie angebrochen war. Elf Jahre später verlor ich auch die Mama auf tragischste Weise und blieb allein, die letzte unserer Familie, allein mit meinen unermesslichen Qualen.

Wann und wie werde ich enden? Dieser Gedanke beschäftigt mich viel. Trotz meines unerträglichen Daseins habe niemals im Ernst daran gedacht meinen Tagen gewaltsam ein Ende zu setzen. Das einzige was ich mir noch wünsche ist, eines schnellen Todes zu sterben. Ich fürchte mich vor Krankheit, vor dem Einbüßen der Kräfte. Es gibt keinen Menschen der sich um mich kümmern würde. Und ich fürchte auch die Menschen. Was haben mir meine lieben Mitmenschen in ihrer christlichen Nächstenliebe nicht alles angetan. Gegen einen Wehrlosen ausholen macht auch heute jederman Vergnügen.

Wo bist Du mein Bruder, ich brauche Dich, Deinen Beistand. Ich altere einsam und verlassen und kalte Schauer laufen mir über den Rücken wenn ich an den Übergang ins Jenseits denke. Der Tod wird für mich eine erwünschte Erlösung von einem Leben sein, das für mich nichts als schwerste Leiden ~~und unermessliche Qualen~~ gehabt hat. Doch den Übergang – den fürchte ich, vor dem schaudert mir.

Verzeih mir mein Bruder dass ich Dir soviel vorgejammert habe. Habe keinen Menschen dem ich mein Herz ausschütten könnte, und weil es zu platzen drohte, habe zur Feder gegriffen um es vor Dir auszuschütten.

Adieu Bruno, mein Brüderchen

Deine Schwester

Blanka

Konstantza April 1955

Chapter 6. Corresponding with the Dead: 1941 to 1945 Revisited

Fatigue followed by rest will so thoroughly turn over the soil and penetrate the bedrock of our bodies that we discover down there, where our muscles plunge and twist in their ramifications and breathe in new life, the garden where we played in our childhood. There is no need to travel in order to see it again; we must dig down inwardly to discover it. What once covered the earth is no longer above but beneath it; a mere excursion does not suffice for a visit to the dead city: excavation is necessary also.

- Marcel Proust, *The Guermantes Way*⁴⁰⁶

Dvorski rief jetzt herüber: „Zum Teufel, steck ihm doch den Nuckel rein!“

Ranek suchte vergebens nach dem Beruhigungsmittel. Er wunderte sich im Stillen, wo Dvorski im Getto einen Nuckel aufgetrieben haben mochte, denn solche Luxusartikel gab's nirgendwo zu kaufen. „Ich kann ihn nicht finden!“ rief er zurück.

„Er muss in der Wiege liegen!“

Ranek durchstöberte die Kiste aufs neue. Er fand ein Stück Kohlrabi. Er hielt es in die Höhe.

„Steck's ihm rein!“ rief Dvorski.

Also das ist der Nuckel, dachte Ranek. Der Kohlrabi war spitz zugeschnitzt; er passte gerade in den kleinen Mund. [...] Raneks Kopfschmerzen hatten nicht nachgelassen. Der Anblick des Kohlrabis brachte ihm seinen Hunger nur noch mehr zum Bewußtsein, und das leere Gefühl im Magen wurde immer unerträglicher. Und da er's nicht länger aushalten konnte, klappte er das rostige Taschenmesser, das er immer mit sich herumtrug, auf und schnitt ein Stück von dem Kohlrabi ab. [...] Er konnte nicht widerstehen und schnitt noch ein zweites Stück ab und steckte es gierig in den Mund. Und dann noch ein drittes. Der Rest des Nuckels war so unansehnlich geworden, daß er Angst hatte, daß das Kind ihn verschlucken würde. Das hätte noch gefehlt, dachte er, daß dir das Kind unter der Hand krepirt! Er nahm nun auch den Rest des Nuckels und aß ihn auf.

Nun begann das Kind wieder zu weinen. Dvorski kam ärgerlich herangehumpelt. „Was hat es denn schon wieder?“

„Es hat den Nuckel verloren.“

- Edgar Hilsenrath, *Nacht*⁴⁰⁷

⁴⁰⁶ Marcel Proust, *The Guermantes Way*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncriff and Terence Kilmartin (Random House, 1981. Reprint: Modern Library, 2003), 115.

⁴⁰⁷ Edgar Hilsenrath, *Nacht* (Kinder, 1964, repr., Eule der Minerva, 2016), 75-76. Hilsenrath was in the same ghetto as Blanka, that of Moghilev-Podolsky. In oral histories, he states that the ghetto in *Nacht* is the ghetto of Moghilev, though he used a fictitious name. English: “Now Dvorski called over: ‘Damn it, stick the pacifier in!’”

In the period after her mother's death, but especially beginning in 1955, Blanka wrote prolifically. In the first seven years of the diaries, from 1948 to 1954, she wrote a total of 349 diary entries, while in the following five years from 1955 to 1959 she recorded 496 entries, often averaging an entry every three days. These entries were, moreover, generally extensive. With her mother's death and her increased loneliness, writing became more than just a vent to release her frustrations with the cage in which she found herself, it became one of her primary ways to pass the time and the diary her primary confidante. During this period, she also wrote several lengthy letters to her dead loved ones. The letters all include flashbacks of some sort and were written over the course of six months, end of 1954 to late spring 1955. Her first experiment with this genre was the letter to her mother, cited in the chapter above, in which she relived her mother's illness and processed her own related guilt. The effort must have been therapeutic for over the next few months she wrote two more such letters to the dead, this time, rather than filling them with recent regrets, she sank into memory and "spoke" with the beloved.

In her diaries she referenced the war a mere handful of times. But she used the letters differently, reporting on what had happened, as if to "catch up" the loved one on her life. The letter to her fiancé, Walter (printed in full in the annexes) dwelt more than the others on a chapter of joy in her life, as she recalled in detail their meeting, her infatuation, and engagement, before turning to destruction. Here, while addressing a third person, she described the circumstances of her brother's death. In the letter to her brother (cited in full above), however, just as she could not articulate the moment of her mother's death in the letter to her mother, she circumvented the act

Ranek searched in vain for the calming object. He quietly wondered to himself where Dvorksi could have managed to find a pacifier in the ghetto, since such luxury items were not to be found for sale anywhere.

'I can't find it!' he called back.

'It has to be in the cradle!'

Ranek rummaged through the box again. He found a piece of kohlrabi. He held it up.

'Stick it in!' yelled Dvorski.

So that is the pacifier, thought Ranek. The tip of the kohlrabi was sharpened; it fit perfectly into the little mouth. [...] Ranek's headache had not let up. The sight of the kohlrabi only made him more conscious of his hunger and the empty feeling in his stomach became increasingly unbearable. And because he couldn't endure it any longer, he snapped open the rusty pocket knife which he always carried with him and cut a piece of the kohlrabi off. [...] He could not resist and cut a second piece off and stuffed it greedily into his mouth. And then a third one. The rest of the pacifier had become so dingy that he feared the child could choke on it. That is the last thing you need, he thought, for the child to croak under your hand! He took the rest of the pacifier and gobbled it up.

Now the child began to cry again. Dvorski limped over angrily. 'What is wrong with it now?'

'It lost the pacifier.'

This translation is my own as I was unable to access the published English translation.

of his murder, zeroing in instead on her own fate and that of her mother in the ghetto. In this chapter, I aggregate what we know of the pogrom during which Josef Lebzelter, former gendarme sergeant of the Habsburg empire and distinguished civil servant in pension of Vășcăuți, together with his son, the young architect Bruno Lebzelter, were murdered by their neighbours. I then turn to the women survivors and discuss the ghetto of Moghilev-Podolsky.

The traumatic losses of the war wove their way into Blanka's daily interactions and reflections, and yet, in her writings, she consistently and carefully sidestepped describing the Transnistrian period. The almost complete omission from her texts of these three crucial and formational years posed a discrete challenge. In writing about Moghilev, I turned to oral histories and structured this section around the experiences of one man, who was close to Blanka's age and class background.⁴⁰⁸ By focusing a lens on the voice of one person, I endeavour to access individual experience and learn what insights could be applied to the experience of the Lebzelter women. I chose to write of these events at this point in my work because on the one hand, I did not wish to begin a complex portrait of a woman with her wartime victimhood. But also, I was drawn to the fact that Blanka herself reflected on these events at this juncture: in 1955 she chose to close her eyes and not only excavate the events of 1941, but to set them down on paper and create a testimony. I begin this chapter by stepping back again several years to the pre-World War II period to establish the context upon which the events of World War II took place.

Tremours of Tension

Newspaper articles reporting on Vășcăuți during the interwar period contain numerous examples of tension between the historic population of Ukrainians and Jews and the newcomers, the Romanian administrators, who were bent on Romanianizing the population. Likewise, episodes of everyday antisemitism, as well as isolated more extreme incidents, which became frequent across the region during the interwar period, make for regular reporting. To illustrate this, I selected one example, provided below, depicting the underlying antisemitism colouring aspects of daily life and the hostilities between the "native" populations, in this case being Ukrainian and Jewish, and the new interwar Romanian administrators.

An article from July 1923 described an incident that had occurred several months earlier, in February 1923. The original newspaper report was "confiscated" or censored by the authorities

⁴⁰⁸ I will introduce this individual and the gender discrepancy in more detail later in the chapter.

on the grounds that the conflict was going to the courts. To make a point the paper printed the title “The ‘Rebels’ of Waschkoutz” and then a blank column with the word “confiscated” in large, bold letters, almost certainly ensuring that news about the incident was spread by word of mouth and likely in a manner less helpful to the courts.⁴⁰⁹



Figure 43. “Confiscated” newspaper column detailing an incident in Vășcăuți. Source: *Ostjüdische Zeitung*, 16 March 1923

In July, with court proceedings having begun, the newspaper reprinted its original report.⁴¹⁰ According to the report a local Romanian commissioner, Popescu, had been accidentally grazed by the drawbar of a sled. He became infuriated and beat the driver of the sled with a stick with such severity that the stick broke to pieces and then demanded the driver come with him to the police office. The driver, Abraham Rosenberg, feared additional abuse and asked to go instead to the district court (incidentally, at this time, where Chaim Heiss was employed). In the meantime, a crowd of peasants and Jews had gathered and, siding with Rosenberg, they prevented Popescu from taking Rosenberg to the authorities. Most likely Rosenberg, in asking to go to the district court where Chaim Heiss sat as clerk since 1907, instead of the police station (almost certainly staffed with Romanians new to the area), was manoeuvring for treatment not only from a sympathetic party, but also one rooted in the community. Popescu claimed that his hands had been injured in the tumult and was suing Rosenberg and companions for “inciting rebellion.” According to the newspaper Popescu asserted in the lawsuit that the “region there was inundated with foreigners.” To which the newspaper wryly noted, “apparently Mr. Commissioner means that

⁴⁰⁹ “Die ‘Rebellen’ von Waschkoutz. (Brief aus Waschkoutz),” *Ostjüdische Zeitung*, 16 March 1923, p. 2.

⁴¹⁰ “Die Rebellen von Waschkoutz,” *Ostjüdische Zeitung*, 2 July 1923, p. 3.

Vășcăuți is inhabited by Ukrainians and Jews.”⁴¹¹ This apparent show of comradery between the Ukrainian and Jewish population against the Romanians is, however, deceptive. Antisemitic tendencies in the neighbours had revealed themselves during World War I and inclinations were strengthened by political developments in the Ukrainian nationalist movements in the interwar period.⁴¹²

Chaim Heiss and Josef Lebzelter appear by name a few years later in another incident conveying tension in the town. In September 1926 a fire broke out in Chaim’s barn:

Brand in Waschkoutz. Aus Waschkoutz wird uns berichtet: Samstag, den 11. d.M., um 4 Uhr nachmittags brach in der Scheune des Grundbuchdirektors Heiß ein Feuer aus, das in kurzer Zeit große Dimensionen annahm und auf die umliegenden Nachbarhäuser überzugreifen drohte. Dank dem mutigen Eingreifen einiger wackerer Männer, die das bereits von Flammen ergriffene Wohnhaus evakuierten und den Brand lokalisierten, konnte unabsehbares Elend verhindert werden. Besonderes Lob gebührt Herrn Gemeindesekretär Lebzelter und Herr Skorodezky, die rastlos bis zur Niederringung der Flammen tätig waren. Die Scheune in der sich Getreide und Sachwerte um mehr als 100 000 Lei befanden und die ganz verbrannte sowie das Wohnhaus, das großen Schaden erlitt, waren nur zum geringen Teile versichert.⁴¹³

The day the barn caught fire was Saturday, the Shabbat between the high holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Called Shabbat Teshuvah or the Shabbat of “repentence,” it carries a

⁴¹¹ Ibid.

⁴¹² This has not been studied in detail in Bukovina. The internal reports regarding violence towards civilians by Russian soldiers quoted in the previous chapter frequently asserted that the plundering of Jewish homes and businesses and physical assault on Jewish individuals was also carried out by the local Ruthenian (Ukrainian) population, under the encouragement of the occupying Russians. There are similar reports in the writings of the Yiddish author, Shimon An-ski (Shloyme Rappoport), Olaf Terpitz, *Shimon An-Ski: Der Khurbn in Polen, Galizien und der Bukowina: Tagebuchaufzeichnungen aus dem Ersten Weltkrieg*, (Böhlau, 2019). The working together of the invading “Cossaks” with the local peasants in northern Bukovina is also referred in Winkler, “Der Erste Weltkrieg,” 57.

⁴¹³ “Brand in Waschkoutz,” *Czernowitzer Morgenblatt*, 15 Sept. 1926, p. 7. English: “Fire in Waschkoutz. From Waschkoutz we received the report: Saturday, 11th of this month at 4 p.m. a fire erupted in the barn of the director of cadastral records, [Mr] Heiß. In a short time the fire took on great dimensions and threatened to spread to the houses of the surrounding neighbours. Thanks to the brave interventions of several valiant men, who evacuated the residence, which was already in flames, and localised the fire, incalculable calamity could be avoided. Particular praise is due to Mr town secretary Lebzelter and Mr Skorodezky, who were indefatigably active until the flames had been put down. The barn, in which grain and material assets worth more than 100 000 Lei had been stored and which burned in its entirety, as well as the residence, which suffered severe damage, were only marginally insured.”

particular significance as the Shabbat falling during the holiest part of the year, the ten-day liminal period of repentance or atonement between the new year (Rosh Hashanah) and Yom Kippur when, according to religious Jewish tradition, one's fate for the next year is sealed in the book of life. Generally, even less religious families observed these holidays in some manner, for example by attending services for the New Year and Yom Kippur as well as fasting on Yom Kippur. Blanka confirms her family's loose religious observance specifically in regards to Yom Kippur several times, stating as quoted above in 1952 "Gestern war Jom Kippur, habe eine Lampe und Kerzen brennen lassen - das war der Feiertag im Kreise meiner Familie" and several years later in 1955 "Morgen ist Jom Kipur. Es ist der einzige Tag im Jahr der mich mit der Religion meines Volkes verbindet. Habe mich für morgen vom Dienst befreit. Ich gehe jetzt essen und dann 24 Stunden fasten."⁴¹⁴

Whatever the individual observance traditions, non-Jewish neighbours would have been fully aware of the significance of these holidays, especially in light of the larger traditional Jewish population in the town: shops would have been closed, the synagogue and prayer houses would have been full, religious Jews would have donned their festive attire. Fires were a relatively common calamity often reported on in the papers, so it is impossible to know whether the cause of the fire was accidental or man-made. It cannot, however, be ruled out that the fire was set on purpose, by fellow townspeople either resentful of the Heiss family's relative financial comfort and standing—only four months earlier Chaim Heiss was promoted to *Grundbuchdirector* (director of cadastral records)—or simply in a spontaneous antisemitic act, during a period in the calendar year when the Jewish population and their differences to the Christian population particularly stood out.

1926 was a particularly tense year for the Jewish population of Bukovina, though in mid-September the zenith of animosity had not yet been reached, nor was it necessarily foreseen. Amongst other things, the Romanianization measures of the school system included, from 1925, passing the baccalaureate in order to secure admission to universities. The antisemitic government was intent on ensuring an unofficial "numerus clausus" (Jewish students about comprised 30% of

⁴¹⁴ 21 Sept. 1952 and 25 Sept. 1955. English: "Yesterday was Yom Kippur, I lit a [memorial] light and candles – that was the holiday in the circle of my family"; "Tomorrow is Yom Kippur. It is the only day of the year which connects me with the religion of my people. I have taken off from work tomorrow. I am going to eat and then fast for twenty-four hours." Presumably with "light" in the first quote Blanka refers to the Yahrzeit candle lit on Yom Kippur in memory of deceased family members. As time passed, Blanka ceased entirely her observance of Jewish holidays, I will discuss this briefly in the conclusion.

the university population)⁴¹⁵ and undertook this by changing customary procedure, mandating outside examiners to conduct the tests and creating extremely stringent and inflexible requirements.⁴¹⁶ In October 1926 the tests were held in Czernowitz at the former k.u.k. Staatsgymnasium I; of 106 candidates ninety-four were Jewish, of these ninety-two were failed. The students and general public were angry, the external examiner for history, Diaconescu particularly incurred their wrath. Shortly after the results were released Diaconescu was manhandled on the street by a crowd of students and their sympathisers, including one of those who had been failed, David Fallik. The next day David Fallik along with twenty-four others were arrested and charged with “assault of a public official while exercising his duty.”

The trial began quickly, on 10 November 1926. On the first day Diaconescu’s lawyer demanded the trial be moved to Câmpulung Moldovenesc, a southern Bukovina town known as a stronghold of Romanian antisemitism. The judges agreed to the move but declined to appoint the place and adjourned for the day. As the parties exited the hall and moved down the stairs, David Fallik was shot twice by a rightwing Romanian university student from Iași, Neculai Totu. Fallik would die two days later and Totu was tried for his death in Câmpulung a few months later in February 1927. His lawyer argued that the killing was justified because Fallik had insulted a teacher and thus the Romanian state, he stated [as Fallik] “so will die all the country’s enemies, by innumerable bullets which will be fired against the filthy beasts. Gentlemen of the jury, ... Totu is a martyr and a hero.”⁴¹⁷ Totu was declared not guilty after ten minutes deliberation.

This episode is perhaps the most well-known and startling example of Romanian interwar antisemitism sanctioned not only by the general population, but also the State and the educated

⁴¹⁵ Spitzer, Hirsch, “Ghosts,” 76.

⁴¹⁶ A detailed description of the changes to testing procedure and this event is in Dr. B. Brandmaker, “David Fallik,” in *Geschichte der Juden in Bukowina*, ed. Gold, 174-176. On the numerus clausus in Romania and antisemitism in the university system, see Roland Clark, “From Numerus Clausus Demands to Antisemitic Laws: Student Antisemitism in Romania, 1888–1938,” in *Quotas: The “Jewish Question” and Higher Education in Central Europe, 1880-1945*, ed. Michael L. Miller and Judith Sapor (Berghahn Books, 2024), 280-309 and Andrei-Dan Sorescu and Raul Cârstocea, “The (Great) Numbers Game: Demographic Anxieties and Quotas in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Romania and the Global Antisemitic Imaginary,” in *ibid.*, 67-109.

⁴¹⁷ Quoted in Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics*, 86. The details of the period leading up to the incident in October 1926, its aftermath, the trial, the murder, and the subsequent trial of Nicolai Totu, as well as his further career, which included a leadership position in the Iron Guard movement, give detailed insight into the social and interethnic tensions of the time, but stray too far from my primary narrative to discuss in detail here. For greater analysis see Livezeanu, “A Violent Baccalaureate,” in *Cultural Politics*, 79-87; Spitzer and Hirsch, *Ghosts of Home*, 69-70 and 76-77; Dr. B. Brandmaker, “David Fallik,” in *Geschichte der Juden in Bukowina*, 174-176. On the fascist movement in general in interwar Romania, see Clark, *Holy Legionary Youth*.

classes: 3,000 lawyers volunteered for the “honour” of defending Totu.⁴¹⁸ In Vășcăuți, however, as illustrated above with the incident of the commissioner, the interethnic state was more complicated due to the overwhelming Ukrainian population, which in that instance, appeared to have taken the side of the Jewish driver and thus positioned themselves together with the Jews against the “intruder” Romanian administrator. Further analysis of interethnic conflicts and accommodations would shed more insight into a life on the Bukovina periphery during the interwar period, a subject given scant attention by historians due to the gravitational force exerted by the region’s centre, Czernowitz.

The younger generation of the Lebzelter and Heiss family would have been well aware of these pressures and conflicts. Blanka references the tension in the letter quoted above to her brother with the sentence “Trotz aller Unterdrückung unserer Volksgenossen bei uns im Lande in den Vorkriegsjahren, sagte man Dir eine glänzende Karriere voraus.”⁴¹⁹ The three surviving Heiss children (recall Willy disappeared and was presumed dead sometime during the interwar years) were aware as well as and acted accordingly, two (the men, thus with more options) choosing a path away from Bukovina. Though the Heiss children were ten or more years older than the Lebzelter children, throughout the 1920s at least, they surely spent significant time together. With the exception of the eldest Heiss child, Leopold (Paul/Poldi), who emigrated already in 1923 when Blanka was seven and Bruno was five, Berthold and Berta were almost certainly permanently or regularly in Vășcăuți. In 1930, however, Berthold Heiss moved to Berlin, together with his wife, Rosa Schmidt, to study medicine. He transferred in 1931 to Prague and completed his studies in 1935.⁴²⁰ Prescient, in 1938 he managed to procure visas for Chile and departed, bringing Rosa and their firstborn son, Sally, over in 1939.⁴²¹

⁴¹⁸ Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics*, 86.

⁴¹⁹ English: “Despite all the oppression of our people in our country in the pre-war years, one predicted you would have a splendid career.”

⁴²⁰ Berthold Heiss was registered at the Faculty of Medicine of the German University in Prague from the winter term 1930/1931 to June 1935. Registry books of the German University in Prague, inventory no. 5, registry book of doctors of the German University in Prague (1931-1936), p. 441. Berthold’s son, Jonny Heiss, recounts that his father was advised by a friendly university official or professor in Berlin to transfer elsewhere. Personal communication Jonny Heiss to author, 5 July 2024.

⁴²¹ Berthold wrote an extensive article about student life in Berlin giving advice for Bukovina Jews interested in studying there in one of the local Czernowitz papers, Berthold Heiss, “Bukowinaer Studenten in Berlin. Ratschläge; Informationen und Winke,” *Czernowitzer Morgenblatt*, 2 March 1930, p. 11. Berthold Heiss and Rosa Schmidt engagement announcement is in *Czernowitzer Morgenblatt*, 27 June 1929, p. 8; for an excellent description of a local social event including the names of specific dances and who led them, see “Studentenredoute in Vășcăuți,” *Czernowitzer Allgemeine Zeitung*, 11 Jan. 1931, p. 13. Rosa Schmidt won the beauty contest.



Figure 44. Chaim Heiss and his wife, Sali with an unknown man and their daughter-in-law Rosa Schmidt (1930). Source: Private Archive, Jonny Heiss.

Berta Heiss had, by 1931 at the latest, married Meier (called Max in the family) Lindenbaum, a doctor in the village of Boian (outside Czernowitz), where he was assigned in 1923.⁴²² They would remain there until the war. Sali, as described above, had died in 1937. All this means that Chaim Heiss was alone by the end of the 1930s. Berta was by far his closest child geographically but Boian, though in Bukovina, was a village on the other side of Czernowitz, towards Bessarabia, not exactly around the corner. It is at this point that we lose the thread of Chaim Heiss/Uncle Sigmund: he may have moved to live with Berta in Boian or he may have remarried (we know he did from Blanka's diary) and moved to Rădăuți. In any case, in July of 1941, he was not in Vășcăuți.

⁴²² She registered during a short stay in Vienna in 1931 as Berta Lindenbaum née Heiss, then of Boian. Historische Meldeunterlagen for "Berta Lindenbaum, birth date 20 Feb. 1904," 3. Sept. 1931, WStLA. Dr. Meier/Mayer (known as Max in the family) Lindenbaum's appointment is announced in the *Monitorul Oficial*, 2 Oct. 1923, p. 7223. Berta Heiss was engaged to someone else in 1924 and this was announced officially in the newspapers. It is not clear when this engagement was called off and when exactly she wed Dr. Lindenbaum, likely it took place in Vășcăuți, for which there are no extant marriage record books.



Figure 45. Sali Heiss, Chaim's wife with her daughter-in-law Rosa Schmidt, presumably in front of their home in Vășcăuți (circa 1930). Source: Private Archive, Jonny Heiss.

The "Russian Year"⁴²³

Complicating the narrative of Bukovina Jewry during World War II is the particularity of the so-called "Russian year" of June 1940 to June 1941.⁴²⁴ In the wake of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact and the outbreak of hostilities, in June 1940 the Soviet Union demanded the "return" of Bessarabia, which had been ceded to the Kingdom of Romania after World War I. It also insisted on including Bukovina in the territorial change, though Bukovina had never historically belonged to Russia. Eventually it agreed to take only northern Bukovina, justifying its claim as "compensation for the tremendous damage inflicted on the Soviet Union and the population of Bessarabia by twenty-two years of Romanian domination in Bessarabia."⁴²⁵ Because Romania was allied with Hitler's Germany, which was intent on upholding the pact and secret protocol regarding distribution of

⁴²³ Sections of the following appear in Dawson, "Survival in the Ghetto of Moghilev-Podolsky," and Julie Dawson, "Introduction to the Testimony of Norbert Nadler," *Critical Editions. Holocaust Testimonies in Historical Context*. Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, Yale University, summer 2022. <https://editions.fortunoff.library.yale.edu/essay/hvt-0536>.

⁴²⁴ This is how most of those who lived through this period referred to it, see for example Silbermann, "Das erste Russenjahr 1940-1941," in *Czernowitz-Stadt der Dichter*, 126-139; Fichman, "Russians Overnight," in *Before Memories Fade*, 60-72; also Hirsch and Spitzer, subsection "The Russian Year, 1940-1941" in the chapter "Are we really in the Soviet Union," in *Ghosts of Home*.

⁴²⁵ David J. Dallin and Leon Dennen, *Soviet Russia's Foreign Policy, 1939-1942* (Yale University Press, 1942), 237-38, quoted in Hirsch and Spitzer, *Ghosts of Home*, 104.

new territories, Germany could not and did not respond to Romania's protests and in June 1940, Czernowitz and the surrounding region of northern Bukovina became part of the Soviet Union.

As is the case for most historiography of Bukovina, we have ample sources regarding this period as it related to Czernowitz. The eventful year and its implications for the population are addressed in numerous memoirs as well as scholarly analyses of the period.⁴²⁶ We know, however, remarkably little about how this year played out in the provinces, in the smaller towns and villages of Bukovina. I know of no studies devoted to the installation of Soviet officials and whatever other changes were wrought during this period amongst the rural population, though it certainly must also have been a momentous year for the countryside. Some of the new conditions in Czernowitz certainly applied to the provinces as well, though local circumstances may have influenced measures.

From Blanka's writings we know only a handful of facts about this period: her brother had returned home from successful studies in architecture and Blanka herself was working in an office, she does not specify what kind. In her letter to her fiancé, Walter, a doctor, her depiction of life seems relatively normal. Walter's presence itself and the fact that he was apparently new to the town probably indicated that he had arrived with the Soviets. His subsequent reassignment to a small Bessarabian town definitely indicated his role of medical personnel within the Soviet system, and the assignment was accepted by Blanka and Walter as a disappointing blow, but not an insurmountable one. Besides this transfer, nothing that she wrote in her description of the period prior to the pogrom references or indicates the Soviet atmosphere, with the exception, possibly, of her job. In Czernowitz, in any case, one study asserts that "women from bourgeois Jewish families tended to fare better in the new order" due to the fact that they often had more Ukrainian-language skills (from their interactions with household staff or at the marketplace and shops) than the average Jewish man of Czernowitz. This is, however, an example of how rural circumstances would have differed from the city, where German remained a primary language, especially with the older generation who had been educated and employed under Habsburg Austria.⁴²⁷ In the

⁴²⁶ See footnote above as well as Manfred Reifer, "Ein Jahr Sowjet-Rußland," in Corbea-Hoisie, ed., *Jüdisches Städtebild Czernowitz*, 243-255; for Paul Celan's experiences see Chalfen, "Kyrillisches," in *Paul Celan*, 86-97; Alfred Kittner, *Erinnerungen*, 47-54. See also Gaëlle Fisher, subsection "The Russian Year 1940-1941," in "Exploring Lived Experience: Pinus Rubinstein's Diary of the War and the Holocaust in Cernăuți," *EHRI Document Blog*, <https://blog.ehri-project.eu/2024/03/25/pinus-rubinsteins-diary-in-cernauti/>. Accessed 26 March 2024.

⁴²⁷ Hirsch and Spitzer, *Ghosts of Home*, 111. Hirsch's mother found work as a secretary at a textile factory, according to the book "work was mandatory for anyone over eighteen," Hirsch and Spitzer, *Ghost of Home*, 111.

provinces of northern Bukovina, where the Ukrainian population was the majority group, most people, even non-Ukrainians, spoke at least some Ukrainian. We know, in fact, that Blanka's father in particular, was skilled linguistically. Still it may have been her multilingualism that did help her to an office position, most probably associated with the Soviet administration in some way.⁴²⁸

Her brother Bruno's presence may also have been a direct result of the Soviet takeover. Many memoirists describe the elation—and confusion—with which the announcement of the regime change was greeted, there was a sudden darting over the border in both directions.⁴²⁹ Bruno had studied architecture in Romania, most probably in Bucharest.⁴³⁰ It may have been coincidence that he completed his studies at that time and decide to return home, but he may also have consciously chosen to return to Soviet northern Bukovina and join his family. Most Jews initially experienced the Soviet arrival as a reprieve after the raw antisemitism of interbellum Romania. Whether or not they were politically involved with leftist movements, the majority of the Jewish population believed life would improve under the “egalitarian” Soviet regime. In his memoirs, the Czernowitz author Alfred Kittner recalled: “At that time, as Jews we were already very persecuted and thus experienced this cession [by the Romanians] as liberation. Of course, we did not know how everything would be arranged, but for the moment we were free of the worry of discrimination.”⁴³¹

In the urban setting of Czernowitz, however, it did not take long for many to realise the promises of equality made by the Soviet state were a sort of ‘Potemkin village.’ Structural discrimination was exchanged for only apparent equality, girded by restrictions of movement and social vulnerability, suspicion, and general uncertainty. The Soviets issued identity cards with

⁴²⁸ If she did work for an office affiliated with the Soviet administration, it is also possible that her position contributed to the sentiment that her family were Soviet sympathisers or allies and thus influenced the selection of her father and brother for murder, but because I have no information on this, I only mention this here as a speculative possibility.

⁴²⁹ Again, almost all memoirists from Czernowitz describe the mix of emotions of this period, but a joke of the time recounted by Carl Hirsch best demonstrates the mood: “Two trains meet on June 28 in a station between Bucharest and Czernowitz, one going South with refugees from Czernowitz, the other going North with returnees to Czernowitz. Looking out of the windows, across the tracks, two brothers recognize each other. One is on the train going North towards the newly Soviet Northern Bukowina, the other joined ethnic Romanians fleeing South from territories that had been annexed by the Soviets. As the trains pull out of the station in opposite directions, the two brothers simultaneously yell to one other, gesticulating wildly: “Meshugenner! *Where* are you *going*?” quoted in Hirsch and Spitzer, *Ghosts of Home*, 99.

⁴³⁰ Bruno Lebzelter is listed as having been adopted into a list of architects (requiring a certification or testing process) in *Monitorul Oficial* Nr. 134, 14 June 1939, p. 3790. In the future, I hope to locate his certification file and/or university papers which would presumably include drawings and incorporate these into a future work. My timeframe did not permit this research for the present work. I am grateful to Anca Filipovici and Dragoș Sdrobiș for discussing options for studying architecture in interwar Romania and advising me on where such collections may be located.

⁴³¹ Kittner, *Erinnerungen*, 47. Siegfried Benzer noted “After all, according to the imagination of the people, the Soviet system was the only possible solution to antisemitism.” Coldewey et al, eds., *Zwischen Pruth und Jordan*, 30.

social categorisations; after an initial moment of euphoria, it became immediately important to speak Russian. Moreover, following Soviet policy, those deemed “exploiters” were deported to Siberia and many never returned. As one man, approximately Blanka’s age explained, overnight there was “no predictability anymore. You didn’t know where you-- where you are.”⁴³² Again, this however, was the situation in Czernowitz, and it is difficult to know how the regime change affected everyday life in Waschkoutz.⁴³³

The only text I have located devoted to the history of the Jewish community of Vășcăuți is found in Hugo Gold’s notable two-volume compendium on the Jewish history of Bukovina. This text is, however, only four paragraphs long, remarkable for its brevity and vagueness, especially as compares to the historical sketches of other communities.⁴³⁴ According to this author, it was only after Bukovina became part of Romania that antisemitism became an issue in the Ukrainian and Polish circles. The author goes on to assert that with the coming of the Soviet administration, all “expressions of Jewish public life came to an end,” though this statement does not hold up with what occurred elsewhere—there are plenty of examples of Yiddish cultural events promoted and supported by the Soviet state during this period. Presumably he was referring to explicitly Zionist activities. He goes on to write that approximately 150 Jews were deported to Siberia by the Soviets in July [sic: June!] 1941.

This matches with what occurred in Czernowitz, though exact numbers are everywhere difficult to pin down. Despite the general disenchantment and underlying sense of insecurity, after almost one year many had begun to navigate the new system and, if not master, at least feel comfortable in Russian. Then, suddenly, in June 1941 deportations began. The formula was

⁴³² Norbert N., HVT 536; FVA.

⁴³³ For an overview on this period in Czernowitz, see my piece on the oral history of Norbert Nadler for Yale University’s Fortunoff Video Archive, Dawson, “Introduction to the Testimony of Norbert Nadler.”

⁴³⁴ Hugo Gold’s incredibly detailed, two-volume work is a fascinating publication, created in the immediate postwar years by the Bukovina diaspora. Due to the specific historical moment at which it was created, it has a decidedly Zionist slant and the historical descriptions of the smaller localities are unquestionably subjective, written by individuals who must have in some way been known to the editor and who were almost certainly of the elite class of the respective town. This does not necessarily detract from the general content, but must be kept in mind when reviewing the assertions made. In the case of Waschkoutz, for example, two paragraphs describe the general landscape and economy of the area, noting occupations in which Jews were active, one paragraph names the “oldest” Jewish families of the town (which includes the name of the author) and then the families which became the most powerful families (also including the name of the author) and the final paragraph describes the *Soviet* destruction of Jewish life, with only one sentence dedicated to the Transnistrian deportations. The pogrom is not mentioned at all and possibly the author was not aware of it. Dr. A. Leschem-Lifschitz, “Waschkoutz,” in *Geschichte der Juden in Bukowina vol. II*, ed. Gold, 119-120.

familiar, as the arrival of the Soviets had also brought a spurt of deportations.⁴³⁵ The deportees included “people who had been employed in the service of the [Romanian] state, members of the middle-class parties, including Social Democrats, business owners who had more than two or three employees, in short: anyone considered to be an ‘enemy of the people’ by the Soviet government.”⁴³⁶ The city was stunned. One young woman returned to Czernowitz after a month elsewhere on 20 June 1941 and noted “[I] found the city darkened and the people crestfallen. During the four weeks I was gone, there had been deportations to Siberia. The German invasion of the Soviet Union was imminent. The Soviets knew there would be war. Thus, before their own army had to retreat, they wanted to get rid of all potential detractors [...]”⁴³⁷ Approximately 4,000 Jews were deported from Czernowitz during the Soviet occupation.⁴³⁸

It is not clear where Blanka’s family would have stood in the eyes of the Soviet administration. On the one hand, her father had been employed by the Romanian state, though he had retired already by 1937. Her family was of the educated class, certainly not workers, yet they were not shop or factory owners, they were not particularly wealthy, nor did they own land. In their careers first in the Habsburg military and then as higher-ranking local civil officials, both Josef Lebzelter and Chaim Heiss had carved out professional identities apart from stereotypical Jewish occupations: they were neither small craftsman, nor great industrialists, nor did they work in professions specific to Jewish Bukovina, such as logging; they worked neither in finance, law, nor medicine, nor, as their father had, did they work in religious education, teaching texts to children within the Jewish community (generally one of the lowest-paying occupations). We know that the family was neither particularly religious, nor involved in the Zionist movement, thus they

⁴³⁵ In her oral history, the celebrated Yiddish poet Beyle Schaechter Gottesman recalled her father’s deportation from Czernowitz in 1940: “My father was deported. I experienced the Holocaust before-- a year before it started. Because my father was deported, and he was the best-- this was the greatest shock of my life. He was deported to Siberia, and he never came back.” In her retelling, Schaechter-Gottesman described a tortuous process during which her father was arrested, tried, released, tried again, and eventually deported (she did not provide dates, but it was prior to her marriage in early 1941). This incident marked profoundly her perception of the war period. Later persecutions and close encounters with death under the Romanians were experienced, in her retelling, as less traumatic than the loss of her father to the Soviet Gulag. Her statement bears witness to the common conflation of the experiences under Soviet and Fascist German or Romanian rule into one period of unprecedented affliction, during which self-evident social norms, especially a just judicial system, collapsed. Beyle S.; HVT 0181 (1982), FVA.

⁴³⁶ Kittner, *Erinnerungen*, 54. For more on the experience of these deportees, many of whom remained for decades in the Soviet interior, see Margit Bartfeld-Feller, *Wie aus ganz andern Welten. Erinnerungen an Czernowitz und die sibirische Verbannung* (Hartung-Gorre Verlag, 2000); Julius Wolfenhaut, *Nach Sibirien verbannt. Als Jude von Czernowitz nach Stalinka 1941-1994* (Fischer Verlag, 2005).

⁴³⁷ Silbermann, *Czernowitz*, 139.

⁴³⁸ Coldewey et al, eds., *Zwischen Pruth und Jordan*, 38. For these final deportations, see also Hirsch and Spitzer, *Ghosts of Home*, 116-117.

may have been well positioned to be viewed with favour by the Soviets—or at least, to avoid deportation.

Pogrom in Vășcăuți

On 22 June 1941 Germany attacked the Soviet Union in Operation Barbarossa. The Soviet personnel, whether military or civilian, hastily packed up and fled Czernowitz and the surrounding region. Russians who had been brought in to teach at the university or work in the administration departed, as well as many students and others who were particularly supportive of or involved in the communist regime. Great uncertainty reigned as families and friends tried to gauge the wisest move. Memoirists record the tension and uncertainty stretching over days and this sense of foreboding was to prove all too accurate.⁴³⁹ In the first week of July as the Romanian army re-entered the territory, countless pogroms took place in the villages and small towns of northern Bukovina, as well as in Czernowitz itself. The victims included men, women, and children; the perpetrators varied—Romanian and German soldiers, but also, and sometimes primarily, depending on the location, Ukrainian and Romanian civilians.⁴⁴⁰

This chapter of the Holocaust remains under-researched, possibly because of the combination of the sheer number of acts of spontaneous violence coupled with the lack of official orders or a paper trail. There was tacit approval or encouragement given by the Romanian army.⁴⁴¹ Historical sources are primarily only witness testimonies, which on the one hand are complicated to aggregate; on the other, it is difficult to sift facts from these testimonies, which are frequently

⁴³⁹ One woman recalled “[In] that last week of June 1941 people were petrified at the imminent arrival of the German troops.” Fichman, *Memories*, 73. Kittner described it more pragmatically, that everyone wondered what would happen and that the streets were empty, Kittner, *Erinnerungen*, 55.

⁴⁴⁰ For the massacres that took place in northern Bukovina villages around Czernowitz see Geissbühler, *Blutiger Juli*, especially pp. 59-71. See also Vladimir Solonari, “Patterns of Violence: The Local Population and the Mass Murder of Jews in Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina, July-August 1941,” in *The Holocaust in the East: Local Perpetrators and Soviet Responses*, ed. Alexander M. Martin, Peter Holquist, and Michael David-Fox (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013), pp. 51-82. Solonari describes the Romanian local population involved in pogroms in Bessarabia, while the local Ukrainian population spurred on the pogroms in northern Bukovina, which were often halted by the Romanian military, when it arrived. The degree of violence varied dramatically from place to place, according to witnesses, survivors, and postwar tribunals. See also Simon Geissbühler, “‘He spoke Yiddish like a Jew’: Neighbors’ Contribution to the Mass Killing of Jews in Northern Bukovina and Bessarabia, July 1941,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 28, no. 3 (Winter 2014): 430-449.

⁴⁴¹ The degree to which the pogroms were “ordered” is debated, see Solonari, “Patterns of Violence,” for an extended discussion on military leaders and orders. I am less interested in following this thread and dwelling on hair-splitting questions of perpetration; it is clear that many groups acted as perpetrators and some acted with orders while others acted without. For the victims, there was little distinction.

told by those who experienced this trauma as children. The events in Vășcăuți and their treatment by historians, illustrate this situation well.

According to the first publication addressing the pogroms of northern Bukovina, on 4 July 1941 the Russians departed from the county of Storojineți (where Vășcăuți is located) and on 5 July the population was given to understand that for twenty-four hours they could do as they would with the Jews.⁴⁴² The book, published in 1945, apparently collected testimonies of survivors, the author documented the pogrom in each village and town, describing the murders with brutal detail and often listing individual names of the victims. Compared to the violence in the surrounding villages, the description of events in Vășcăuți is relatively tame:

In Vășcăuți they pulled all the Jews from their homes and took them to the police station. There they told them they would be killed.

They chose a first group, young men and boys not younger than ten to twelve years.

About forty people. They took them to Anenahora [Anna Mountain] and they executed: *Reichman*, a merchant with his son; *Lebzelter Iosef*, retired, the former secretary of the town hall, with his son, *Bruno*; *Abraham Rincker*, watchmaker with his son of eighteen years, *Heșiu*. And others.

Then they returned to take another group for execution; but in the meantime a major had come and he commanded the executions to be stopped.⁴⁴³

This summary overlaps remarkably with Blanka's narration of the episode, which though also succinct, constitutes the most detailed description I have found of this pogrom. She wrote in her letter to Walter:

Am 22. Junie 1941 überfielen die nazistischen Raubmörderhorden die Sowjetunion. Einige Tage später wurden wir aus dem Hause gejagt ins Gefängnis getrieben und gefoltert. Mein einziger herrlicher Bruder, über dessen geliebtes Gesicht ich keinen Schatten huschen sehen konnte ohne besorgt aufzufahren, wurde getötet. Ebenso unser Vater. Mama und ich entgingen dem Tode im letzten Augenblick durch das Einschreiten eines rumänischen

⁴⁴² Marius Mircu, *Pogromurile din Bucovina și Dorohoi* (Editura Glob, 1945), 24.

⁴⁴³ Mircu, *Pogromurile*, 49.

Maiors der plötzlich inmitten der blutgierigen Bestien in Menschengestalt auftauchte und das Gemetzel unterbrach. Wäre er eine Stunde früher gekommen, wahrscheinlich wären wir alle am Leben geblieben, hätte er noch eine halbe Stunde verspätet wäre keiner von uns mit dem Leben davongekommen. Ich war gefasst zu sterben. Ich war wie ein Stein. Ich fühlte die Schläge nicht mehr. Das einzige was ich empfand war Ekel. Ekel vor dieser Welt in der sich so etwas abspielen konnte und bedauerte nicht sie verlassen zu müssen. Mama und ich schleppten uns nachhause und fanden unser Heim ausgeplündert. Kein einziges Kleidungs- oder Wäschestück, keine Decke, keine Lebensmittel. Dieses Haus ist vor wenigen Wochen noch ein kleines irdisches Paradies gewesen, bewohnt von glücklichen Menschen. Und jetzt – jetzt – es war nicht zu fassen.⁴⁴⁴

I have searched for other testimonies regarding this pogrom and found little. One woman also mentioned about forty men who were killed on the hill.⁴⁴⁵ A man, who was only a boy at the time, described how his father was taken away with the group, but returned some time later, covered in blood. This man, then a boy, believed that the group taken away had not been killed, per se, he said they were tied hand and foot with barbed wire and left to die.⁴⁴⁶ In reports from other pogroms of the region, the killings were carried out gruesomely. According to the testimonies, the perpetrators were almost always the Ukrainian civilians, thus the neighbours, and the killings often involved tools such as scythes or axes.⁴⁴⁷ I have found no information on the manner of death of Josef and Bruno Lebzelter. I would like to believe their death was by gunshot and thus more merciful than some of the other bloody killings, but of this I have no proof and Blanka's remark in the letter to her brother that "Dein Verlust und die Art wie dies geschehen war, war weder zu verschmerzen noch zu vergessen"⁴⁴⁸ give me pause in this regard.

There is, however, another source, a physical memorial, testifying to the Vășcăuți pogrom. The stone was erected outside of Vășcăuți, on the low-sloping hillside where the killings took

⁴⁴⁴ Lieber Walter, 1955.

⁴⁴⁵ Testimony of Neta Neti Shoton née Shikler, item ID. 13248585, Testimonies Dept. of Yad Vashem Archives, Yad Vashem.

⁴⁴⁶ Testimony of Joseph Dagan Gerstenhaber, item ID. 13158879, Testimonies Dept. of Yad Vashem Archives, Yad Vashem.

⁴⁴⁷ See Chava Wiesenfeld's testimony for the pogrom of Stanești de Jos, not far from Vășcăuți. Chana Koffler, "Leaving Home," 1949. Translated by Julie Dawson. Personal collection of Howard Wiesenfeld.

⁴⁴⁸ Mein Bruder, 1955. English: "Your loss and the manner in which it took place could neither be overcome nor forgotten."

place.⁴⁴⁹ It is dated 15 April 1945 and was certainly commissioned and set in place by surviving community members and relatives of the dead. The letters are carved somewhat rudimentarily, in German-inflected Yiddish it reads: “Here lie the bodies of twenty-two Jewish [men] who on 9 [Juli] 1941 were brutally murdered by fascist agents”⁴⁵⁰ and then lists the names.



Figure 46. Memorial stone for Vășcăuți pogrom victims, erected 1945. Source: Shaun Williams, 2011.

I was first taken to the stone in 2011, by the then-mayor of Vashkivtsi and an older man who was known as the local historian. The mayor knew nothing of the stone or the pogrom and was at first skeptical, but the older gentleman assured him of what had taken place and led us directly there.⁴⁵¹ The stone was surrounded by large trees, clearly planted in a circle about the mass grave. I found the trees a particularly moving and reflective gesture. One could see them from afar, their size and

⁴⁴⁹ This is the slope of the “Anna Mountain” (more a hill) still called such today, referred to in the Mircu publication from 1945.

⁴⁵⁰ There is one word which was illegible from my initial photos from 2011, it may be the word “July” but if so, it was placed in front of the word for “nine,” which is unusual placing for the date.

⁴⁵¹ This gentleman, though he walked with a cane, did not in fact seem to be very advanced in years. He was perhaps in his sixties but must have come from a family interested in local history. He also collected Austrian-era postcards and general historical trivia related to the town. I am grateful to Shaun Williams who accompanied me on this initial trip and acted as translator. Unfortunately I did not note down the name of this man nor of the mayor at the time.

strength an enduring sign of commemoration, one that clearly had been undertaken with deliberate thought for the future.



Figure 47. The circle of trees planted at the site where the Vășcăuți pogrom victims are presumed to be buried, the trees encircle the memorial stone. Source: Julie Dawson, 2011.

When I returned to Vashkivtsi in 2024 I sought the stone again. As I walked away from the town, along the dusty road leading up to the top of the “Anna mountain” where a new monastery had been built, I searched the horizon for the circle of trees, which should have been even more striking, after more than ten additional years of growth. But I saw nothing like the crowns of trees in my photographs from 2011 and wandered perplexed around a brambly and narrow strip of earth, covered in high grass, nettles, and young trees, between the road and a ploughed field, which I thought was the approximate place where we had last time found the stone. Eventually I gave up and found myself fretting about the deterioration of memory. Was I searching in the wrong place altogether? That the stone could have been vandalised was conceivable, but where were the trees? As I turned, defeated, to search for a path through the nettle and thorns back down to the road, I suddenly glimpsed the grey stone, barely visible, surrounded by undergrowth and slender trunks and stalks and I understood. The stone remained, but the trees had been felled. Navigating through the underbrush, I reached the stone and looked at the neatly sliced tree stumps, mutely testifying to recent destruction.

The stone itself had been “maintained” by someone with good intent, however they clearly did not read Yiddish. In an effort to make the worn-out letters more legible, they had completely destroyed the original text, tracing the weathered indentions with black paint in a haphazard fashion according to what they imagined to have been there, the text was now filled with nonsensical fragments. “Gimel” became “nun,” (g to n) a “lamed” turned to a “kof” (l to k) and as such, the text was now impossible to decipher, a jumble of letters which made no sense. It was overall a disquieting return: the destruction of the trees, disappearance of the original text, and general unease aligning with the fraught state of war in Ukraine.⁴⁵²

To my knowledge, the names on the stone are the most complete record of those killed that day, having been compiled by survivors in the immediate aftermath of the war. The Chernivtsi state archives hold an additional source referencing the names of those killed—though only if one knows the context and the names of several who were murdered, as I did. In the Vășcăuți police files at the Chernivtsi archives there is a list of Jews.⁴⁵³ The list has no title, nor is there a date, but all the paperwork within the folder date from 1941 to 1942 and the list is clearly of the Jewish residents. The names are arranged according to family, with designations of “head,” “wife,” “widow,” “son,” and “daughter.” It records the birthplace and birth year of each person (inaccurately in at least some instances, the birthdates of both Josef and Anna Lebzelter are off by several years). Pencilled in small, clear letters next to seventeen of these names, including Josef and Bruno Lebzelter, is the Romanian abbreviation for “disappeared.” All but four of these seventeen names also appear on the memorial stone. The memorial stone itself has four names entirely eroded such that no letters are legible whatsoever. The stone also contains an additional four names which are not marked as “disappeared” on the list. By combining the lists, twenty-two names appear, the same number stated in the inscription on the stone itself. The following list is alphabetical.

⁴⁵² The repercussions of the war were everywhere, including in Vashkivtsi, where a hospital for amputees had been established beside the Jewish cemetery. Thus the majority of men on the streets had lost one or even both legs.

⁴⁵³ [untitled, no date], Вашківецький комісаріат поліції Сторожинецького повіту, м. Вашківці Comisariatul de poliție Vașcăuți, județul Storojineț fond 831, op. 2, folder 2, SACO.

Table 11. Victims of the pogrom in Vășcăuți, July 1941

Key: * indicates individual noted as “disappeared” in Vășcăuți police registry book of Jews ♦ indicates name on memorial stone ♠ indicates has page of testimony in Yad Vashem • indicates appears in Mircea Mircea’s 1945 book on Bukovina pogroms ⁴⁵⁴ For simplicity’s sake, I have using standardised German spelling for the names, ie, Hersch and not Herș	
Avram, Chaim*♦	Bloch, Strul*♦
Erdreich, Jabob*	Etelberg/Ensenberg (?), A.*♦
Factor, Benzion*	Gengler/Genkler♦♠
Gerstenhaber, Wolf*♦	Izraeli, Azriel*♦
Krumholz, H.*♦	Lair, Hersch*
Lair, Schlomo*	Lebzelter, Bruno*♦♦
Lebzelter, Josef*♦	Rinker, Abraham*♦♦
Rinker, Haim*♦	Rinker, Hersch♦♦
Reichmann, Leib*♦♦ (and son•)	Singer, Josef*♦
Singer, Solomon*♦	Srulowitz, Hersch*♦
Wassermann, D.*♦	Zloczover, Herman*♦

The list created by the Vășcăuți police demonstrates that the Romanian police personnel who returned in July 1941 were well informed about who had been murdered. But the perpetrators of these murders were not named by Blanka, nor is it clear from the other sparse sources. The date of 9 July 1941, as recorded on the stone, is somewhat of an anomaly for the region, many other reports of pogroms in the area occurred several days earlier.⁴⁵⁵ But Blanka reconfirmed this date, recording on 9 July 1958:

⁴⁵⁴ Mircea, *Pogromurile*, 49.

⁴⁵⁵ Simon Giessbühler provides an overview of the available sources regarding these pogroms in *Blutiger Juli* but in general an exhaustive scholarly analysis of the violence, which for the most part was carried out by the civilian population, is missing. Indicative of the unusual void of information regarding Vășcăuți, to report on this pogrom Giessbühler quoted a present day descendent of a family which had emigrated already prior to the war. The descendent stated that “many Jewish men and boys were murdered,” which is true, but the lack of detailed knowledge surrounding the incident is startling. Giessbühler, *Blutiger Juli*, 65. For a day-by-day chronicle of the events in Czernowitz see Dr. Nathan Getzler, “Tagebuchblätter aus Czernowitz und Transnistrien,” in *Geschichte der Juden in der Bukowina* vol II, ed. Gold, 53-56. The worst of the violence took place there from 1 to 14 July, and especially around the 9th. Regarding the Bukovina and Bessarabian pogroms see also the aforementioned Solonari, “Patterns of Violence.”

*Habe das Tagebuch aufgeschlagen um von einem neuen Misgeschick zu schreiben, doch als ich das Datum niederschrieb fuhr ich zusammen und ein wahnsinniger Schmerz überflutete mich. An diesem Tage vor siebzehn Jahren wurden von hitleristischen Banditen mein einziger über alles geliebtes Bruder und mein Vater getötet. – Jetzt erinnere ich mich auch dass ich diese Nacht meinen Bruder geträumt habe. Er war auf der Flucht vor seinen Verfolgern und sagte mir ich solle ihn verstecken. Ich schickte ihn auf den Boden; ich sagte mir, wie kann ich ruhig in meinem Bett schlafen wenn ich weiss wie schwer mein Bruder leidet.*⁴⁵⁶

From witness testimonies, it appears that primary perpetrators of the rural pogroms were the Ukrainian civilians, this is in contrast to Czernowitz where, for example, the German and Romanian armies also played a role in torturing and killing Jewish residents.⁴⁵⁷ It is also in contrast to the similar pogroms in the borderland of Bessarabia and around Iași, where the non-Jewish population was Romanian. The handful of oral histories regarding Vășcăuți also indicate that the Ukrainian neighbours instigated and carried out the murders.⁴⁵⁸ Blanka herself is vague, though she explicitly refers, in the letter quoted above, to the social discomfort she and her mother experienced upon their return to Vășcăuți: “Tag und Nacht geplagt von qualvollsten Erinnerungen

⁴⁵⁶ 9 July 1958. Blanka was often visited by nightmares and was awoken, after the death of her mother, by her own screams multiple times.

⁴⁵⁷ This was also the case in parts of Galicia, these pogroms have come under scholarly scrutiny more often. See Kai Struve, “Anti-Jewish Violence in the Summer of 1941 in Eastern Galicia and Beyond,” in *Romania and the Holocaust*, ed. Giessbühler, 89-113 and Witold Mędykowski, “The Pogroms in the Former Soviet Occupation Areas in the Summer of 1941,” in *Romania and the Holocaust*, ed. Giessbühler, 115-129. See again Solonari, “Patterns of Violence,” especially 61-65 on pogroms carried out in villages near Vășcăuți by Ukrainian nationalists. On anti-Jewish sentiment in Ukrainian Nationalists also from the interwar period see Karel C. Berkhoff, and Marco Carynnyk, “The Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists and its Attitude Toward Germans and Jews: Iaroslav Stets'Ko's 1941 *Zhyttiepys*,” *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 23, no. 3 (1999): 149.

⁴⁵⁸ Testimony of Filip Shraga Schwarz, item ID. 13182601, Testimonies Dept. of Yad Vashem Archives, Yad Vashem. Schwarz references gentile neighbours with axes and Ukrainian murderers, though he did not witness the killings. Like those who gave the two oral histories cited above, he was also a child at the time. Note that there are several oral histories in Hebrew at Yad Vashem touching in some way upon Vășcăuți, most of these are given by individuals who were children at the time. Also, the nature of the pogrom in Vășcăuți seems to have differed from other localities—almost all testimonies cite the gathering together of the Jews in one place and then the removal of a first group of men. The subsequent killings were carried out, therefore, away from the rest of the community (many other incidents in the region took place in central public space, with Ukrainians and Jews witnessing the violence). This may explain the lack of detail regarding the individual murders. An exhaustive survey of all oral histories related to Vășcăuți created (most are in Hebrew and some in Russian) by the various oral history institutions was outside the scope of this project.

und untern Menschen die nicht schuldlos an unserer Tragödie.”⁴⁵⁹ The most incriminating source comes again from the Vășcăuți police files. In an anonymous letter dated September 1941, the anonymous writer reported a conversation of several Ukrainian nationalists in which they asserted “we should not have accepted it when the major disarmed us, we should have killed the major the same way we killed the kikes.”⁴⁶⁰ The conversation referred to weapons which they wanted returned to them, possibly indicating firearms rather than rudimentary farming tools.

The killings of the men in their family was devastating, Blanka time and again places the locus of her misery and grief and that of her mother’s on these acts of murder. For Blanka this was the first of several events of massive trauma which she and her mother would experience during World War II. For Anna, this was most likely an inconceivable revisitation of violence similar to what she had witnessed in the First World War.

Just as historiography has glossed over the northern Bukovina pogroms and Vășcăuți in particular, so is it also unclear what exactly happened to the survivors from July 1941 to October 1941, when they, along with most of the Jews of Bukovina, were deported to Transnistria. According to Hugo Gold’s chronicler, who did not mention the pogrom at all, the Jews were put into a local ghetto.⁴⁶¹ This overlaps with several testimonies, though the police files do not make the situation clear. In fact throughout the months from July to October 1941 and even later, there are numerous documents involving Jewish residents: asking for permission to settle in Vășcăuți, asking for permission to join family elsewhere, lists of Jewish craftsmen, and so forth.

In whatever liminal state the Jewish residents found themselves for this period, which nevertheless lasted three to four months, by October the Romanian government had finalised its plans for “cleansing” the countryside of Jews. The only explicit reference to a local camp in Vășcăuți and its dissolvment is in the testimony of the Czernowitz mayor, Dr. Traian Popovici, who recorded “Am 9. Oktober 1941 wurde in Czernowitz bekannt, dass die Juden aus dem Norden der Bukowina, die in den Lagern von Storozynetz, Wiznitz, Waschkoutz und Luzan konzentriert

⁴⁵⁹ English: “Plagued day and night by the most tortuous memories and among people who were not innocent in our tragedy.”

⁴⁶⁰ “Високоважний пан Гурук” (Sept. 1941), Вашківецький комісаріат поліції Сторожинецького повіту, м. Вашківці Comisariatul de poliție Vășcăuți, județul Storozineț fond 831, op. 2, folder 4, p. 341-343, SACO. My thanks go to Asya Fruman for deciphering, transcribing, and translating this letter. The letter was also translated by the Romanian police.

⁴⁶¹ Leschem-Lifschitz, „Waschkoutz,” in *Geschichte der Juden in der Bukowina* vol. II, ed. Gold, 120.

gewesen waren, ausgehoben und in die Richtung zum Dniester getrieben wurden.“⁴⁶² In Blanka’s words: “Wir wurden hinaus gejagt ins Freie und samt der übrigen Volksgenossen in Todeslager getrieben.”⁴⁶³

Transnistria

From this point on, I have found no archival material related to the fate of the Lebzelter women during World War II. The only document testifying to their presence in the Moghilev-Podolsky ghetto are the ghetto identity cards which Blanka herself carefully kept and slipped into her diaries, together with the letters to the dead. Without these cards, it would be impossible to know where in Transnistria the women had been sent. Because I can only speculate as to their life for the next three years, in this section I depart from trying to follow the women as individuals and instead describe the basic contours of deportation from northern Bukovina to Moghilev and the structure of life in the ghetto. I will conclude the chapter by citing the handful of facts that I have collected related to the family and see how they might be woven into what we know of Moghilev.

Though Transnistria has been addressed by scholars from multiple perspectives, a microhistorical approach has still seldom been taken.⁴⁶⁴ Due to the nature of my interest, however, I am keen to examine the experience on an intimate and individual level and moreover to probe the specificity of the Moghilev-Podolsky ghetto. Thus, I worked here primarily with oral history testimonies and I chose to organise this section around one man’s testimony—a man of Blanka’s approximate age and social class—though I also quote from and draw on other testimonies, in addition to incorporating other primary sources, such as memoirs or diaries, and secondary sources.⁴⁶⁵

My objective here was not to execute an overarching analysis that, for example, compares Moghilev with smaller ghettos that have been examined in scholarly publications. Neither do I, in

⁴⁶² Traian Popovici, „Mein Bekenntnis“ in *Geschichte der Juden in der Bukowina*, vol. II, ed. Gold, 63. English: “On 9 October 1941 it became known in Czernowitz that the Jews from the northern part of Bukovina, who were concentrated in the camps of Storozynez, Wiznitz, Waschkoutz, and Luzan, had been removed and driven in the direction of the Dniester.”

⁴⁶³ Lieber Walter, May 1955. English: “We were driven out into the open and chased with the rest of our people to the death camps.”

⁴⁶⁴ For an overview of literature on Transnistria, please see the section “State of Research” in Chapter 1.

⁴⁶⁵ Portions of this section article were used in my related “Critical Editions” essay for the Fortunoff Archive: Dawson, “Introduction to the Testimony of Norbert Nadler,” as well as in Dawson, “Survival in the Ghetto of Moghilev-Podolsky.” I would like to thank the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, Yale University, and the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for a fellowship during which I could focus on this subject.

the context of this chapter section, aim to explore exhaustively the spectrum of ghetto life in Moghilev, which is indeed a matter worthy of a book-length project. Instead, I seek to plumb the experience of one individual as they encountered the primary themes of ghetto life. The central contours of disease, hunger, starvation, exposure, and destitution have been touched upon by every scholar writing on Transnistria and its ghettos. This chapter aims to step away from the blurred image afforded by the general and to chronicle the fine-grained experience of an individual. Tracing the trajectory of one individual during a period of exceptional duress may more readily grant insight into concepts of survival, trauma, and agency, and offer us a clearer picture of the world in which Blanka found herself.

I chose to organise my discussion of the Moghilev-Podolsky ghetto around the experience of one individual, Norbert Nadler, leaning on his oral history testimony to narrate key aspects of ghetto experience. I selected Nadler due to several overlapping biographical traits with Blanka: he was a young adult at the time, no longer a child, nor yet a parent, from an educated, Bukovina background.⁴⁶⁶ Nevertheless, there are several crucial differences which must be kept in mind. First, Nadler came from Czernowitz, not a small town, thus his social education, network size, and probably his language skills would have differed from Blanka. Secondly and of great significance, he was a man. This gender aspect is, of course, an absolutely fundamental difference. Initially I intended to follow a woman's testimony, yet the circumstances described in the testimonies of women held by the Fortunoff Archive (my primary source of oral histories for this section) differed from Blanka's in ways in which I felt were even more significant: all of the female interviewees were either children in the ghetto (often orphaned) or mothers who therefore suffered the death or near-death of their own children. Though I listened to these narratives and incorporate their voices at various points in time below, I found that the role of mother within a ghetto brought with it an exceptional array of concerns and priorities rarely applicable to non-mothers. Thus, while acknowledging the significant discrepancy in experience that gender entails, in the end I selected to follow the experience of a young man, who, like Blanka, was accompanied by his parents but had no offspring or partner of his own. He was a native German speaker, middle class, from a solidly rooted Czernowitz family. As she did, Nadler moved to Romania after the war and

⁴⁶⁶ The following testimonies from the Fortunoff Video Archive were drawn upon: Leah K., HVT 4166; Edgar H., HVT 3726; Elsie B., HVT 1228; Mikel C., HVT 1204; Norbert N., HVT 0536; Dora and Salo R., HVT 0012; Shmuel S. and Dora R., HVT 0013; Michael S., HVT 1749; Pearl T., HVT 2639; Yuri R., HVT 3294; Zvi O., HVT 3767; Ernest E., HVT 1499; Max K., HVT 1964; Dori L., HVT 0593; Gusta K., HVT 1608; Olga F., HVT 2602.

emigrated in the early 1960s. It is this man’s testimony that I use as a framework, and his narrative thread I follow below.⁴⁶⁷ I begin each thematic section with an excerpt from Nadler’s interview and a second quotation from another testimonial source; the quotations are followed by contextualisation.⁴⁶⁸

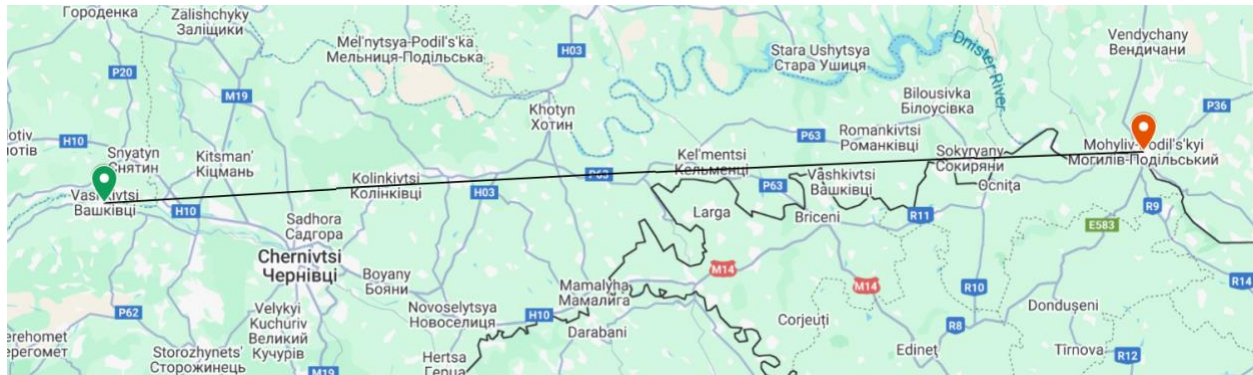


Figure 48. Map of Moghilev in relation to Vășcăuți. Boian (Boyany), where cousin Berta was living, is just southeast of Czernowitz. Source: See footnote 468.

Ataki, Gateway to Moghilev

And then, they didn't bring us-- in Ataki they didn't bring us to the railroad station. They stopped the train in the middle of a field. It was a rainy day. And who has ever been in Bessarabia know[s] what the mud in Bessarabia is. We were in mud until here [gesturing]. And here, you're supposed to get out. You get out, you get out into mud to-- to your knees.

Norbert Nadler⁴⁶⁹

In the first night in Ataki I saw what human misery means. I saw people who no longer had a human face. [...] In the night I saw how a person goes mad. The struggles of the brain to save its own mechanism, the spasms of the mind. In the night the pharmacist Garai went mad. [...] The poor man could not become accustomed to the thoughts that he will no longer have a house, that he will never again be a pharmacist, and that he, who had always been a dignified citizen, was thrown out and expelled, in the filth, with all the Jews.

Miriam Korber⁴⁷⁰

Ataki was a small, unassuming Bessarabian town on the Romanian side of the Dniester River, across from the larger city of Moghilev-Podolsky and the first station for most who had been

⁴⁶⁷ For the full contextualisation of Nadler’s testimony, beginning with his youth in Czernowitz, see Dawson, “Introduction to the Testimony of Norbert Nadler.”

⁴⁶⁸ Map in Figure 48 by Julie Dawson, created using Google Maps, Map data ©2024 GeoBasis-DE/BKG (©2009).

⁴⁶⁹ Norbert N., HVT 536, [00:21:34.42], FVA.

⁴⁷⁰ Korber, *Deportiert*, 55-56.

deported from Czernowitz and other villages of northern Bukovina.⁴⁷¹ Located today in the Republic of Moldova, Ataki (Otaci today) is about 150 km or 95 miles as the crow flies, due east from Czernowitz, while Moghilev itself is about 200 km east of Vășcăuți. The arrival in Ataki and transport over the Dniester River looms large in the memories of survivors. Here, at the latest, all became aware of the gravity of their situation.⁴⁷² If overt violence had been in some way evaded thus far, it was now impossible to bypass, whether this entailed physical beatings by Romanian soldiers or soldiers and peasants stealing belongings with impunity.

It was a brisk, wet autumn. The rain and mud ingrained themselves into the memory of many survivors. Ella Warzmann recalled, “It rained very, very hard that day. [...] We walked and the rain poured and the Romanians beat [us].”⁴⁷³ Mirjam Bercovici-Korber, deported from the southern Bukovina town of Câmpulung Moldovenesc, also recalled the “hideous” weather and trudging through the “dung and muck,” during her several days in Ataki in early November 1941. The fundamental shift in realities was immediate, foreshadowing what was to come: “In Ataki we saw that hunger is not a disgrace,”⁴⁷⁴ Korber recorded.

Whether they remained in Ataki for days or continued immediately, crossing the river by ferry was inevitable.⁴⁷⁵ Nadler’s telling of the ferry crossing is somewhat ambivalent, but many recall the crossing as a particularly traumatic experience, with children separated from parents, people shoved off and left to drown or even shot. In her narrative of the events of the war,

⁴⁷¹ Blanka and her mother probably arrived here in overcrowded train cars sometime in October 1941. They may or may not have been together with others from the Vășcăuți community, the deportations were not necessarily carefully organised and by this time, Jews from the surrounding villages had also been forced into a ghetto in Vășcăuți. This is mentioned in various testimonies and Vășcăuți police files contain a list of over 550 Jews from the surrounding villages held in “Lagarul Cpt. Grigorescu” (Captain Grigorescu Camp). Вашківський комісаріат поліції, м. Вашківці Сторожинецького повіту (Comisariatul de poliție, Vășcăuți), fond 831, inv. 2, folder 2, SACO. Regarding the arrival from Vășcăuți, testimonies contradict one another. Joseph Dagan Gerstenhaber asserts they took a train, other testimonies mention walking. Testimony of Joseph Dagan Gerstenhaber, item ID. 13158879, Testimonies Dept. of Yad Vashem Archives, Yad Vashem.

⁴⁷² Those who were deported from Czernowitz had not necessarily been through what the rural Jewish communities had already survived and a good number of Czernowitz testimonies report on family members or friends who boarded the trains willingly, hoping that life might be better in Transnistria, as the rapidly erected ghetto in Czernowitz was horribly overcrowded. For more on this see my Critical Edition essay on Nadler’s testimony, section “Ghetto and Deportation.”

⁴⁷³ Coldewey,, „Jüdische Deportierte aus Czernowitz in Transnistrien. Zwei Augenzeugenberichte“ in *An der Zeiten Ränder*, ed. Cécile Cordon and Helmut Kusdat, 212.

⁴⁷⁴ Korber, *Deportiert*, 56.

⁴⁷⁵ The earliest deportees report crossing via a bridge, which was destroyed at some point in time. Most recall traumatic crossing on ferries or barges. The bridge was rebuilt by Jewish forced labourers during the war. One labourer reported that following completion near the end of 1942, the bridge was destroyed once more by large chunks of ice in the river; he called this “providence,” since it meant that workers were required yet again. Earnest E., HVT 1499, FVA.

experienced as a girl of eight years and written soon after arriving in Israel in 1949, Chana Koffler (from a village only fifteen km from Vășcăuți) recorded such a violent arrival in Ataki:

Early in the morning we were driven to the [river] port. As we got to the Nester [Dniester] three hundred Storozynetz⁴⁷⁶ people were thrown [into the water] before us. I noticed this and began to scream, “I want to live still.” Suddenly an order came that the rest of us should be transported over to Ukraine. Meanwhile we were left to stand in the mud. It was raining, it was cold, it was not possible to even pull a foot out of the ground. We stood this way until the evening. During the night we were loaded onto the barge like pieces of cattle. Many fell off and drowned, and so we arrived in the [river] port city of Ukraine, Mogilev.⁴⁷⁷

Miriam Korber was more fortunate and crossed without incident. After having reached the Dniester via horse-drawn wagon, “we all crossed with a boat,” she wrote. Later, from the other side, she realised their luck: “The nights in Moghilev were dreadful. We lived beside the Dniester and every day we saw people crossing the river. But they did not cross as we had. Beaten, driven, ransacked, they had to cross during the night. What wailing and weeping, the crying of the mothers and that of children who had lost their families, this choir increased our distress.”⁴⁷⁸

⁴⁷⁶ From the town of Storojineți / Storojinetz, forty km from Vășcăuți.

⁴⁷⁷ Chana Koffler, “Leaving Home,” 1949. Translated by Julie Dawson. Personal collection of Howard Wiesenfeld.

⁴⁷⁸ Mirjam Korber, *Deportiert*, 58. See also Coldwey et al eds., “Das Durchgangslager Ataki,” in *Zwischen Pruth und Jordan*, 52-53. The map pictured in Figure 49 is titled „Deutsche Heereskarte M35-128D Mogilew-Podolsk,” published by OKH/Gen St dH, Chef des Kriegskarten- und Vermessungswesens, 1944. It is accessible via the Polish website Mapster <http://igrek.amzp.pl/1761474> retrieved on 18 March 2025.



Figure 49. The town of Moghilev-Podolsky with Ataki (Otaci) on the west side of the Dniester River, 1944. Source: See footnote 478.

Moghilev-Podolsky: Transnistrian Transit Point

We come over there.⁴⁷⁹ In the meantime, it [had] become dark and it's evening. We didn't have where to go. And we saw some ruins. So we went into this [sic] ruins. It was an old factory. I do not know what kind of factory. We found one room. And in this room there were already some fifteen people. So we went in, another ten.

Norbert Nadler⁴⁸⁰

In Moghilev we met an old acquaintance, who took us in. The other people who had been deported with us and were unable to find a room had to continue on, but we could stay in Moghilev and that is why we survived.

Felicia Gininger⁴⁸¹

The town of Moghilev-Podolsky was originally designated as a transit point for the Jewish deportees, but due to poor organisation and the sheer number of deportees, it came to harbour the largest ghetto in Transnistria. Of the prewar Jewish population of almost 9,000, between 3,000 and 4,000 remained in the town during the war.⁴⁸² An estimated 50,000 to 60,000 deportees passed

⁴⁷⁹ Nadler is referring to the fact that the deportees had crossed the Dniester River.

⁴⁸⁰ Norbert N., HVT 536.

⁴⁸¹ Felicia Gininger, "'Goethe kann man nicht verbrennen,' sagte Mama," in Coldewey, "Czernowitz is gewesen," 26.

⁴⁸² Coldewey, *Zwischen Pruth und Jordan*, 56–57; "Mogilev-Podolskiy," in *The Yad Vashem Encyclopedia of the Ghettos during the Holocaust* Vol. 1, ed. Guy Miron and Shlomit Shulhani, (Yad Vashem, 2009).

through or remained in the town between October 1941 and February 1942. Between 15,000 and 20,000 Jews were housed there at various points, during a 1943 census, 12,588 Jews were registered.⁴⁸³

Moghilev had seen battle and part of the city was destroyed. There had also been recent flooding. The ravaged town appeared as a sodden ruin, dank and crumbling: “Moghilev had been through a large flood. The houses were all wet, many were without windows and doors,” recalled one survivor.⁴⁸⁴ As Nadler described in the quote above, the first order of business was to find a place to sleep. Initially the deportees could reside wherever they found shelter. Survivors describe sleeping in the ruins of barracks,⁴⁸⁵ a gymnasium,⁴⁸⁶ schools,⁴⁸⁷ cellars,⁴⁸⁸ a cinema,⁴⁸⁹ and the town hall.⁴⁹⁰

Many of the deportees were—at first—unsure whether it was better to try to remain in the town or to continue eastwards. Several survivors describe leaving Moghilev deliberately, while others did all they could to evade further deportation.⁴⁹¹ Over the course of the war, if those deported east managed to escape, they frequently attempted to make their way back to Moghilev, seeking what many hoped would be a degree of anonymity, and thus security, amongst a larger population.⁴⁹² Nadler, who was deported from Czernowitz together with his parents and siblings,

Yad Vashem Encyclopedia, 493; “Moghilev-Podolsk,” in *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos*. Vol. 3, *Camps and Ghettos under European Regimes Aligned with Nazi Germany*, ed. Geoffrey P. Megargee, Joseph R. White, and Mel Hecker (Indiana University Press, 2018), 715. In 1939, the Jewish population was 8,703, or forty percent of the total population. Yehuda Slutsky and Shmuel Spector, “Mogilev-Podolski,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., eds. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik (Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 14:418.

⁴⁸³ Due to continual deaths, new arrivals, and regular deportations further east, population numbers were in constant flux, though numbers appeared to have hovered around 15,000 for most of the war. “Mogilev-Podolskiy,” *Yad Vashem Encyclopedia*, 493, and “Moghilev-Podolsk,” *USHMM Encyclopedia*, 715.

⁴⁸⁴ Coldewey et al., *Zwischen Pruth und Jordan*, 57.

⁴⁸⁵ Jewgenija Finkel and Markus Winkler, eds., *Juden aus Czernowitz: Ghetto, Deportation, Vernichtung 1941–1944: Überlebende berichten*, trans. by Kateryna Stetsevykh (Hartung-Gorre, 2004), 42; Yosef Govrin, *In the Shadow of Destruction: Recollections of Transnistria and Illegal Immigration to Eretz Israel 1941–1947* (Vallentine Mitchell, 2007), 39.

⁴⁸⁶ Coldewey et al., “Czernowitz is gewesen,” 61.

⁴⁸⁷ Edgar H., HVT 3726, FVA.

⁴⁸⁸ Coldewey et al. (eds.), “Czernowitz is gewesen,” 25.

⁴⁸⁹ Ernest E., HVT 1499, FVA.

⁴⁹⁰ Coldewey et al., *Zwischen Pruth und Jordan*, 59.

⁴⁹¹ Miriam Korber records that, remarkably, her family paid Germans to transport them on trucks farther east, see Korber, *Deportiert*, 58–59. In contrast, Yosef Govrin describes simply stepping out of the convoy line, together with his mother and aunts, and slipping into a nearby carpentry shop, in order to remain. Govrin, *In the Shadow of Destruction*, 40. See also Coldewey et al., *Zwischen Pruth und Jordan*, 57–58.

⁴⁹² One woman, a girl at the time, escaped from multiple Transnistrian death camps further east and returned each time to Moghilev. Initially she went to her aunt, and then to a Ukrainian woman outside the ghetto who cared for her. Leah K., HVT 4166, FVA.

determined to stay. The group quickly recognised the priorities for survival: shelter and employment, which should, in turn, ensure food.



Figure 50. Map of the Moghilev-Podolsky ghetto. Source: See footnote 493.

Work and Social Status

So my brother-in-law had the first idea, say, OK, I can do any work you want. So there was a tool and die factory. [He] said, yeah, I worked always in tool and die. So he went over there. Start[ed] working in tool and die, start[ed] learning. The factory was – was managed by Jews, Jewish engineers from Romania, already which was over there. And they were trying to teach you. You get at least a meal a day. And the meal was so big that you can take a little bit home for – to have another half meal at home. And he has the authority [authorisation] to stay because he was working.

Norbert Nadler⁴⁹³

I thought with the time, I could give lessons for which I could get a few potatoes or a few marks and maybe even a little room.

⁴⁹³ Norbert N., HVT 536, FVA. The ghetto map in Figure 50 hangs in the Museum for the Victims of National-Socialism in Moghilev-Podolsky, which I was unable to visit in the course of my research as a result of the corona pandemic and the Russian war against Ukraine. I am grateful to Dr. Markus Winkler for sending me this photo, unfortunately no one is aware of a higher-resolution photo or other map of the ghetto. Dr. Winkler took the photo in 2019.

Nadler's brother-in-law probably worked at what is known as "Jägendorf's foundry" (*turnatoria* in Romanian). Siegfried Jägendorf was an engineer originally from Rădăuți, he was selected as a leader within the ghetto and had connections to the Romanian authorities.⁴⁹⁵ He immediately set to work convincing the authorities of the need for a broken-down foundry to be repaired and secured workers for the undertaking. Precise numbers of those saved through the foundry are hard to come by. Lists of personnel from 1943 and 1944 include around six hundred workers, but because of the benefits of employment in the factory—both official in the form of residence permits and unofficial in terms of food, and the implications thereof extending to family members—the number of people who survived due to the enterprise was certainly many times higher than the number of those with permits alone.⁴⁹⁶ Furthermore, there is some indication that there was even room for manoeuvre to "adopt" people onto employment permits.⁴⁹⁷

Jägendorf was not viewed positively by everyone and he remains a controversial figure, some seeing in him a dandy who worked to save first and foremost those closest to him and ensure himself material comforts, others seeing a man who fought to save as many lives as possible under harrowing conditions.⁴⁹⁸ It remains undisputed that many lives were indeed saved as a result of the foundry's operation. Nevertheless, even if one assumes that the foundry saved between four to five times above the number of six hundred official workers, this amounts to between two to three thousand people. In a ghetto of around fifteen thousand people, this is a significant portion of the population, yet hardly a majority. Moreover, those employed were more likely to be educated,

⁴⁹⁴ Lydia Harnik, "Man liebte weiterhin Österreich," in "*Czernowitz is gewesen*," ed. Coldewey et al., 41.

⁴⁹⁵ I discuss community leaders later in this chapter. For Jägendorf's own account of the ghetto experience, see Jägendorf, *Jägendorf's Foundry*.

⁴⁹⁶ The list from 1944 includes the number (and names) of dependents alongside the workers, often listing four to six dependents and several times up to seven. "List of the Jewish laborers in the Turnatoria factory in Mogilev" (1944), and "List of the Jewish laborers in the Turnatoria factory in Mogilev" (1943), Archive of Siegfried Jaegendorf, President of the Jewish Coordinating Committee for the Deported Jews in Transnistria, 1941–1967, P.9, Yad Vashem Archives.

⁴⁹⁷ Govrin writes: "At a certain stage our names were added to those [of] one of the foundry's workers, an engineer by profession, and his family. This afforded us some protection, but we did not rely on it too much." Govrin, *In the Shadow of Destruction*, 46.

⁴⁹⁸ In addition to his memoir, see also the collection at Yad Vashem: Archive of Siegfried Jaegendorf, President of the Jewish Coordinating Committee for the Deported Jews in Transnistria, 1941–1967, P.9. The author whose novel is quoted at the beginning of this chapter, Edgar Hilsenrath, also found work in Jägendorf's foundry. Edgar H., HVT 3726, FVA. Hilsenrath's name appears on the lists in Yad Vashem. Hilsenrath's more than six-hundred-page novel, *Nacht*, focuses on the lives of the most impoverished in the Moghilev ghetto. In his oral history Hilsenrath himself acknowledged that he was of the privileged class due to his employment. Hilsenrath, *Nacht*.

technically trained, or with personal connections to the well-off leadership, that is, they were already of the privileged class. What of the less fortunate?

Indeed, as Nadler's and other testimonies reveal, there was stark social stratification within the ghetto.⁴⁹⁹ Nadler explains: "[...] the Jews have just right [a]way been divided. The Jews from the occupied territory, from—from Moghilev, they were the worst. The Jews from Bessarabia, they were the second worst. And we, from the Bukovina, which came in, we were considered a little bit better."

In an article on ghetto leadership, Gali Mir-Tibon discusses this hierarchy at length.⁵⁰⁰ The divisions fell primarily along the lines of national borders. Those Jews who were living in the Soviet Union at the time of the Romanian occupation (i.e. those from Moghilev) were thus at the bottom. Above them were those from Bessarabia and northern Bukovina, who had lived for one year under the Soviet regime. At the top were those Jews from southern Bukovina and Dorohoi who had, since 1918, lived within the Romanian state. Those who had had longer affiliation with the Soviets were suspected by the authorities of espionage, while those from southern Bukovina and Dorohoi were considered the "most" Romanian.

Socioeconomic status—which both resulted from and mirrored these shifting national boundaries—also played a role. Those from southern Bukovina, who had not experienced life under communism, arrived better off financially, with both valuables and cash, thus they were in a position to offer attractive bribes. Those from Moghilev, who had survived fighting, occupation, and *Einsatztruppen*, had nothing left with which to barter; probably they had little of value in the first place, having been part of the Soviet state already for twenty years.⁵⁰¹ Those from Bessarabia and rural northern Bukovina also arrived with few possessions, having already been dispossessed in the summer of 1941, as Blanka's family was. Many or most arrived already frail due to months spent in ghettos in northern Bukovina and marches on foot over the summer and early fall.⁵⁰²

⁴⁹⁹ Social stratification in Transnistrian ghettos is examined in several articles. See especially Ofer, *Life in the Ghettos*, 261–269.

⁵⁰⁰ Gali Mir-Tibon, "Am I My Brother's Keeper?," 127–146, esp. 137.

⁵⁰¹ For an account of the fate of those Jews who were the original residents of the region of Transnistria, see Veidlinger, *In the Shadow of the Shtetl*, 186–231. Some of their fates overlapped with the deportees from Bukovina. For testimonies from the Soviet Jews of Transnistria, see also Boris Zabarko, "Nur wir haben überlebt": *Holocaust in der Ukraine: Zeugnisse und Dokumente*, trans. Margrit Hegge, Renate Meier, and Ruth Vogt, ed. Werner Müller and Margret Müller (Weilerswist-Metternich Dittrich, 2016).

⁵⁰² The Romanians began deportations from Bessarabia in the summer of 1941, often shuttling hundreds of people back and forth between the Prut and Dniester rivers. Many thousands died of starvation, exposure, and disease. Those that survived were eventually brought to Moghilev for further transport east; some remained. There are conflicting

Czernowitzers, in contrast, though from northern Bukovina, generally arrived by train and with certain possessions intact. More so than the rural inhabitants, urban Czernowitzers also tended to be of the educated, middle class and brought with them small valuables, such as jewellery. The original Jewish residents of Moghilev did, however, have one point in their favour—shelter. Without shelter, one was not only exposed to the elements but also in grave danger of being rounded up in the regular “raids” and sent further east.

Disease and Starvation

Now the first winter you got the typhus. [...] And I would say between the hunger and the typhus, probably half of the population was exterminated. You were going out in the morning. It was cold. It was bitter cold. We didn't have anything [with which] to heat. We were seeing dead people on the street, in sitting position, in lying position, in closed position. And people were going, taking them out on the – getting them to the cemeteries. They couldn't even dig graves at that time, so they just covered them up with snow.

Norbert Nadler⁵⁰³

I came to Moghilev and will not forget the scenes of the people who were killed. They were sitting in front of their houses, mothers holding children, sitting, and they were all dead. Death became part of my life.

Leah K.⁵⁰⁴

When Nadler first arrived in the autumn of 1941, Jews could and did live throughout the ruined city. A closed ghetto was only established in the summer of 1942, when the Jewish deportees were forced to live in established and restricted areas, cordoned off with barbed wire.⁵⁰⁵ With the closing

accounts of the arrival of those from northern Bukovinian villages: some arrived in the summer having undergone the same experience as the Bessarabians of marching on foot from place to place, while others seem to have been deported from Czernowitz shortly before (or with?) the Czernowitzers. Unfortunately, there are no precise studies about the deportees from northern Bukovinian towns, rather accounts conflict. This confusion only demonstrates how much work is still to be done to understand even basic details about the Romanian Holocaust.

⁵⁰³ Norbert N., HVT 536, FVA.

⁵⁰⁴ Leah K., HVT 4166, FVA.

⁵⁰⁵ Mir-Tibon, “Am I My Brother’s Keeper?,” 131. Despite the fact that technically the “ghetto” was only established partway through the war, I use the term “Moghilev ghetto” both for simplicity’s sake and because it is not clear to what degree the majority of the deportees palpably distinguished the administrative change. For most of the deportees, dreadfully impoverished, the entire period upon arrival until liberation was experienced as a period of ruthless restrictions regarding residence, whether due to a lack of funds, the ravaged state of existing shelters, or official sanctions. For more on the establishment of official ghettos, see Mir-Tibon, “Am I My Brother’s Keeper?,” 129–130. The entry in the *Yad Vashem Encyclopaedia* states that when the ghetto was officially established in 1942, the Jews were made to build a wall from rubble around the borders, topping this with barbed wire. “Mogilev-Podolskiy,” *Yad Vashem Encyclopedia*, 495. Lebzelter refers to the walls in her description of the ghetto’s liberation: “We saw it. I stood on a low rise and saw the Soviet tanks tear down the camp walls confining us, we were free, there were no more barriers between Jew and Christian, between man and man.” *Mein Bruder*, 1955.

of the ghetto, the already straitened conditions became even more dire. As Nadler recalled: “so we were standing in the ghetto and they’re not letting you out, but not letting in anything in the ghetto—no food, no clothing, nothing. So people—it was not—it was not an extermination camp. It was a starvation camp.”⁵⁰⁶

Death by disease or starvation went hand in hand and the true cause of death was often indistinguishable.⁵⁰⁷ Epidemic typhus (*Flecktyphus*) was rampant during the first winter of 1941 to 1942, killing thousands.⁵⁰⁸ Corpses littered the streets of the town:

Even more horrible was to move around in the streets in the mornings. Corpses were taken out of the houses and dumped on carriages. [...] Even when the death toll from typhus abated, the number of the dying did not decline, since many succumbed to other infectious diseases or starvation. This meant that the terrifying scene of wagons collecting the dead continued almost the whole time we were in the Moghilev ghetto.⁵⁰⁹

Typhus is spread by lice and thus outbreaks occur under squalid living conditions, such as were unavoidable among the deportees of Transnistria. The disease runs its course in approximately two weeks, but thousands did not survive what was referred to as the “crisis,” occurring around day twelve or thirteen. Those who did survive and who had the good fortune to have access to regular food were confronted with the constant danger of being further deported to even more precarious locations.

Raids and the Privilege of Connections

And this bureau of evidence⁵¹⁰ was supposed to give the lists. So they [i.e. the Romanians] weren’t coming to take you out. It was the dirty work of the Jews who have to bring up the people to be transported to – to the places. So I had this friend at the bureau of evidence. And he knew a day or two before when such an

⁵⁰⁶ Norbert N., HVT 536, FVA.

⁵⁰⁷ Hilsenrath makes this wry point in the conclusion of his book, *Nacht*, when the main character is assumed to have died of typhus, but in fact dies of starvation after he is robbed of food by an acquaintance. Hilsenrath, *Nacht*.

⁵⁰⁸ On the typhus epidemic in Moghilev, see Ancel, *Transnistria*, 1: 357–362. Ancel writes that, in April 1942, there were 4,451 cases, with 28 per cent of the ill succumbing to death. Ancel, *Transnistria*, 1: 360. Hirt-Manheimer writes that approximately 7,000 Jews were infected in Moghilev, of whom half survived (source not cited). Hirt-Manheimer, *Jagendorf’s Foundry*, 57. The true number may lie somewhere in between these two figures.

⁵⁰⁹ Govrin, *In the Shadow of Destruction*, 43.

⁵¹⁰ Nadler’s reference to a “bureau of evidence” is a direct translation of the Romanian *birou de evidență*, indicating a registration office which would keep track of people’s places of residence and deal with identity cards or papers.

action is going to come. And he knew more or less which places are going to be involved. So this was the reason how we survived this fall of '42.

Norbert Nadler⁵¹¹

I remembered that in Czernowitz a man worked, whom we named "Hitzel," and he patrolled the streets with his cart to catch dogs. It was exactly like this now, in the streets of the Moghilev ghetto.

Emil Wenkert⁵¹²

The Jewish committee of Moghilev understood that survival depended on the deportees being made useful, even indispensable, and correspondingly created as many jobs as possible.⁵¹³ However, the leaders were also taxed with peopling lists for deportations further east: some of those deported went to work camps, some to so-called "death camps."⁵¹⁴ The Jewish police, referred to by survivors with fear and disgust, were charged with rounding up the deportees. Being caught and put on one of these trains was generally understood as a death sentence.

Two different sorts of deportations from Moghilev took place in 1942. First, the Romanian authorities were worried that the typhus epidemic would spread to populations outside the ghetto, especially to the soldiers. To curb the overcrowding and unhygienic living conditions contributing to the epidemic, in the summer of 1942 a command was issued to send four thousand Jews from Moghilev to Scazineți and three thousand to Pecioara. At these sites, the population was essentially cordoned off and left to die.⁵¹⁵ Second, Jews were sent as forced labourers for the Nazi-run "Organisation Todt," which used slave labourers to construct roads and bridges. There was little prospect of returning from forced labour for the Nazis.

⁵¹¹ Norbert N., HVT 536.

⁵¹² Wenkert, *Czernowitzer Schicksale*, 24.

⁵¹³ The committee was formed by order of the vice prefect of the Moghilev district on 18 November 1941. Most members were Jewish and the membership changed often. See Coldewey et al. eds., *Zwischen Pruth und Jordan*, 71–72. For a detailed analysis of the actions of the leadership of the ghetto, see Mir-Tibon, "Am I My Brother's Keeper?" Mir-Tibon designates this as "rescue-through-work, which essentially meant providing a flexible Jewish workforce, appropriately trained, with almost no demands in terms of remuneration, thereby presenting itself as valuable to the Romanian authorities and worth maintaining." Mir-Tibon, "Am I My Brother's Keeper?," 133–134.

⁵¹⁴ Pecioara was designated as a "lagărul morții", a death camp, by the Romanians. Pecioara, *USHMM Encyclopaedia of Camps and Ghettos*, 3, 742.

⁵¹⁵ Mir-Tibon, *Brother's Keeper*, 134, and Coldewey et al. eds., *Zwischen Pruth und Jordan*, 65–58. According to the *USHMM Encyclopaedia*, approximately four thousand Jews perished in Pecioara, and 350 were liberated in the spring of 1944. "Pecioara," *USHMM Encyclopaedia of Camps and Ghettos* 3, 742–743. Death numbers for Scazineți are less clear, but 1,500 were alive when the camp was dissolved in September 1942. "Scazineți," *USHMM Encyclopaedia of Camps and Ghettos* 3, 756–757.

Survival was guaranteed to none, but as Nadler indicated in the quotation above referencing the acquaintance at the registration office, those with connections, whether familial or otherwise, had better chances. Yosef Govrin recalled the hierarchy of survival:

Three main problems faced us. First, vigilance—we had to remain constantly alert to avoid being caught and deported further eastwards. Second, basic existence—how could we make a living? The reservoir of our belongings was almost dried up. What would we do when there was nothing more to sell? And third, integration—how to become part of the daily life that had been organised in the ghetto?⁵¹⁶

The narratives accessible to us today are, by nature, almost exclusively those of the relatively privileged, who inhabited rungs higher up the hierarchical ladder. Those who survived did so primarily because through some means they were able to procure work, food, and shelter. In his interview, author Edgar Hilsenrath states explicitly that his experience was privileged,⁵¹⁷ while Nadler acknowledged as much in the following exchange near the end of his testimony:

David Terman [interviewer]: Why do you think you survived and the others did not?

Norbert N.: Because we were working. We were working. And not only we were working, we were working in the right places.⁵¹⁸

In linking their survival to their employment, both men nod to the elevated position of workers in the ghetto hierarchy. Securing work was vital, but not possible for all. Published studies about or by former leaders of the ghetto describe the leadership committee arranging work for thousands of deportees, but Nadler's account suggests a more nuanced reality, in which great responsibility lay on the individual to procure work. Hilsenrath's novel, *Night*, which describes in harrowing detail the lives and deaths of those clinging to the lowest rungs of the ghetto, is entirely void of leadership figures: the impoverished characters seek work, housing, and sustenance on their own; despite herculean efforts, they often—or indeed mostly—fail.⁵¹⁹

⁵¹⁶ Govrin, *In the Shadow of Destruction*, 44.

⁵¹⁷ Edgar H., HVT 3726, FVA.

⁵¹⁸ Norbert N., HVT 536, FVA.

⁵¹⁹ The novel *Night*, with its six hundred pages and rich social detail, represents a unique source on ghetto life in Moghilev. In his oral history interview, Hilsenrath states that “*Night* is the ghetto of Moghilev-Podolsky, but I used a

An interview with one woman, an orphan, and thus representing one of the few narratives accessible today of the least privileged, described the brutal reality for a child lacking all protection. The woman recollected her attempts to procure assistance from the official orphanage: “I know that money was sent but I never got any help from the *Judenrat*. Every time I went for a garment, a shoe, [they said] ‘we don’t have, we don’t have.’” For a time, she slept at the orphanage, which she described as “hell.” Then she, along with some others, heard that children from the orphanage were being put on the deportation lists and they fled, taking shelter in “a bombed-out house” and sleeping “on rags, branches, like the birds.” Later, after a Ukrainian woman had taken her in and was housing her outside the ghetto, she was caught by two of the Jewish police: “The minute they heard me speak [Romanian], they kidnapped me, pulled me into the ghetto, put me on a death train to Pechora. They let out someone else. That person gave them a package of cigarettes. That was what my life was worth.”⁵²⁰

As the above example demonstrates, the existence of family members was an irreplaceable force whereas the status of being alone, without any family, put one immediately and continually at risk. Nadler also survived because he was with family members who protected and provided for one another. In a world in which morality stood on end, family members represented the last and final bastion of protection. In a statement exemplifying the tight web of work, sustenance, and familial support, Nadler explains:

“[My father received] at least one meal a day. And this was very much. This was very much. And I remember, I didn’t touch a meal at home because I ate outside. My brother-in-law didn’t touch a meal at home because he – my late father didn’t touch a meal at home because he ate with the peasants. So whatever came in home was for the rest of the family.”⁵²¹

Liberation

Moghilev was liberated by the Soviets in March 1944 and families were often scattered. In Nadler’s family the men were unceremoniously drafted by the Red Army and the women, for a

fictional name.” However, due to methodological considerations regarding the incorporation of literary works into this historical analysis, I refer to it here rarely.

⁵²⁰ Leah K., HVT 4166, FVA.

⁵²¹ Norbert N., HVT 536, FVA.

short period, sent to work in Russian mines. This experience was entirely typical for the Bukovina survivors. The Soviets drafted all men they encountered in the liberated Ukrainian zones and all memoirs and testimonies speak of the various attempts, often futile, of the menfolk trying to evade being drafted.⁵²² Many accounts also dwell at great length on the chaotic year following liberation, some expressing almost as much emotion and uncertainty about this period as when they were in the ghettos.⁵²³ By late 1945, most survivors had regrouped in Czernowitz or their hometown and the next chapter in the dismantling of Jewish Bukovina commenced, with the mass emigration of thousands of Bukovina Jews across the Soviet border and into Romania.⁵²⁴

Fitting in Blanka and Anna

In their chapter “Toward a Microhistory” historians Claire Zalc and Tal Bruttman describe how “reducing the level of analysis increases knowledge, because smaller spaces can better elucidate the complexities of decision-making, help reestablish the ‘space of the possible,’ show how reality was experienced at the individual level, and ultimately provide more compelling insights into the events that contemporaries faced in their day-to-day lives.”⁵²⁵ By closely examining Nadler’s life, we learn that his ability and initiative to secure regular work proved crucial, as did the personal connection within the Jewish ghetto administration which enabled him and his family to evade further deportations. The existence of multiple family members, many of whom were able to procure at least limited daily meals, facilitated the survival of the women, who were less likely to obtain work in the factories or as hard labourers and were consequently more likely to be viewed by the Jewish committee as “non-productive” and convenient for deportation.⁵²⁶

⁵²² For example, Kittner, *Erinnerungen*, 99-100 and Wenkert, *Schicksale*, 29-30.

⁵²³ See for example, Elsie B; HVT 1228, FVA. The interviewee discussed the months after liberation in far greater detail than the period in Transnistria. This could be due to trauma. In her memoir Chana Koffler also dedicates significant space to the period following liberation (1944) and prior to emigration to Romania (1945 or 1946), Koffler, “Leaving Home.”

⁵²⁴ On this period see Altskan, “The Closing Chapter.” Nadler and his family joined this wave. He spent the next years in Iași, studying medicine, then received a medical position in Câmpulung Moldovenesc, his father’s hometown. He met his wife, Judith Pitsch, a fellow Czernowitzer (Judith’s family survived the war in the city; her father, a pharmacist, received one of the authorisations to remain), during a trip to the southern Transylvanian fortress town of Brașov. They married in 1954 and lived in Câmpulung until 1960, when, after years of petitions, they received an exit visa and made *Aliyah* to Israel. Nadler went on to work in medicine in Israel and the United States. Judith would become the director of the University of Chicago library, building a Judaica collection rich in material on Bukovina. I am very grateful to Judith Nadler for providing me with these biographical details, personal communication Judith Nadler to the author, 17 July and 24 July 2021.

⁵²⁵ Zalc and Bruttman, *Toward a Microhistory*, 3.

⁵²⁶ Mir-Tibon specifies that in particular single mothers and their children were selected for deportation due to this reasoning. Mir-Tibon, “Brother’s Keeper,” 136. Mir-Tibon chose a fictional framework in which to reflect on the

Through narrating Nadler's story, I reconstructed the stations of passage for survival (or death) for individuals within the Moghilev-Podolsky ghetto, highlighting possible spaces of agency under coercive conditions and examining implications of privilege, or its absence, in daily life. These stations also applied to Blanka and Anna and indeed, the one sentence in the letter to her brother summarising her ghetto experience, closely mirrors the portrait painted above: „Die furchtbarsten Qualen haben wir dort erdulden müssen, Hunger, Kälte, Ungeziefer, ein schmales hartes Brett als Nachtlager, und ausgeliefert Henkern, die uns zu jeder Stunden aufknüpfen oder in irgend einen grausamen Tod jagen konnten.“⁵²⁷

As women without immediate male family members, I long wondered how it was that the women *did* survive. In her letter to Walter, Blanka provided no clues, remarking in apparent incredulity, “So unglaublich es scheint, Mama und ich haben all das entsetzliche überlebt. Es war wohl ein Wunder, anders kann ich es mir nicht erklären.“⁵²⁸ But during the course of the project, as I learned more about her extended family, I came to realise that their survival was most likely possible due to the same reasons through which Nadler's family survived: a combination of family support and a place of relative privilege.

As it turns out, the women were *not* alone in the ghetto. Archival records list Chaim Heiss, described as the retired director of cadastral records of Rădăuți, as being in Moghilev; Dr. Meier (Max) Lindenbaum, county doctor in Boian and “former employee of the state,” is also listed in Moghilev, and his wife, Berta (Chaim's daughter), was with him.⁵²⁹

plight of these women and children and of the men in power who chose them for deportation, Gali Mir-Tibon, *Reshimat Ha-Imahot* [The List of the Mothers] (Am Oved, 2017).

⁵²⁷ Mein Bruder, 1955. English: “We had to endure the most awful agonies there, hunger, cold, vermin, a narrow, hard board to sleep upon, and at the mercy of hangmen who could string us up at any hour or chase us to a horrific death.”

⁵²⁸ Lieber Walter, 1955. English: “As unbelievable as it seems, Mama and I survived the horror. It must have been a miracle, I cannot explain it any other way.”

⁵²⁹ Chaim Heiss appears on two lists, one is for retired civil servants and one is for “former” civil servants. “Tabel Nominal de evreii pensionari de stat, ce se află in ghetourile din raza acestei Legiuni,” created by the “Legiunea Jandarmi Moghilev.” It is available upon request from the USHMM https://www.ushmm.org/online/hsv/person_view.php?PersonId=7255173 (retrieved 1 July 2024), I received the file on 2 July 2024. The second list is “Tabel-Nominal de evreii foști funcționari de Stat aflați in ghetourile din raza Legiunei Jandarmi Moghilev.” It is also available upon request from the USHMM here https://www.ushmm.org/online/hsv/person_view.php?PersonId=7172499 (retrieved 1 July 2024), I received the file on 2 July 2024. The USHMM states that these documents are from “RG-31.004M” and part of the Odessa Oblast Archives records. There is no other information regarding original fond or folder nr. or other details to their provenance.



Figure 51. Max Lindenbaum, Berta Lindenbaum née Heiss, and Chaim Heiss, year unknown (circa 1940). Source: Private Archive, Jonny Heiss.

We cannot know exactly the circumstances, but these five family members almost certainly found each other (unofficial networks informing people of relatives were rampant), thus their chances of surviving as a group were immediately higher than if they had been alone—and indeed, they all survived, even though Chaim was seventy years old in 1941. They had a doctor amongst them. Not only could Lindenbaum care for them, but he would have received payment, normally belongings of some sort, for his services (in high demand), which could in turn be exchanged for food with local peasants. It is also possible that the simple status of having roots in Rădăuți, whether this meant family members (Chaim had numerous nephews and nieces there, the children of his sister Ettel) or networks, acted favourably for the family—after all, it was those from Rădăuți with Jägendorf at their head who were considered the most privileged group of the ghetto.⁵³⁰ Chaim's entries on the ghetto lists moreover stated that he had been deported *from* Rădăuți, he may have relocated there prior to the war.⁵³¹

Jägendorf gave preferential treatment to other deportees from Rădăuți and even within the eyes of the Romanian authorities they may have enjoyed greater liberties or esteem. It is also

⁵³⁰ Regarding the children of Ettel Edelstein, older sister of Chaim and Josef, I did not pursue the date of all these individuals but anyone who had remained in Rădăuți most likely would also have been in the Moghilev ghetto. As described, however, in Ch. 5, we do not know whether Chaim, Josef, and their immediate families, were in contact with Ettel's family, whose family, like their sister Sara's, appears to have been more religiously observant.

⁵³¹ See footnote 529, on both lists his place of deportation is provided as Rădăuți. The document regarding retired civil servants, however, contains errors (Josef Lebzelter is listed as alive and in Moghilev), so it is possible Heiss claimed to be from Rădăuți due to the privileges associated with the town's residents. Since it was his place of birth and he had family there, this would not have been difficult to argue. Numerous sources cite the absence or destruction of personal documents so creating certain biographical details, with the help of a few witnesses, was often possible. Blanka recreated her own (false, as we now know) birth certificate in Constanța, entry 7 Dec. 1949.

conceivable that Jägendorf, a former officer of the Habsburg army and decorated in World War I, and/or other former higher-ranking members of the imperial armed forces, ensured the widow and orphan of a decorated k.u.k. gendarme were protected and given assistance, where possible. Indeed, the relationships forged during the period of the monarchy continued to play a role in the lives of Bukovinans in World War II. Blanka references this in her search for Walter, when she turned to “ein ehemaliger Würdenträger, gewesener Freund meines Vaters, der aus dem Altreich zurückgekehrt war”⁵³² for help. Jägendorf himself claimed that he was greeted by the Romanian prefect of Moghilev with the words “Grüssen Sie Gott” after which he referenced their joint service in the Austrian Army: “Yesterday we fought together. Shall I be your enemy today?”⁵³³ These connections are speculative, but there is no doubt that the Lebzelter women would have been acknowledged as peers, or as the surviving family members of a peer, by a cohort of the ghetto “elite” or privileged. The greater the network, and the more privileged the network was, the greater the chances were for receiving assistance: there were simply more people to ask for help.

⁵³² English: “A former dignitary, an old friend of my father’s, who had returned from the *Altreich* [presumably Austria proper], helped me.”

⁵³³ Jägendorf, *Foundry*, 6.



Figure 52. Anna Lebzelter's ghetto identity card and census confirmation card with Blanka listed as her daughter.
Source: See footnote 534.

There are moreover indicators that Anna and Blanka endeavoured to be included within this privileged group. The first identification document which Blanka kept is a confirmation that they were counted in the census of Jews in Moghilev dated 1942 and the place of evacuation is listed as Rădăuți. Only on the second identity card from 1943 is the name “Vașcăuți” visible, though this was struck through and replaced with a word difficult to decipher, but is most likely “Cernăuți” (Czernowitz). A scribble near the bottom notes “place of evacuation corrected by [illegible], 1944.”⁵³⁴ It is not clear what purpose these three variants of “home”—Rădăuți, Vașcăuți, Cernăuți—may have served. Maybe it denoted inclusion within a group, maybe it was a thought to the future: if one was to be returned to the place of “evacuation,” perhaps Anna preferred trying to find her way in her girlhood home of Cernăuți, rather than the site of her husband’s and son’s murder. Whatever the reason, the mark-ups demonstrate agency (there was almost certainly a bribe involved to register the change). The Lebzelter women worked within the framework of possibility

⁵³⁴ These identity cards are in folder one of the Blanka Lebzelter Collection, AR 25437, LBI.

to place themselves within a social group which enjoyed higher security or steer the geographic trajectory of their postwar fate.

There are a few other hints to solidify the connection not only to the Rădăuți community, but to those within it of relative wealth. In the one extant letter we have from Blanka to a living person, dated 1947, she wrote to her cousin Babette (who had been in the ghetto of Bershad), “In Moghilev waren wir gut bekannt mit einer Familie Jossel Wolf aus Radautz. Dieser Herr hatte einen reichen Bruder und einen Sohn in Bukarest.”⁵³⁵ One of the peculiarities of Transnistria was that ghetto inhabitants were permitted to receive money from relatives or other benefactors. This policy certainly aided survival and Jossel Wolf, along with three of his relatives, received in May 1942 a significant transfer of money, the largest sum on the list of about thirty recipients and if taken together as a family, almost ten times the average sum received.⁵³⁶ Acquaintance with such a relatively well-off family would certainly have benefits.

Finally, Josef Lebzelter appears on a list of retired civil servants of the state within the ghetto.⁵³⁷ It is not clear for what purpose this list was created, but conceivably retired civil servants continued to draw a pension (the contradictions in Transnistrian regulations abound), if this is the case, then the women may have either directly drawn his pension or had a friend stand-in for Josef, so that his pension continued to be drawn, thus ensuring them a regular income, however meagre. Moreover, Chaim Heiss as well as his son-in-law, Dr. Meier (Max) Lindenbaum (Berta’s husband) appear on the same or similar lists.⁵³⁸

⁵³⁵ Liebe Babette, 1947. English: “In Moghilev we were closely acquainted with the family of Jossel Wolf from Radautz. This man had a rich brother and a son in Bucharest.”

⁵³⁶ This document is titled “Avem onoare vă rugă să binevoiți [etc.].” It is available upon request from the USHMM https://www.ushmm.org/online/hsv/person_view.php?personid=7182388 (retrieved 1 July 2024), I received it on 2 July 2024. The accompanying email from the USHMM stated only that it was from “RG-31.004M” and that it is part of the Odessa Oblast Archives records. There is no other information regarding original fond or folder nr. or other details to its provenance. On this list, sums averaged between 100 and 200 RKKS (Reichskreditkassenscheine, Reich credit treasury note), per person, while Jossel Wolf and his relatives received 400 each, thus 1200 as a family.

⁵³⁷ This document is titled “Tabel Nominal de evreii pensionari de stat, ce se află în ghetourile din raza acestei Legiuni,” created by the “Legiunea Jandarmi Moghilev.” It is available upon request from the USHMM https://www.ushmm.org/online/hsv/person_view.php?PersonId=7255182 (retrieved 1 July 2024), I received it on 2 July 2024. The accompanying email from the USHMM stated only that it was from “RG-31.004M” and that it is part of the Odessa Oblast Archives records. There is no other information regarding original fond or folder nr. or other details to its provenance.

⁵³⁸ Lindenbaum appears on the same list of “former” employees of the state as does Chaim, see footnote 529, “Tabel-Nominal de evreii foști funcționari de Stat aflați în ghetourile din raza Legiunei Jandarmi Moghilev.” The page with his name may be requested here https://www.ushmm.org/online/hsv/person_view.php?PersonId=7172466 (retrieved 1 July 2024), I received it on 2 July 2024. The accompanying email from the USHMM stated only that it was from “RG-31.004M” and that it is part of the Odessa Oblast Archives records. There is no other information regarding

In light of all these human connections, I believe it is reasonable to assume that the women survived the three years in the ghetto due to their belonging within a community which found means to protect and support one another, even within the extreme context of ghetto life. The most intimate community comprised their family members—Chaim Heiss and Max and Berta Lindenbaum—while the wider community may have included extended relatives or friends from Rădăuți and former colleagues of Josef Lebzelter and Chaim Heiss.

Writing on the study of emotions exhibited within letters historian Marcelo Borges asserts “As an expression of thoughts and feelings, personal writing not only contributes to self-making but, through textualisation, it also shapes feelings and creates emotional experiences.”⁵³⁹ When Blanka determined to sit down in 1955 and recall, in letters to the dead, the period of the war and the months directly proceeding it, she was undertaking several practices. First, she was working through, to an extent, the traumatic moment when her father and brother were killed, as well as, very superficially, the years in Moghilev. But, perhaps foremost, she was also describing her prewar world and nodding to a community that existed, even within the privations of the ghetto and which she had, in the postwar years, lost. Though the addressees were dead, the exercise removed her, for a time, from the daily cycle of anguish, created a positive “emotional experience,” gave her a space to recall her prewar self, and to reinhabit the body of a young woman not yet marked by devastation and hardship. Though this space she created for herself was ephemeral and circumscribed by the walls of her own memory, the very fact that these letters along with the diaries were precious to her, that she could not bear the thought of them being destroyed or taken, indicates their psychological import.

In the letters Blanka ensured for posterity that she was more than a victim of unjust persecution, wracked by pain, illness, hair loss, and insecurity, a middle-aged single woman, alone and abused by her neighbours, state officials, and colleagues. Rather she inscribed herself as a clever, charming, and attractive young woman, a treasured sister, a devoted daughter, a desired and beloved companion, a member of a caring community. Though she does not go into the members by name and she may not have been able to articulate this particular loss of belonging within a *communal* network, I argue that it was the loss of communal ties and the inability to reestablish

original fond or folder nr. or other details to its provenance. It is not clear what purpose these lists served and as yet no colleague has been able to enlighten me.

⁵³⁹ Marcelo Borges, “Narratives of Self” in *Sources for the History of Emotions: A Guide*, ed. Katie Barclay, Sharon Crozier-De Rosa, and Peter N. Stearns (Routledge, 2021), 101.

any such of substance, that became one of the greatest psychological distresses in the years covered by the diaries. Despite her reticence to provide details on individuals, she repeatedly references the presence of others, however vague—the dignified friend of her father who helped her seek the fate of Walter, a family from Rădăuți with whom she and Anna were “well-acquainted” in the ghetto.⁵⁴⁰ In stark contrast, it was the utter absence of such a caring, communal network and the lack of physical protection and psychological support it would have provided, which crushed Blanka emotionally in the latter period of the diaries.

⁵⁴⁰ She references this friend of her father’s in the letter to Walter, see the annexes. She references the Jossel Wolf family in her 1947 letter to Babette, see annexes.

Diary Excerpts: 3. Juni 1956 – 25. Juli 1956

Sonntag 3 Junie 1956

Was soll ich machen, ich kann diese Zustände hier im Hause, die mich ganz zugrunde gerichtet haben, nicht länger aushalten. Doch kann ich mir allein nicht helfen, und niemand will mir beistehen.

Ich bin so schwach dass ich nichts arbeiten kann, die Wohnung und meine Sachen sind vernachlässigt. Ich kann nicht lesen, kann nicht zuhause sitzen und kann nicht herumgehen.

Meine Lieben denen ich teuer war wurden mir aufs grausamste entrissen und nun bin ich allein und schutzlos so schrecklicher Pein preisgegeben.

Donerstag 7 Junie 1956

Jetzt etwas in anderer Gedankenfolge obwohl die schreckliche Sache mit der Nachbarschaft mir keinen Augenblick Ruhe lässt.

Habe seinerseit davon geschrieben dass ich nach der Adresse eines Schriftstellers (H.L.)⁵⁴¹ geforscht, dass es lange gedauert bis ich sie endlich kriegt, und als ich dann hinschrieb, erhielt ich keine Antwort. Vor 2 Wochen habe an einen anderen Schriftsteller (I.L.)⁵⁴² geschrieben und bis jetzt ist keine Antwort da. Habe die Hoffnung noch nicht aufgegeben, doch fange an unruhig zu werden. Obwohl ich in einer so schrecklichen Verfassung bin dass mich nichts anderes interessiert als wie ich von hier entkommen könnte, habe doch noch Interesse für diese Sache aufgebracht. Ich wäre untröstlich sollte nichts daraus werden.

Habe noch 2 Briefe geschrieben, doch nur nach Vermutung adressiert und frage mich ob sie ankommen und ich Antwort kriegen werde. Der Eine an Kousine Berta, die vor 10 Jahren in Solca

⁵⁴¹ Most probably she refers to Horia Lovinescu (1917-1983), a playwright whose play *Citadela sfărâmată* (*The Shattered Citadel*) she had recently seen. The play deals with a bourgeois family trying to come to terms with the new world order in post-World War II Romania and may have resonated with her in several ways.

⁵⁴² This may be Ion Luca (1894-1972), also a playwright, though the connection is not as clear as with Horia Lovinescu. If she indeed wrote to Luca, then her choices of authors continue to complicate her story, both were Romanian nationalist-leaning. At this time, there was no shortage of Romanian authors with Jewish background still in Romania, including those with specific Bukovina roots, but it seems that she did not seek out this circle or else was unaware of them. The most prominent example is Alfred Margul-Sperber (born 1898 in Storojinetz, died 1967 in Bucharest), who was known at the time for helping young German-language writers, especially those from Bukovina. See George Guțu and Peter Motzan, „Editorischer Bericht,” in *Die Buche. Eine Anthologie deutschsprachiger Judendichtung aus der Bukowina*, ed. Alfred Margul-Sperber with George Guțu, Peter Motzan, and Stefan Sienerth (IKGS Verlag, 2009), 21-42. We never learn the contents of her letters to these writers.

wohnhaft war (ist sie heute auch noch dort?). Der zweite an die Verwalterin jener Willa in Sinaia wo ich vor 3 Jahren gewohnt habe.⁵⁴³ (Ich glaube mich an den Strassenamen zu erinnern doch bin ich dessen nicht sicher).

- Die Schmerzen in der rechten Brust über die ich diesen Winter klagte, setzen mir wieder arg zu. Ich bin wahnsinnig unglücklich.

Sonntag 10 Iunie 1956

Gestern war ich in der Poliklinik. Wegen dem Schmerz in der rechten Brust, war ich zuerst bei "Interne" und dann in der chirurgischen Abteilung. Gott sei Dank nichts verdächtiges. Nehme jetzt Pulver und Gott soll helfen ich soll diese Schmerzen die mich über 6 Monate beunruhigen, loswerden. Wegen meinen allgemeinen schlechten Gesundheitszustand werde Dienstag eine Röntgenaufnahme und 2 Blutanaliesen machen.

Doch wie soll ich die Ursache dieser Uebel, meine Wohnverhältnisse, beseitigen. Ich sehe ich kann nichts machen und bin namenlos verzweifelt.

- Der Brief den ich nach Sinaia geschickt, ist zurückgekommen. Den Strassennamen hatte ich aus dem Gedächtnis, ohne Sicherheit geschrieben, und keine Hausnummer angegeben. Habe gehofft da die Strasse nicht viele Häuser hat, werde der Brief ankommen, doch mir geht alles schief. Der Schriftsteller antwortet nicht. Bin ein arg verdammtes Geschöpf.

Donerstag 14 Iunie 1956

Vor 3 Tagen Habe Antwort von der Berta bekommen. Habe kaum zu hoffen gewagt mein Schreiben werde sie erreichen und tatsächlich staune darüber, denn sie wohnt nicht mehr in Solca sondern in Suczawa.⁵⁴⁴

Vorgestern habe eine Lungenröntgenaufnahme gemacht, das Resultat beunruhigt mich. Ich weiss nicht was dieses Resultat bedeutet, ich weiss nur soviel dass ich keine gesunden Lungen mehr habe. Die Umstände unter welchen ich lebe, zerstören meine Gesundheit. Dies weiss ich schon

⁵⁴³ In August 1953 Blanka spent a holiday in Sinaia with other members of her cooperative; they resided together in a villa, presumably nationalised and used for state employees.

⁵⁴⁴ Most probably, the letter found its way to Berta despite an incorrect address due to the fact that Berta's husband, Max Lindenbaum, was a well-known doctor in the county (Solca is about forty-five km from Suceava, both are in southern Bukovina). In my own postcard collection, I have a 1937 postcard addressed simply to the priest in Câmpulung [Moldovenesc] (a small southern Bukovina town) and in parenthesis "Roman-Catholic priest." Clergy, doctors, and other unique officials could apparently receive mail without precise addresses.

lange. Ich kann mir allein nicht helfen und niemand kümmert sich um mich. Nicht nur das, wenn ich ein Geringes fordere, das mir helfen könnte, wird es mir verweigert. So mein Gesuch an den Sfát⁵⁴⁵ mir zum Tausch für meine Wohnung eine andere Wohnung zu geben, und das Gesuch an die Prokuratur das Nachbargesindel das mich so bitter peinigt, zu bändigen.

Donerstag 21 Iunie 1956

Bin krank. Fühle mich sehr schlecht. So schwach bin ich noch nie gewesen.

Ich war gestern im Dampfbad und glaube ich habe einen Fehler begangen. Habe nicht daran gedacht dass nach dem ungünstigen Röntgenresultat, mir ein Dampfbad schaden könnte. Habe während des Bades mich schlecht gefühlt, und genau so fühle mich heute den ganzen Tag. Bin nicht imstande mich auf den Beinen zu halten. Ich war heute in der Poliklinik, die Aerztin hat gesagt ich muss mich schonen und hat mir verschiedene Kräftigungsmittel verordnet. Hoffentlich wird mir bald besser, denn in meiner Lage, wenn ich noch krank bin, nichts tun kann - was fange ich an, was wird aus mir?

Freitag 22 Iunie 1956

Heute war mir genau so schlecht wie gestern. Trotz der Medikamente und appetitanregungsmittel kann ich nichts essen.

Habe heute einen zweiten Brief an den Schriftsteller geschrieben und in meiner Zerstretheit, ihn ohne Marke in den Postkasten geworfen. Am Nachmittag war ich auf der Post habe eine Marke dort gelassen und ein Beamte hat mir versprochen den Brief zu frankieren. Hoffentlich kommt er an.

Der zweite Nachbar, der Tischler, hämmert heute den ganzen Tag. Vielleicht haben meine Quälgeister nicht genügt, habe jetzt noch diese Zugabe. Im Radio wird die Oper "Faust" übertragen, doch in meinen Ohren hämmert es.

Habe vor einigen Tagen einen Zettel zwecks Wohnungstausch angeschlagen. Es haben sich einige Personen gemeldet, doch wurde nichts daraus.

Von nirgends ein Hoffnungsschimmer und ich halte es nicht mehr aus. Bin in diesen furchtbaren Zustand nur aus Ruhemangel geraten, was nun weiter? Bin so schrecklich gequält, wo ist Gott? Ist Gott nur für die Glücklichen da. - Ich war soeben draussen und habe den Tischler gefragt, ob

⁵⁴⁵ Romanian: council.

er nicht aufzuhören gedenkt. Mir ist sehr schlecht. Schreckliche Kopfschmerzen (im ganzen Kopf) Magenschmerzen, Uebelkeit, und ein unangenehmes, quälendes Gefühl im Herzen.

Samstag 23 Junie 1956

Habe mich heute mit dem Tischler aufgeregt. Bin nachhause gekommen und habe ihn hämmernd angetroffen. Habe ihm dies vorgeworfen mit der Begründung ich möchte mich nach der Arbeit ausruhen und bei dem Lärm den er verursache sei dies unmöglich, der Kopf zerspränge mir. Er hat mir grob geantwortet. In meinem gegenwärtigen Zustand wirkt Aufregung schrecklich auf mich. Bin ganz kaput. Wer weiss ob es mir nicht seit dem Dampfbad ärger mit dem Lungen geworden ist. Habe seit mehreren Wochen schreckliche Rückenschmerzen, doch in der letzten Zeit hat sich dieser Schmerz verstärkt. Diese Schmerzen und mein hilfälliger Zustand lassen mich Schlimmes befürchten.

Habe heute wieder wegen Wohnungstausch verhandelt. Bin bereit meine beiden Zimmer für ein Einziges zu geben; nur um dieses Unglück hier los zu werden. Doch zweifle ich trotzdem, dass die Betreffenden werden herkommen wollen. Wären sie einverstanden hätten sie gleich ja gesagt; beim Anblick des Vorzimmers und der Nachbarschaft schrecken alle zurück.

Dienstag 26 Junie 1956

Habe heute eine Karte von der Berta bekommen. Sie lädt mich ein den Urlaub bei ihr zu verbringen. Bin sehr froh darüber.

Der Brief an den Schriftsteller wurde nicht auf der Post frankiert wie mir versprochen wurde, und ist zurückgekommen.

C-ța Samstag 30 VI 56

Mir ist schlecht. Und wenn ich daran denke dass nur der Ruhemangel und die Aufregungen mit dem Nachbargesindel mich in diesen Zustand gebracht haben, wachsen alle meine Schmerzen. Beabsichtige nächste Woche wieder eine Röntgenaufnahme zu machen, fürchte sehr das Resultat denn fühle mich sehr schlecht. Gerade jetzt wo ich die Berta gefunden habe und die Reise zu ihr plane, bin ich so kaputt, dass ich kaum genug Kraft aufbringen kann um mich zu waschen.

So heftige und langanhaltende Rückenschmerzen habe niemals gehabt. Auch der Schmerz in der Brust lässt nicht nach.

Heute gegen 4 Uhr früh war ein Erdbeben. -

Morgen nachmittags machen wir (Büro) einen Ausflug am Meer. Hoffentlich ist schönes Wetter, denn es regnet täglich und ist kalt. Hoffentlich werden auch meine Kräfte reichen.

Sontag 1 VII 56

Der Ausflug war angenehm. Wir fuhren mit dem Schiff "Neptun" ins Weite bis Konstantza ausser Sicht kam. Dann machten wir Kehrt. Es war sehr schönes Wetter.

Habe mich heute morgen wieder einmal mit dem Banditen schrecklich aufgeregt. Natürlich wegen Nichts, das heisst, wie gewöhnlich in seinem Wahnsinn, zu seinem Vergnügen. Habe mich sehr aufgeregt, so etwas jetzt bei meinem Zustand.

Dienstag 3 VII 56

Mir war gestern und heute sehr schlecht. Was ist mit mir?

Was ich auszustehen habe geht nicht auf eine Elefantenhaut, so dass ich mich nicht wundere dass ich in diese Lage geraten bin. Doch ich will nicht krank sein, warum wird mir nicht besser, ich bin allein, ich darf nicht krank sein.

Sontag 8 VII 56

Die Berta erwartet mich. Gedenke am 18ten d.h. in 10 Tagen abzureisen.

Ich war vorgestern wieder in der Prokuratur wegen dem Banditen.

Donerstag 12 VII 56

Habe gestern an die Berta geschrieben und sie verständigt dass ich am 18ten d. M. Von hier abreise.

Wie lange die Reise dauert weiss ich nicht.

Bis Samstag soll ich mit all meiner Arbeit für die Bilanz fertig sein.⁵⁴⁶ Hoffentlich gelingt es.

Gesundheitlich geht es mir noch immer schlecht.

Ich kann es nicht fassen dass ich so kaput bin.

Sontag 15 VII 56

⁵⁴⁶ Blanka works as an accountant for a cooperative.

Habe heute das Filmmanuskript an dem ich seit diesem Winter gearbeitet, beendet. Habe oft tagelang nichts geschrieben und wiederum an manchen Tagen nur sehr wenige Zeilen. Nun ist es fertig. Nach meiner Rückkehr werde es noch einmal durchsehen und korrigieren.

Dienstag 17 VII 56

Bin reisefertig. Habe auch schon Fahrkarte. Hätte noch einiges zu tun, doch bin ich zu müde. Es ist 10 uhr abends. Hoffentlich erwache ich morgen früh vor 5 uhr.

Suczawa 19 VII 56 Donnerstag

Bin heute morgen in Suczawa angekommen. Die Berta und der Max haben mich herzlich empfangen. Sie finden mich gutaussehend, ob es aufrichtig ist oder nur freundliche Worte, kann ich natürlich nicht wissen. Ich weiss dass ich mich gealtert habe und dies ist auch natürlich. Berta und Max haben sich bedeutend gealtert, besonders letzterer; 12 Jahre sind eben keine Kleinigkeit.⁵⁴⁷

Habe gestern in Bukarest die Lya aufgesucht. Habe auf der alten Adresse die Neue erfahren. Sie wohnt jetzt sehr elegant. In Bukarest und Konstantza war grosse Hitze, hier ist es kühl. Bin die ganze Nacht im Zug gereist und habe mich sehr geplagt. Habe versucht am vormittag zu schlafen, doch gelang es mir nicht. Jetzt bin nach dem Mittag (habe sehr gut gegessen) und sitze im Garten in der frischen Luft. Hier ist sehr gute Luft.

Suczawa 25 VII 56 Mittwoch

Gestern war ich mit der Berta in Radautz. Wir haben den Onkel Sigmund besucht. Dies ist Bertas Vater und meines Vaters Bruder. Er ist bereits ein 80 jähriger Greis.⁵⁴⁸ Der Anblick der beiden alten Leute (er hat die 2te Frau) hat mich sehr beeindruckt und tief gerührt. Sie haben sich mit mir sehr gefreut. Als wir zum Zug gehen mussten und uns verabschiedeten haben wir alle 4 bittere Tränen vergossen.

⁵⁴⁷ This indicates they last saw one another in 1944, which matches with the time when the Moghilev ghetto was liberated.

⁵⁴⁸ According to his documents, Chaim Heiss (Uncle Sigmund) would have been eighty-five years old at this time.

Montag abend waren wir bei einem symphonischen Konzert. Es wurde gespielt die 5te Symphonie von Dvorak und das Konzert für Violine und Orchester von Mendelsohn-Bartoldi; Solist war der bekannte Geiger Ion Voicu. Mir hat das Konzert sehr gut gefallen.

- Habe Pech mit dem Wetter. Es regnet jeden Tag.

Von heute in einer Woche gedenke ich wieder abzureisen.

Chapter 7. Confronting Survival: Succours, Solace, Seclusion

„Ich habe auch vor der Nacht Angst, nicht wenn ich wache. Ich habe nicht mehr das Zutrauen zu ihr, deshalb kann ich nicht schlafen, ehe es Tag wird. [...] Aber vielleicht ist das alles, was ich da sage, falsch. Angst ist nicht das rechte Wort, Furcht ist es nicht. Nenne du es, Dojno.“

„Es gibt wahrscheinlich kein Wort dafür. Es ist vielleicht der Schauer der Einsamkeit und des Abgeschnittenseins von jeder Zukunft. In dem, was man gewöhnlich Trauer nennt, findet man das tröstliche Mitleid für sich selbst. Aber dieser Schauer zerstört das Mitleid, er versteint das Herz und den Augenblick zugleich. Wie sollte man solche Trauer von der Angst, zu sein und nicht zu sein, trennen können?“

- Manès Sperber, *Wie eine Träne im Ozean*⁵⁴⁹

In the letter to her brother, Blanka lucidly articulated the emotional emptiness of survival: „Und nun die Befreiung erlebt, liess die Spannung nach, nun gab es für mich nichts mehr zu erwarten, das Leben so mühsam erhalten, verlor jeden Wert. Eine schreckliche Leere nahm Besitz von meiner Seele,” a sentiment echoed by countless survivors.⁵⁵⁰ Perhaps the most well-known is Primo Levi who described liberation as “neither joyful nor lighthearted,” but rather pierced by “the sorrow of the dispersed or lost family; the universal suffering all around; [...] the problems of a life to begin all over again amid the rubble, often alone.”⁵⁵¹

Loneliness, feelings of being deserted, abandoned, and left to the mercy of strangers and enemies, are the reoccurring emotions Blanka expresses the most frequently in the years following her mother’s death. This chapter explores these emotions from two contrasting sides: On the one hand, I look at her efforts to master her solitude and depression—first, through searching for and

⁵⁴⁹ Manès Sperber, *Wie eine Träne im Ozean* (Sonderzahl Verlagsges.m.b.H., 2024). 417. English: “‘I am also afraid of the night, not when I wake. I no longer trust it, this is why I cannot sleep until it is day. [...] But maybe everything that I am saying is wrong. Fear is not the right word, it is not dread. You name it, Dojno.’

‘Probably there is no word for it. It is perhaps the shudder of loneliness and being cut off from every future. In that which is typically called grief, one finds the consoling compassion for oneself. But this shudder destroys the compassion, it turns the heart and the moment to stone. How should one be able to separate such grief from the fear of existing or not existing.’”

⁵⁵⁰ This phenomena has been studied and is frequently commented on, so that I will not elaborate further. See Yehudit Kleiman and Nina Shpringer-Aharoni, *The Anguish of Liberation: Testimonies from 1945* (Yad Vashem, 1995). English: “And now, having seen liberation, the suspense dissipated, now there was nothing else to wait for, life, preserved with such effort, lost all value. A horrible emptiness took hold of my soul.”

⁵⁵¹ Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (Vintage International, 1989), 70-71.

finding surviving family members, secondly through cultivating a few, precious friendships, and thirdly through participating in the cultural life of Constanța, as well as working creatively in her free time. On the other hand, however, I describe how ultimately these acts of agency did not result in enough emotional wherewithal to withstand the weight of her crushing loneliness and increasing marginalisation, which had very real roots in her everyday life. As time passed, she was victimised by those around her, primarily her neighbours and her coworkers. Her solitude and seclusion as brought about by the war appears to have legitimised her abuse in their eyes. Ultimately, she was right: she had no protector.

Reconstructing Family Networks in the Aftermath of the Shoah

After the war, one of the primary first tasks of survivors was to establish who had survived and where they were.⁵⁵² The existence of family members outside of Europe, whether themselves survivors or whether they had emigrated prior to the war, often played a crucial role in the postwar wellbeing of survivors stranded in Europe. As we have seen with Blanka and Anna, they could provide financial support, sometimes they were able to aid in obtaining emigration visas. On another level, reestablishing contact with family members who had also undergone persecution but survived acted as a fundamental emotional support; one was not entirely alone. In this first section, I trace the fate of Blanka's extended family, a search which she and her mother also undertook, and turn then to her eventual reuniting with her cousin Berta and her Uncle Sigmund (Chaim Heiss).

The Windbeutel Sisters in Vienna

As illustrated in the previous chapters, Blanka's extended family was fairly large, though regular interactions were presumably limited to those who lived locally, that is her mother's sister Zirl Chomed in Czernowitz with her two children, Babette and Gustav Chomed, and the Heiss family in interwar Vășcăuți.⁵⁵³ Her mother's other three sisters, all younger, had resided in Vienna since

⁵⁵² On this search, see the recent publication dedicated exclusively to this topic, Dan Stone, *Fate Unknown: Tracing the Missing after World War II and the Holocaust* (Oxford University Press, 2023). On various aspects of the family and its meaning during the Holocaust and afterwards, see Joanna B. Michlic, *Jewish Families in Europe, 1939-Present: History, Representation, and Memory* (Brandeis University Press, 2017) and Eliyana R. Adler and Kateřina Čapková, *Jewish and Romani Families in the Holocaust and Its Aftermath* (Rutgers University Press, 2021).

⁵⁵³ The Windbeutel grandparents, Henie and Bernhard, had both passed away by 1928, thus the house would have been known as the Chomed house by this time. Zirl's husband, Leon Chomed, died on 2 February 1936, his death is reported in the local newspapers, "Todesfälle," *Czernowitzer Morgenblatt*, 10 Feb. 1936, p. 5.

the first World War, but Blanka knew them personally and at least one of them well: in July 1933 when she was seventeen, she travelled to Vienna for the wedding of her step-cousin, Ernestine Buczaczer. She arrived on 6 July 1933, just three days prior to the wedding ceremony.⁵⁵⁴



Figure 53. Wedding photo of Ernestine Buczaczer and Egon Deutsch, Vienna 1933, attended by Blanka. Source: Private Archive, Jan Deutsch.

Blanka then stayed on in Vienna for the next six months, returning to Vășcăuți only in January 1934. During this half year she lived with her aunt Karoline, her mother's younger sister (by just one year), and her step-uncle, Nathan Buczaczer, in Engerthstrasse of the twentieth district. Her residence registration paperwork states that she attended school.⁵⁵⁵ As noted in Chapter 5, Nathan and Karoline had wed in Vienna in 1917. He was a widower from Czernowitz with three young children, Ernestine (b. 1908), Max (b. 1911), and Thea (b. 1913), who was only four years old when they wed.⁵⁵⁶ By 1933, when Blanka moved in with the family, the children were grown but

⁵⁵⁴ Ernestine Buczaczer wed Egon Deutsch on 9 July 1933 in the Pazmanitengasse synagogue. „9. Juli 1933, Egon Deutsch-Ernestine Buczaczer,“ Trauungsbuch für die Israelitische Kultusgemeinde Wien, Pazmanitengasse 1933, Entry No. 73. I am grateful to Carole Vogel, a descendent of the Deutsch family, for providing me with this marriage record and parts of the following biographical information regarding the experience of Egon Deutsch and Ernestine Buczaczer. Private communication from Carole Vogel to Julie Dawson, June and July 2024. I am also exceedingly grateful to Jan Deutsch, the wife of George Thomas Deutsch (child of Ernestine and Egon) for allowing me to use the wedding photo and providing details as to Karoline Windbeutel's war-time experiences. Private email to Julie Dawson 25 April 2025.

⁵⁵⁵ Historische Meldeunterlagen for “Blanka Lebzelter, birth date 22 Feb. 1916,” 6 July 1933, WStLA.

⁵⁵⁶ In fact, Karoline had cared for the children since 1915, when their mother, Julie/Chuli Nestel, a relative of Karoline's, died suddenly. Nathan, at the time recuperating in what is today the Czech Republic from an injury received

Max and Thea (twenty-two and twenty respectively) may still have lived with Karoline and Nathan. Max emigrated to Palestine around this time and there wed in 1935.⁵⁵⁷ Thea wed in Vienna, also in 1935, but joined Max in Palestine the same year.⁵⁵⁸

Their father, Nathan Buczaczer, died in 1936, leaving Blanka's aunt Karoline a widow. She was moreover somewhat crippled after having contracted polio in 1917 and required a cane to walk.



Figure 54. Karoline Windbeutel, Blanka's aunt, and Nathan Buczaczer. Source: Private Archive, Jan Deutsch.

on the Russian front, sent the children to live with Karoline in Vienna (his wife and children had joined him after he was injured). I am extremely grateful to Jan Deutsch for providing me with these personal details. Jan's late husband, George Thomas Deutsch, the son of Ernestine Buczaczer and Egon Deutsch, penned a manuscript regarding the family's history but did not wish the manuscript in full to be shared with non-family members. Jan graciously shared relevant excerpts from the manuscript with me for which I am very grateful. I cite these details without page numbers due to the fragmented nature of the source. George Thomas Deutsch, "untitled manuscript," 2014, private collection of Jan Deutsch. Private emails Jan Deutsch to the author, 25, 26, and 27 April 2025.

⁵⁵⁷ According to the afore-mentioned manuscript by George Thomas Deutsch, Max and Thea became involved in Zionist activities in the 1920s and Max had already emigrated to Palestine in 1932. If accurate then he missed his sister, Ernestine's, wedding. Deutsch, "untitled manuscript."

⁵⁵⁸ "Adolf Neuman-Thea Buczaczer," date unknown (1935), Trauungsbuch für die Israelitische Kultusgemeinde Stadttempel 1935, entry nr. 428. This record was accessed using JewishGen here https://www.jewishgen.org/databases/jgdetail_2.php, retrieved on 26 July 2024 (entries for the weddings of Nathan and Karoline in 1917 and Egon and Ernestine in 1933 are also on this page). Upon request, the IKG Archive declined to provide me with additional details of this marriage record. Regarding Thea's emigration in 1935, see Deutsch, "untitled manuscript."

At the time of the “Anschluss” Karoline lived with her stepdaughter Ernestine and her husband, Egon Deutsch.⁵⁵⁹ Afterwards Egon Deutsch acted quickly to get the family out, submitting emigration papers on 15 May 1938 to the emigration department of the Israelitische Kultusgemeinde (Jewish Community of Vienna). It is not clear what happened afterwards, but by 13 June 1938, he and Ernestine were in Brussels, where she gave birth to a son, George Thomas.⁵⁶⁰ At the same time, in early June 1938, Karoline was registered at a new address back in the twentieth district, closer to where she had earlier lived with Nathan.⁵⁶¹

Karoline managed, however, to join Ernestine and Egon in Brussels approximately one year later, she arrived there in October 1939. The further war-time fate of this family is complex, at some point they fled further to France and were eventually separated. Nevertheless, Ernestine, Egon, their young son, and Karoline all survived.⁵⁶² Karoline was the only of the five Windbeutel sisters, besides Anna, to survive the Holocaust. She was also the only sister not to be deported or held in a ghetto or concentration camp, rather she survived by being smuggled by priests into a

⁵⁵⁹ Karoline’s official registration papers record that she lived with Ernestine and Egon in the 7th district (Lerchenfelderstrasse), however the private manuscript of the Deutsch family states that she in fact went to live with the other two Windbeutel sisters, who were nearby in the 6th district (Ägidigasse). Historische Meldeunterlagen for “Krenzia Buczaczer, birth date 16 Oct. 1886,” registration documents from 1921-1939, WStLA. Historische Meldeunterlagen for “Klara Windbeutel, birth date 5. March 1893,” registration documents from 1915-1942, WStLA. Egon Deutsch’s address can be gathered from his emigration papers (see below). The otherwise untraceable detail that Karoline in fact lived with her two younger sisters is described in the manuscript cited above, Deutsch, “untitled manuscript.” Egon Deutsch’s emigration registration papers are available via MyHeritage. The website does not provide details as to fond number or other administrative information, with the exception of this comment: “Die Auswanderungspapiere sind Teil des umfangreichen Gemeindegarchivs der Wiener Israelitischen Kultusgemeinde, das zu den Beständen des Zentralarchivs für die Geschichte des jüdischen Volkes (CAHJP) in Jerusalem gehört.“ The document “Egon Deutsch. Birth date 18. Dec. 1907, Vienna, Austria,” Jüdische Auswanderungsanträge, 1938-1939, Österreich, Wien was retrieved here <https://www.myheritage.at/research/collection-11000/osterreich-wien-judische-auswanderungsantrage-1938-1939?itemId=39415&action=showRecord> on 5 July 2024.

⁵⁶⁰ The family manuscript references that Karoline wished to emigrate legally and thus had stayed behind, the inference being that Ernestine and Egon left clandestinely in some way.

⁵⁶¹ Her new address was in the Klosterneubergerstrasse. Historische Meldeunterlagen for “Krenzia Buczaczer, birth date 16 Oct. 1886,” registration documents from 1921-1939, WStLA.

⁵⁶² These details are fascinating but not relevant for the present narrative. Ernestine ended up with the young George Thomas in Switzerland; Egon was deported to Auschwitz and Mauthausen but survived. His mother, Paula, who was initially with them in Brussels, was killed in Auschwitz. Egon and Ernestine eventually reunited after the war and emigrated in 1949 to Australia. Private email from Carol Vogel (relative of the Deutsch family) 3 June 2024 to the author, with various digital archival records attached. The initial destination, Belgium, of the Deutsch/Buczaczer family was in fact a common trajectory and a significant number of Viennese Jews survived the war there by going underground. For more, on the fate of Viennese Jews in Belgium see Andrea Hurton, “Verfolgung und Rettungswiderstand. Untergetauchte Wiener Juden und Jüdinnen in Belgien 1940–1945; drei Familiengeschichten“ in *Verfolgung und Ahndung*, ed. Christine Schindler (Dokumentationsarchiv des Österreichischen Widerstandes, 2021).

French convent and passing as a nun for the remainder of the war.⁵⁶³ According to her (step)grandson, she would later regal him with stories of life in the convent, how she dressed as a nun, donned a crucifix, and attended mass daily.⁵⁶⁴ Indeed, Karoline was reunited with Ernestine, Egon, and the young George Thomas after the war (1946) and they lived together for some years (Karoline shared a room with her (step)grandson), until, in 1949, the Deutsch family left for Australia and Karoline joined her other two step-children, Thea and Max, in Israel. There, her exact fate is unknown. Blanka refers to her six times between May 1948 and July 1949 and then there is nothing. The last diary entry mentioning her is opaque, Blanka wrote:

C-ta Mittwoch 7/XII 1949

[...] Die Kousine schreibt die Tante sei bei ihnen, fühle sich aber nicht gut weil sie infolge der Einsamkeit sehr leide. Sie seien Beide den ganzen Tag auswärts beschäftigt und wohnen entlegen. Keine Zuschrift von der Tante nicht einmal ein Gruss. Sehr sonderbar, die Tante hat immer aus Bruxelles sehr fleissig geschrieben und sich sehr interessiert an uns gezeigt. Was soll das jetzt bedeuten? Zuerst haben wir das Schlimste angenommen, jetzt ergeben wir uns in andere verschiedene Vermutungen, doch nur Gott weiss was dort ist. [...]

⁵⁶³ According to the private manuscript of the Deutsch family, Karoline was secretly taken from Nice to Lyon by two priests, where she was hidden in the Les Petites Soeurs des Pauvres convent. The bishop and nuns were aware of who she was and why she was there. Deutsch, “untitled manuscript.”

⁵⁶⁴ A mystery that remains entirely unexplained is that Karoline was in fact receiving welfare payments from the Catholic community in Vienna prior to her emigration; her emigration papers state as much quite clearly (“steht unter Fürsorge der K.G.”) and they are stamped with a prominent red “K,” indicating “Katholisch” (Catholic). One of her sisters, Berta, also has a large, red “K” pencilled onto her residence registration papers, though she was, at the same time, noted as Jewish (and a smaller, red “J” also appears). Historische Meldeunterlagen for “Berta Windbeutel, birth date 14 Dec. 1891,” registration documents from 1914-1942, WStLA. Neither sister appear on conversion records held by the Catholic community in Vienna, private email and information Dr. Johanna Kößler, director of the Diözesanarchiv to author, 22 July 2024. The location of registers regarding recipients of welfare payments in 1939 is unknown. Because this matter is tangential, though intriguing, I did not pursue it further, but it may indicate that Karoline and her sisters were already accustomed to passing as Catholic or had contemplated and/or pursued this avenue of survival at an earlier date. Karoline Buczaczer née Windbeutel’s emigration registration papers are available via MyHeritage. The document „Krenzia Buczaczer. Birth date 16. Oct. 1886, Vienna, Austria,“ Jüdische Auswanderungsanträge, 1938-1939, Österreich, Wien; was retrieved here <https://www.myheritage.at/research/collection-11000/osterreich-wien-judische-auswanderungsantrage-1938-1939?itemId=116499&action=showRecord> on 5 June 2024. For additional details on the Catholic Hilfsstelle (Archiepiscopal Aid Agency for “Non-Aryans”) see Michaela Raggam-Blesch, “Unexpected Alliances and Limits of Solidarity. Non-Jewish Organizations and the Jewish Community assisting Jews and “Non-Aryans” in Vienna, 1938-1945,” in *Jewish Solidarity: The Ideal and the Reality in the Turmoil of the Shoah*, ed. Dan Mikhman and Robert Rozett (Yad Vashem, 2022). This agency was only founded, however, in 1940 (Raggam-Blesch, “Unexpected Alliances,” 157), meaning that Karoline received welfare from a different administrative entity.

According to the descendants of Ernestine and Egon, Karoline passed away in Israel.⁵⁶⁵

The other two Windbeutel sisters, Klara and Berta, had never married and lived in the same flat in the Ägidigasse in Vienna's sixth district from 1915 until 30 December 1939. At that time they moved or were moved a few hundred metres away, presumably to a *Sammelwohnung* (collective flats), where Jews were forced to live together under crowded conditions. Here they stayed for a year and a half, before being transferred to another *Sammelwohnung*, this time in the second district, in the Aloisgasse on 30 June 1941.⁵⁶⁶ From here they were deported on 27 April 1942 with 1,000 other Viennese Jews to Włodawa, Poland. Of this transport only three people survived.⁵⁶⁷ Somehow in the early postwar years, Blanka and her mother had learned of the fate of Klara and Berta. In May of 1948 Blanka wrote „Vor Kurzem hatten wir auch ein erstes Schreiben aus Brüssel von meiner Tante Karoline, eine Schwester meiner Mama, die einzige die ihr von vier geblieben ist.“⁵⁶⁸



Figure 55. Berta and Klara Windbeutel on the Shoah Wall of Names Memorial in Vienna. Source: Julie Dawson, 2024.

Finding family members scattered across the world or Europe after the war was no simple task.⁵⁶⁹ The Arolsen archives contain millions of documents testifying to the search for lost relatives, but Blanka and her mother do not appear there. It is not clear how Karoline discovered their

⁵⁶⁵ The family manuscript states that Karoline died in 1951 or 1952 and that she lived with Max in Haifa. Her grave was not indexed via any databases at the time of writing.

⁵⁶⁶ For more on the *Sammelwohnungen* and this period of Jewish persecution in Vienna, see Dieter J. Hecht, Michaela Raggam-Blesch, Heidemarie Uhl, *Letzte Orte: die Wiener Sammelager und die Deportationen 1941/42* (Mandelbaum Verlag, 2019) and in general regarding the fate of the Jewish community in Vienna Dieter J. Hecht, Eleonore Lappin, Michaela Raggam-Blesch, und Heidemarie Uhl, *Topographie der Shoah: Gedächtnisorte des zerstörten jüdischen Wien* (Mandelbaum Verlag, 2015).

⁵⁶⁷ For their addresses, see the residence registration documents cited above for Berta and Klara Windbeutel. The information regarding the date of deportation can be seen from the final registration card as well as the documents provided by the Memento project, which details the deportation of Jewish individuals in Vienna. The website is a project of the Dokumentationsarchiv des österreichischen Widerstandes (Documentation Archive of the Austrian Resistance). The Windbeutel sisters are listed here <https://www.memento.wien/person/44632/> and <https://www.memento.wien/person/44633/>, retrieved 13 March 2024.

⁵⁶⁸ 12 May 1948. English: “We also recently received a first letter from Brussels from my Aunt Karoline, a sister of my mama, the only one that remains of four.”

⁵⁶⁹ On the Arolsen archives, see Stone, *Fate Unknown*. On missing persons see also Tehila Darmon Malka, “Missing Persons and World War II: Between Personal and National Loss,” *War in History* 29, no. 3 (2022): 641–63 and Tehila Darmon Malka, “‘I Am Filled with Hope That My Son Is Still Alive’: The Search for Missing Children after the Holocaust,” *Legacy* 10 (2017): 24–36.

whereabouts in Constanța, nor how Anna learned of her sisters' murders in Poland, but the radio was a frequent means of broadcasting the survival and basic location of family members.⁵⁷⁰ The local Jewish community accepted messages and correspondence for more or less any Jew who happened to be there.⁵⁷¹

Though haphazard, the messages via the radio often functioned. In the first entry of the diaries, quoted at the beginning of Chapter 3, Blanka references both that she had discovered her (step)cousin⁵⁷² Max's address in Haifa and written to him, while he had simultaneously heard her greetings via Radio Jerusalem and had immediately written to her. For the next few years she recorded writing regularly to Max and Thea, but at some point, the letters ceased or in any case, she did not again record writing to or hearing from the two cousins in Israel.⁵⁷³ Perhaps her frustration with her plight and grief surrounding her mother's death rendered her paralysed in this arena or she may have found the drudgery of her life left nothing about which to write. She conveys this sense of boredom and disgust in some of her own diary entries.

Her only other cousins on her mother's side of the family were Babette and Gustav Chomed. Strangely, she never mentions Babette Chomed within the diaries, though Babette's papers in Mediaș included one letter and a postcard from Blanka, both dated 1947 and written in an intimate, friendly, tone. Possibly, with her move to Mediaș in Transylvania (Babette was initially in Bucharest), Blanka and her mother lost track of Babette. The reason for why they were not in contact during the period of the diaries remains a mystery.⁵⁷⁴ Babette and her mother, Zirl, had

⁵⁷⁰ Tehila Darmon Malka, "'Mi makir, mi yodea' mechipushi hakrovim be'eropa le'achar hashoa ve'ad hamdur l'chipush krovim" ["'Who knows, who knows?' On searching for relatives in Europe after the Holocaust to the department for searching for relatives"], *Israelis: A Multidisciplinary Journal for the Study of Israel* (Ben Gurion Institute for the Study of Israel and Zionism, 2011), 47-69. The Jewish Museum in Berlin recently hosted an event dedicated to this radio program. <https://www.jmberlin.de/wer-weiss-wer-kennt>. Retrieved 6 May 2025.

⁵⁷¹ For example, in Blanka's 1947 letter to Babette (in the annex), Blanka instructed Babette to continue sending their mail to the Jewish community in Constanța, not to their private address.

⁵⁷² Blanka refers to Max and Thea as her cousins and the private manuscript of the Deutsch family also indicates that the familial relationship between Karoline and her (step)grandson George Thomas especially was a very close one, she had, after all, become the mother figure to the Buczaczer children when they were all very young.

⁵⁷³ Max Buczaczer died in 1992 in New York; he emigrated with his family to the United States already in the 1950s and/or 60s. His naturalisation certificate dates 1964 though his son appears in various documents in the 1950s. "Max Buczaczer. Birth date 25. April 1911. Naturalization Date 13. Jan. 1964," New York Southern District Court, Index to Petitions for Naturalization Filed in Federal, State, and Local Courts in New York City, 1792-1989, New York, NY, USA, The National Archives at New York City. Database online at Ancestry.com. I have not been able to discover when or where Thea Neumann née Buczaczer died. Ernestine and Egon Deutsch died in Australia in 1993 and 1973 respectively. Private email from Carol Vogel to author 3 June 2024. The Buczaczer siblings in Israel and Australia were not in regular contact after the war. Private email, Jan Deutsch to author, 29 April 2025.

⁵⁷⁴ It is also possible they *were* in contact, but Blanka did not record it, though given her loneliness after her mother's death, it seems improbable.

been deported from Czernowitz but were in the harsher Transnistrian camp of Bershad and Zirl did not survive.⁵⁷⁵ Gustav had left Czernowitz in July 1941 with the Russian army and only returned after the border to Romania was closed in 1947.⁵⁷⁶ Thus, Babette, in several ways, lived a similar life to Blanka during the first few decades after the war, as an educated, single woman devoid of family members and uprooted from her home community.

Though we cannot know whether Babette was as lonesome as Blanka or traumatised to the same degree, she was in some ways better equipped to deal with the displacement due to several key factors at odds with Blanka's experience. First, Babette was a mature adult at the start of the war, she had studied in the interwar period in France, held a degree from the University of Czernowitz and was trained as a teacher.⁵⁷⁷ She taught privately (and probably within the school system as well) prior to the war in Czernowitz, thus she had an established professional identity and had been independent prior to the war. In Mediaș she continued to pursue this occupation, one for which she was qualified and had herself chosen, teaching there until her retirement.⁵⁷⁸

In addition, born in 1904, she was already in her late thirties when the war began and may have come to terms with (or deliberately chosen) her unmarried and childless status prior to the war, rather than having this thrust upon her by circumstance. Moreover one member of her immediate family, Gustav, had survived, they were in regular contact and visited one another over the years.⁵⁷⁹ Finally, Mediaș was culturally a German town, founded in the 13th century by Transylvanian Saxons. Though by the postwar period and even interwar period, the German (Siebenbürger Sachsen) population had decreased and was no longer a majority, it retained its German-language character. Several schools were taught in German and especially in the historic centre German continued to be commonplace in daily life. The Jewish community itself had been multilingual but a significant portion of the community identified explicitly as German-speakers

⁵⁷⁵ I have not found Zirl in archival documents but besides the fact that she is clearly not physically present in any postwar material, we know from Blanka's comment regarding her mother's sisters that she died in the war. On the Bershad ghetto, see Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, *Ghosts of Home*, 274-286.

⁵⁷⁶ Please see footnote 114 for references to Gustav Chomed's biography.

⁵⁷⁷ A variety of papers related to Babette Chomed's life in Mediaș, including a copy of her diploma from Czernowitz, are to be found in the Jewish community archives there: "Assistance file for Chomed Babette, refugee from Czernowitz, 1964-1989," Box SD2, Folder 5, Mediaș Jewish Community Collection, Mediaș Jewish Community Archives, Mediaș.

⁵⁷⁸ The date of her retirement is not known but in 1972, when she received a flat in one of the new blocs, she was still described as a teacher, see file citation above.

⁵⁷⁹ Several of Gustav's letters to Babette are also part of the Blanka Lebzelter Collection, they are found in folder 1, Blanka Lebzelter Collection, AR 25437, LBI. Regarding the siblings visiting each other, see sources cited in footnote 114.

(this in addition to Hungarian, the other language primarily spoken by the Jews in southern Transylvanian Saxon towns).⁵⁸⁰ It was moreover, like Bukovina, a region which had formerly belonged to the Habsburg Empire. In other words, the “culture shock” which Blanka experienced in Constanța, would have been significantly less in Mediaș. Gustav was permitted to emigrate from Czernowitz to Israel in 1972, but Babette never joined him. She died in Romania sometime after 1989.⁵⁸¹ It is not clear whether she applied to emigrate and was denied permission (which seems unlikely in light of her age) or whether she was perhaps content with her life in Mediaș, a quiet town with medieval walls and towers, situated in a verdant valley.

The Lebzelter/Heiss Cousins

Though her mother may have been closer to her own sisters, Blanka was probably closest to her father’s side of the family, or at least to the Heiss children, who, with the exception of the eldest, Leopold, would have been a regular presence in her childhood. Berthold, the youngest, had fled to Chile in 1938 and presumably Blanka had no contact information for him, he does not appear in the diaries until 1959. Leopold, who had emigrated to the United States in 1922 but visited Vășcăuți in 1936, is most probably the cousin in New York with whom she regularly corresponded from 1948 to 1952.⁵⁸² Leopold (Paul Hays) sent her regular packages and occasionally money, though the logistics of receiving it were complex. Still, the existence of this relative and the support they received through him, contributed for several years in a tangible manner to the survival of the Lebzelter women. Loath as she was to ask for aid, Blanka did so a number of times, for example in the particularly dire period of 1949, when her expectation of imminent emigration turned to dust and she had not yet secured a job.⁵⁸³

From 1949 onwards, however, the rules for sending packages became increasingly cumbersome and expensive, such that soon it was no longer worth it to receive packages from

⁵⁸⁰ The interwar statutes of the community specify German as the community’s language. On this community, see my Master’s Thesis, Julie Dawson, “The Jews of Saxon Mediaș: The German-Jewish Thread in Transylvanian Tapestry,” Columbia University, 2012, p. 46.

⁵⁸¹ The final documents in her file record that she moved to a Jewish home for the elderly in 1989. “Assistance file for Chomed Babette, refugee from Czernowitz, 1964-1989,” Box SD2, Folder 5, Mediaș Jewish Community Collection, Mediaș Jewish Community Archives.

⁵⁸² Unfortunately, Blanka never gives a name to this cousin, so I cannot be absolutely certain it was Leopold/Paul, but it seems the most likely person in light of their shared background and for lack of other relatives with whom she was close in the United States. Presumably she and her mother had retained his address or received it from Berta immediately after the war and were able to reestablish contact.

⁵⁸³ This entry is quoted in the diary excerpts from 1949, prior to Chapter 4.

overseas. The last time she mentions her “American cousin” is in January 1952, when she wrote begging him to send medicine for her mother, to which he responded that sending medication was no longer permitted.

From 1952 onwards, for several years, she does not again mention writing to or hearing from her relatives in the United States. Thus, with the tightening of the Iron Curtain, so too did her paths of communication outside of the country narrow. By the 1950s the Securitate, the communist secret police organ, was well established, as were the prisons for dissenters or suspects of dissent. Blanka wrote seldom and circumspectly about the political situation and never outright about concrete inland political events, for example, the purging of Ana Pauker or trials of Zionists (both of which took place in the 1950s).⁵⁸⁴ But like all Romanian citizens, she would have been aware of the secret police and she had moreover already intimately experienced the powerlessness of an individual against a criminal state. Indeed, she was repeatedly flustered by cryptic inquiries on the part of the Romanian police regarding her past life. In 1949 she reported her unease at the refusal of the police to recognise her postwar papers:

C-ta Mittwoch 7/XII 1949

[...] Man gibt seit einiger Zeit bei uns in der Stadt neue Buletine⁵⁸⁵ heraus. Man muss dazu verschiedene Dokumente haben. Da wir doch alle Dokumente verloren haben, habe mir was möglich war verschafft, einen Ersatzgeburtschein und 2 Certifikate der cetățenie.⁵⁸⁶ Gestern ist unsere Gasse an die Reihe gekommen. Habe mich gestern abend mit den vorhandenen Papieren und den photographien bei der Miliz⁵⁸⁷ präsentiert. Man hat mich gefragt von wo ich bin, seit wann ich hier bin, und mich damit abgewiesen dass ich keine Akte habe. Man hat in den alten Buletins vermerkt: Besitzt keine Akte, bleibt sich später zu prezentieren. Ähnliches hat man auch in einem Register eingetragen. Das ganze hat mir nicht gefallen, doch will ich mich nicht beunruhigen. Es gibt so viele Repatrierte im Lande, die Transnistria-Ueberlebenden, es widerstrebt mir zu glauben dass man gegen uns was im Schilde führt. [...]

⁵⁸⁴ See Levy, *Ana Pauker*, for details as to these events. Because Blanka entirely ignores these events in her diary (Ana Pauker's purging was taking place around the time her mother died), I have chosen not to go into more detail.

⁵⁸⁵ Romanian: identity cards.

⁵⁸⁶ Romanian: certificates of citizenship.

⁵⁸⁷ This was the (Germanised-spelling of the) Romanian designation for the police force at the time.

Similarly, in September 1953 she reported:

C-ța Freitag 11.9.53

Vor einigen Tagen habe eine Vorladung auf die Miliz erhalten. Konnte mir nicht denken wofür. Dort hat man mir geheissen eine Deklaration schreiben wo ich seit dem Jahre 1940 gewöhnt habe und womit ich mich seither beschäftigt habe. Mir war nicht gut zu Mute. Warum kann die das interessieren. Führe ein stilles, zurückgezogenes Dasein, wie kommt die Miliz dazu sich um mich zu interessieren. Auf meine Fragen hat man mir zum Schluss geantwortet es handle sich um eine Geldstrafe auf der Eisenbahn. Ich sagte ich wäre niemals auf der Eisenbahn bestraft worden und wunderte mich dass man meinen nicht gewöhnlichen Namen mit einem andern verwechseln könne. Ich finde die Sache merkwürdig. Auf der Vorladung stand mein Namen korrekt, wie kommt das? Weiss nicht was ich davon halten soll.

Blanka was probably right to be suspicious of this incident and her statement regarding her “silent, withdrawn existence” may indicate a conscious decision to do everything possible to fly beneath the radar of the authorities.⁵⁸⁸ She almost certainly was aware of arrests and the prisons of the secret police, also of their suspicion of individuals who communicated with foreigners. She may have stopped corresponding with her relatives outside of the country to protect herself, frightened of drawing the attention of the authorities in any way.

But one Heiss cousin remained within reach. For reasons that cannot be known but may be as banal as a lack of energy and incentive after the struggles of managing each day, Blanka and her mother had lost touch with Berta (née Heiss) and Max (Mayer/Meier) Lindenbaum in the period after the ghetto was dissolved. The Lindenbaums do not appear on the lists from 1946 of those who crossed in mass from northern Bukovina to southern, they had arrived earlier: in May 1945 Dr. Mayer Lindenbaum, formerly of Boian, was reinstated and appointed doctor in the sub-

⁵⁸⁸ Regarding living in a police state the present day journalist and Russian exile recently wrote “People live in growing isolation and with the feeling of low-level dread, and these are the defining conditions of living in a secret-police state. People lose the ability to plan for the future, because they feel that they have no control over their lives, and they try to make themselves invisible. They move through the world without looking, for fear of seeing too much,” all of which resonates with Blanka’s opaque references to anything political in her diary and nervousness in the face of police authorities. Masha Gessen, “Unmarked Vans. Secret Lists. Public Denunciations. Our Police State Has Arrived,” *New York Times*, 2 April 2025.

district (*circ*) of Coțușca, near the border to Bessarabia and Bukovina.⁵⁸⁹ From there Lindenbaum transferred, by 1948 at the latest, to Solca, a small town in southern Bukovina and only about twenty kilometres to Rădăuți.⁵⁹⁰

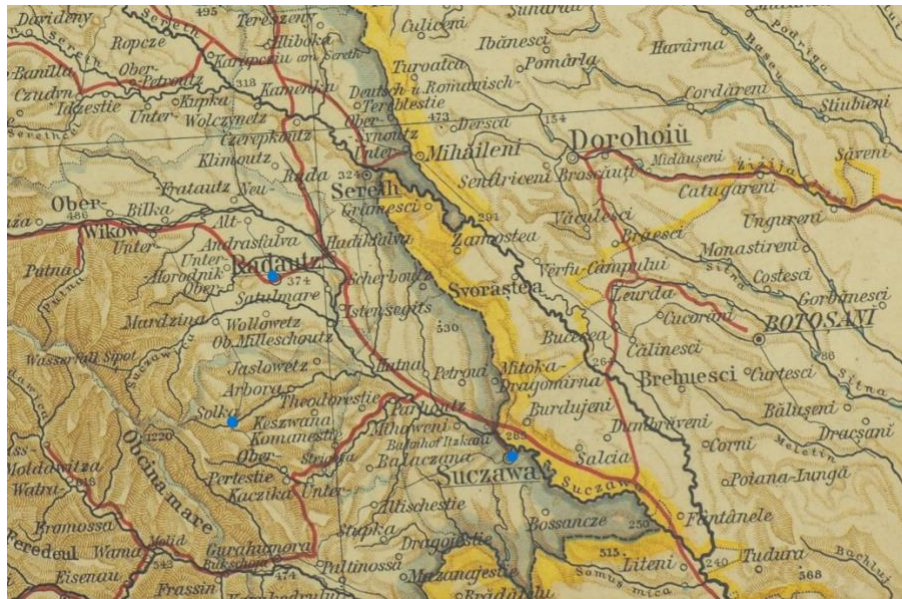


Figure 56. Southern Bukovina region where Max and Berta Lindenbaum lived postwar. Source: See footnote 590.

Chaim Heiss most likely remained with them after their liberation from the ghetto until he (re?)settled in Rădăuți at some unknown point. His name appears neither on the lists of those crossing the border in 1946, nor, however, in lists from the Rădăuți Jewish community from 1945-1949, possibly indicating that he had remained with the Lindenbaums for this period.⁵⁹¹ Sometime

⁵⁸⁹ This lengthy declaration, which specifies Lindenbaum's previous post in Boian and outlines receipt of retirement payments for the time he had been removed due to "anti-Jewish" laws, is under the rubric "Ministerul Sănătății" (Ministry for Health), *Monitorul Oficial* (Partea I), Nr. 112, 21 May 1945, p. 4202.

⁵⁹⁰ Activity reports from Solca filed by Lindenbaum to the head county doctor in Suceava date from June 1948 but similar files prior to this date are not in the collection. A folder with a chart of medical personnel in the district could not be found by archivists (folder 3/1949 of collection cited below). "Repoarte de activitate ale medicilor din circumscripțiile sanitare din județul Suceava," Serviciul sanitar al județului Suceava 1926-1949, inv. 114; fond. nr. 30; folder 29/1948, SJAN Suceava, Suceava. The map in Figure 56 is cropped from "Nordöstliches Ungarn, Östliches Galizien und Bukowina," in *Andrees Allgemeiner Handatlas*, ed. A. Scobel (Perles, 1912), Private Archive, Julie Dawson. The blue dots indicate the towns of Solca, Suceava, and Rădăuți. Coțușca is not pictured but is northeast of Dorohoi.

⁵⁹¹ The collection of the Jewish community of Rădăuți was closed for processing when I lived in Suceava to undertake an archival survey of Jewish-related material (2012). It has since been re-opened to researchers but the inventory is only available on-site and the collection is extensive (many thousands of pages) and rich in postwar material. During my 2024 research trip to Romania and Ukraine time only allowed me to view a fragment of the collection. I viewed several lists of Jews residing in Rădăuți in the initial postwar years as well as various lists of those receiving welfare payments. Chaim Heiss was not on any of the lists. It is also possible his absence resulted from not affiliating with the official Jewish community, in a similar way to that of Blanka, though this is impossible to determine. Fond Comunitatea evreiască Rădăuți, inv. 111, fond 346, SJAN Suceava, Suceava. I viewed lists of names contained in the following folders 2/1945, 10/1945, 11/1945, 23/1945 (comprising two folders).

between 1949 and 1956, the Lindenbaums moved or were transferred again, now to the larger town of Suceava, while Chaim settled in Rădăuți, with his second wife.⁵⁹²

Perhaps as a result of memories brought to the fore via her narrative letters written in 1955, one year later Blanka sought Berta and found her. The reestablishment of relations with Berta and Max was to have a decisive and positive influence on Blanka's wellbeing, though it also distilled the vast emotional abyss in her daily life and the grievous shortcomings of her own physical environment. Though her visit to the Lindenbaums in Suceava was not a return to her hometown, towards which she would always harbour ambivalent feelings, it did return her to Bukovina and to a way of life she had not experienced for years. Her visit to Berta was one of recuperation. She noted several times the good food, the good air, the peace of the garden. She attended a concert, visited with her cousin's friends and Berta and a former schoolmate tried to arrange a match for her. In short, she was embraced and taken care of, part of a community, consisting not only of family but also other individuals whom she once knew, German-speaking Bukovina Jews, with a shared background, shared loss, and shared hopes.

During the first visit in July and August 1956, described in the excerpts above, she ended up staying longer than the planned two weeks, at the urging of Berta and Max. In the end her departure was unexpectedly awkward as Uncle Sigmund (Chaim Heiss) fell suddenly ill at the beginning of August, after Blanka had already postponed her return to Constanța. Berta hastened to be with her father in Rădăuți and Blanka returned to Constanța a few days later without a personal farewell. Nonetheless, the reunion and experience had impressed upon her how unusually apart she lived and how dismal her environment was. In an entry describing her return trip she concluded:

Konstantza Sontag 19.8.56

Habe in der Wohnung grosse Ordnung gemacht. Natürlich nicht auf einmal, dazu reichen meine Kräfte nicht.⁵⁹³ Habe die Hauptarbeit vorigen Sonntag und heute gemacht. Das Zimmer ist wie ein Schmuckkästchen. Doch kommt kein Besuch zu mir. Fühle wieder die Einsamkeit mich schwer bedrücken.

⁵⁹² There are no records indicating the identity of this second wife nor when or where they wed (for example, prewar or postwar). We know this fact only from Blanka's diary.

⁵⁹³ Blanka was suffering from an undiagnosed ailment at the time, which she attributed to the psychological stress of constant harassment by the neighbours.

Nevertheless, the visit had shifted Blanka's perspective in several ways. She wrote a few days later to her cousin Leopold/Paul (Berta's brother) in the United States again, noting that it was the first time in four and a half years. That is, she had kept track of her own silence.⁵⁹⁴ A few weeks after her return she sought out the performance of a Soviet-Ukrainian dance and song troop, noting afterwards: "Es war eine sehr schöne Darbietung und manches von den Gesängen und Kostümen hat mich an meine bukowiner Heimat erinnert."⁵⁹⁵ This, the only time in the diaries in which she specifically references Bukovina, was thus immediately after her first return to the region since 1946. In September she anxiously waited for word from Berta, who had yet to respond to her letters upon her return. In late September she learned why: Uncle Sigmund, Chaim Heiss, had died.⁵⁹⁶

Over the next year Blanka and Berta corresponded regularly, though Berta's answers were often delayed as Max had fallen ill.⁵⁹⁷ Berta appears to have been more cognizant than Blanka of the importance of community above all else and how damaging the lack thereof was to Blanka's mental state, she encouraged Blanka to move to Suceava. Nevertheless, despite her situation in Constanța, which Blanka would never describe as positive, she demurred, explaining in the diary, somewhat surprisingly, that she saw the "poor living conditions" [in Suceava] and did not like the "little town." Apparently, despite her negative experiences, Blanka considered Constanța superior in its cultural offerings, she had, after all, always longed to escape provincial life in Vășcăuți. Though Suceava would have offered community, she may have recognised aspects of her childhood surroundings which disturbed her and hesitated to take what she seems to have considered a step "back."⁵⁹⁸

⁵⁹⁴ She records writing to him on 30 August 1956 and does not record whether she received an answer.

⁵⁹⁵ 16 Sept. 1956. English: "It was a very lovely performance and some of the songs and costumes reminded me of my Bukovina home."

⁵⁹⁶ She records this on 20 Sept. 1956. Chaim Heiss' gravestone in the Rădăuți cemetery records that he died on 27 August 1956, almost one month to the day after Blanka had reunited with him. It is only due to her diary entry regarding his death that I was able to finally piece together that Chaim Heiss was "Uncle Sigmund," i.e. k.u.k. Gerichtskanzlist Siegmund Heiss (from the Waschkoutz birth record book, just one of his many names, as I have shown above).

⁵⁹⁷ For example, on 27 Jan. 1957 Blanka records „Gestern erhielt ich eine Karte von der Berta in der sie mir mitteilt der Max sei schwer krank und seit 6 Wochen im Bett.“ English: "Yesterday I received a card from Berta in which she told me that Max is very ill and has been bedridden for six weeks."

⁵⁹⁸ It is difficult for us as readers to understand what counted for Blanka as "poor living conditions." Her own flat in Constanța had no running water, the toilet facilities were in an outhouse in the courtyard and she had no garden, which was a substantial and real advantage at the time because it allowed one to grow one's own food. She was presumably referring to something specific about the conditions of the houses in Suceava or the state of the roads, but it is impossible for us to know exactly what she meant.

Still, less than a year later her living and employment conditions had deteriorated to such a degree that she changed her mind and wrote to Berta above a possible move, signalling her willingness if she could find a room and a position of employment.⁵⁹⁹ Berta's response was lost in the mail, but a later letter invited Blanka to spend her holiday with them once more.⁶⁰⁰ Blanka gladly acquiesced, travelling in August again to Suceava, arriving in the middle of the night and taking a horse and carriage (*Fiaker*) to their home, in 1957 this was still the most common means of transportation in the region.⁶⁰¹ There she found Max ill and the well-being of both deteriorated, but Blanka was now more aware than ever of the beneficial surroundings and the discrepancies with Constanța: "Hier ist schönes Wetter und ziemlich kühl, nicht die grossen Hitzen von Konstantza. Ich beneide die Berta um ihre Nachbarschaft. Lauter feine anständige ruhige Menschen. Hätte ich solche Nachbarn wäre ich ein ganz anderer Mensch."⁶⁰²

Blanka's description of this visit was more ambivalent, perhaps as a way to protect herself from the disappointment that a move to Suceava seemed to be off the table, apparently due to the state of Max's health.⁶⁰³ She was also overwhelmed with anxiety for her belongings in Constanța, and thus relieved, in one way, to depart. Nevertheless she noted immediately upon her arrival in Constanța:

Sonntag 25 VIII 57

Die Pein der Einsamkeit hat wieder angefangen. Über zwei Wochen war ich mit Leuten zusammen die mir gut waren, jetzt bin wieder allein. Nur zwei Wochen von einem Jahr nicht einsam, und auch dann mit qualvollen Gedanken und Sorgen um mein Hab und Gut das hier herrenlos zurückbleibt.

⁵⁹⁹ 30 April 1957.

⁶⁰⁰ 15 June 1957.

⁶⁰¹ 10 August 1957.

⁶⁰² 10 VIII 57. English: "It is beautiful weather here and fairly cool, not the great heat of Constanța. I envy Berta her neighbourhood. Nothing but dignified, decent, quiet people. If I had such neighbours I would be an entirely different person."

⁶⁰³ During this visit Rosa Heiss, née Schmidt, the wife of Berthold Heiss (Berta's brother; she is pictured in photos in Chapter 6), also visited Berta and Max. Rosa came from Chile, bringing many fine gifts and Blanka received a bracelet, a blouse, and a Parisian lipstick, in addition to a watch from Berta, who had received a new golden one from Rosa. Blanka reports on the visit with some detachment. She does not write as much, but these interactions may have been painful as she witnessed up close the possibilities that life had offered to those who had escaped both wartime persecution and communist restrictions.

The next year, in August 1958, she again spent her summer holiday in Suceava with Berta and Max, commenting again on the “Ruhe und gutes Essen” (peace and good food) which she there enjoyed while noting that everything was arranged around Max’s care, as he had suffered from a heart attack. This trip marked the beginning of a new change: on her return trip to Constanța, she stopped for a day in Bacău to visit Max’s brother, another Czernowitzer, and also a doctor.⁶⁰⁴ That very day he had received notification that his private practice would be closed by the authorities and also, unofficially, that his emigration paperwork had been approved.

By late September it became clear that emigration permits were being granted again in larger numbers. In mid-October 1958, Blanka had managed to apply as well:

16 X 58

Gestern habe den ganzen Nachmittag auf der Miliz verbracht, beschäftigt mit ausfüllung der Formulare. Es waren viele Seiten auszufüllen. Habe gemerkt das Gewicht gelegt wird auf die Verwandten die man in Israel hat, denn Zweck der Ausreise soll Vereinigung der Familienangehörigen sein. Ich Arme habe weder dort noch sonstwo jemand der mich aufnehmen würde. Ich musste aber doch jemand angeben zu dem ich fahre und so habe den Kousin Max angegeben. Habe die Frau die neben mir sass beneidet als ich sah wie sie die Namen ihrer Eltern und Geschwister in Israel wohnhaft, aneinander reihte.

Only two months later, at the end of December 1958, she recorded breathlessly that Berta had received her passport⁶⁰⁵ and on 13 January 1959, Berta and Max boarded the train to Vienna. Blanka had met them in Bucharest to say farewell and Berta gifted her a generous amount of money, knowing that the Lindenbaums would have no need of the currency once they crossed the border. Blanka reported that to her own surprise, it was not difficult to say farewell: “ich war ruhig, vielleicht war es eine Art Stumpfsinn oder die Hoffnung ihr sehr bald zu folgen.”⁶⁰⁶

Blanka believed Berta and Max were going to Israel, as everyone stated on their applications, thus she was shocked and confused to receive a letter in February 1959 bearing an African stamp and a Chilean return address. Berta was not going to Israel, but rather sailing to Chile to join her brother Berthold. Her report of their travels since they had left Romania Blanka

⁶⁰⁴ 28 Aug. 1958.

⁶⁰⁵ 27 Dec. 1958.

⁶⁰⁶ 14 Jan. 1959. English: “I was calm, maybe it was a sort of numbness or the hope to follow her very soon.”

equated to “ein Märchen” (a fairytale), she concluded the entry bittersweet “Meine Hoffnung also mich mit ihr in kurzer Zeit in Israel wiederzusehen ist ins Wasser gefallen. Es schmerzt mich tief und die Tränen fließen sooft ich daran denke, trotzdem bin ich froh sie am Ziel zu wissen.”⁶⁰⁷

With the departure of Berta and Max in 1959, she lost one of the relationships that had become most important to her in the last several years and that must have also, due to their shared memories of family members, hometown, and experience in Transnistria, offered particular comfort. But though Blanka would never have described herself as outgoing socially, she did have a few other social connections and especially one intimate friend, Ani Gheorghiu.

Friendships

Blanka names two women, Lya and Ani, in the diaries as “friends,” everyone else she calls an acquaintance (*Bekannte*) and provides no names for the latter. Lya is a woman Blanka knew from Bukovina, though it is not clear whether she was a childhood friend from Vășcăuți or a friend made later, perhaps at a gymnasium in Czernowitz or another town (Vășcăuți had no gymnasium of its own). Lya lived in Bucharest during the period of the diaries and their friendship was somewhat fraught. Blanka was plagued now and then by jealousy, especially after Lya married a man who earned well. Thus, she lived comfortably, had a successful husband and attractive child, travelled by airplane, and stayed in hotels. In short, she lived a life of which Blanka could only dream. But despite her envy and their occasional quarrels, theirs was clearly an old friendship and one that Blanka valued greatly. However, in February 1958 Lya received her emigration permit and departed:

9.II.1958.

Bin die ganze Woche nicht dazu gekommen über das letzte Ereignis hier zu berichten: Die Lya ist nach Israel abgereist. Habe Montag ihr Schreiben mit dieser Nachricht erhalten und hat es mich wie ein unerwarteter Keulenschlag getroffen. Habe bitter zu weinen angefangen und die halbe Nacht Tränen vergossen. Nun bin ich noch einsamer und habe in Bukarest kein Abstiegsquartier mehr. Wenn auch dass Freundschaftsband das uns verknüpfte sich mit den Jahren und der Entfernung verdünnt hatte so hätte es doch niemals

⁶⁰⁷ 14 Feb. 1959 English: “Thus my hope to reunite with her in just a short time in Israel was in vain. It hurts me deeply and the tears begin as soon as I think about it, but nevertheless I am happy she is at her destination.”

reissen können. Und dann die Entfernung war nicht unüberbrückbar; wir konnten uns doch sehen, wenn dies auch nur selten geschah.

More present in her life than Lya, however, was a woman whom Blanka met in Constanța, Ani Gheorghiu. She appears for the first time in the diaries in 1952, half a year after Anna's death and when Blanka was ill with no one to care for her. Blanka wrote: "Montag nachmittag, nachdem ich die letzten Zeilen geschrieben habe, ist die Anni gekommen. Sie war so nett und hat Holz gehackt und Feuer gemacht, und versucht mich ein wenig aufzumuntern."⁶⁰⁸

From this point on Ani appeared regularly in the diaries. It is not clear how the two met, though it may have been through work in some way, as Ani also worked in accounting.⁶⁰⁹ Besides the natural affinity required for friendship, their relationship appears to have been based on a shared love of literature, culture, and the German language itself. Blanka harboured a deep desire to remain culturally connected to the German language and culture, which in Constanța proved nearly impossible. Where she did succeed it was generally with Ani by her side. Furthermore, Ani's mother was German-Jewish, though this was hidden to all, including the authorities (more on this below). It is not clear whether Blanka was "in" on the secret and whether they therefore also acknowledged a shared assimilated German-Jewish background, or if Ani also kept this secret from her friend. In 1953, when Ani moved to Bucharest, Blanka recorded a more formal description of their friendship:

C-ța Sontag 27.9.53

Eine einzige Freundin hatte ich hier in Constanța, die Ani Gheorghiu, ein nettes sehr intelligentes Mädchen. Seit der Mamas Tod war sie der einzige Mensch mit dem ich noch deutsch sprechen konnte, der einzige Mensch mit dem ich stundenlang über alles plaudern konnte und mit dem ich mich gut verstand. Nun hat mich die Ani verlassen, ist nach Bukarest gezogen und ich bin ohne Freundin geblieben. So ist meine Einsamkeit vollendet.

⁶⁰⁸ 13 December 1952. English: "Monday afternoon, after I had written the last lines, Anni arrived. She was so nice and cut wood and made a fire and tried to cheer me up a bit." Please note Blanka writes both Anni and Ani. I spell the name with one "n" in my main text but transcribe according to Blanka's original text, as explained in the introduction.

⁶⁰⁹ This is cited in numerous documents in Ani's Gheorghiu's file. File on Ana Gheorghiu, I 0421984, ACNSAS, Bucharest. They may even have worked at the same cooperative for a short while, but because there were two cooperatives named "Mihai Dumitru" (and both worked for one of them at some point in time), it is not possible to say with confidence.

The closeness of their friendship, which grew over the years, demonstrates two things: first, Blanka's emotional attachment to the German language itself and secondly, once more an ambivalence or even deliberate distance from the official Jewish community and those affiliated with it. Ani and her family certainly were not members. On the contrary, they did everything to prevent it being known that Berta/Bertha Gheorghiu, Ani's mother, was Jewish.

Ani was one of four children born to Constantin (1882-19?) and Berta Gheorghiu née Mayer (1886-1955).⁶¹⁰ Constantin was born in Constanța, to a family of Greek origin and many years later Ani would change her name back to its Greek version: Georgiou.⁶¹¹ Constantin left Romania in 1907 for Brussels and later London, where he married Berta Mayer in 1911.⁶¹² Berta was born in Luxembourg in 1886, but her parents were German-Jews, born in Offenbach and Könen (Konz), Germany.⁶¹³ Constantin and Berta moved to Berlin in 1911, where their four children, Platon (1914-circa 1989),⁶¹⁴ Nestor (1923-2000),⁶¹⁵ Ani (1925-1999),⁶¹⁶ and Vladimir

⁶¹⁰ Constantin's birth date is provided on numerous documents in Ani's CNSAS file (see citations above). Berta's is as well, but it is mistakenly stated to be 1888. Her Luxembourg birth certificate states 1886. "Bertha Mayer," Birth date 8 May 1886, entry Nr. 214; registre des naissances de 1886; État civil, Luxembourg ville, Archives nationales de Luxembourg. My thanks to Philippe Blasen who sent me this document. It is available via familysearch, which provides this citation

"Entry for Bertha Mayer, 1886," Luxembourg, Registres d'état civil, 1796-1941, accessed via FamilySearch at <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:QP7V-5RYT>, retrieved 9 Dec. 2024. Blanka noted in her diary when Berta Gheorghiu passed away (1955). I have not discovered when Constantin Gheorghiu died.

⁶¹¹ Personal communication of Cornelia Gheorghiu, niece of Ani Gheorghiu, 26 June 2024.

⁶¹² These details are repeated multiple times in Ani's CNSAS file, sometimes with slight errors or discrepancies in the years and were also confirmed by Cornelia Gheorghiu, Ani's niece. Personal communication of Cornelia Gheorghiu, 26 June 2024. File on Ana Gheorghiu, I 0421984, ACNSAS, Bucharest.

⁶¹³ The birth records in Luxembourg did not record the religion, but the family is found in the 1885 census and here both of Berta's parents are listed as Jewish and their birth places are given. "Entry for Heymann Mayer, 1885," Luxembourg Volkszählungen 1843-1900, accessed via FamilySearch at <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:6P7Y-W473>, retrieved 9 Dec. 2024. Note that in the census from 1890, the family was entered as Protestants (*Evangelisch*), so they must have converted. The conversion would not have mattered in the eyes of the Nazi regime, but it presumably indicates that Berta (and her children) led an entirely assimilated life. "Entry for Bertha Mayer, 1890," Luxembourg Volkszählungen 1843-1900, accessed via FamilySearch at <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:659Q-WYN8>, retrieved 9 Jan. 2025.

⁶¹⁴ Platon Gheorghiu is sometimes missing as one of Ani's family members in her CNSAS file, presumably because he was over ten years older than the other siblings and much earlier independent. He does appear with birthdate of 7. Feb. 1914, Berlin, on a "Referat" dated 1952, I 0421984, page 42 of 49, ACNSAS, Bucharest, Romania. Cornelia Gheorghiu stated that he died around 1989 in a personal communication on 26. June 2024.

⁶¹⁵ Nestor was born 25 May 1923 in Berlin, according to numerous documents in Ani's CNSAS file and online sources. He died in 2000 in Nürnberg. Aurelia Lăpușan, "Portrete. Oameni care au făcut istorie culturală în Dobrogea: Nestor Gheorghiu," *Ziua de Constanța*, 15 May 2017. <https://www.ziuaconstanta.ro/fondul-documentar-dobrogea-de-ieri-si-de-azi/articol/portrete-oameni-care-au-facut-istorie-culturala-in-dobrogea-nestor-gheorghiu-galerie-foto-68.html> retrieved 16 June 2024 and Richard Constantinidi, "Nestor Gheorghiu (1923-2000)," published 30 April 2013 on the website "ClickZoomBytes. Art and Politics of Romanian Music," <https://czb.ro/articol/4799/>, retrieved 29 May 2024.

⁶¹⁶ Ani's birth year is given as both 1924 and 1925 in numerous documents in her CNSAS file. Her niece stated that she died in Paris in 1999. Personal communication of Cornelia Gheorghiu, 26 June 2024.

(1926-2010),⁶¹⁷ were born. The family's descendants know very little about their time in Berlin, but presumably it was not possible to conceal Bertha's Jewish background from the Nazi administration. In 1936 they moved to Constanța and here successfully obscured their Jewish roots. Ani Gheorghiu has a Securitate file, which makes no mention of the mother being Jewish, rather the family is referred to on various forms as Greek or German in ethnicity, Orthodox in religion, Romanian in citizenship.⁶¹⁸

Proof positive of the success of the family's deception, or perhaps the lengths they were willing to go to undergird the secret, was that Ani worked as a translator for none other than the German Navy in Constanța from 1941 to 1944.⁶¹⁹ According to an undated letter submitted by her brother, Nestor, to the president of the council of ministries, she disappeared without a trace along with everyone engaged by the Nazis on 25 August 1944 (the letter asked the president for help tracing her).⁶²⁰ The Securitate reports that in 1944 she "fled" with the Germans, her brother stated she "disappeared," and on her petition to re-enter the country in 1947 she wrote she had been "evacuated by the Red Cross."⁶²¹ The Securitate documents and her own declaration state that she spent the period from 1944–1947 in Hamburg. Documents, however, from the Arolsen Archives have her registered in Munich in 1946 and 1947.⁶²² Wherever she was and whatever exactly she did during those years, on 1 July 1947 she crossed the border at Arad, and returned to her family in Constanța, arriving, that is, about a year after Blanka did.⁶²³ Her employment with the German

⁶¹⁷ Peter Burkhard & Petra Netter, "In Memoriam: Vladimir Gheorghiu," *International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis*, 59:2 (2011), 143-145.

⁶¹⁸ The information about Berta's Jewish background was concealed through the generations. The daughter of Vladimir Gheorghiu only discovered this after her father's death, but also by way of family "rumour" and without documentary confirmation. Personal communication of Cornelia Gheorghiu to the author, 26. June 2024. The various descriptions of the family's ethnicity, religion, and citizenship are found on numerous documents in Ani's Gheorghiu's file and are the one detail that is often inconsistent over the years. Never, however, is there any mention of Jewish ethnicity or religion for any family member on any of the documents. File on Ana Gheorghiu, I 0421984, ACNSAS, Bucharest.

⁶¹⁹ This fact is reported in almost all the documents in her Securitate file and is cited as the motive for the Securitate opening a file on her: due to this past she was suspected of being a German spy. This is stated explicitly on the document "Referat, 15.02.1956," I 0421984, page 17 of 49, ACNSAS, Bucharest.

⁶²⁰ "Domnule Președinte," undated with stamp 3. XI. 194_, I 0421984, page 18 of 49, ACNSAS, Bucharest.

⁶²¹ Numerous documents in her CNSAS file (which often repeat the same information over many years) state that she "left" or "fled" (*fugit*) with the Germans. Her brother's statement is cited directly above. Ani's statement is on the document "Comisia de Triere a repatriaților, Arad. Fișa-Declarație Nr. 28323" [Number difficult to decipher], I 0421984, page 19 of 49, ACNSAS, Bucharest.

⁶²² She is registered at two different addresses in Munich in 1946 and 1947 on "List of all persons of United Nations and other foreigners, German Jews, and other stateless persons" for Romania. Reference code: DE ITS 2.1.1.1 BY 101 RUM ZM; document ID: 70086812 and reference code: DE ITS 2.1.1.1 BY 101 RUM ZM, document ID: 70086887; Arolsen Archives, Arolsen, Germany.

⁶²³ "Comisia de Triere a repatriaților, Arad. Fișa-Declarație Nr. 28323" [Number difficult to decipher], I 0421984, page 19 of 49, ACNSAS, Bucharest, Romania.

army during the war and the years she spent in Germany immediately afterwards would lead the Securitate to open a file on her in the 1950s, suspecting her of being a German spy.⁶²⁴

Whether Blanka knew any of this and the degree to which the two women discussed war-time events or any aspects of Jewish identity, is something that is never touched upon in the diaries. Blanka wrote rather of Ani's many visits, their outings together, the books they lent one another (six volumes of Heine) and how much she valued her friendship. Despite Blanka's misgivings, Ani's move to Bucharest in 1953 did not mean an end to their friendship. Though they saw one another less often, whenever Ani came to Constanța (where her parents still lived), she sought out Blanka. Frequently she disembarked and went immediately to Blanka's home, where she often spent the night.



Figure 57. Ani Gheorghiu, 1953. Source: Private Archive, Cornelia Gheorghiu.

Thus, it was the daughter of a family, anything but average (with their background in Berlin but also Luxembourg, Brussels, and London), whose parents were of imprecise and mixed nationalities and religions, and whose siblings pursued careers in the arts and research, to whom Blanka felt

⁶²⁴ See footnote 619.

drawn and with whom she became most intimate.⁶²⁵ Nestor, Ani, and Vladimir would all eventually leave Romania: Nestor died in Nürnberg, Vladimir in Giessen, and Ani in Paris.⁶²⁶

Especially for the years from 1953 to 1959 Ani is a constant presence, appearing frequently in entries such as the following: “Heute hat mich die Ani mit ihrem Besuch überrascht. Sie war mir sehr willkommen. Wir haben nach langer Zeit wieder einmal stundenlang über alles geplaudert. Leider bleibt sie nur 3 Tage hier.”⁶²⁷

Ani was not just a friend with whom she could chat, she also frequently slept over. When she was in town the women spent days and nights together, providing Blanka with the sort of close solace more often provided by family members. For example, in 1957 she recorded: “Die Ani ist gestern abend unerwartet angekommen. Sie hat mir die 6 Heine Bände mitgebracht. Sie ist von der Bahn direkt zu mir gekommen und hat natürlich bei mir geschlafen. Wir haben bis spät nach Mitternacht geplaudert.”⁶²⁸ And though they were not close, Blanka also knew Ani’s family—at the very least, her brother Nestor, his wife, and their children. She probably had met her mother, prior to her death in 1955 (which she comments on).

⁶²⁵ Ani’s eldest brother, Platon (b. 1914), had been in the military and gradually disappears from documents. Nestor (also Nistor), was just one year older than she, and involved in the arts, especially music, though his degree was in engineering. He appears in the diaries in the late 1950s, when he became director of Constanța’s theatre (I will discuss this more below). He would later lead the well-known Electorecord company, still appreciated today as having created valuable recordings of folk music during the communist period. Vladimir, her younger brother, completed a psychology degree in Bucharest in 1955 and would eventually become a successful psychologist who worked internationally and managed, in the early 1980s, to leave Romania for Germany. I had almost given up hope on discovering anything about the baffling Ani Gheorghiu because both her first and last name are very common (the CNSAS will not search for a file without a birth date, so I could not access her file when I first requested it many years ago), when I discovered her brother Vladimir’s obituary, which immediately untangled the story of the Gheorghiu family. See Burkhard & Netter, “In Memoriam: Vladimir Gheorghiu.” Because Ani Gheorghiu and her family play a relatively small, though crucial, role in the present work, I have not undertaken a more critical reading or analysis of Ani’s Securitate file. I can say with almost 100% certainty that her brothers, Nestor and Vladimir, also have files at the CNSAS, but I did not submit requests to see these files. Blanka herself does not have a file, nor, apparently, did any of her living family members, in any case, the CNSAS responded in the negative to these requests. Reading the files of the secret police poses its own challenges and the theory and discourse surrounding such readings is a broader topic in its own right. For an excellent overview which takes into account gender issues and microhistorical approaches, see Cristina Vădulescu, *Reading the Archival Revolution: Declassified Stories and Their Challenges* (Stanford University Press, 2024). Other works examining such sources and/or discussing methodological approaches include Valentina Glajar, Alison Lewis, and Corina L. Petrescu, eds., *Secret Police Files from the Eastern Bloc: Between Surveillance and Life Writing* (Camden House, 2016); Valentina Glajar, Alison Lewis, and Corina L. Petrescu, eds., *Cold War Spy Stories from Eastern Europe* (Potomac Books, 2019); Florian Kühner-Wielach and Michaela Nowotnick, eds., *Aus den Giftschränken des Kommunismus: Methodische Fragen zum Umgang mit Überwachungsakten in Zentral- und Südosteuropa* (Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 2018).

⁶²⁶ See above citations regarding their birth and death dates.

⁶²⁷ 2 Dec. 1956. English: “Today Ani surprised me with her visit. I was very pleased to see her. It has been a long while and we again talked about everything possible for hours. Unfortunately she only stayed here three days.”

⁶²⁸ 30 June 1957. English: “Ani arrived unexpectedly yesterday evening. She brought me the six volumes of Heine. She came from the train directly to me and of course slept over. We chatted until late past midnight.”

An entry featuring Ani and her nephew is one of the most evocative, in my opinion, in the entire corpus of the diaries. It at once captures Blanka's solitude, reflective nature, and the significance of her friendship with Ani:

Freitag 11 VII 58.

Die Ani ist hier, sie hat Urlaub. Heute eine Woche war nachts ein schreckliches Gewitter das mich aufgeweckt hat. Als das Gewitter nachgelassen hatte, klopfte es plötzlich an meinem Fenster. Es war die Ani mit ihrem 8 jährigen Neffen. Nachdem sie sich die Füße gewaschen übergab ich ihnen mein Bett und legte mich aufs Sofa. Sie waren müde und schliefen gleich ein. Ich lag schlaflos (draussen hat das Gewitter wieder von vorn angefangen) und lauscht ihren ruhigen Atemzügen. Es war für meine Ohren ein ungewohntes doch nicht störendes Geräusch.

Beyond literature, the interests the women shared included theatre and music. They frequently attended performances together, especially after Ani's brother, Nestor, became director of the city opera:

Freitag 11 VII 58.

Wir haben jetzt in unserer Stadt eine Oper. Die Eröffnung hat mit der Oper „Traviata“ von Verdi stattgefunden. Ich glaube, ich habe bereits erwähnt dass der Anis Bruder da Direktor ist. Habe die Oper 2 mal gesehen, in 2 verschiedenen Besetzungen der Hauptrolle. Das erste mal war ich Sonntag. In der Pause zwischen den 3ten und 4ten Akt, führte uns der Anis Schwägerin hinauf in die Kabine der Hauptdarstellerin um uns mit dieser bekannt zu machen.

As the excerpt above demonstrates, in addition to being an emotional support, Ani opened a private door into the cultural life of Constanța, something Blanka adored.

Cultural Life and Creative Aspirations

Especially in the mid-1950s, Blanka vigorously participated in the cultural life of the town: she attended concerts and theatre performances and went regularly to the cinema, literary readings, and exhibitions by visiting international groups. As we saw in the diary entries preceding this

chapter, she sought contact with at least two well-known authors and, as I will describe below, she composed a creative text herself. She was listened to the radio avidly, including the international stations. Her most constant companion, according to her own words, was her radio.

A theme oft repeated in various guises in Blanka's writing is her longing to belong to the modern world. Modernity as defined by opportunity, especially to women, and the freedom of choice, but also as defined by a certain globalisation—a recognition and appreciation of or even participation in other cultures. This attraction to the possibility of a cosmopolitan life is, we have seen, one of the motives she chose Constanța: she thought it would be a “large, interesting city.” In Constanța, however, under communism, the promises of modernity linked to education or freedom of movement were empty to her and as the crush of the state on her everyday life grew, she collapsed into an internal opposition or private resistance to her state-sanctioned misery. Either through indulging in the emotional relief provided by her meagre personal networks described above or via escape in the cultural world or creative output, she sought spaces where she could pursue the promises of modernity, even if not in a public space.

It was the few times she was in Bucharest for events that her pleasure at participating in the mingling of humanity at large-scale cultural events is particularly palpable. Her relationship to Bucharest throughout the diaries is conflicted: Bucharest dictates, both the good and the ill. It is a territory of permissions and fines, at times hot and hostile, a reminder of the power of the state over the citizen. Nevertheless, the city remained the capital and Blanka was mesmerised by those elements which customarily characterise a large urban settlement—a certain cosmopolitanism and vivid cultural life. In 1953 Bucharest hosted the International Youth Festival and Lebzelter was delighted. She was to go on holiday in the mountains and passed through Bucharest on the way there. She recorded:

Sinaia, 5. VIII 1953 Mittwoch

Beabsichtigte diesen Tag in Bukarest zu verbringen um mich mit den Fremden zu sehen die gegenwärtig in Bukarest weilen anlässlich des Jugend Weltfestiwals der zwischen den 2ten und 16 August in Bukarest stattfindet. Bukarest bietet jetzt ein schönes und buntes Bild. Flaggen aller Länder der Welt und Losungen in allen Sprachen. Habe den Nachmittag im Stalin-Park⁶²⁹ verbracht. Hier war ein buntes Treiben und ein unverständliches Sprachen-

⁶²⁹ Today Herăstrău Park.

Gewirr. Habe mit Französinen gesprochen und mich mit Einer die mir besonders sympathisch war, geküsst. Habe mit einen Indonesen „gesprochen.“ Dieser hat mir seine Adresse ins Notizbuch geschrieben und gesagt: „Korespondenzia.“ Ebenso habe mit Schweden, Finländern u.a. „gesprochen“ und eine Menge Vertreter aus verschiedenen Ländern gesehen. Ein unvergesslicher Nachmittag.



Figure 58: International Youth Festival, Bucharest 1953. Source: See footnote 630.

In this entry Bucharest also becomes a safe sexual space, a space where Blanka feels at ease enough to acknowledge and act upon sexual attraction—and at that, with a woman. It is difficult to know how much to read into this kiss. In a space brimming with youthful energy and sensuality, it may simply have been “safer” to participate by kissing a woman rather than a man. While the episode is intriguing, there is unfortunately too little information available to speculate on Blanka’s sexuality. This is the only instance in the diaries where she records anything of a sexual nature, with the exception of the letter to her deceased fiancé.

A few weeks after her jaunt in the park and following a holiday in the mountains, she again passed through Bucharest, now in the midst of the closing ceremonies of the festival. She attended an evening performance of the Israeli delegation, with choirs singing in Hebrew and Yiddish, returning to Lya’s home close to midnight. The next day she watched the performance of the Soviet delegation, which was so magnificent she wrote, “dass ich mich in eine Märchenwelt versetzt

glaube.”⁶³⁰ The day afterwards she watched Polish dances, visited an art expedition, and strolled through the centre watching the peoples of the world mingle. She recognised an Indian woman with whom she had spoken in Sinaia and stopped, placing her hand on the woman’s shoulder from behind, and as the woman turned, Blanka greeted her happily in English, “Sinaia, you remember?” The woman stretched out her hand, responding “glad to meet you again.”⁶³¹ These human interactions were absolute highlights for Blanka, thrilling and memorable. At these times, Bucharest became a place of possibility, where her world no longer felt constricted. Concurrently, these transient joys emphasised the discrepancy in her desires and her reality, underscoring the bleakness of her solitary life in Constanța.

The most impressive of her acts of agency, and simultaneously the one about which I know the least, was her writing of a screen play. It is in this act that she may have revealed most honestly the ambitions of her youth, had she been given more opportunity—or more encouragement. We have seen that Blanka was more than a fan of film. She did not just collect cards of movie stars, she also worked at a cinema. She records attending movies throughout the diaries, from Indian to Austrian to Soviet productions, she seems to have watched everything offered. Her love of cinema and the arts ran deep and she longed, it appears, already in the 1930s to take a leap into the world professionally.⁶³²

In 1936, in the Romanian illustrated film magazine *Cinema*, filled with glamorous photographs of movie stars and tales of their lives, a female “B. Lebzelter” received an answer to an unprinted question under the column “Să stăm de vorbă” [let’s chat].

⁶³⁰ 30 August 1953. She describes here events that took place about two weeks earlier. English: “I thought I was in a fairytale land.” The festival was impressive. One report, also referencing what was purposefully hidden, reads: “Bucharest’s drab buildings were scrubbed and painted. An 80,000 seat stadium, an artificial lake, and an open-air summer theatre with 3,500 seats were built, while the severe housing shortage went ignored as it had been during all the ten years of Soviet rule. All this construction was accomplished by ‘volunteer labor.’ House and neighborhood wardens instructed citizens not to form queues, wear any but their best clothes, or allow their children to go barefoot during the Festival. [...] The Festival was rated by one citizen, as ‘the greatest change in Bucharest since the War.’ The results of Bucharest’s clean-up campaign were seen by 29,000 young people from 111 countries from August 2-16.” Author unknown, *The Background of the Vienna Youth Festival* (Independent Service for Information on the Vienna Youth Festival, 1959), 31. See also Marian-Alin Dudo, “Bucharest and the IVth World Festival of Youth and Students (1953) in Western Press Commentaries,” *Analele Universității din Craiova. Istorie, Anul XX*, no. 1 (2015): 137-143. The photo in Figure 58 is from Agerpres, 1953, photo ID: 6965579; https://foto.agerpres.ro/?is_search=1&id_foto=6965579, retrieved 16 June 2022.

⁶³¹ 30 Aug. 1953.

⁶³² Interestingly, the son of Ernestine and Egon Deutsch recorded that Blanka’s aunt Karoline was also passionate about the cinema. Karoline was reunited with the Buczaczer-Deutsch family in Brussels in 1946 and they lived there together until 1949. George Thomas writes that Karoline took him to the movies almost every weekend and that the elderly woman with a cane and he, now around ten years old, going to the cinema together became a familiar sight in the neighbourhood. Deutsch, “untitled manuscript.”



Figure 59. A page from the issue of the illustrated magazine "Cinema" in which a response to Blanka's query appeared. Source: "Cinema," 14 August 1936.

The column was an advice column of sorts, it took questions from readers and answered them, often sarcastically or with humour. The unprinted question can be understood through the answer, which is both sexist and belittling:

No and no and no, my dear. Don't make the mistake that hundreds of little girls in the province dream of making. The life of Bucharest is not the life of the Promised Land. The truth is far from it. It is a machine that grinds nerves, grinds beautiful thoughts, grinds lives.

Why not seek to learn the beauty of the place where you are? Why not seek to listen to the wonderful story of the meadow, the trees, and the sky? Why do you not want to see how close you are to happiness there, in the corner of the garden? And how naive you are! Do you think it is enough to know two or three addresses of artists and two or three biographical details, so that you can earn your food and shelter? You are a child, my dear.

I would like you to confess in the next letter that you have gotten over longing for the city and are happy to be a little girl lost in the middle of the meadow, the sun, and the sky.⁶³³

In light of the unusualness of the name Lebzelter in Romania, her gender, and biographical details—that her home had a garden and was surrounded by meadows, trees, and hills and that she almost certainly in the 1930s regularly read the *Cinema* magazine, I believe that Blanka was “B. Lebzelter” who wrote in 1936, when she was twenty years old, asking for advice about whether she should venture a move to the capital, to explore a career in the creative arts (we do not know to what the “address of several artists” might refer). The hesitancy and desire to ask for advice also fits into her personality. Though the uncertainty marking her postwar life was influenced by the atmosphere of pervasive ambiguity, she frequently exhibited a particular penchant for asking advice of others.

I cannot help but wonder how receiving an answer of such derision, of such disdain towards “a little girl” even *imagining* an artistic life in Bucharest, might have negatively impacted her ambitions and self-confidence. Still, Blanka’s love for the cinema and desire to be involved in the industry did not wane. Two decades later, in 1956, she decided to compose a screenplay. Unfortunately, she did not write in the diary what it was about, but she recorded when she worked on it, when she recopied it, her efforts to find the address to whom it should be mailed (the Bucharest Film Studio), when she mailed it off, and her anxious wait for a response:

Donerstag 18 X 56

Heute sind 2 Wochen seit ich mein Manuskript weggeschickt habe. Welches ist sein Schicksal? Wohl stelle ich mir diese Frage, doch fürchte sehr die Antwort. Es gibt Augenblicke wo mich die Fantasie fortreist und mir rosige Wunschbilder vormalt. Doch im Grunde sehe ich die Sache nüchtern an und mache mir ängstliche Sorgen. Ich weiss dass

⁶³³ “Să stăm de vorbă,” *Cinema*, 14 August 1936, p. 21. The magazine cost 5 Lei. Romanian: “Nu și nu și nu, dudue dragă. Nu face greșala pe care sute de fetițe din provincie visează s’o facă. Viața Bucureștiului nu este viață de țară a fagăduinții. Departele este adevărul. Este o mașină ce macină nervi, ce macină gânduri frumoase, ce macină vieți. Dece nu cauți să înveți frumusețea locului unde te afli? Dece nu cauți să ascuți minunata -poveste a campului, a copacilor și a cerului? Dece nu vrei să-ți dai seama cât de aproape de fericire ești acolo, în colțul acela de grădină? Și, cât ești de naivă! Crezi că e suficient să cunoști două-trei adrese de artiști și două, trei amănunte biografice, ca să poți să-ți câștigi hrana și adăpostul? Ești copil, dudue dragă. Aș vrea ca în viitoarea scrisoare să te mărturisești odihnită de dorul de oraș și fericită de a fi o fetiță pierdută în mijlocul campului, soarelui și cerului.” My great thanks go to Anca Filipovici for talking to me about this column and its purpose.

es sich bei dieser Sorte Arbeiten nicht nur um Qualität handelt. Die Konkurrenz ist dort sehr gross und habe gehört dass ein gewisser Schriftstellerkreis auf das Ressort Filmmanuskripte, sozusagen Monopol gelegt hat.

Die Idee meiner Arbeit ist originell, zeitgemäss und auf „der Linie.“ Die Handlung, alle 100% in meinem Kopf entstanden, könnte einen sehr hübschen Film ergeben, doch dies hängt nicht nur von mir ab und weiss ich nicht ob die kompetenten Personen meine Meinung teilen.

In December, two months after she sent in the manuscript, she received a note of rejection and bitterly complained that only the “Protektionskinder” (those with connections) had success in the industry. It is, indeed, remarkable that she dared to submit a manuscript with no connections to the industry whatsoever. The archival collection for this film studio has fifty-two manuscripts from 1956 of which thirty-three were contracted for filming explicitly, while nineteen were not. Of these fifty-two, four were co-authored by a man and women, and only three were written exclusively by women. All three screenplays written by women were cartoons or puppet films intended for children. Of the four scripts with a female co-author, two were intended for children. If we assume that the manuscripts which remained with the studio are even partially representative of submissions (some of those rejected were presumably returned to the author), Blanka’s undertaking was extraordinarily unconventional. Blanka responded to the studio’s rejection of her work with a warning not to steal her idea, and presumably requested the manuscript be returned to her. It is, in any case and unfortunately, not in the archives of the film studio for that year.⁶³⁴

Multiplications of Marginalisation

⁶³⁴ For the information from this paragraph I consulted in detail the inventory for the following fond as well as nine folders of manuscripts: Centrul de producție cinematografică “București,” Centrala Romaniafilm 1956, inv. 1393, fond 2 (or fond 1091?), SMBAN, Bucharest. Please note the inventory has two fond numbers: 2 and 1091 and the collection itself is not listed on the archive’s website of collections open to researchers. Unfortunately, the register of correspondence received and sent for 1956 could not be located by the archival staff, so I could not confirm the exact correspondence between Blanka and the studio and whether or not they returned the manuscript. I am immensely grateful to Gabrielle Filipii for sharing with me her study on film in Romania during this period and telling me where to find this archive, about which no other archivists with whom I spoke in Bucharest or even several film scholars knew. Filipii asked whether Blanka might have submitted under a pseudonym. To my knowledge she did not and I am not sure she would have been in a position to in her circumstances. But her name, clearly not Romanian, and her gender, may have indeed inhibited her success.

Juxtaposed to the agency she demonstrated by participating in cultural activities, exploring a creative medium through writing the screenplay, and nurturing her small social network of friends and family members (however distant), was her day-to-day confrontations with acute harassment from her neighbours and antisemitism in the workplace which grew more blatant over time. Blanka's reality over the course of the late 1950s became increasingly unsustainable and this seems to have been due mostly to her status as an unmarried woman with no protector, no family, no local and constant allies, that is, her aloneness. The emotional toll of the abuse was exacerbated by her engulfing loneliness, which continued to grow as her small social network shrank in the wake of new waves of emigration. By the end of the diaries the ongoing distress caused by what she would certainly have named persecution overcame her. She suffered from debilitating physical ailments brought about by emotional distress, her hair fell out, she could barely eat. She almost entirely ceases to write in the diaries. In 1960 she recorded a meagre seventeen entries (in 1959 it was seventy-eight and 1955 to 1958 were about 100 or more each year) and in 1961 thirteen (six of which were during the three-week period after she received her passport and before she departed). The end of this chapter outlines the sober last years of her life in Romania.

Acute Harassment, Insidious Trauma

The abuse at the hands of her neighbours within her own home, that space which is traditionally considered to be a sphere of peace, privacy, and refuge, is the violation which over time was most devastating to her mental and physical wellbeing. Besides more common complaints such as noise-making and filth, Blanka was subjected to regular verbal, emotional, and even physical harassment. She was deliberately locked out of her home, one neighbour—a woman—threw a bowl at her head, narrowly missing, and it shattered to pieces in her flat.⁶³⁵ Blanka appealed to officials multiple times without result. Several months later, she was physically attacked once more:

Sontag 21 IV 57

Was ich gestern erlebt habe übertrifft alles was ich bisher mit diesen Banditen durchgemacht habe. Gestern hat das eine Weib, das Vorzimmer, von dem Gesindel total verschweinert, waschen wollen. Da ist der Militarist hinausgekommen und hat geschrien sie soll nicht waschen, ich soll es tun. Und haben angefangen alle

⁶³⁵ 15 February 1957.

zusammen mich zu beschimpfen und zu bedrohen. Ich wollte nicht reagieren, denn nur von dem blossen Anhören war ich genug aufgeregt. Doch etwas später musste ich ausgehen, und als ich mein Zimmer verliess, stürzte das Weib des Militaristen auf mich zu, ich solle sofort das Vorzimmer waschen, sonst werden sie mich nicht mehr hineinlassen. Ich antwortete mit einer Weigerung all den fremden Schmutz zu waschen. Sie beschimpften mich und ich nannte sie ihrem Benehmen gemäss Legionäre.⁶³⁶ Bei meiner Rückkehr, als ich die Türe aufsperrte, begann der Streit von Neuem. Ich hatte mein Zimmer kaum betreten und ohne zu wissen wie so etwas geschehen konnte, stürzte mir das Individuum nach und schlug mich ins Gesicht. Als ich ihn dafür schreiend einen Verbrecher nannte, stürzte er wieder auf mich zu und verdrehte mir die Finger der rechten Hand. Dies schmerzte so sehr dass ich glaubte der Daumen und Zeigefinger seien gebrochen. - So etwas ist mir passiert. Von dieser Aufregung war mir sehr schlecht. Die ganze Nacht habe nicht geschlafen. Mehr als alles quält mich Ekel und Wut dass solch ein Scheusel sich an mir vergriffen hat. Den ganzen Tag habe das Zimmer nicht verlassen, obwohl ich kein Wasser habe. Die beiden Finger schmerzen mich sehr, sind geschwollen und der Daumen blau. Habe mit Mühe geschrieben. Wie soll ich mein Dasein weiter ertragen? - was beginnen?

Over the years Blanka submitted complaint after complaint to a variety of committees and authorities regarding her neighbours' behaviour. In the instance above, she again sought out the soldier's commanding officer, with no result. Some months later, in spring 1958, a hearing was convened with a small people's "court" of four committee members to hear and rule on a complaint involving the neighbour she had submitted. After listening to her plea and the neighbour's response, which Blanka wrote were outright fabrications, she reported the response of the committee president:

Sontag 9.III 58

Dann sagte er: Die üblichen Reibungen zwischen Intellektuellen und Arbeitern, und quatsche in diesem Sinne noch einiges weiter. Ich sah plötzlich unsere Rollen

⁶³⁶ This was the virulently antisemitic political movement of the prewar and (partially) war years who were, in the postwar period, outlawed and imprisoned by the communists.

getauscht, statt Klägerin, Angeklagte. Dem Nachbar stieg der Mut und fing wieder zu lügen und zu verleumen an. [...] Zum Schluss sagte [der Mann am Schreibtisch]: Sie sind eine gebildete Person und wir stellen an Sie Ansprüche, die wir an ihn nicht stellen dürfen.

The hearing closed with a gentle reprimand to the neighbour and an admonition was given to Blanka as well. After this, she stopped submitting complaints.⁶³⁷ Indeed, Blanka perceived the failure of the Romanian state in this utter disregard for the needs of individuals, in particular for the problems of those without other support, in other words, for those who fell outside of the patriarchal system and the conventional expectations for women. Psychologist Laura Brown defines “insidious trauma” as “traumotogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but do violence to the soul and spirit.”⁶³⁸ The combination of insidious trauma in the form of neglect by the state for the wellbeing of individuals with the real and ongoing harassment by her neighbours was disastrous.

Blanka articulated her anger clearly in one instance, which she heard in 1958 a West German radio program which included a radio documentary based on Anne Frank’s diaries and, apparently, witness testimonies.⁶³⁹ Afterwards an official appealed to the German people for donations towards the Anne Frank scholarship, which would enable a young person from Israel to study in Europe. The program moved Blanka to tears, she meticulously recorded the man’s turns of phrases, moved by multiple facets of the speech. She then noted, formally, that she would like to express several questions and comments:

Sontag 16 III 58

In den westlichen Ländern werden die Opfer des Nazismus versorgt und geehrt, bei uns jedoch wo soviel vom Humanismus gesprochen wird, geschieht nichts dergleichen. Kein Privilegium für die Pogrom und Lagerüberlebenden. Mir

⁶³⁷ On 5. February 1959 she noted following another incident that she had given up filing complaints since it was pointless.

⁶³⁸ Laura S. Brown, “Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma,” *American Imago* 48, no. 1 (1991): 128.

⁶³⁹ She wrote “Zeugenaussagen” (witness statements) but does not elaborate on what exactly these were, that is, victims or bystanders, excerpts from written material or people on-site in the studio.

persönlich wurde nicht nur niemals irgendwelche Hilfe zuteil, im Gegenteil, bin allen Schickanen und Gefahren schutz- und wehrlos preisgegeben.

Nicht dass ich etwa der Meinung wäre dass das Geschehene wieder gut zu machen wäre, Nein!!!

Die Toten bleiben tot.

Bin bloss der Meinung dass man sich in diesem Lande gegen die Opfer der Fascistenherrschaft, jener finstern Epoche der Massenmorde unschuldiger Menschen, anders benehmen könnte. Man hat sich nie um die Überlebenden gekümmert, und deren schwere Leiden haben in keiner Lage vor den Autoritäten irgend ein Gewicht.

Antisemitism in the Workplace

After changing employers several times, in 1953 Blanka began to work as a bookkeeper for the large beauty- and body care cooperative Higiëna. Almost immediately, however, Blanka noted a distressing development.

C-ța Sontag 31.I.54

Kaum war ich mit den Arbeiten fertig und glaubte nun eine Weile freier atmen zu können, stellt sich ein neuer Ärger ein. Dieser Ärger verursacht mir ein Weib dass im gleichen Büro mit mir arbeitet. Sie hat vor Kurzem sich faszistischer-antisemitischer geäußert, ich habe sie mit wenigen Worten auf ihren Irrtum aufmerksam gemacht und seither mit ihr nicht mehr gesprochen. Für mich war damit die Angelegenheit erledigt, für sie aber nicht. Sie macht böserartige Anspielungen auf mich, hetzt das übrige Personal gegen mich auf und führt eine systematische Unterwühlungsarbeit. Fühle mich in dieser neu geschaffenen Lage sehr schlecht. Gestern bin zur Personalschefin gegangen und habe mein Herz ausgeschüttet. Sie schien mich zu verstehen und mit mir zu halten. Doch wer weiss ob sie sich nicht wird anders beeinflussen lassen.



Figure 60. One of the main boulevards in Constanța, with a branch of the beauty cooperative Higiena picture, 1950s. Source: Private Archive, Julie Dawson

Over the next few years Blanka's experience at work varied, depending greatly on whether her immediate superior was sympathetic and simply in the office. Her conflict with the antisemitic woman was muted for some time, but she continued to reference in passing her "enemy" in the diary. In 1958 things took a turn for the worse. Her workload increased inexplicably and along with it, her anxiety: on the one hand she worried she would not manage the new tasks set her, on the other, she was terrified of being left without work. A new boss arrived, he changed customary procedures and threw the office into disarray. The situation continued to deteriorate, Blanka's tasks increased in scope and complexity, her "enemy" was relieved of certain duties which were then reassigned to Blanka.⁶⁴⁰ These events occurred simultaneously to the ongoing physical and verbal harassment by her neighbours.

Finally, she submitted a request of demission and asked to be reassigned as a cashier in one of the cooperative's shops. This step reveals how unbearable her situation had become, back in

⁶⁴⁰ 14 Nov. 1958.

1953 while working at a different cooperative, she refused to be assigned a cashier position, remarking that she “had no intention of degrading [herself].”⁶⁴¹ When the reassignment was approved in December 1958 she noted the much smaller salary was one from which it was impossible to live, but she had no regrets:

Sontag 7 XII 58

Habe aber tun müssen was ich getan habe. Ich wurde von Bösewichtern, Menschen die keine Prinzipien von Menschlichkeit und Ehre besitzen, in diese Lage getrieben. Mit dem Abgang des frühern Schefbuchhalters wurde der einzige Damm in diesem schmutzigen See entfernt, ich wurde überschwemmt und zu Boden geworfen. Jetzt triumphieren sie dort, Higiene ist nun judenrein.

Departure

Blanka never did work as a cashier. In 1959 her health deteriorated to such an extent that she was first put on sick leave for several months and eventually pensioned prematurely. How she got by on the most meagre of income is not clear. By this time her closest circle had emigrated, with the exception of Ani. Lya had left in spring 1958, Berta and Max in January 1959. Blanka expected to follow them quickly. Knowing as we do that she would not receive her permit to leave until two years later in 1961, the entries from 1959, as she waited once more with fevered anticipation, are difficult to read. In January she lamented, “Doch soll der Pass nur kommen, meine einzige Hoffnung meine gräulichen Nachbarn loszuwerden und eventuell auch meine fürchterliche Einsamkeit und Verzweiflung;”⁶⁴² in February she hoped “Es haben bereits einige Personen die gleichzeitig mit mir eingereicht haben, die Pässe bekommen.”⁶⁴³ Throughout these months her ailment, probably a result of grave anxiety and depression, caused her to be almost unable to eat.

Freitag 24 IV 59

Ich suche mich zu beherrschen um nicht den Verstand zu verlieren. Doch es ist sehr schwer. Diese schauerhafte Einsamkeit, meine Krankheit und die gräulichen Nachbarn. Und das Alter, so zu altern, unter solchen Umständen, keine Jugend, nicht einmal eine fröhliche

⁶⁴¹ 15 Sept. 1953.

⁶⁴² 30 Jan. 1959.

⁶⁴³ 22 Feb. 1959. On this, her birthday, which she noted has always been a sad day for her, even worse as she aged, she wishes for health and to be able to depart by Easter. Three days later she heard (presumably via rumour) that emigration to Israel was to be halted once more.

Kindheit gehabt zu haben, und nun dieses tragische hoffnungslose Altern. So ein Los hätte nur eine Verbrecherin oder ein Scheusal verdient. Ich habe nie etwas böses oder unehrliches getan, und in meiner Heimatstadt galt ich als das schönste Mädchen.

Im Jahr 1950 konnte ich nicht wegfahren obwohl mich hier niemand brauchte und dort höchstwahrscheinlich Heirat und Familie auf mich wartete. Und jetzt wo es so spät ist, warum mussten auch jetzt Hindernisse dazwischen kommen. So ein langes banges Warten auf ein Zeichen, irgend ein Rühren in dieser Angelegenheit, damit ich wieder Hoffnung und Mut fasse. Nichts rührt sich. Die Tage sind so lang die Nächte grausam. Ich quäle mich unsagbar. Kann nicht mehr.

1959 continued in this vein. Like in 1950, she wrote petitions to the authorities, waited for responses, fretted, continued to lose weight, and suffered physically. Her only solace were letters from Berta, upon which she also waited with desperation: “habe täglich dem Briefträger entgegengeschaut. Die Sehnsucht eines Einsamen der nach einem guten Wort lechzt.”⁶⁴⁴ Almost all her entries revolved essentially around one question: “Ich will wegfahren, für mich gibt es nichts anderes mehr, und man lässt mich nicht. Warum lässt man mich nicht.”⁶⁴⁵ Why, indeed?

Romanian emigration policy towards the Jewish population in the late 1950s has not seen the same sort of scholarly attention as the mass emigration wave of the early 1950s.⁶⁴⁶ Radu Ioanid asserts that the renewed thawing of policy in 1958 was due to the hopes of the Romanian government to promote trade with the west.⁶⁴⁷ There was, however, similar to during the early 1950s, a backlash after the government registered the vast number of people, over 100,000, who wished to leave the country. Ioanid attributes the backlash to a mixture of humiliation felt by the Romanian authorities that so many citizens wished to quit the country as well as complaints from Arab allies that the number of emigrants would boost the Israeli army.⁶⁴⁸ In February 1959 emigration was halted again—this timing explains why Berta and Max Lindenbaum got out, as well

⁶⁴⁴ 17 May 1959. English: “Daily I kept watch for the postman. The yearning of a lonely person craving a kind word.”

⁶⁴⁵ 19 May 1959. English: “I want to go away, for me there is nothing else left, and I am not allowed. Why am I not allowed.”

⁶⁴⁶ As cited in Chapter 4, Robert Levy carried out meticulous research on Ana Pauker’s life and her role in Jewish emigration prior to her being purged; there is not an equivalent for later years.

⁶⁴⁷ Ioanid, *Ransom of the Jews*, 76. A clear motive for the sudden shift in policy in 1958 is not given. In May Gheorghiu-Dej suddenly approved many thousands of unprocessed emigration applications (Ioanid, *ibid.*, 74) and by the fall many thousands more were applying to leave. For this period, see the chapter “Barter,” pp. 68-91.

⁶⁴⁸ Ioanid, *Ransom of the Jews*, 77-79.

as Blanka's friend Lya, while she did not. Gradually, after negotiating with Israel and Arab diplomats, Romania resumed emigration. Slightly less than 10,000 Jews emigrated in 1958, 1959, and 1960, while in 1961 the number suddenly doubled.⁶⁴⁹ None of this explains, however, why certain individuals were given precedence over others. The "heirarchy" of approving emigration applications has not been studied and indeed, may never be understood, and may have had little rhyme or reason.⁶⁵⁰ Blanka was far from the only one left in limbo during this period from 1958 to the early 1960s and oral histories and memoirs attest to a particularly anguishing time of waiting and insecurity.⁶⁵¹ For Blanka, however, things now took an even blacker turn.

In 1960 a legal suit was opened against the accounting department of her cooperative, claiming misuse of funds. She and one other woman were the accused. Adding to her ailments and anxieties came the terror of communist prison, which even the most politically uninvolved knew to fear. The particulars of this court case will never be known: such legal documents are closed to the public in Romanian archives. Even broad strokes from this period of 1960–1961 are impossible to reconstruct as Blanka recorded so little and when she did, she was vague to the extreme. Her words are often those of a woman teetering, indeed, on the brink of sanity. Ani disappears from the pages, as do any references to Berta, any other individual, or any sort of leisure activity. As noted at the start of this chapter, she went from recording an average of about eight to nine entries a month to less than two. When she did write, it was almost always a few hasty sentences,

⁶⁴⁹ See chart in Ioanid, *Ransom of the Jews*, 185. On the resumption of emigration see Ioanid, *ibid.*, 78-79.

⁶⁵⁰ Sometimes payments in cash were made for individuals but the larger scale bartering of goods for emigreees appears to have begun later in the 1960s and would not have affected the period relevant for Blanka or her family and friends. On these payments see Ioanid, *ibid.*, 84-91. Because officially the reunification of the family was given as a reason for allowing emigration, it may be that Blanka's position of having no family members or very few in Israel (her step-cousin Max was actually living in the United States by now) resulted in her application receiving little priority. Only a large-scale study of these emigration applications and notes related to their approval or disapproval would shed light on the decision-making process of the Romanian authorities at the time, but I have not been successful in locating where this material is stored, nor would the material most likely be open to researchers on grounds of "privacy."

⁶⁵¹ See the memoirs cited earlier written by women who were children at the time, Molnar, *Under a Red Sky* and Vsasopolos, *No Return Address*. Judith Nadler, the wife of Norbert Nadler (whose oral history formed the core of Ch. 6) shared with me their story. The couple had been living in Câmpulung Moldovenesc, a town in southern Bukovina, where Nadler was a doctor. Judith Nadler wrote "In 1959, after 9 years of unsuccessful attempts [at applying for emigration permits], Norbert's 10th request (first now for the three of us) was granted! We packed as much as we were allowed to travel with, gave away or left behind the rest, and took the train out of Campulung to Bucuresti. On the day we arrived at the border, the border had been closed! Again, we gathered our belongings and embarked on a now much drearier train ride back to Campulung. The apartment was empty, the unpacking was futile. Norbert's position had been downgraded, our lives were unsettled, the set-back was immeasurable. In early 1960 we were finally granted an exit visa to Israel." Judith Nadler, personal communication to the author, 24 July 2021.

describing her terror, fragmented updates on the court case, her illness, her desire for death. Against this backdrop her passport arrived on the 5th of April 1961.

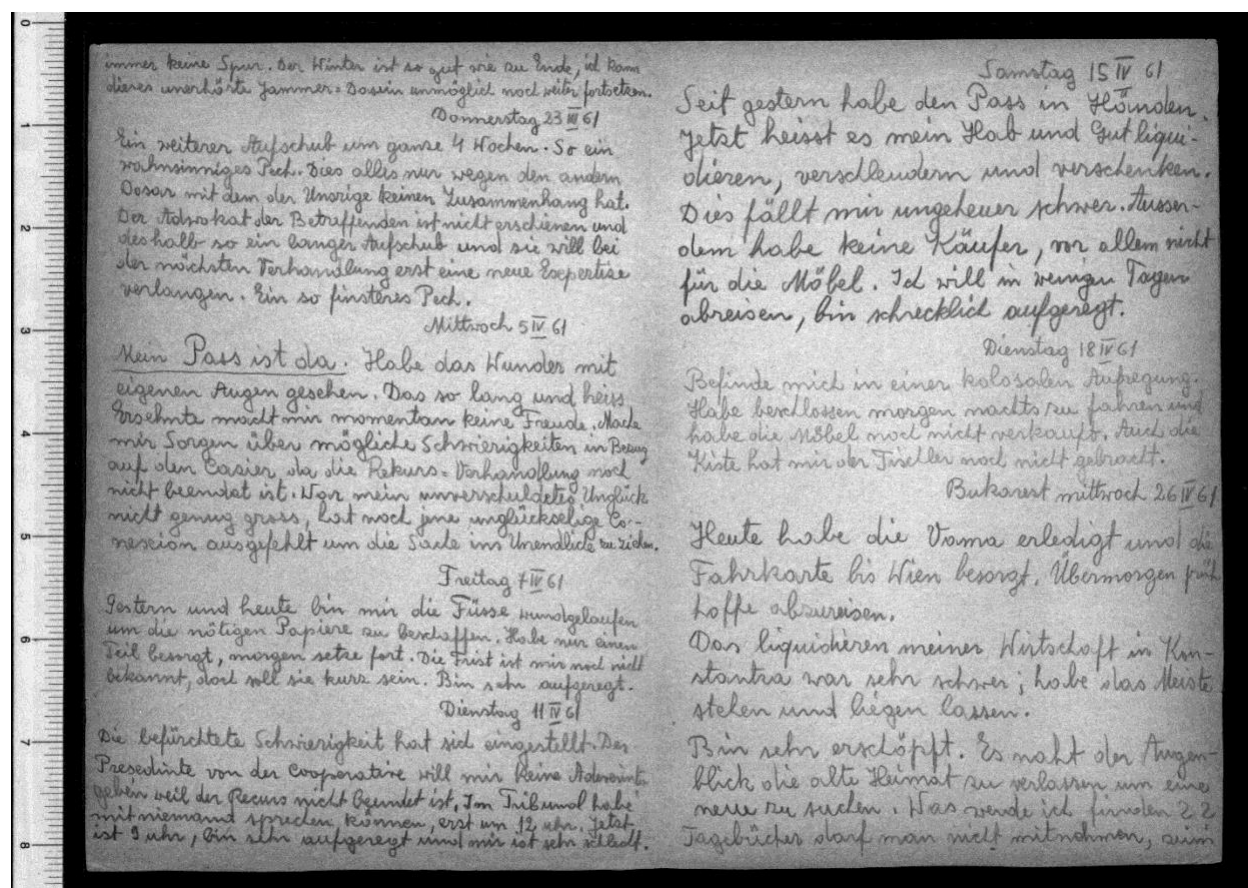


Figure 61. The final entries of Blanka's diary, recording her last weeks in Romania in April 1961. Source: Blanka Lebzelter Collection, AR 25437, LBI.

Three weeks later she recorded the final entry:

Bukarest mittwoch 26 IV 61

Heute habe die Vama⁶⁵² erledigt und die Fahrkarte bis Wien besorgt. Übermorgen früh hoffe abzureisen.

Das liquidieren meiner Wirtschaft in Konstantza war sehr schwer; habe das Meiste stehen und liegen lassen.

Bin sehr erschöpft. Es naht der Augenblick die alte Heimat zu verlassen um eine neue zu suchen. Was werde ich finden?? Tagebücher darf man nicht mitnehmen, zum

⁶⁵² Romanian: customs.

vernichten habe mich nicht entschliessen können. Werde sie jemand zur Aufbewahrung anvertrauen. Werden sie jemals den Weg zu mir zurückfinden?

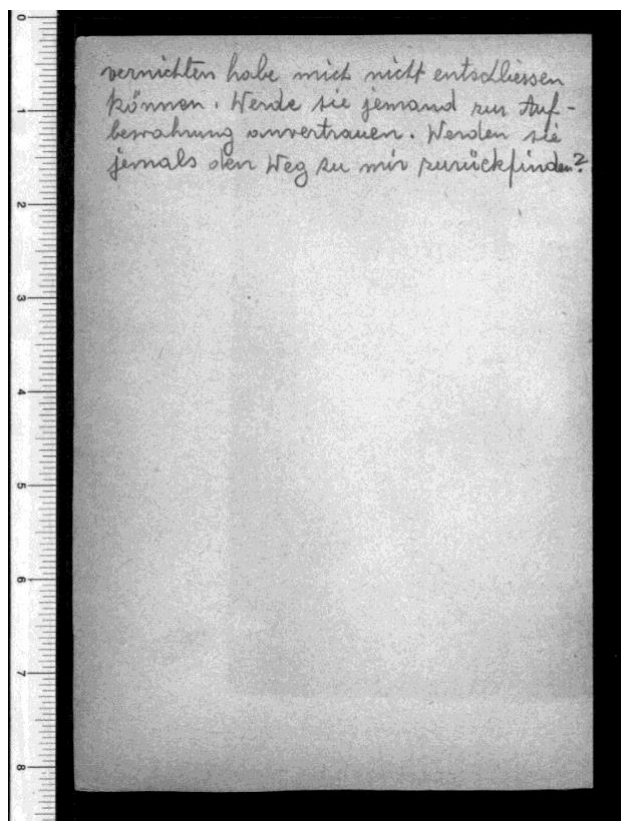


Figure 62. Final page of Blanka's diary. Source: Blanka Lebzelter Collection, AR 25437, LBI.

Chapter 8. Conclusion: Tangled Legacies of Trauma

In his research diary for the project of the clog-maker Alain Corbin wrote:

Within just a few weeks it has been possible to perform a series of resurrections, of collateral reanimations. A whole dense network of people around [my subject] Pinagot has begun to emerge like the layers of a branching vine. He has brought any number of ghosts out of the darkness with him. [...] In this way a hidden avenue of access to the nineteenth century has begun to open up. My sense is that a thousand pages on Pinagot, no matter how descriptive and overcautious in interpretation, would do more to satisfy the desire to understand this period [...] ⁶⁵³

My experience seeking for traces of Blanka has mirrored this. Though my work initially had at its centre the postwar experience of a Holocaust survivor, in order to understand the place from which she was writing, my research required far more digging into the period prior to World War II than I expected. Moreover, what I found took on an importance which I did not anticipate. As relevant details piled up related to Blanka's family, the narrative expanded temporally and geographically and then narratively, to include the lives of multiple individuals whose names I had not known and about whose existence I had been unaware. Taking into account "family as a crucial category of analysis," as described by Natalia Aleksion, became one of the most prominent lenses through which to understand Blanka's postwar grief. ⁶⁵⁴

What started as a blurry portrait of an individual uncoupled from social networks and familial ties became a woman sewn into an intricate web. Beyond Blanka's life, I was driven to learn more about the biographies of her parents, k.u.k. Gendarme Wachtmeister Josef Lebzelter and Anna Windbeutel, of her Uncle Sigmund (Chaim Heiss), and his children Leopold (Paul Hays), Berthold, Berta, and the mysterious Wilhelm Rudolf, whose fate remains entirely unknown. On Anna's side of the family I wish I could write more about the lives of the Windbeutel sisters, seamstresses in

⁶⁵³ Corbin, *The Life of an Unknown*, xiv.

⁶⁵⁴ Natalia Aleksion, "A Familial Turn in Holocaust Scholarship?," in *If This Is a Woman : Studies on Women and Gender in the Holocaust*, ed. Denisa Nešťáková, Katja Grosse-Sommer, Borbála Klacsmann, and Jakub Drábik (Academic Studies Press, 2021), 21.

Vienna, deported to their death in Poland. Karoline Buczaczer née Windbeutel's story of being smuggled by French priests into a convent to live as a nun and thus survive the war, this while in her mid-fifties and with paralysed knees due to polio, is its own incredible tale. These stories would not be known were Blanka's story not told—of the five Windbeutel sisters of Czernowitz, only one, Zirl, has living descendants and it seems doubtful that they are aware of these family narratives.⁶⁵⁵ Beyond her family members, learning about Blanka's closest friend, Ani Gheorghiu, uncovered an entirely unexpected and astonishing narrative of a family in postwar Constanța with roots in Berlin, Luxembourg, and London: the Gheorghiu family could be a research project of its own.

Besides Blanka herself, the person to whose biography I found myself most drawn was her Uncle Sigmund (Chaim Heiss). He is buried in Rădăuți/Radautz, his place of birth and the town to which he had returned after at least fifty years at various stations throughout the Habsburg Empire, thirty of those years were spent in Waschkoutz/Vășcăuți. The inscription on his tombstone invites analysis: [in Hebrew] “Honored and exalted, native of Washkova [Waschkoutz], his community; he was close to all those who sought his council” and then in German “Here lies our father, Chaim Heiss, retired director of cadastral records, born 17. June 1875, died 27 August 1956.”⁶⁵⁶ It is impossible to know whether the (mistaken) assertion in stone that Chaim was born in Waschkoutz was done at his request or undertaken unknowingly by others. It seems surprising that his daughter, Berta, who presumably was the one to commission the stone, would have been unaware of his true place of birth—Radautz—which, in contrast to his name, is one of the few consistencies in his administrative paper trail. But whoever insisted on the name of Waschkoutz on the tombstone did it deliberately. It is unusual to make such an explicit gesture to one's place of birth on a stone and I have not encountered this before. The inclusion of Waschkoutz in this, a permanent and encapsulated biography of sorts, was a conscious action on the part of someone, to both write Chaim Heiss into the history of Waschkoutz and vice versa, Waschkoutz into the life of Heiss. I find the gesture that much more meaningful in light of the partner stone standing in Waschkoutz, at the place where Chaim's brother, Josef, and nephew, Bruno, were murdered. I

⁶⁵⁵ This is the daughter of Gustav Chomed, who reportedly also has one daughter. Unfortunately, though I have written emails to her many times over the period since I found the diary and tried, via mutual acquaintance, to establish contact, I have never received a response.

⁶⁵⁶ Note the discrepancy in birth year, which here is listed as 1875, whereas countless administrative papers from the Austro-Hungarian and interwar Romanian era state it as 1871.

wonder whether, with this tombstone, Heiss or his family intended to ingrain in memory their presence in Waschkoutz and not only their absence.



Figure 63. Tombstone for Chaim Heiss, “Uncle Sigmund” in Rădăuți Jewish cemetery. Source: Julie Dawson, 2024.

Loose Ends and Questions without Answers

As I concluded my project, on the one hand I felt gratified at the degree to which the knowledge of biographical details and her family’s past had enriched my understanding of Blanka’s life and her writings. On the other hand, however, certain details had crystallised into permanent questions with no answers, more puzzling than before. Perhaps the most chaffing question which has cropped up over the years and to which I can find no answer is why Babette, the cousin to whom in the end Blanka entrusted her writings, does not figure in the diaries in any way. When she was so desperate for companionship and in mourning after the passing of Anna, why did Blanka not write to Babette, the daughter of her mother’s sister? Surely, she would at least have wanted to tell Babette of Anna’s

death. Or did she write, but she never recorded these communications?⁶⁵⁷ In 1947 Blanka and Babette knew where the other lived and how to communicate with each other, why did their communication cease? Did they have a falling out? Did they in fact lose track of each other, did Babette move to Mediaș and not inform Blanka of her new home? Why? Was the intimacy of the 1947 letter deceptive, did the two women in fact not get along? Did Blanka in the end *not* knowingly entrust the diaries to Babette, but to an unknown mutual Bukovina acquaintance in Bucharest, who eventually passed them on to Babette at some later date? There will never be answers to these questions.

Another elephant in the room throughout the diaries is the fact that Blanka virtually never speaks of her father. She refers to him only in the context of a parental unit together with her mother, for example when she complained of them (“denn es gab mir Eltern die die Gabe Eltern zu sein niemals besassen. Sie waren nicht schlechte Menschen, bloss schlechte Eltern”)⁶⁵⁸ or, on the other hand, when she described her childhood and parents with more rose-coloured lenses (“Von meiner Geburt bis Julie 1941 war ich das verwöhnte Kind meiner Eltern“),⁶⁵⁹ or when she referred to their joy at her falling in love (“Obwohl ich zu meinen Eltern nie darüber sprach was mich in jenen Tagen so sehr ausfüllte, hatten sie doch alles erraten und freuten sich über die Verwandlung ihrer für ihr Alter viel zu ernsten und grüblerischen Tochter“).⁶⁶⁰ When Blanka wrote of the past, recounting the trauma of Bruno’s murder or Anna’s solitary death, she sometimes neglected to mention her father at all. When she did, it was almost an afterthought, for example

⁶⁵⁷ I tend to believe she did not write to Babette, for the fact that Babette apparently laid value on the letters from Blanka: she kept the 1947 letter and a brief postcard over the decades, just as she did with the 1947 letters from her brother Gustav (these were found in her papers in Mediaș). There was also a postcard from Rosa Zuckermann, the same Rosa Zuckermann of the documentary *Herr Zwilling und Frau Zuckermann* (1999). Rosa and Babette were in the Bershad ghetto together, though they may have been acquainted previously. The postcard, dated 1986, indicates they carried on a correspondence over the years but no further letters were found. Babette may have taken them with her to the home for the elderly in Bucharest or they may have been part of the parcel she requested to be sent to her; they may also have been discarded over the years. Rosa’s son, Felix Zuckermann knew Gustav Chomed’s family and confirmed that his mother and Babette wrote letters to each other regularly for many years. According to his mother’s wishes, however, the letters and other papers were destroyed upon her death. Personal communication Felix Zuckermann to the author, 17 April 2024. The postcard and documents from the Mediaș Jewish community staff detailing the liquidation of Babette’s belongings after she moved to Bucharest in 1988 are in “Assistance file for Chomed Babette, refugee from Czernowitz, 1964-1989,” Box SD2, Folder 5, Mediaș Jewish Community Collection, Mediaș Jewish Community Archives, Mediaș.

⁶⁵⁸ 22 Feb. 1948. English: “because it [fate] gave me parents who never possessed the gift of being parents. They were not bad people, just bad parents.”

⁶⁵⁹ 5 Feb. 1956. English: “From my birth until July 1941 I was the spoiled child of my parents.”

⁶⁶⁰ Lieber Walter. English: “Although I never spoke to my parents about what had absorbed me to such an extent in those days, they guessed everything and were happy about the metamorphosis in their daughter, who was much too serious and brooding for her age.”

when in the letter to Walter she described her brother's killing, she followed with the sentence: "Ebenso unser Vater."⁶⁶¹ She also referred to him formally, as "Vater," whereas her mother was almost always "Mama." Josef as an individual never figures in her writing. The only instance she somewhere implied a warm paternal presence is in an entry in which she recalled her family's seder, which Josef presumably would have led, though here too he was not explicitly named. This came at a time when she had ceased all observance of Jewish holidays and ritual, a fact that left her simultaneously bitter and anguished:

Sontag 6 IV 58

Habe zufällig erfahren dass wir jetzt Ostern haben. Freitag abend war Seder und mir liefen Schauer durch den Körper als ich Radio "Kol Israel" einschaltete und die Gebete hörte. Habe ich jemals Familie gehabt und die Feierlichkeit des Sederabend im Kreise meiner Lieben miterlebt? Mir ist als wäre dies niemals gewesen. Jetzt weiss ich nur eines, bin schrecklich allein und verlassen, namenlos unglücklich, und jetzt zu Pesach esse nicht nur Brot sondern auch Schweinefleisch.

What could the emotional frigidity towards Josef signify? One interpretation could be that writing of him was too painful for her, though in light of her unbridled emotionality in regard to her brother and mother, this appears unlikely. The other extreme, which seems more probable, is that she was not close to Josef at all. One can speculate as to the motives for the emotional distance: Perhaps, as a former gendarme, he had an authoritarian nature, off-putting to his daughter. Maybe the trauma of World War I and the devastation caused by the collapse of the empire, whose authority he had embodied in his adult life, marked him in ways we will never know. He was, moreover, presumably not a present father figure in the first few years of her life, while the war raged. There are many possibilities and all of them are in their essence speculations.

There are other questions, loose ends that cannot be tied up: Why did Anna and Josef not have a child until five years after their marriage? Were there additional still births or miscarriages, compounding Anna's later losses? What of the child, Maximilian, born to Josef and Anna in 1921? What was the fate of the fourth and youngest of the Heiss children, Wilhelm Rudolf, who simply

⁶⁶¹ English: "Our father, too." Similarly, in an entry of 21 Aug. 1955 she wrote that her heart cries (*schreit*) constantly for her mother and brother and makes no mention of her father.

vanished one day in interwar Romania? These unanswerable questions demonstrate the limits of any researcher's work to reconstruct and fully understand social and family networks long past.

Devastation of Justice Denied

We have seen that the traumatic experiences of the Shoah, Blanka's postwar displacement geographically and culturally, and her solitude during the years the diaries cover, led to grave emotional distress. I have focused less than I initially imagined on the manifestations of past trauma which plagued her daily life. These do appear: in her explicit withdrawal from the company of others (which she described in her letter to Walter as a direct result of wartime events, she also references this in diary entries); in her paranoia, distrust, and fear of people (she articulates this in her letter to Bruno); in her frequent nightmares, which revisit past horrors and from which she is awakened by her own screaming. Over the course of research, I began to feel that her trauma was, on the one hand, self-evident and required little elaboration. On the other hand, I came to believe that it was the inconclusive nature of the trauma, the fact that she was, to an extent, in a state of suspended trauma with no possibility of closure, echoing what Cathy Caruth describes as the "oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival,"⁶⁶² which so profoundly affected her mental wellbeing and made recovery, while she lived under the conditions in Constanța, impossible.

Psychiatrist Judith Herman's groundbreaking works on trauma make this very clear.⁶⁶³ In her recent publication on the need for trauma survivors to experience justice, Herman writes "If traumatic disorders are afflictions of the powerless, then empowerment must be a central principle of recovery. If trauma shames and isolates, then recovery must take place in community." Blanka's writings do nothing if not record her ongoing state of powerlessness in myriad facets of life, while also revealing the lack of an empathic community.

⁶⁶² Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1996), 7-8. The study of trauma in literature and testimonies is a field in its own right, for a recent overview of scholarship and directions, see Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja, *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma* (Routledge, 2020).

⁶⁶³ These are Judith L. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (Basic Books, 1992, repr. Basic Books, 2022) and Judith L. Herman, *Truth and Repair: How Trauma Survivors Envision Justice* (Basic Books, 2023). I cannot here cite all the extensive work done on trauma and recovery, which is its own vast realm, nor have I taken all works into consideration, as Herman's work and conclusions align so succinctly with Blanka's experience. One other more recent foundational work is Bessel Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (Penguin Books, 2015).

In *Trauma and Recovery*, Hermann traces three stages of recovery from trauma: 1) establishing safety in the present 2) revisiting the past to grieve and 3) refocusing on the present and future, by cultivating relationships with a community.⁶⁶⁴ In her recent follow-up study, *Truth and Repair*, Herman makes the case for what she calls a fourth and final stage, that of justice, arguing that “If trauma originates in a fundamental injustice, then full healing must require repair through some measure of justice from the larger community.”⁶⁶⁵ Applying Herman’s stages to what we know of the conditions of Blanka’s postwar life in Romania makes the degree of her inability, indeed, the *impossibility*, of recovery from the trauma experienced eminently clear.

Regarding the first stage, her safety was always in question, even in the “simplest” arenas of food and heat supply. As time passed, her safety destabilised further as she was subjected to and lived in fear of physical attack from her neighbours. The stage she came most close to completing was the second one, revisiting the past. Indeed, she undertook this stage herself through writing the letters to the dead. Here, however, she could not complete the stage, which Herman describes as including “making meaning” which requires the presence of others: “Social support is a powerful predictor of good recovery, while social isolation is toxic. People cannot feel safe alone,” Herman asserts, “and they cannot mourn and make meaning alone.”⁶⁶⁶ Finally, stages three and four, which focus on creating a future within a supportive community and a public acknowledgement of and—perhaps even—apology for the injustice suffered, were inconceivable in her postwar world, though she was cognizant of the need of such action. The entry quoted in the previous chapter regarding her frustration with the indifference of the Romanian state to victims of the Holocaust illustrates her awareness that indeed, this communal apathy was a further injustice compounding the initial acts of persecution. Her righteous anger was directed towards the degradation caused not only by justice denied but also a refusal to even acknowledge loss.

Uncomfortable Narratives and Peripheral Stories

At various points over the years of this project and even before it began, (male) colleagues have questioned, both explicitly and implicitly, the value of Blanka’s diaries as a source. It was once

⁶⁶⁴ In *Trauma and Recovery*, individual chapters are devoted to these stages, she terms them “Safety,” “Remembrance and Mourning,” and “Reconnection.” For a concise and eloquent summary of these stages see Herman, *Truth and Repair*, 2-3.

⁶⁶⁵ Herman, *Truth and Repair*, 3.

⁶⁶⁶ Herman, *ibid.*, 2.

suggested, because she did not appear in indexed, digital databases, that she may not have existed.⁶⁶⁷ One man dismissed her writings as “emotional drivel,” while another man asked me, when presenting on a panel at a conference, whether I thought “Blanka was troubled.”⁶⁶⁸ As I reflected over the years on these instances, I came to believe that the exact framings of these questions were irrelevant because what they all essentially implied was that something was *wrong* with Blanka, that she or her life had a flaw which rendered her writing and her story as she told it unworthy of examination. This position towards the narratives of women, the non-elite, the marginalised, is not new and reinforces and repeats the very marginalisation these people experienced in their waking lives. The remarks recalled to me the comment of historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich in her introduction to the midwife Martha Ballard’s diaries. She wrote that “those few historians who have known about the diary have not known quite what to do with it” and went on to explain that one man declared Ballard’s writings “...with some exception not of general interest,” while another called it “trivial and unimportant.”⁶⁶⁹

What my colleagues may have been trying to express was the discomfort caused by listening to Blanka’s story, which is not the survivor narrative that postgenerations prefer to think about, nor one on which historians prefer to dwell. The story is not uplifting. The years after the war do not demonstrate the “resilience” about which much has been written.⁶⁷⁰ These “stories of resilience”

⁶⁶⁷ This man was not aware of the array of private writings of Blanka, including the 1947 postmarked letter to Babette and her ghetto identity cards. After I shared these with him he agreed she must have existed. I mention this here, nevertheless, to illustrate the perils of reliance on digital archives. Neither Blanka nor Anna appear by name in any of the extensive databases of archival material created by the Romanian authorities related to Transnistria that has been digitised (accessible at USHMM and Yad Vashem), but we know from Blanka’s private writings and her identity cards that they were there. On the other hand, Josef Lebzelter *does* appear on these lists, though Blanka witnessed his murder in Văscăuți. I have had several colleagues send me the document with Josef Lebzelter’s name and insist that therefore he was, after all, in Moghilev. Needless to say, I do not believe Blanka and her mother were mistaken about the murder of their father/husband (beyond the fact that there are additionally two other sources attesting to his death—the memorial stone itself and the 1945 book). Thus, the “authority” of lists created by perpetrators as well as the primacy of digitised material, must, at times, be questioned.

⁶⁶⁸ This remark may have been lost in translation, I still do not understand what precisely was meant with the term “troubled.” Traumatized? Yes. Depressed? Yes. Were there exterior motives for her state of mind? Yes. Did he mean he thought she was mentally unstable? Perhaps. The experiences and narratives of the mentally unwell both in the past and present still tend to be dismissed by scholars. See Meir, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl*.

⁶⁶⁹ Ulrich, *A Midwife’s Diary*, 8-9. Ulrich’s exploration of these “trivial” writings and the woman behind them went on to win a Pulitzer Prize.

⁶⁷⁰ The concept of “resilience” in survivors of the Shoah has almost become a platitude, it now appears in countless contexts from scholarly articles, newspapers, videos, music compositions, and more. Many scholarly studies do take into account the long-term nuance of surviving and also acknowledge the ongoing psychological effects of trauma. I, personally, find the term currently overused and over-lauded as it seems to prioritise those whose outside lives reflect an image of success, often one defined by capitalist society, and seems to make less visible (and perhaps, somehow, culpable) those who did not survive or succeed outwardly. A short sampling of works that centre on the concept of “resilience,” are Melissa L. Morgan, Veronica Franco, Erick Felix, and Nicole M Ramirez, “And the Ones That

revolve around recovery and rehabilitation, marriage or remarriage, further education, the climbing of social and economic ladders, proliferation of offspring, and the creation of a legacy, whether financial, creative, or interpersonal.⁶⁷¹ But these tales of “success” (generally defined in capitalist terms) took place before a background of narratives which were far more common, but less glamorous and less often told: the stories of those who were traumatised and injured such that external signs of success were not feasible. In the course of the diaries Blanka could not carry out any of the markers of “success” or “resilience” listed above, though she wished to. Rather, Blanka’s story illuminates and emphasises the vast diversity of postwar Jewish experience. For her, this was an experience of ongoing persecution, including a pervasive sense of defeat, difficult, she claimed several times, in some ways to separate from the miseries of the war.

The distress in her words, especially at the end of the diaries, is indeed difficult to listen to. Those who suffered in the postwar period as she did, especially those in the communist sphere, left fewer physical records (indeed, this was the objective of the communist regime in forbidding written material to leave the country). The story is singular because such stories of ongoing marginalisation did not get recorded—or if they did, they did not survive or are rarely told. Blanka was marginalised on multiple levels during the period covered in this project: the marginalisation began most probably as a child growing up in a German-speaking assimilated Jewish family, somewhat indifferent to Jewish tradition, surrounded by a traditional Jewish milieu and a very rural, Ukrainian-speaking non-Jewish population. My assignment of a status of marginalisation here is not meant to be one of economic or gender marginalisation but rather social. Her family’s status and behaviour aligned with neither the majority (Ukrainian) nor minority (observant Jewish) populations in interwar Vășcăuți.⁶⁷² Research on Jewish Bukovina has been largely focused on

Survived Had Hope’: Resilience in Holocaust Survivors,” *Journal for Social Action in Counseling and Psychology* 14, no. 2 (2023): 111–26; Ruth Reches and Jolanta Sondaité. “Resilience to Trauma by Holocaust Survivors: Factors in Surviving, Coping and Thriving,” *Holocaust. Studii și cercetări* 10 (2017): 211–226; Nechama Tec, *Resilience and Courage: Women, Men, and the Holocaust* (Yale Univ. Press, 2003). Moreover, as Katarzyna Prot admits in a study of survivors, “There is an inherent bias in the study group selection. The participants were those whose coping with their traumatic experiences was successful enough to let them talk.” See Katarzyna Prot, “Strength of Holocaust Survivors,” *Journal of Loss and Trauma* 17, no. 2 (2012): 183.

⁶⁷¹ Such works, whether in the form of scholarly works, self-published memoirs, or mass-marketed publications, are so prolific that I cannot begin to cite them here.

⁶⁷² Blanka’s experience as a child may have reflected interwar scenes described by Gregor v. Rezzori (1914–1998) in a small Bukovina town where the more cultured, educated, and German-speaking Jewish family was looked down upon by both the Jews and the non-Jews. Gregor von Rezzori, *Memoiren eines Antisemiten* (Steinhausen, 1979), especially the first chapter “Skutschno.” Indeed, it may be literature, where ego documents and other sources are absent, that best conveys the nuances of rural life in early twentieth century Bukovina and gender expectations. I was astonished by the judgement of one male author towards a woman who chaffed at provincial life, yearning for

Czernowitz and, to a lesser degree, on some of the larger towns such as Suceava or Rădăuți. I argue that the complex and unexplored social dynamics in which Blanka grew up marked her also as an adult, yet her circumstances of (assimilated) Jewish life in the Bukovina province are ones about which we simply know very little.

Blanka was well-read and culturally informed. She knew her life did not have to unfold under the strictures of a conservative, rural social setting but her efforts to escape were met with derision, at least in the case of the magazine episode discussed in the previous chapter. Perhaps her parents, also, did not encourage the cosmopolitan dreams of their daughter; maybe the decades they had spent on the periphery had left them cautious, this we will never know. But it does seem that as a young woman in interwar, *rural* Bukovina, she was at a particular disadvantage due to her gender. Her brother studied architecture in a big city. Her cousin, Leopold/Paul emigrated to the United States. Her other cousin, Berthold, studied medicine in Berlin and then Prague. But the women were left with fewer choices. At best, it seems, they could marry one social rung up and enjoy a change of scenery. The only female cousin in Vășcăuți, Berta, married a local doctor and moved to Boian, next to Czernowitz. This was the path Blanka was on as well, when the war came in between. From memoirs and oral histories we learn that young girls in Czernowitz, however, had more options, whether by means of a gymnasium education in their own town, parents more accustomed to city life, or simply access to a larger social circle with larger dreams. Blanka's other female cousin, Babette of Czernowitz, attended teacher's college and had even studied abroad in France.

The marginalisation in which she grew up was only exacerbated in the postwar period. Here her status as an unmarried woman, an unobservant Jew, an orphan, an "intellectual" (as labelled by the communist official), a Holocaust survivor, and a child of the Habsburg empire, collected to push her to the margins in almost every setting. The only person with whom she felt comfortable was another young, unmarried woman and native German-speaker, who, it seemed, also thrilled to the possibilities of the modern world, as Blanka did. Even here, however, the

"something more." Over several pages of his memoirs Yiddish author Alexander Spiegelblatt (1927-2013) negatively depicts a female relative and her dream of leaving the villages of Jewish Bukovina behind: "sie wollte die ganze Welt verschlingen und auf niemanden zählen. [...] ich erinnere mich daran, wie sie unaufhörlich in ihrer überspannten Sprache lamentierte: *Man will doch etwas haben vom Leben!*" Alexander Spiegelblatt, *Durch das Okular eines Uhrmachers*, trans. Armin Eidherr (Otto Müller Verlag, 2003), 26. Moses Rosenkranz's (1904-2003) memoirs are also useful for contextualising rural Jewish Bukovina. Note that all the authors cited here are, however, men. Moses Rosenkranz, *Kindheit. Fragment einer Autobiographie* (Rimbaud, 2001) and Moses Rosenkranz, *Jugend. Fragment einer Autobiographie* (Rimbaud, 2014).

discrepancy of having a stable family network, which Ani did, led to differences between the two. Narratives such as Blanka's have remained marginalised today.

At the start of this project, my process was framed by the Romanian context. Though I knew full well of Blanka's German-language background, the story I thought I would tell unfolded in Romania and I saw it marked as such. Nothing has happened to change the geographic spaces across and through which Blanka and her mother moved and yet, by the end of the project the imprint of the Habsburg periphery is clearly visible. While my assertion of Blanka's tale being one which took place in twentieth-century Romania is true, completing the backstory of her narrative encapsulated the many and far-flung shards of the Habsburg Empire, with the implications of life on the periphery of the empire playing a significant role. Over the telling of the story, borders and belonging became blurred.

Blanka occupied a liminal space and time, stable in contrast to life in the ghetto, yet one that still felt threatening, was precarious, and in many ways foreign to her. On multiple levels, Blanka's position during the diaries seems to overlap most closely with those of refugees or displaced persons, not only due to her geographic dislocation but also her cultural alienation. And she was indeed displaced from her home, yet, technically, as a Romanian citizen, she was not a foreign refugee. This ambiguous status certainly affected her shifting and uncertain attitude towards Romania, at once her home and her persecutor. To borrow a phrase of Matthew Johnson a colleague and comparative literature scholar, who writes on 20th century literary Bukovina, Blanka's writing are "permeated by their context," a complex context, still being explored by scholars today and which resists simple categorisation.

The shattering of her life began with her birth, on the front of World War I. She herself emphasised this several times, stressing the "shadow" cast upon her earliest days.⁶⁷³ We will never know the exact circumstances of her birth, but I argue that the trauma in her family took root during the collapse of the empire. The murder of her father, the decorated former gendarme officer, by Ukrainian nationalists whose language he spoke and whose families he knew; Chaim Heiss'

⁶⁷³ 11 March 1959. Her entire statement is: "Ein Schatten lag über meiner Kindheit, meine Jugend war von schwersten Unglück vernichtet, und jetzt ist mir nur die eine Hoffnung noch geblieben, sie darf nur nicht genommen werden, es ist ohnehin so spät." She is referring to being permitted to emigrate. English: "A shadow lay over my childhood, my youth was destroyed by gravest misfortune, and now only the one hope is left to me. It cannot be take from me, it is in any case so late."

assertion in death of belonging to Waschkoutz; the fates of the Czernowitz-born Windbeutel aunts in Vienna, are all narratives ingrained with a Habsburg patina. Blanka's inability or unwillingness to fully engage with or integrate into Constanța, choosing instead as a friend a German-speaking woman born in Berlin, reads as a rejection of a Romanian label, she clung to a peripheral space, the German language and a German culture identity to the end.⁶⁷⁴

Ultimately, beyond illuminating the experience and writings of one woman in twentieth-century Romania, this work aims to lay the foundation for further research into questions of peripheries and margins, geographic and social, those chosen and those into which we are born or thrust by circumstance. Blanka Lebzelter's postwar story is singular not due to her suffering, which was in various ways experienced by millions during and after the war, but rather for the fact that it was recorded, was kept, and was found.

⁶⁷⁴ Note for example, the Anne Frank 1958 broadcast she says she tuned in to so that she could hear the German language being spoken, no matter what was being said.

Epilogue

For many years, throughout the majority of my archival research and writing for this project, I did not know what became of Blanka. After 1961 she seemed to disappear and her name did not turn up in any of the customary databases related to the Shoah or genealogy, with the exception of Yad Vashem, where she was listed as killed in World War II.⁶⁷⁵ Various inquiries to Israeli archival repositories dedicated to immigration resulted in the same response: there was no file, her name does not appear. At some point, I stopped searching entirely, the breadth of material I wanted to cover in the project was challenging in its own right and continued to grow. I felt the need to focus on the period of the diaries without distractions as to what came afterwards. I also began to feel that I did not want to know – at least not until I had completed this project. I suspected my writing and perspective might change if I knew what came after April 1961.

Then, as I approached the end of the writing, I suddenly began to search again for her, almost feverishly. As the final chapters were crystallising, I found that I very much needed to know what had become of her. My impetus was linked to the search for descendants of her family, though she herself would likely have been too old to bear children after leaving Romania. I had begun to wonder whether relatives would have known her, might still hold letters, photos, or memories of a woman whose physical appearance and post-diary presence was so elusive. One day, on a train returning from a lecture on the diaries, while working on the various narratives of extended family members using the online genealogy databases that have become much richer over the past decade, I put her name again into one of the common databases, in which she had earlier never appeared. And suddenly, there she was, listed beside a burial: Blanka Lebzelter. Buried 16 March 2008 in Kfar Saba, Israel. There was a blurry image of her tombstone.

I felt a mixture of curious emotions: shock to see her name appear so simply and quickly in an electronic database, where for so many years she had been absent, but I also felt a sense of letdown and even grief or mourning. Though I had known she could not still be alive, seeing her tombstone with the name and place solidified her passing. Her fate was, moreover, no longer a

⁶⁷⁵ Despite numerous emails to Yad Vashem over the past ten years explaining that Blanka Lebzelter survived the war and despite having submitted the paperwork they require in order to change her status, as of September 2024 she was still listed as murdered in World War II. This episode has called into question, for me, the validity of Yad Vashem's list. Retrieved 18 Sept. 2024. <https://collections.yadvashem.org/en/names/search-results/lebzelter%20blanka?page=1>.

mystery, which could be imagined in manifold ways and in manifold places over an unknown timeline. Rather, she was rooted now. She had indeed gone to Israel, or in any case, she had died there. And she had lived to be very old, a startling ninety-two. Incidentally, the birthyear on the tombstone is 1921, meaning that she had apparently continued to use her “revised” birthyear even after emigration. Establishing the year of her death caused, as I had expected, a lucid rethinking and shifting of narrative: my biographical project spanned less than half of her life. She lived forty-seven years outside of Romania and forty-five within. What does that mean for her and the story I had told?

My first two immediate thoughts different drastically in theme. First, I pondered that she must have experienced physical relief. If she lived another forty-seven years it must mean she had found medical assistance, a diagnosis, medical treatment, and, hopefully, experienced a respite from the pain and physical suffering which wracked her daily life in the last years of the diary. Secondly, to my own surprise, I found my thoughts wandering immediately to the films she might have watched, movies from my own childhood but also my young adulthood. What cultural touchstones did she and I share, in the end? Did she participate in popular culture of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries? If so, then this would mean she could have participated in all the trappings of the Shoah memory field, especially the drive to collect oral histories of survivors, which became so prominent after *Schindler's List*. Yet she is nowhere to be found in these databases, apparently indicating that she neither provided an oral history nor completed any paperwork, at Yad Vashem, for example, not even submitting the names of her family as victims. What does her absence from this topography mean? Was it deliberate?

I hope Blanka found a place to live in dignity, where she was treated with respect, and was able to indulge her love of the arts and languages. In the diaries, Blanka was most content or even happy when interacting in some sort of cosmopolitan environment. The intellectual and cultural stimulation provided by foreign visitors, performances, languages, thrilled her. Whether speaking with visitors from India at Sinaia and Bucharest, kissing a French woman, admiring a Chinese dance troupe—these entries burn with excitement and her delight is palpable. I hope she was able to nurture these interests in the second half of her life.

After so many years of bitterness, regret, resentment, fear, loneliness, and grief, it is difficult to imagine her recovering from such a dark emotional space. But I would like to think she did recover, that she experienced safety, mourned her loss together with a community, encountered

friendly faces, and experienced the support of relatives who offered care and affection despite her withdrawn personality and a broken spirit.

What did she wish for? After so many disappointments, she had tempered her wishes. She articulated a revised wish-list in 1954: to live with respectful neighbours and to have a small circle of acquaintances with whom she could chat or attend the theatre.⁶⁷⁶ That is, she desired a life of dignity and mutual respect with those around her. I believe she had once desired to work creatively or in the arts in some way, but such desires were so inconceivable at the time of her diary writing, she could not voice them. Instead, she expressed them in the limited manner left to her, in the act of writing in her diary and composing a screenplay. By the time she left Romania, in her mid-forties, I doubt she imagined the possibility of pursuing employment in the literary arts or a creative field. The concept of a creative pastime, whether for leisure or financial gain, was so far from the physical and emotional precarity in which her reality was embedded as to be unimaginable. I do wonder however if, after recovering physically and psychologically, she turned to the creative arts in any way. Maybe she remained a passionate movie goer or participated in a book club, visited art exhibitions or attended literary readings. I can only speculate about Blanka's life after 1961, but perhaps she kept a diary and it will one day be found.



Figure 64. Sunprint of an unfinished sketch found in a prayer book in the Mediaș synagogue. Source: Răzvan Anton, 2019.

⁶⁷⁶4 July 1954.

Annexes

Liebe Babette! 1947 (German)

Constanța 22 VI 1947

Liebe Babette!

Endlich ein Lebenszeichen von Dir. Die Mama hat Dich tatsächlich schon in einem bessern Jenseits vermutet und sehr betrauert. Ich habe sie getröstet und glaubte nicht an Dein Ende. Da ich Dich kenne vermutete ich es ginge Dir schlecht, oder Du hättest Ärgernisse, Kummer. Ich versuchte gerade die Adresse von Dr. Ehrenkranz zu erfahren um mich nach Dir zu erkundigen, als Dein Brief ankam. Kannst mir glauben dass ich mich sehr gefreut habe und Mama hat sogar geweint.

Ich kann mir denken wie die neuen Lebensverhältnisse auf Dich anfangs gewirkt haben. Nur, wir haben genug Erfahrung um zu wissen dass der Mensch sich mit allem gewöhnen kann wenn er muss. In der heutigen irrsinnig schweren Zeit ist es das wichtigste wenn man eine Tätigkeit hat von der man sich ernähren kann. Wenn Du zu essen hast, nicht weisst was das heisst hungrig sein ohne sich den Hunger stillen zu können, gib Dich zufrieden, betrachte die Dinge viel milder.

Sind Deine Brotgeber nette Menschen? Ich will es für Dich hoffen. Will hoffen dass Du Dich einer guten Behandlung erfreust. Was das Kind anbetrifft, will ich gar nicht fragen ob es artig ist; von einem Kinde darf man nichts erwarten, ein Kind erfordert Geduld, viel Geduld und Güte. Nie sollst Du Dich hinreissen lassen und zum Kind böse oder gereizt sein. Dadurch lässt sich so leicht alles verderben ohne es wieder gut machen zu können.

Bin sehr empört auf Frau Silberstein. Lotte hat ihr doch nichts von ihrem Eigentum zurückgelassen. Mit welchem Recht beanspruchte sie etwas. Was für Sachen hat sie Dich nicht mitnehmen lassen? Und warum hast Du Dich gefügt? Ist Dir Dr. Ehrenkranz in dieser Sache nicht beigestanden? Ich verstehe diese Sache nicht.

Lotte hat wahrscheinlich den Verstand verloren dass sie jenen Kerl geheiratet hat.

Nun willst Du wahrscheinlich wissen wie es mir geht. Leider kann ich Dir nichts erfreuliches mitteilen. Wir haben einen sehr schwern Winter mitgemacht. Ich weiss gar nicht wie wir ihn überlebt haben soviel haben wir gehungert und gefroren. Bin auch als Folge sehr abgemagert.

Anfang März ist uns dann Hilfe gekommen, 25 Dollar von Lipper.⁶⁷⁷ Wir haben uns damals gleich Lebensmittel eingekauft, vor allem Brotmehl. Den letzten Bani von diesem Gelde haben wir bei grössten Sparsamkeit schon längst ausgegeben und den Mehlsack vor 2 Wochen ausgewaschen. Nun hat sich der Hunger wieder bei uns eingenistet. Der Mamas Pension reicht wie man so sagt auf Petersilie. Da Petersilie wie alles phantastisch teuer ist, so ist dies gewiss nicht übertrieben. Habe Anfang dieses Monats grossen Ärger gehabt. In einem hiesigen Kino wurde der Kassierer Posten vakant. Ich hätte eine wertvolle empfehlung und bewarb mich um den Posten. Der Direktor versprach ihn mir fest, behielt sich nun vor für den Fall dass ich mich nicht bewähren sollte, mich nicht behalten zu können. Er gab mir dieses Versprechen 3 Tage vor dem 1ten. Am 1 Juni hätte ich beginnen sollen. Ich war voller Freude und legte mir ein System zurecht nachdem ich arbeiten wollte. Da erfahre ich am 31ten Mai zu meinem grossen Entsetzen dass das Syndicat bereits eine Person auf den betreffenden Posten eingesetzt hat. Wie diese Nachricht auf mich gewirkt hat, kann ich Dir nicht beschreiben. Ich glaubte den Verstand zu verlieren. Kurz, mein Protektor unternahm Schritte, meine Konkurentin wurde entfernt und ich übernahm die Kassa. Dies entfesselte einen Riesensturm im Syndikat. Ich vernahm davon und verstand dass ich verloren hatte. 3 Tage sass ich an der Kassa und während dieser 3 Tage dauerte der Kampf zwischen den Syndikat und meiner Partei. Das Syndikat musste natürlich siegen, sonst konnte es ja seine Tore schliessen. Habe in jenen Tagen sehr schwer gelitten und genug Gesundheit eingebüsst. Die Enttäuschung war auch zu niederschmetternd. Bewährt hätte ich mich ohne Zweifel, Beweis waren diese 3 Tage.

Aus jener ersten Wohnung wo wir mit andern 2 Familien zusammen gehaust haben, sind wir im Jänner übersiedelt. Wir bezogen ein sehr schönes Zimmer im Zentrum. Aber diese Herrlichkeit dauerte kaum 4 Monate. Da im hintern Teil des Hauses Reparaturen nötig waren, bekam der Hausherr Lust das ganze Haus zu renovieren. So mussten wir ausziehen. Keine einfache Sache bei der hiesigen Wohnungskrise. Mit schwerer Müh und Not bekam ich durch die *rechiziție*⁶⁷⁸ ein Zimmerchens. Kaum eingezogen drohte mir es wieder zu verlieren. Ich hatte viele Aufregungen durchzumachen bis ich die Sache arrangierte. Unser jetztiges Zimmer ist klein, und das Fenster

⁶⁷⁷ I tried to discover a connection between a “Lipper” and the Windbeutel/Chomed/Lebzelter family and could find nothing concrete. From the interwar newspapers it is clear that there were several well-off Lippers in Czernowitz and presumably one of them was close to the family or perhaps even distantly related. Blanka does not mention this name again, except in occasional reference to her “benefactor” in the diaries, at which time she also refers to the gift of the money and how crucial it was to their physical survival.

⁶⁷⁸ Romanian: “requisitions” referring to a governmental department responsible for assigning living quarters.

führt nicht auf die Strasse sondern in einen engen Hof. Es liegt jedoch im Zentrum der Stadt, was kein zu unterschätzender Vorteil ist; wir halten sauber und haben Ruhe.

Hast Du im Laufe der Zeit Nachricht von oder über Gustl bekommen?

Warum ziehst Du vor Post auf Dr Ehrenkranz Adresse?

In Moghilev waren wir bekannt mit einer Familie Jossel Wolf aus Radautz. Dieser Herr hatte einen reichen Bruder und einen Sohn in Bukarest. Vielleicht Verwandte von Deinen Leuten?

Ich möchte sehr ich könnte jemand zu Dir schicken um das von Dir versprochene zu holen; doch fehlt mir momentan jede Gelegenheit. Vielleicht wird doch ein günstiger Zufall dazu verhelfen. Und vielleicht wird es der Zufall wollen dass sich gar Dir Gelegenheit bietet. Ich wünsche sehr ich hatte das englische Buch zurück und könnte Dir Dein Buch und die rus. Wörterbücher zurückerstatten.

Wir wohnen str. Mircea No. 71bis⁶⁷⁹, doch schicke die Post weiter an die Comunitate.⁶⁸⁰

Anworte bald. Schreibe mir wenn Du willst einiges über Deine neue Lebensweise.

Mit der Hoffnung bald wieder von Dir zu hören schliesse ich,

Verbleibe aufs herzlichste gegrüsst und geküsst von mir und meiner Mama.

Blanka

⁶⁷⁹ The “bis” is part of the official address.

⁶⁸⁰ Romanian: “community,” referring to the official Jewish community and their offices.

Dear Babette! 1947 (English)

Constanța 22. June 1947

Dear Babette!

Finally a sign of life from you. Mama truly believed you had gone to a better place and was grieving. I comforted her and did not believe you were gone. Because I know you, I supposed you were unwell, or you had nuisances, sorrows. I was just trying to find out the address of Dr Ehrenkranz in order to inquire after you when your letter arrived. You can believe me that I was so happy and mama even wept.

I can imagine how the new living conditions must have affected you at the beginning. But we have enough experience to know that one can get used to everything when one must. In today's ludicrously difficult times, the most important thing is that one has an occupation on which one can subsist. If you have something to eat, do not know what it means to be hungry without being able to still that hunger, be content, look at things more leniently.

Are your employers nice people? I hope so, for your sake. I hope that you can enjoy good treatment. As to the child, I will not even ask whether it is well-behaved; one cannot have expectations of a child, a child requires patience, much patience and gentleness. You should never let yourself lose your temper and be cross or irritable to the child. Everything can be spoiled so quickly because of that and one cannot set it right again.

I am terribly outraged with Mrs Silberstein. Lotte did not leave any of her property behind with her. With what right does she claim something. What sort of things did she not let you take with you? And why did you comply? Did Dr Ehrenkranz not support you in this matter? I do not understand the thing.

Lotte must have been out of her mind that she married that fellow.

Now you probably want to know how I am. Unfortunately I cannot share with you anything pleasant. We went through a very difficult winter. I do not even know how we survived it, we starved and froze so much. As a consequence I have lost a dreadful amount of weight. Then at the beginning of March, help arrived, 25 dollars from Lipper.⁶⁸¹ We bought food immediately at the

⁶⁸¹ I tried to discover a connection between a "Lipper" and the Windbeutel/Chomed/Lebzelter family and could find nothing concrete. From the interwar newspapers it is clear that there were several well-off Lippers in Czernowitz and presumably one of them was close to the family or perhaps even distantly related. Blanka does not mention this name again, except in occasional reference to her "benefactor" in the diaries, at which time she also refers to the gift of the money and how crucial it was to their physical survival.

time, especially flour for bread. The last penny of this money has long been spent, despite immense frugality and we washed out the flour sack two weeks ago. Now hunger has taken up with us again. Mama's pension is enough, as the saying goes, for parsley.⁶⁸² Since parsley, like everything, is fantastically expensive, this is surely not an exaggeration.

At the beginning of the month I had a terrible hassle. In one of the local cinemas the post of cashier became vacant. I had a valuable recommendation and applied for the position. The director promised it to me absolutely, with the only reservation that if I was not up to the task, then he would not keep me. He gave me this promise three days before the first. On the first of June I was to begin. I was so happy and made a schedule of how I wanted to work. Then I found out on the thirty-first of May, to my great horror, that the union had already placed a person in the relevant position. I cannot describe to you the effect of this news on me. I thought I would go mad. In short, my protector took steps, my rival was removed, and I assumed the register. This unleashed a giant storm in the union. I learned of this and understood I had lost. I sat at the cash register three days and during these three days the struggle lasted between the union and my party. Of course the union had to be victorious, otherwise they may as well close their doors. I suffered terribly in those days and forfeited enough of my health. The disappointment was also too shattering. I certainly would have been up for the task, without a doubt, the proof were these three days.

In January we moved out of that first flat where we were living together with two other families. We moved into a very pretty room in the centre. But this splendour lasted barely four months. Because repairs were required for the back portion of the building, the owner decided to renovate the entire thing. So we had to move out. Not a simple matter with the housing crisis here. With great effort and misery I got a tiny room through the *rechiziție*.⁶⁸³ We had barely moved in and I was threatened to lose it again. I had to go through a lot of commotion until I could arrange the matter. Our current room is small and the window does not look out onto the street but rather into a narrow courtyard. Nevertheless, it is in the centre of town, which is an advantage not to be underestimated; we keep it clean and have peace.

Have you, over time, received any word from or about Gustl⁶⁸⁴?

Why do you want to receive mail at Dr Ehrenkranz' address?

⁶⁸² This is a saying expressing that something is entirely lacking.

⁶⁸³ Romanian: "requisitions" referring to a governmental department responsible for assigning living quarters.

⁶⁸⁴ Referring to Gustav Chomed, Babette's brother.

In Moghilev we knew the family Jossel Wolf from Radautz. This man had a rich brother and a son in Bucharest. Perhaps they are relatives of your people [i.e. employers]?

I very much wish that I could send someone to you to get the [item] you promised, but at the moment I have no opportunity whatsoever. Maybe after all a convenient chance will make it possible. And perhaps by chance you will even receive an opportunity. I very much wish I had the English book back and could give you back your book and the Russian dictionary.

We live at str. Mircea No. 71bis⁶⁸⁵, but continue to send the mail to the *Comunitate*⁶⁸⁶.

Respond soon. Write me, if you want, a bit about your new way of life.

With the hope to hear from you again soon, I close,

Remain with the warmest greetings and kisses from me and my mama

Blanka

⁶⁸⁵ The “bis” is part of the official address.

⁶⁸⁶ Romanian: “community,” referring to the official Jewish community and their offices.

Mein Mütterchen, 1954 (German)

Mein Mütterchen

Zweieinhalb Jahre sind vergangen seit Du mich und diese Welt verlassen hast, und ich einsam und verlassen in meinem bodenlosen Schmerz dahinlebe.

Was gäbe ich nicht darum, könnte ich jetzt mein schweres Herz vor Dir ausschütten, Deine guten treuen Mutteraugen teilnahmvoll auf mir ruhen fühlen, Deine sanften Trostwerte hören.

Doch Du bist nicht mehr bei mir, schweigend muss ich alle Schmerzen in mir tragen. Oft glaube ich, nicht mehr weiter zu können, winde mich wie ein zu Tode getroffenes Tier, möchte laut brüllen, doch beisse die Zähne zusammen, und nur ein unterdrücktes Stöhnen, oder der halblaut gewimmerte Ruf "Mama" entringt sich meinen Lippen.

Nie habe ich daran gedacht dass Du mein Mütterchen sterblich wärst, und habe Dich nicht zu schätzen gewusst.

Verzeih mir.

Wenn ich abends nachhause kam, sah ich schon von der Ferne das beleuchtete Fenster, und wusste, da drinnen wartet freudiges Aufleuchten in deinen Augen. Komme ich jetzt abends nachhause, finde ich de Wohnung dunkel und leer, jetzt im Winter auch kalt, und dann fühle ich doppelt meine Verlassenheit, und unendliche Traurigkeit presst mein Herz zusammen.

Wiederholt träumte mir Nachts: Du liegst bleich und abgemagert mit geschlossenen Augen im Bett, ich blicke auf Dich nieder, und mich packt entsetzliche Angst Du könntest sterben. Doch ich sage mir, nein, nein, es kann nicht sein, es ist nur ein böser Traum - und erwache. Ich erwache, doch nicht mir einem Seufzer der Erleichterung, wie es bei andern Menschen nach bösen Träumen geschieht, sondern mit dem Bewusstsein dass die Wirklichkeit schlimmer ist, als es der böse Traum gewesen.

Ach! Wenn diese furchtbaren 3 Jahre nur ein böser Traum gewesen wären, und ich beim Erwachen Deine ruhigen, regelmässigen Atemzüge hören würde, welch ein Glück wäre dies, und wie wüsste ich jetzt dieses Glück zu schätzen.

Du dürftest vor allem nicht mehr arbeiten. Ich würde vor dem Dienst den Markt besorgen, und nach dem Dienst die gesamte Hausarbeit. Du dürftest nur soviel tun, als nötig zu Deiner persönlichen Bewirtung während meiner Abwesenheit. Ich würde mich mit schmalen Bissen begnügen, und alles für Deine gute Ernährung und Dein Wohl hergeben. Kein lautes oder schlimmes Wort kriegtest Du von mir zu hören, und keines Deiner harten Worte, einer

Misstimmung entspringend, würde ich Dir übelnehmen. Eine Misstimmung würde ich gleich durch liebevolle Worte zu verscheuchen suchen, denn wir Beide, unserer Ernährer und Beschützer beraubt, in einer fremden Stadt sich selbst überlassen, müssen innig und fest zusammenhalten. Zu spät - zu spät. Vergebens lausche ich durch die Stille der Nacht, kein Atemzug, nicht der leiseste Laut dringt an mein Ohr, leere schwarze Dunkelheit gähnt rings um mich her.

Und aus der Dunkelheit tauchen Erinnerungen und Bilder auf, so klar wie ich sie bei Tageslicht nicht sehe, und lassen mir keinen Zweifel über die grausame Wirklichkeit.

Alle bösen Geister waren damals verschworen Dich mir zu entreissen.

An einem kalten Wintertag erkranktest Du schwaches Geschöpf an Lungenentzündung. Wo Du Dir dies geholt hast, weiss ich bis heute nicht, vielleicht hast Du während meiner Abwesenheit eine Unvorsichtigkeit begangen, doch möglich dass Dich diese Krankheit ohne äussere Ursache, wie aus der Luft, erfasst hat. Doktor R. Wusste keine Diagnose zu stellen; 2 bange Tage vergingen ohne Besserung. Da fasste ich den Entschluss am folgenden Tag den besten Arzt zu holen, mir vom Dienst unbezahlten Urlaub zu nehmen, und alles Menschenmöglich für Deine Pflege zu tun. Eine hübsche Summe Geld hatten wir doch zu jenem Zeitpunkt im Hause. Sorglich hatte ich dieses Geld aufbewahrt, damit es uns in Notfällen soll dienen können. Ein schwer Notfall hatte uns jetzt heimgesucht.

Als ich am folgenden Morgen das Haus verliess, nur den einen Gedanken im Kopfe, nun die Hilfsaktion für Deine Rettung in Bewegung zu setzen, erfuhr ich auf der Strasse das Niederschmetterne: Geldentwertung. Staub was über Nacht aus unserem Geld geworden, aus meinem Gehalt dass ich tagsvorher bezogen hatte, aus der Rettungsaktion. Jetzt hatten wir nicht einmal was zu essen, woher auch nur ein bischen Milch für Dich hernehmen? Als der Krankenkasse-Arzt kam, Lungenentzündung feststellte, und sofortige Internierung im Spital empfahl, wolltest Du davon nichts hören. "Wisse," sagtest Du mir, "bringst Du mich jetzt ins Spital, hollst Du mich von dort aus der Leichenkammer." Ich wollte Dir nicht zureden, wusste nicht was tun, was lassen, hatte gänzlich den Kopf verloren. So kam es, dass Du nun täglich viele Stunden allein lagst, ohne Hilfe, ohne Pflege, und bis auf die Knochen abmagertest.

Mit dem ersten Geld das ich in Form einer Gehaltsangabe in die Hände bekam, kaufte ich Penicilin. Vergeblich ertrugst Du die Stiche, zu spät, es half nicht mehr.

Als ich Dir an einem Februarnachmittag das Thermometer entnahm, und einen Blick darauf warf, erbleichte ich. Das Fieber war erschreckend gestiegen. Ich hatte mich nicht rechtzeitig genug

gefasst, Du hattest mein Entsetzen bemerkt, und sagtest: Nun habe ich mich doch entschlossen ins Spital zu gehen. Ich lief in die Poliklinik Deine Aufnahme im Spital zu arrangieren. Ein heftiger Schneesturm würbelte und heulte durch die Luft. Ich liess meinem Schmerz freien Lauf und heulte mit dem Sturm um die Wette.

2 Tage später folgte Deine Ueberführung ins Spital und nach weiteren 2 Tagen, erfuhr ich die schreckliche Diagnose. Fatale Komplikationen hatten sich ergeben, eine Lunge war durchlöchert. Ich war vernichtet. Ich geriet in eine unerträgliche seelische Verfassung.

Als kurz nach Deiner Ueberführung ins TBC Spital, die Ärzte Deine Internierung in einem TBS Sanatorium, einige hundert km. weit von hier entfernt, empfahlen, war ich dagegen. Nicht weil ich mir von dort keine Hilfe versprach, erhoffte sogar viel von einer Luftveränderung, und dann warum sollte nicht gut sein was die Ärzte dringend empfahlen. Ich war dagegen weil ich fürchtete Dich so weit weg von mir, und ohne meine Aufsicht zu lassen, und weil ich fürchtete die weite Reise wäre viel zu anstrengend für Dich, konnte mir überhaupt nicht denken, wie Du in Deinem vollkommen entkräfteten Zustand, diese Reise unternehmen könntest. Du aber Mama, Du warst gleich dafür, Du hattest vom Wort Sanatorium einen veralteten Begriff. Du hattest in Erinnerung das Sanatorium in Czernowitz wo Deine Mutter gepflegt wurde als sie erkrankte. Elegante Räume mit 1-2 Betten, Ärzte die alle von der medizinischen Wissenschaft zur Verfügung gestellten Mittel anwandten, um den Patienten zu helfen, auserlesen Pflege und engelgleiche Pflegerinnen.

Unser Verhängnis wollte es dass Du zu Beginn Deiner Krankheit nichts ins Spital wolltest, wer weiss vielleicht wäre damals noch ein Vorbeugen jener verheerenden Komplikationen möglich gewesen, dagegen jetzt, warst Du ohne Zögern bereit in jenes ferne unbekannte Sanatorium zu ziehen. Und ich willensschwaches verantwortungsloses Geschöpf, liess Deinen Willen geschehen, statt alle Menschen anzuhalten um nach Informationen und Rat zu fragen und dann meine Schlussfolgerung daraus zu ziehen.

Und so kam es, dass als kein Aufschub mehr bewilligt wurde, ich Dich eines Abends ende April, vom Spital direkt zum Bahnhof brachte, um die Reise nach dem Sanatorium anzutreten. Ach, warum kam mir keine Warnung von irgendwo, warum rief mir keine Stimme “zurück” zu, warum

wurde ich nicht hellichtig, machte Kehrt vor dem Bahnhof und brachte Dich nachhause. Warum waren wir Beide, in unsern schweren Stunden, so von GOtt und Menschen verlassen.

Als wir nach jener langen beschwerlichen Reise ans Ziel anlangten, fanden wir eine Stätte des Grauens. Baracken überfüllt mit schwerkranken Menschen, keine Medikamente, gleichgültiges, brutales Personal. An einem solchen Ort, musste ich Dich mein teures Mütterchen, Du mein Einziges und Alles, allein lassen und umkehren. Als nach einigen Tagen Dein Telegram mich zu Dir rief, da wurde mir zum ersten Mal bewusst, dass ich Dich verliere. Ich eilte zu Dir . . . Hier durchreisse ich den Faden der Erinnerungen, sie sind zu schrecklich ich ertrage sie nicht. Stets kämpfe ich gegen diese Gedanken, suche sie zu verdrängen, wenn sie mich aber doch übermannen dann empfinde ich einen so rasenden boden- und grenzlosen Schmerz, wie ihn nie ein menschliches Wesen zwischen Himmel und Erde, je empfunden hat. Doch ich raffe all meine Willenskraft zusammen, entreisse mich der Macht dieser qualvollsten Gedanken, und ertrage tapfer mein Geschick. Ich weiss, so wäre es in Deinem Sinne, und richte mich danach.

Ruhe friedlich mein Mütterchen und sei sorglos meinerwegen. Ich achte auf meine Gesundheit und bin bedacht nicht trübsinnig zu werden. Ich arbeite, bin sogar avansiert. Habe mir neue Möbel und verschiedene Haussachen gekauft. Vor zwei Jahren habe meinen Urlaub in Bukarest verbracht, und voriges Jahr in dem schönen Gebirgskurort Sinaia.

Jetzt schliesse ich für einen Augenblick die Augen, und sehe Dich vor mir meine teure Mama. Ich sehe Dich auf dem Stuhl neben dem Ofen sitzen, in Deinem langen dicken Flanellschlafrock. Ich sehe Deine lieben Hände im Schosse ruhen, die Hände die zahllose schmackhafte Mahlzeiten für mich bereitet haben, die zahllose Mal für mich genäht und gestrickt haben, und die so sanft auf meiner Stirne ruhten wenn ich nicht wohl war. Ich sehe Deine Augen, Deine schönen dunklen langbewimperten Augen, deren Blick in treuer selbstloser Liebe so oft auf mir geruht. Ich drücke Dich fest an mein Herz.

Verzeih mir mein teures Mütterchen dass ich Dich nicht besser zu schonen und pflegen verstanden, und dass ich Dich ohne reifliche Ueberlegung, nur auf der Aerzte Vorschlag hin, an jenen

furchtbaren, verfluchten Ort, der sich Sanatorium nannte, gebracht habe. Ich bereue bitter, doch
Deine Güte ist unermesslich, ich weiss Du verzeihst mir.

Und nochmals mach Dir gar keine Sorge um mich.

Adieu mein Mütterchen, ewiger Friede sei mit Dir.

Deine einzige Tochter

Blanka

Konstantza December 1954.

My dear mother, 1954 (English)

My dear mother,

Two and a half years have passed since you left me and this world, and I go on living lonely and abandoned in my bottomless pain.

What would I not give to unload my heavy heart to you, to feel your good, faithful mother's eyes rest compassionately upon me, listen to your gentle words of comfort.

But you are not with me any longer, silently I have to bear all my pain within me. Often I think I cannot go on any longer, I thrash like an animal stricken to death, I want to bellow loudly, but I bite my teeth together and only a repressed groan or a low whimpered call of "mama" escapes my lips.

I never thought that you, my dear, little mother, would be mortal, and I did not appreciate you.

Forgive me.

When I came home in the evening, already from a distance I saw the window illuminated and knew, inside awaited me your joyfully lit-up eyes. When I come home in the evenings now, I find the flat dark and empty, at present in the winter also cold, and I feel my lonesomeness doubly so, and endless sadness presses down upon my heart.

Repeatedly I have dreamt at night: You lie pale and thin with closed eyes in bed, I look down upon you and am overcome with horrible fear that you could die. But I say to myself, no, no, it cannot be, it is only an evil dream – and awake. I wake, but not with a sigh of relief as happens to other people after bad dreams, rather with the awareness that the reality is worse than it was in the evil dream.

Oh! If only these terrible three years would only have been an evil dream and upon waking I would hear your quiet, regular breaths, what happiness this would be and how I would now know to appreciate this happiness.

First of all, you would not be allowed to do anymore work. Before I went to work, I would take care of going to the market and after work, all of the housework. You would only be allowed to do as much as required for your own needs during my absence. I would be satisfied with small morsels and turn over everything for your nourishment and well-being. You would never hear a loud or ill word from me and I would resent none of your hard words, rising from some ill-humour. I would

try to directly shoo away any ill-humour by way of loving words because we two, robbed of our providers and protectors, left on our own in a foreign city, must earnestly and closely cling to one another. Too late – too late. In vain do I listen through the quiet of the night, no breath, not the slightest sound reaches my ear, empty black darkness yawns about me.

And from this darkness, memories and images appear, as clear as if I saw them by daylight and they leave me no doubt as to the cruel reality.

All evil spirits had conspired at that time to rip you from me.

On a cold winter day you, weak creature, fell ill with an infection of the lungs. Where you caught this, I know not even today, maybe during my absence you undertook some imprudence, but it is possible that this illness seized you without any external cause, as if from the air. Doctor R. could offer no diagnosis; two frightened days passed without improvement. Then I made the decision to, on the next day, procure the best doctor, to take unpaid vacation from work, and do everything humanly possible for your care. After all, we had a tidy sum of money at that point in time in the house. I had carefully saved this money so that it could help us in emergencies. A grave emergency had now sought us out.

When I left the house the following morning, with only the one thought in my mind to put into motion the relief operation for your rescue, I learned the devastating news on the street: currency devaluation. Overnight our money, my salary which I had received the days before, the rescue operation, had turned to dust. Now we did not even have anything to eat, where should I even find a bit of milk for you? When the state-appointed doctor (*Krankenkasse-Arzt*) arrived, confirmed a lung infection, and recommended immediate internment in the hospital, you wanted to hear nothing of it. “Listen,” you said to me, “if you take me to the hospital now, you will pick me up from the morgue.” I did not want to argue, did not know what to do, what not to do, I had lost my head entirely. And thus it transpired that you lay alone, daily, for hours, without help, without care, and lost weight down to the bones.

With the first money that I received in the form of a partial payment of salary, I bought penicillin. In vain you bore the stabs, too late, it no longer helped.

As I removed the thermometer one February afternoon and threw it a glance, I grew pale. The fever had risen alarmingly. I had not caught myself quickly enough, you noticed my fright and said: now I have decided to go to the hospital after all. I ran to the polyclinic to arrange your

admission to the hospital. A fierce snowstorm swirled and howled through the air. I let my pain run free and howled with the storm.

Two days later your transfer to the hospital took place and after another two days, I heard the wretched diagnosis. Fatal complications had resulted, one lung was riddled with holes. I was devastated. I fell into an unbearable emotional state.

When, shortly after your transfer to the TB hospital, the doctors recommended you be sent to a TB sanatorium, several hundred kilometres away, I opposed this. Not because I thought there would be no help there, I was even hopeful about a change of air and after all, why would what the doctors urgently recommended not be good. I opposed it because I was afraid of leaving you so far away from me and without my supervision and because I feared the long journey would be much too strenuous for you, I could not at all imagine how you could undertake such a journey in your completely debilitated condition. But you, mama, you immediately wanted to go, you had an outdated concept of the word sanatorium. You recalled the sanatorium in Czernowitz where your mother was cared for when she fell ill. Elegant rooms with one to two beds, doctors who applied all the methods available in medical science to assist their patients, exquisite care, and nurses like angels.⁶⁸⁷

It was our ill-fated destiny that at the beginning of your illness you did not want to go to the hospital, who knows, perhaps at that time it would have been possible to prevent that disastrous complication, in contrast now you were ready to move without hesitation to that far-off and unknown sanatorium. And I, weak-minded, irresponsible creature, let your will be done instead of stopping all the people [I knew] and asking for information and advice and making my decision based on that.

And thus it happened that when no further postponement was approved, one evening at the end of April, I took you directly from the hospital to the train station to begin the journey to the sanatorium. Oh, why did I not receive a warning from anywhere, why did no voice call to me “back,” why was I not perceptive, did I not turn around at the train station and bring you home. Why were we both, in our dark hour, abandoned by God and man.

⁶⁸⁷ This passage is quoted in Chapter 5 with footnotes elaborating on some aspects of the context, for example, the sanatorium in Czernowitz.

When after that long, arduous journey, we reached our goal, we found a place of horror. Barracks crammed with grievously ill people, no medicine, indifferent, brutal staff. At such a place I had to leave you alone, my dear mother, you my one and only, and turn back. When a telegram called me to you after a few days, then I realised for the first time that I was losing you. I hurried to you Here I must rip asunder the threads of memory, they are too horrid, I cannot bear them. I am struggling constantly against these thoughts, I seek to suppress them, and when, after all, they overcome me I experience such an excruciatingly bottomless and boundless pain such as no human creature has ever experienced between heaven and earth. But I gather together all my willpower, rip myself from the power of these tortuous thoughts and bravely bear my fortune. I know, this is what you would want and I act in accordance.

Rest in peace my dear mother and do not worry about me. I pay attention to my health and I keep in mind not to become gloomy. I work, have even been promoted. I purchased new furniture and various things for the household. Two years ago I spent my holiday in Bucharest and last year in the beautiful mountain spa town of Sinaia.

Now I close my eyes for a moment and see you before me, my dear mama. I see you sitting upon the chair beside the oven, in your long, thick flannel nightgown. I see your dear hands resting in your lap, the hands which prepared countless delicious meals for me, which countless times sewed and knitted for me, and which rested so softly on my forehead when I was unwell. I see your eyes, your beautiful, dark, long-lashed eyes, whose glance rested on me so often with faithful selfless love. I press you close to my heart.

Forgive me my dear mother that I did not know better how to protect and care for you and that I brought you to that terrible, cursed place, without careful consideration, simply due to the doctors' recommendation. I regret it bitterly, but your charity is unmeasurable, I know you forgive me.

And again, do not worry about me at all.

Adieu my dear mother, may eternal peace be with you.

Your only daughter

Blanka

Constanța December 1954.

Lieber Walter, 1955 (German)

Konstanza Mai 1955

Lieber Walter

Ich kann Dich nicht vergessen und bin Dir treu geblieben. Du warst meine erste und letzte Liebe, ein Mensch wie ich kann nicht zweimal lieben.

Die Versuchung ist jedoch auch nicht gross gewesen, das muss ich zugeben.

Nach dem entsetzlichen Unglück und den 3 Lagerjahren, wurde ich verschlossen und menschenscheu. Meine eisige Gleichgültigkeit Männern gegenüber hielt mir diese fern. Wenn sich einer doch heranwagte, wurde er sofort abgeblitzt. Und die Jahre vergingen. Da begannen meine Bekannten mir Heiratskandidaten vorzuführen. Meistens wehrte ich mich gegen diese Prozedur und liess es nicht dazukommen. In den Fällen jedoch wo ich nachgab und der Bewerber auf die Bildfläche erschien, tauchte im gleichen Augenblick Dein Bild vor meinen Augen auf. Deutlich sah ich Dich vor mir, zum greifen plastisch so wie ich Dich gekannt und geliebt habe. Ich zog Vergleiche und schauderte zurück.

Ach Liebster, wenn Du wüsstest wie schrecklich einsam, wie namenlos unglücklich ich bin.

In der letzten Zeit denke ich viel an Dich. Flüchte aus der grausigen Gegenwart ins Frühjahr 1941 zurück, in den Frühling unserer Liebe. Erinnerst Du Dich Walter an unsere erste Begegnung. Bruno hatte vorher von Dir gesprochen und eines Tages machte er uns bekannt. Ich fand Dich nett, doch machtest Du keinen tieferen Eindruck auf mich. Du hast mir später gesagt, dass der erste Eindruck den ich auf Dich machte, Ueberraschung gewesen ist. Du hattest nicht erwartet in Brunos Schwester ein so schönes Mädchen vorzufinden. Als ich Dich zum ersten Mal sah, dachte ich nicht Du könntest in Kürze Herr all meiner Gedanken und Gefühle, meine grosse Liebe werden. Ich habe überhaupt an die Existenz einer solchen Liebe im realen Leben gezweifelt. Doch als mir bewusst wurde dass ich Dich innig liebte und auch Du mich liebtest, dass die grosse Liebe kein Märchen sei, ahnte ich nicht dass eine schwarze Wolke sich über unsern Häuptern zusammengezogen hatte, und unsere Liebe bald ein jähes Ende finden sollte.

1 Mai 1941. Ein Tag den ich niemals vergessen werde. Es war ein schöner, sonniger, warmer Frühlingstag. Unser Obstgarten stand in voller Blütenpracht. Ich hielt mich an diesem Nachmittag zum ersten Mal länger im Garten auf, entzückt von seiner Pracht und dem herrlichen Duft. Plötzlich erschienst Du. Ich freute mich über Dein Kommen denn ich war so recht in Stimmung mich mit einem netten Menschen zu unterhalten. Und wir unterhielten uns, merkten gar nicht wie

die Stunden vergingen. Als wir auf meine Markensammlung zu sprechen kamen, wolltest Du sie sehen. Es war inzwischen kühl geworden und ich bat Dich ins Haus. Wir saßen in meinem Zimmer und Du besahst Dir meine Markensammlung, das Album mit den Filmstars, die Bücher. Dann erzähltest Du mir einige Episoden aus Deiner Studienzeit in Prag. Von Deiner "Statistenlaufbahn" in Oper und Theater. Viele Studenten gaben sich dazu her um ein paar Kronen zu verdienen, doch Du hast es getan um die Theaterwelt hinter den Kulissen kennenzulernen. Während Du einen drolligen Zwischenfall erzähltest und ich herzlich lachte rissst Du mich plötzlich in Deine Arme und küsstest mich.

Von diesem Tag an waren wir unzertrennlich. Du kamst zu mir ins Büro so oft Du konntest, auch wenn es nur für wenige Minuten war, und die ganze freie Zeit verbrachten wir zusammen.

Ach Walter, mein Walter, wie grenzenlos habe ich Dich geliebt. Wenn ich morgens erwachte warst Du mein erster Gedanke und all meine übrigen Gedanken galten nur Dir. Warst Du nicht bei mir wartete ich voll Ungeduld auf Dein Kommen, und wenn Du kamst erfüllte eine innige Freude mein Herz. Alles verlor an Bedeutung was nicht im Zusammenhang mit meiner Liebe war. Meine Liebe füllte ganz mein Leben aus, machte es reich und schön. Ich horchte in jenen Tagen oft auf die Stimme meines Herzens die sang: Ich bin glücklich, glücklich, glücklich. Manchmal erschreck ich vor mir selber und mir wurde bange. Mir war als müsste ich meine Liebe wie einen unermesslichen Schatz vor profanen Blicken schützen und wäre am liebsten mit Dir auf eine einsame Insel geflohen.

Obwohl ich zu meinen Eltern nie darüber sprach was mich in jenen Tagen so sehr ausfüllte, hatten sie doch alles erraten und freuten sich über die Verwandlung ihrer für ihr Alter viel zu ernsten und grüblerischen Tochter.

Auch war es das erste Jahr dass Bruno nach beendeter Hochschule wieder zuhause weilte. Und wie wunderbar hatte er sich entwickelt; ein anziehender lieber Mensch, und der liebevollste treueste Sohn und Bruder den es geben konnte. Meine Eltern strahlten, nie zuvor hat's in unserm Hause soviel Sonnenschein und Familienglück gegeben.

31 Mai 1941. An diesem Tage hast Du mich gefragt, ernst in meine Augen blickend, ob ich Deine Frau werden möchte. Natürlich habe ich ja gesagt und auch eifrig mit dem Kopf dazu genickt. Erinnerst Du Dich Walter? Am folgenden Tag solltest Du mit meinen Eltern sprechen.

-- In dieser Nacht habe kein Auge geschlossen. Allerlei Gedanken würbelten durch meinen Kopf und liessen mich keinen Schlaf finden.

Am nächsten Tag erwartete ich Dich. Als ich das Tor zuschlagen hörte, wusste ich dass Du es seist und lief Dir frohen Mutes entgegen. Doch als ich Dein Gesicht sah erschreck ich. Bleich und düster sah es aus, der Blick auf den Boden gerichtet. "Was ist geschehen" fragte ich, "ich werde versetzt" war Deine Antwort. Dann zogst Du ein Papier aus der Tasche, ich nahm es in meine zitternden Hände und erfuhr dass man beschlossen hatte Dich mir zu nehmen, in ein entferntes bessarabisches Dorf das nie einen Arzt gesehen hatte zu schicken, damit Du dort eine ärztliche Hilfsstelle organisierst und damit den Ort Deiner künftiger Tätigkeit.

Wir wussten hier gab es nichts zu tun, niemand konnte uns helfen. So unerwartet war dieser Schlag gekommen, wir konnten nicht fassen dass eine fremde unsichtbare Macht uns auseinander reißen wollte. Als Du mich zögernd mit unsicherer Stimme fragtest ob ich Dir in die "Verbannung" folgen würde und hinzufügtest "darf ich denn dieses Opfer von Dir verlangen" wurde ich beinahe böse. "Opfer? Was für Opfer" sagte ich "ich würde Dir überallhin, auch in die Wüste Sahara folgen." Deine Züge erhellten sich, Du danktest mir. Als wir allein blieben, Deine Arme mich umschlangen und mein Kopf auf Deiner Schulter ruhte, sprachen wir über die nächste Zukunft, machten Pläne. Du solltest sobald als möglich einen kurzen Urlaub nehmen, da wollten wir Hochzeit machen. Wir besprochen wie wir uns einrichten, wie wir dort leben wollten und schienen uns mit der neuen Lage abgefunden zu haben. Doch als Du mich um die Mitternachtstunde verliesst, wurde mein Herz sehr schwer.

3 Tage später solltest Du abreisen. Am Tage vor Deiner Abreise kamst Du und schlugst mir vor, jetzt gleich aufs Standesamt zu kommen. Meine erste Regung war einzuwilligen, doch dann sagte ich nein. Ich wollte keine Trauung und gleichzeitigen Abschied von meinem eben angetrauten Mann. Ich wollte wenn wir uns trauen, wir auch zusammenbleiben, Du und ich, zusammen für's ganze Leben. Ich habe mich in den letzten Jahren nicht einmal gefragt ob ich damals richtig gehandelt habe. Das einmal bereute ich und das andere Mal sagte ich mir, „vielleicht besser so.“

3 Junie 1941, der gefürchtete Tag Deiner Abreise war da. Unheimlich schnell war er gekommen. Ich war sehr schweigsam, ich sprach kein Wort weil mich die Tränen würgten. Nachdem Du Dich von meinen Eltern verabschiedet hattest, kamst Du auf mich zu. Ich sehe noch heute Deine Augen vor mir so wie Du mich damals angeschaut hast. Liebe und Schmerz las ich in ihnen. Ich warf mich an Deine Brust um mein Gesicht zu verbergen, ich wollte Dir den Abschied nicht noch schwerer machen. Deshalb ging ich auch nicht mit Dir zum Bahnhof, nur Bruno begleitete Dich. Du gingst, ich sah Dir aus dem Fenster nach, bis Deine Gestalt um die Ecke verschwand. Dann

warf ich mich laut aufweinend auf den Diwan und weinte, weinte unaufhaltsam bis zum nächsten Abend. Ich hatte in jenen 24 Stunden mehr Tränen vergossen als bis dahin in meinem gesamten 20 jährigen Leben.

Fort warst Du Walter, und ich fragte mich jeden Morgen wie ich nun ohne Dich werde leben können, es schien mir unmöglich. Alle meine Gedanken waren nur bei Dir, ich machte den Eindruck einer Nachtwandlerin. Dein erster Brief brachte mich zum Leben wieder. In diesen ersten Brief schriebst Du nur von Deiner Liebe und Sehnsucht. Erst in dem folgenden Brief der 3 Tage später ankam beschriebst Du mir die Ortschaft, Deine Tätigkeit, und sprachst immer wieder von der Hoffnung auf ein baldiges Wiedersehen. Dieses Wiedersehen war nun das Ziel meiner Tage und sah ich ihm in freudiger Erwartung entgegen.

Doch finstere Mächte hatten es anders bestimmt. Wir sollten uns nie wiedersehen, unser Glück und unser Leben, alles sollte jäh ein grausames Ende finden.

Am 22 Junie 1941 überfielen die nazistischen Raubmörderhorden die Sowjetunion. Einige Tage später wurden wir aus dem Hause gejagt ins Gefängnis getrieben und gefoltert. Mein einziger herrlicher Bruder, über dessen geliebtes Gesicht ich keinen Schatten huschen sehen konnte ohne besorgt aufzufahren, wurde getötet. Ebenso unser Vater. Mama und ich entgingen dem Tode im letzten Augenblick durch das Einschreiten eines rumänischen Maiors der plötzlich inmitten der blutgierigen Bestien in Menschengestalt auftauchte und das Gemetzel unterbrach. Wäre er eine Stunde früher gekommen, wahrscheinlich wären wir alle am Leben geblieben, hätte er noch eine halbe Stunde verspätet wäre keiner von uns mit dem Leben davongekommen. Ich war gefasst zu sterben. Ich war wie ein Stein. Ich fühlte die Schläge nicht mehr. Das einzige was ich empfand war Ekel. Ekel vor dieser Welt in der sich so etwas abspielen konnte und bedauerte nicht sie verlassen zu müssen.

Mama und ich schleppten uns nachhause und fanden unser Heim ausgeplündert. Kein einziges Kleidungsstück- oder Wäschestück, keine Decke, keine Lebensmittel. Dieses Haus ist vor wenigen Wochen noch ein kleines irdisches Paradies gewesen, bewohnt von glücklichen Menschen. Und jetzt – jetzt – es war nicht zu fassen.

So bald ich konnte forschte ich nach Dir. Ein ehemaliger Würdenträger, gewesener Freund meines Vaters, der aus dem Altreich zurückgekehrt war, ging mir an die Hand. Ohne ihn hätte ich nichts unternehmen können. Ich hatte eine böse Vorahnung, eine Art Sicherheit dass es Dir ebenso ergangen war wie den Meinen. Das Resultat der Nachforschungen bestätigte es mir.

Das Dach über dem Kopf wurde uns auch nicht gelassen. Wir wurden hinaus gejagt ins Freie und samt der übrigen Volksgenossen in Todeslager getrieben. So unglaublich es scheint, Mama und ich haben all das entsetzliche überlebt. Es war wohl ein Wunder, anders kann ich es mir nicht erklären. Wohl habe ich inbrünstig gewünscht das Ende unserer Feinde, dieser schrecklichen Ungeheuer zu erleben, welche übermenschlichen Kampf hat es gekostet durchzuhalten, und nun dieses Ziel erreicht vermisste ich das Empfinden einer Befriedigung. Ich hatte bloss das Gefühl als wäre mir die Todesstrafe in lebenslängliche Höllenqual verwandelt worden.

Walter Liebster, ich bin so einsam und unglücklich wie kaum noch ein Mensch auf dieser Erde. Wärest Du und Bruno am Leben, wäre ich weder das Eine noch das Andere. Und warum seid ihr nicht am Leben, warum???

Ihr wart doch gesund, im blühendsten Jugendalter, und geschaffen stets Freude und Frohsinn um Euch zu verbreiten. warum seid ihr nicht bei mir, warum???

Ihr wäret nicht fähig gewesen einen Wurm zu zertreten, aber Eure Mitmenschen, was haben sie mit Euch gemacht – mir bleibt der Verstand stehen, tausend Schwerter schlagen auf mein Herz los und zerfetzen es zu Atomen.

-Walter, Du mein Einziger, Du meine erste und letzte Liebe. Wie bodenlos- und grenzenlos ist meine Liebe zu Dir gewesen. Hätte ich doch statt Deiner sterben können, alles alles hätte ich ohne Murren über mich ergehen lassen wenn ich dadurch Dich hätte schützen können.

Mein Walter, vergangene Nacht habe ich Dir geträumt. Ich lehnte mich an Dich, empfand Deine Wärme und fühlte mich so wohl. Die qualvolle Schwere auf meinem Herzen, die mich auch im Schlafen und Träumen nicht verlässt, löste sich und mir wurde so leicht und froh zu Mute. Ich schlang meine Arme um Deinen Hals und bat: Geh nicht mehr fort, lass mich nie wieder allein.

Ach, wäre ich doch nicht mehr erwacht.

Walter Liebster, so vieles möchte ich Dir sagen. Um mein Herz auszuschütten muss ich in eine andere Welt flüchten, auf dieser Welt habe keinen Freund. Würde ich auf einer einsamen Insel als einziges menschliches Wesen leben, wäre ich nicht einsamer, doch mir wäre leichter. Ich lebe aber in einer Stadt von 120.000 Einwohner und unter all diesen Menschen gibt es Keinen den ich meinen Freund nennen könnte, und das ist sehr schwer. Dagegen stosse ich mich täglich gegen die Gleichgültigkeit, Schlechtigkeit und Bosheit der Menschen. Ein gutes Wort ist ein zu grosser Luxus, den dürfen sie sich nicht erlauben, doch gegen Wehrlose losschlagen ist ein billiges Vergnügen und dieses Vergnügen leisten sie sich beständig.

Ich altere. Der Spiegel zeigt mir ein Gesicht das kaum noch eine Aehnlichkeit mit demjenigen aufweist das Du einst geliebt hast. Wir hätten beide zusammen altern sollen, doch ich wurde Deine trostlose Witwe noch bevor ich Dir vor Gott und den Gesetzen angetraut wurde.

Ich weiss dass die Menschen, besonders die Ehekrüppel, diejenigen die unter einem schweren Ehejoch stöhnen oder in ihrer Ehe Schiffbruch erlitten haben, auf mich herabsehen, „ein altes Mädchen.“ Was wissen diese Leute was Liebe, was wissen sie was Treue ist.

Nun muss ich schliessen Walter und es fällt mir schwer als müsste ich wieder Abschied von Dir nehmen. – Ich danke Dir für das kurze Glück das Du mir geschenkt hast. Nur Dich habe ich geliebt und nur Dich werde ich lieben solange mein Herz noch schlägt.

Deine, Blanka

Dear Walter, 1955 (English)

Constanța, May 1955

Dear Walter,

I cannot forget you and have remained faithful. You were my first and last love, a person such as myself cannot love twice.

Though the temptation has also not been strong, I must admit.

After the horrific misfortune and the three years in the camp, I became withdrawn and wary of people. My icy indifference towards men kept them away from me. If, despite this, one approached, he was immediately rebuffed. And the years passed. Then my acquaintances began to present me with marriage candidates. Most of the time I resisted this process and did not allow it. Yet in the cases where I gave in and the suitor appeared on the scene, at that very moment your image appeared before my eyes. I saw you clearly before me, vivid to the touch, so as I had known and loved you. I made comparisons and drew back, shuddering.

Ah dearest, if you could know how terribly lonely, how indescribably unhappy I am.

Recently I think of you often. I flee from the ghastly present back to spring of 1941, the springtime of our love. Do you recall, Walter, our first meeting. Bruno had spoken of you before and one day introduced us. I found you nice, but you made no deeper impression on me. You told me later that the first impression I made upon you was one of surprise. You had not expected to find such a pretty girl in Bruno's sister. When I saw you for the first time, I little thought you would soon become master of all my thoughts and emotions, my great love. In fact, I doubted the existence of a love such as that in real life. Yet as I became aware that I loved you deeply and that you too loved me, that the great love was no fairy-tale, I did not suspect that a dark cloud had gathered above our heads and that our love would soon find an abrupt end.

The first of May 1941. A day I will never forget. It was a beautiful, sunny, warm spring day. Our fruit orchard was awash with blossoms. That afternoon I lingered in the garden for the first time, enchanted by its splendour and the heavenly fragrance. Suddenly you appeared. I was happy to see you as I was really in the mood to chat with someone nice. And we talked, not noticing how the hours passed. As we began to talk of my stamp collection, you wished to see it. In the meantime it had become cool and I invited you into the house. We sat in my room and you looked through my stamp collection, the album with the movie stars, the books. Then you told me some anecdotes of your student years in Prague. About your experience as a "background actor" in the opera and

theatre. Many students did such a thing to earn a few pennies, but you did it to become acquainted with the world of the theatre behind the curtains. As you recounted a droll incident and I laughed with delight, you pulled me suddenly into your arms and kissed me.

From this day forward we were inseparable. You came to see me in the office as often as you could, even if only for a few minutes, and we spent all our free time together.

Oh Walter, my Walter, how I loved you, boundlessly. When I awoke in the morning, you were my first thought and every spare thought was for you. When you were not with me, I waited full of impatience for your arrival and when you came a deep joy filled my heart. Everything unconnected to my love lost all meaning. My love filled my entire life, making it rich and beautiful. Those days I often listened to the voice of my heart, singing: I am happy, happy, happy. At times I myself was startled and grew worried. I felt that I must guard my love as a vast treasure from profane glances and would have most preferred to have fled with you to a secluded island.

Although I never spoke with my parents about what was absorbing me so much during those days, they guessed everything and were pleased about the change in their daughter, too serious and brooding for her age.

It was also the first year that Bruno spent at home having finished university. And how wonderfully he had developed, an engaging, dear person and the most affectionate and faithful son and brother one could have. My parents beamed, there had never before been such sunshine and familial joy in our house.

The 31st of May 1941. On this day you asked me, gazing earnestly into my eyes, whether I wanted to be your wife. Naturally I said yes, nodding eagerly at the same time. Do you remember, Walter? The next day you were to speak with my parents.

-- That night I did not shut my eyes. Every kind of thought swirled through my head and kept me from sleeping.

The next day I expected you. When I heard the gate swing shut, I knew it was you and ran brightly to meet you, yet when I saw your face I became alarmed. It was pale and grim, your gaze was fixed on the floor. "What has happened," I asked. "I am being transferred," you responded, pulling a paper from your pocket. I took it in my trembling hands and learned that they had resolved to take you from me, to send you to a far-off Bessarabian village, which had never seen a doctor, so that you could organise a medical outpost there and thus [this would be] the place of your future employment.

We knew there was nothing to do, no one could help us. As unexpected at this blow was, we could not grasp that a foreign, hidden power wanted to pull us apart. When you hesitatingly asked me, your voice shaking, whether I would follow you into “exile” and added “can I ask this sacrifice of you,” I almost became angry. “Sacrifice? What sacrifice,” I said, “I would follow you anywhere, be it to the deserts of the Sahara.” Your features lightened, you thanked me. When we were alone, your arms wrapped about me and my head resting on your shoulder, we spoke of the upcoming future, made plans.

You were to take a short holiday as soon as possible, then we would have the wedding. We discussed how we would furnish things, how we wanted to live there and it seemed we had come to terms with the new situation. Yet when you left me around midnight, my heart grew heavy.

Three days later you were to leave. The day before your departure you came and proposed that I go with you to the civil registry office [to wed] now, immediately. My first impulse was to agree, but then I said no. I did not want to wed and at the same time bid farewell to the husband I had just married. I wanted for us to wed and then also remain together, you and I, together for our entire lives. In the past years I have asked myself more than once if I did the right thing at that time. Sometimes I regret it and other times I tell myself, “perhaps it was better this way.”

The third of June 1941, the dreaded day of your departure had arrived. It arrived with uncanny speed. I was silent, I spoke no word due to the tears choking me. After you had taken leave of my parents, you approached me. I can still see your eyes today, the way you looked at me then. I read in them love and pain. I threw myself on your breast to hide my face, I did not want to make your farewell even more difficult. For this reason as well I did not accompany you to the train station, only Bruno escorted you. You left, I watched you from the window until your figure disappeared around the corner. Then I threw myself with a cry on the divan and wept, wept without ceasing, until the next evening. In those twenty-four hours I shed more tears than I had until then in my entire twenty years of life.

You were gone, Walter, and each morning I wondered how I would be able to live without you, it seemed impossible to me. All my thoughts were with you, I was like a sleepwalker. Your first letter brought me back to life. In this first letter you wrote only of your love and longing. Not until the next letter, which came three days later, did you describe the place, your work, and spoke repeatedly of your hope that we would soon be reunited. This reunion was the single aim of my days and I awaited it with joyful expectation.

But dark powers had determined otherwise. We were never to see each other again, our joy and our life, everything would come abruptly to a gruesome end.

On the 22nd of June 1941 the murderous and thieving Nazi hordes attacked the Soviet Union. Some days later we were chased out of the house, driven to the jail, and tortured. My only, splendid brother, across whose beloved face I could not bear to see the slightest shadow fall without startling up, anxious, was killed. Our father likewise. Mama and I escaped death in the last moment due to the intervention of a Romanian major who appeared suddenly in the midst of the blood-thirsty beasts in human form and stopped the butchery. Had he come one hour earlier, probably we would all have remained alive, had he come a half hour later, none of us would have escaped with our lives. I was prepared to die. I was like a stone. I did not feel the blows any longer. The only thing I felt was disgust. Disgust for this world in which such a thing could come to pass and I did not regret having to leave it.

Mama and I dragged ourselves home and found it plundered. Not a single piece of clothing or linens, no blanket, no food. Only a few weeks earlier this house had been a small paradise on earth, in which happy people lived. And now – now – it was impossible to grasp.

As soon as I could I looked for you. A former dignitary, an old friend of my father who had returned from the *Altreich*, helped me. Without him I could not have undertaken anything. I had an evil foreboding, a kind of certainty that you had met the same fate as my dear ones. The result of the search confirmed this.

The roof over our heads was also not left us. We were chased out into the open and driven to death camps with the rest of our people. As unbelievable as it seems, Mama and I survived the horror. It must have been a miracle, I cannot explain it any other way.

Of course I wished fervently to see the end of our enemies, these horrible monsters, what superhuman struggle it cost to persevere and now, having achieved this goal [of survival], I missed the sensation of satisfaction. I had only the feeling that my death sentence had been transformed into lifelong agony.

Walter, dearest, I am so alone and unhappy, as hardly any person on this earth. If only you and Bruno were alive, I would be neither of those things. And why are you not alive, why???

You [both] were healthy, in the full bloom of youth, and created to spread always joy and good cheer all about you. Why are you not with me, why???

You were not capable of treading upon a worm, but your fellow humans, what did they do with you – I cannot comprehend, a thousand swords strike my heart slashing it to atoms.

-Walter, you, my one and only, you my first and last love. My love to you was boundless, without end. If only I could have died in your place, I would have let everything pass over me without grumbling, if I could have protected you as a result.

My Walter, last night I dreamt of you. I leaned against you, felt your warmth and felt so comfortable. The torturous weight upon my heart, that leaves me neither in sleep nor in dreams, dispensed and I became light and cheerful. I wrapped my arms around your neck and begged: do not go away, never leave me alone again.

Oh, if only I had not awoken.

Walter dearest, I want to tell you so much. In order to pour my heart out I have to flee into another world, in this world I have no friend. If I were the only person living on a secluded island, I would not be lonelier, yet it would be easier for me. I live in a city of 120,000 people and amongst all these people there is no one that I can call my friend, and that is very hard. On the contrary, daily I come up against the indifference, wickedness, and malice of mankind. A good word is too much of a luxury, they cannot allow themselves such a thing, but attacking the defenceless, this is a cheap thrill and one in which they can always indulge.

I am aging. The mirror reveals to me a face barely resembling that which you once loved. We should have grown old together but instead I became your bleak widow before I was wed to you before God and the law.

I know that people, especially those maimed by marriage, those who groan beneath a heavy yoke of wedded life or those whose marriage is a wreckage, look down upon me, “an old maid.” What do these people know of love, what do they know of faithfulness.

Now I have to close, Walter, and it is hard, as if I were bidding you farewell once again. – I thank you for the brief happiness you gave me. I loved only you and only you will I love as long as my heart beats.

Your, Blanka

Chapter 1 – diary excerpt translations

Constanța, Sunday 23 September 1951

I was in Bucharest and did not accomplish anything. No audiences were allowed, one was not even let into the ministry. Even though officially there were no audiences, those from the countryside were let in and listened to, precisely on the day that I came this was stopped. My efforts were in vain and the money spent in vain. I went to my friend, Lia, whom I have not seen for two and a half years. She has a darling little girl.

What should I do now? For years I have been stuck in an uncomfortable transitional state and there is no end to it. And my torments have no end and are devastating me.

Winter is approaching, it is already noticeably cold. What to do, begin to stock up for the winter? This is a very difficult matter and with what sort of heart can I do it.

Constanța, Thursday 26 October 1950

Exactly one month ago, I put the final period on the last page of my previous diary and hesitated greatly to begin a new one. What meaning can the keeping of a diary have for a person like me. A botched, doomed life, for years I record nothing but misfortune, failure, and suffering. Yet for me, this recording in the diary has become such a habit that I cannot give it up. And so today I start again and begin there where I last left off.

21 June 1952

That same evening I went to Ploiești. Having arrived in this alien, odious city which I wish I had never seen, where should I go, what should I do. In my muddled brain one thought was clear: I have to bring her to the Jewish cemetery of Ploiești. I went to the *comunitate*⁶⁸⁸ and came up against difficulties. I did not have enough money and these days the community has absolutely no funds whatsoever. Moved by my state, the lady clerk at the community lent me the missing money and also took the initiative for what needed to be done. Most importantly she found the people to take care of the transport and the formalities connected to it. Then I went to Paulești. I sat on a bench, looked

⁶⁸⁸ Romanian: community, that is, the official Jewish community which took care of administrative matters related to Jewish life in every town.

towards the mortuary and wept, utterly beside myself. I did not go to see her, my nerves would not have survived. I asked the nurses about her last hours and heard what I had feared: she called for me the entire time and knew that her death was nigh. On the last day of her life she asked for her glasses and the two postcards which I had sent her and read them once again. (How can I live with the thought of these horrific agonies of my dear mother, loved beyond everything, and why? For whom?) I entered the forest on the other side of the “sanatoriums,” walked about, and screamed, the heavens must hear my accusation, my mother my plea for forgiveness. And then I drove with my mother in the coffin (could that be possible) the same path back which I had taken only a few days before, with her by my side, full of hope and a speedy recovery. It was already too late to bury her on the same day. The next day I stood beside her bier until the rabbi and the cantor arrived. Then she was borne to the grave. My good, dear, sweet mother was sunk into the earth.

Bucharest, Wednesday 26 April 1961

I am very exhausted. The moment approaches to leave the old home and seek a new one. What will I find?? One is not allowed to bring diaries, I could not bring myself to destroy them. I am entrusting them to someone for safekeeping. Will they ever find their way back to me?

Chapter 2 – diary excerpt translations

Constanța, Sunday 5 February 1956

I am starting a new diary. The fifth one since my return from the death camps of “Transnistria.” It is a notebook bound in red linen. I look at its white pages, leafing through them, and feel a chill run down my back. What will they speak of when they are no longer white.

From my birth until July 1941 I was the spoiled child of my parents, I had one magnificent brother, whom I worshipped, and I lived relatively without care in my parents’ comfortable home, with its large garden. In the first half of the month of July 1941 I was suddenly left without brother, without father, without home, without bread. We were Jews and thus one was permitted to murder us. By chance Mama and I had escaped with our

lives, now we were deported to “Transnistria.” For three years we grappled daily with death. We experienced the demise of fascism and liberation, but our lives were destroyed. In April 1946 I blindly chose to live in the city of Constanța and made with this I made a poor choice. In May 1952 my mama, the only companion of my lonesomeness, died as a result of a lung disease and I was left entirely alone in this horrid world.

Excerpt from letter to Walter (1955)

The first of May 1941. A day I will never forget. It was a beautiful, sunny, warm spring day. Our fruit orchard was awash with blossoms. That afternoon I lingered in the garden for the first time, enchanted by its splendour and the heavenly fragrance. Suddenly you appeared. I was happy to see you as I was really in the mood to chat with someone nice. And we talked, not noticing how the hours passed. As we began to talk of my stamp collection, you wished to see it. In the meantime it had become cool and I invited you into the house. We sat in my room and you looked through my stamp collection, the album with the movie stars, the books. Then you told me some anecdotes of your student years in Prague. About your experience as a “background actor” in the opera and theatre. Many students did such a thing to earn a few pennies, but you did it to become acquainted with the world of the theatre behind the curtains. As you recounted a droll incident and I laughed with delight, you pulled me suddenly into your arms and kissed me.

From this day forward we were inseparable. You came to see me in the office as often as you could, even if only for a few minutes, and we spent all our free time together.

Diary Excerpts: 28 January to 23 April 1948 (English translation)

Constanța, Wednesday 28. January 1948

I finished my old diary on the first of January and wanted to start the new one immediately but did not manage to until today. First off, I had no time. I was permanently working at “Capitol” from 1. Jan. to the 26th. Now, this week I am unemployed. I have little hope of further employment in my field.

Since I have been going back and forth for weeks on the topic of whether to go to Palestine, I joined one of the local Zionist organisations last month. But unfortunately, I have been feeling so miserable recently that my courage has sunk significantly.

After having learned the address of my cousin Max in Palestine, I wrote him a letter (it is exactly one month since then) in which I told him of my plan to go to Palestine and asked for his opinion. A few days after I had sent my letter, a letter from Max arrived. It was only brief, he wrote that he had received greetings from me via Radio Jerusalem and he expects a detailed letter. Hopefully, he will get that soon, but what will the answer be???

A few days ago, I picked up a package from America from the local customs office. I had received the notification six weeks ago from the Bucharest customs. I did not hurry as I normally do to get it from Bucharest. In the meantime, something has changed, packages are now sent directly to Constanța. For the same package, I received a second notification from the local customs and picked it up immediately. It is a very good package of eight kg net. But when picking it up I was also very annoyed. The customs officials took two boxes of saccharin from me.

Saturday, I wrote a letter to my American relatives and thanked them and wrote of my Palestine project. Hopefully, they will answer, I await this answer with great curiosity and suspense.

Yesterday I went to the Russian film *The Unvanquished*.⁶⁸⁹ It takes place during the German occupation in Ukraine and one scene shows a mass execution of the Jewish population. This scene ripped open all my wounds, not yet scarred over, I wept and am still today under the impression of what I saw.

Constanța, Saturday 7. February 1948

I transferred from the Zionist organisation in which I was registered to the Zionist youth organisation “Busselia.” In the former I was just a name on paper, I paid my membership dues and did nothing else.

I go to “Busselia” often. Am participating in Hebrew lessons which take place three times a week. I have wanted to learn Hebrew for a long time and am happy to finally have the occasion. I joined this movement because I have nothing to lose and not out of conviction. I wish my heart could be

⁶⁸⁹ The film, *Nepokorennye* (Kiev Studios, 1945) [*The Unvanquished*], by Mark Donskoi was filmed in 1944. The execution scene she described was filmed upon Babi Yar itself. The film, released in the Soviet Union in 1945, is generally considered by scholars to be the first feature film depicting the Shoah. The movie quickly disappeared from theatres in the Soviet Union, was screened in Poland in 1946, and ran for a short time in a handful of western countries. It appears to have played around the country in 1948, according to Romanian newspaper advertisements. A review appears in the regional Iași newspaper, “Neînfrinții” in *Lupta Moldovei*, 24 January 1948, p. 1-2. See Jeremy Hicks, *First Films of the Holocaust: Soviet Cinema and The Genocide of the Jews, 1938-1946* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), especially 134-156 and Olga Gershenson, “How a Soviet Novel turned into a Jewish Film: The First Depiction of the Holocaust on Soviet Screens, *The Unvanquished* (1945),” in *Phantom Holocaust: Soviet Cinema and Jewish Catastrophe* (Rutgers University Press, 2019), 40-56.

in it, but unfortunately, this is not the case. Soon I could have duties, for a short or long time, I could be sent on “*hachshara*” and inside I waver. However, when I get an answer from Palestine and America, then I will know what to do.

Constanța, Sunday 22. February 1948

Today is my birthday. Yet another lost year has drawn to an end. A new bead on the chain of my empty, lost years. I am a very unfortunate person. From my birth on unhappy circumstances have shadowed my life. Nature was not exactly merciless with me, it gave me a pretty face and a good figure and even if I am not clever, I am also not decidedly stupid and fairly intelligent. Of course I had and have shortcomings but I know very well that these developed as a result of the tragedies which befell me. – But fate was cruel to me; already at the moment of my birth, because it gave me parents who never possessed the gift of being parents. They were not bad people, just bad parents, entirely opposite as how it otherwise happens in life, that bad people are often the best parents. Then I had to live in a small, shabby little town that I hated and in which I always felt I was suffocating. But the cruellest blow fate dealt me was when it ripped my only, dear brother from me in such a hideous manner. My dear brother who with all his splendid traits would also have been my security for the future. What were the three years in the Transnistria camp with its martyrdom and all the other losses versus this one irreplaceable loss, this frantic pain. And this pain has placed its stamp upon me, has made me into a recluse. – Maybe the fault also lies with myself if my life has not taken a better turn and is not yet in peaceful waters, but the main fault is not with me, rather with my unlucky star. An unhappy star pursues my every step and shows no inclination of giving way to a gentler star.

On birthdays and the New Year I always used to send up secret wishes to heaven. Never was even one fulfilled. Last New Year and today I have not wished for anything. I am now more sensible. There is no need to wish for anything bad, that comes on its own, and no need to wish for anything good either, for it does not come anyway.

Constanța, 28. February 1948 Saturday

I can no longer expect any employment from Criterion-Film. As everyone knows, no more American or English films are being played here (with some rare exceptions). This week a film

from Criterion is playing in Capitol [cinema]. I assumed they would assign me to do the monitoring but I was wrong.⁶⁹⁰ And thus my income is at an end, I am very upset about it.

By chance I got three days of work this week, monitoring in the “Victoria” cinema. Of these three days today is the last and it falls rather inconveniently because today our organisation is giving a performance at the [Jewish] community, I should have sung in the choir, I am hardly indispensable but they will resent my absence.

Constanța, Tuesday 2. March 1948

Today I received a notice for a packet, I went to get mama’s pension and then with the money to the customs’ office.

It was a clothing package. Customs fees for clothing are brazenly high. Additionally, there were twenty pairs of silk stockings and although they were damaged, some even extremely so, I had to pay 75 lei for every pair. The entire pension was barely enough for the customs fee and in addition I had to pay postal taxes. Outrageous the way they flay you, if someone here gets support from America the first one to profit is the state.

As to our noble allies, my heart is full of gratitude. They have helped us so much since we came here, I do not know what would have become of us without their help.

– Our organisation repeated the event on Sunday and so I could take part this time. The event turned out very well and also the money taken in was unusually good.

Constanța, Tuesday 9. March 1948

I am very annoyed that neither from America nor from Palestine have I received an answer to my letters. In both of them I discussed that topic which is occupying my thoughts the most right now: my emigration project to Palestine. I was waiting with impatience and eagerness for the answer but thus far in vain.

– In the organisation I have received a mission; on the part of “Busselia” I have been delegated to give an ideological lecture at the youth organisation “Gordonia.” Unfortunately, I do not feel up to this mission whatsoever. I did not decline, that would be too embarrassing, and I would very

⁶⁹⁰ It is not entirely clear what her job (*Kontrollarbeit*, monitoring work) at the cinema entailed, but in light of the fact that she seemed to have been called in explicitly for English or Russian-language films, it seems likely she was responsible for monitoring the running of the film itself, perhaps specifically ensuring that the translations, presumably done via subtitles, remained correctly aligned with the images.

much like to be active and carry out the work asked of me. But as I said, I do not feel capable of this and I have no idea what will become of this matter. May all good spirits help me that I do not make a fool of myself. For a time now I have had a cold and am coughing terribly.

Constanța, Friday 12. March 1948

I have been bedridden now for three days. I have a serious cold. I have a very severe, dry cough which torments me greatly. The entire night I cough without stopping, I am completely exhausted. I have tried countless home remedies, nothing helps, instead of getting better I get worse each day. But tomorrow I want to get up most definitely.

I got another [customs] notice. Hopefully it is food and not things.

Constanța, Tuesday 16. March 1948

Unfortunately, it was not food but rather things again and not good things. Six pairs of old, worn-out shoes, one of those pairs was entirely in tatters and two pairs were from canvas. I had to pay a 200 lei customs fee for each pair. Of course I was very disappointed.

Thank God my cough is better. I saw the doctor and received medicine. This cough has really spent me; I am entirely weak and lost weight. I also lost my appetite. It is good that I am finally better.

Constanța, Friday 19. March 1948

After a ten-day absence I was at the organisation again yesterday. The *chaverim*⁶⁹¹ asked about why I was gone and *Chaver* Rudi, the head of our organisation, said he was happy to see me again. Still no answer from America and Palestine. I do not know whether I can still hope for an answer. This hurts very much and I am very bitter. Today I posted an airmail letter for American in order to confirm the last two packages.

Friday 26. March 1948

⁶⁹¹ Hebrew and Yiddish: Friends (chaver/haver – male; chavera/havera – female). Zionist organisations used this term to refer to members. The word was, however, also used in Yiddish as well as by the German-speaking population (including non-Jews) across the Austro-Hungarian empire, at least within urban areas (it is still understood and used in today's Vienna). In the diaries Blanka adopted the vocabulary used by the leaders of the Zionist organisation for members and thus she employs it consciously and exclusively to describe her colleagues at the *hachshara* or within the organisation. In other words in this context it means "fellow members" and does not necessarily denote personal friendship.

Thus far I have only spoken about Palestine in connection with my personal interests but I have not written a single word about the Palestine problem as such.⁶⁹² Now I want to say a few words about this problem. Palestine is the ancient fatherland of the Jews. I do not want to talk about the history of the Jewish people here but only say this much, that the Jews were driven from their homeland 2000 years ago by the Romans, the hordes of Titus, and since that time have lived scattered across the entire world. The most recent Jewish persecutions, which began with Hitler's assumption of power in Germany, awoke in the Jews for the first time the need, showed them clearly the necessity, of having their own country. An active emigration to Palestine began and a zealously selfless work for the building up of the country. Yet then England, mandatory power for Palestine, put hurdles in the way of Jewish immigration. Immigration took place only under the greatest difficulties and delays. Now this, the most disastrous of all wars, broke out. Over six million Jews were murdered in the most bestial manner. Over six million innocent people, precious human lives, were killed by the Hitlerist gangs in the most ghastly way. When peace finally came in spring of 1945, only a fragment remained of European Jewry. And this remainder had just one goal: to return to the land of its fathers.

Constanța, Saturday 27. March 1948

Now I want to continue where I broke off yesterday.

But England would not permit it. England did not let the ships with Jewish immigrants dock in Palestine. English ships escorted the Jewish immigrant ships to the island of Cyprus where the passengers were placed in camps. From here 1500 people go to Palestine monthly. The exasperation of the Jews was great. After all the namelessly terrible suffering, to be treated such. Jewish representatives protested the world over. The Jewish matter was supported by numerous countries, for a while America demonstrated great sympathy and goodwill. The Palestine problem was discussed back and forth before the United Nations.⁶⁹³ It was suggested to partition Palestine

⁶⁹² It is beyond the scope of the present project to discuss Blanka's interpretation of the creation of the state of Israel and the 1948 war. Her entries here are naturally based on the news available to Romanians and the ideological material she received in the framework of the Zionist organisation. As will be discussed in the following chapter, Zionism played little or no role in her family or upbringing. Publications on the Palestine/Israel conflict are too numerous to cite and this topic falls outside the sphere of my research. For a recent publication on specifically 1948 which employs ego documents alongside other archival material, please see Shay Hazkani, *Dear Palestine. A Social History of the 1948 War* (Stanford University Press, 2021).

⁶⁹³ Blanka writes here and in the following sentences "Völkerbund," which is the German designation for the League of Nations, disbanded in 1946. To avoid confusion, I translate this as United Nations. At the time of writing, the general

into a Jewish state and an Arab state. On 29. November 1947 the general committee of the United Nations voted on the partitioning. The Jewish areas with the Negev, that is somewhat more than half the country, was to go to the Jews and form the future independent Jewish state, the rest was to go to the Arab state. England was to withdraw its troops from Palestine by the 15th of May and lay down its mandate.

The Jews did not want to hear of a division before, now where it seemed there would not be a better solution, they agreed. The Arabs were dissatisfied, the most dissatisfied was England. – It did not take long and riots broke out in Palestine. Bloody fighting between Arabs and Jews and assassinations. The Arabs who participated in these fights come, for the most part, from the other side of the borders, from Syria, Libya, Transjordan. There is no doubt that England provoked this militant atmosphere amongst the Arabs and maintains it. British policy needs this bloodshed so that it does not lose Palestine. Now the British cannot leave Palestine, they must remain in order to “keep the peace.” They do not allow ships with Jewish immigrants to land in Palestine, but in contrast they allow armed Arab gangs to penetrate the country unhindered over the borders. – And now, recently there has been a shift in the attitude of America towards the Palestine problem. America has interests in Palestine and the Arab states, petroleum, and that is more important than justice. In the meantime, blood still flows in Palestine, young Jewish people are dying, of the few that our left to us, and my pain, like that of the entire Jewish people, is nameless.

Constanța, Thursday 1. April 1948

We received three food parcels from America. Unfortunately, they arrived in very bad condition; in each parcel was a 2 ½ kg package of powdered sugar, but we received only the crushed empty packaging, the contents had been spilled and lost. And we had been looking forward to precisely sugar with such longing, it is very aggravating that from such a great quantity as that which was sent, we are left with nothing. The time before last they confiscated the saccharin from me and now this bad luck, everything sweet seems to have conspired against us.

After a long break I had monitoring work last week for a Sovromfilm in [cinema] Majestic.

public or those with whom she was communicating, may have used these titles interchangeably and the constant translating between languages probably added to the confusion.

In the organisation they are talking again about my mission. Now the matter has become very current. What should I do? As I said I do not feel up to the task whatsoever and lack now more than ever the qualities it demands.

Constanța, Friday 16. April 1948

Yesterday, for the first time, I gave a lecture in our organisation for the members assembled. The topic was “Contribution of Jews in Civilisation.” I had only insufficient material but despite this, I worked out a good lecture with a contemporary conclusion. Before the talk, I was worried about speaking poorly and without confidence, after all, it was the first time. But this did not happen, I spoke well. The short debate that took place afterwards between 2-3 *chaverim* was completely wrong. I very much regret today that I did not speak up and refute the nonsense. I am just too used to keeping silent, maybe now that the first step has been taken, I can remedy this evil. I did not know what sort of impression my lecture had left on the leaders, I found out at the end of the “*sicha*”⁶⁹⁴—a very good one. Rudi gave me his hand with the words: You did that very nicely. And the others also expressed their satisfaction. That made me very happy.

Constanța, Friday 23. April 1948

Yesterday morning a *chavera* burst in with the message that I was to be sent to Radautz on *hachschara*. I was flabbergasted, I did not expect that yet and am unprepared in every respect, especially emotionally. Without hesitating an instant, I refused. I do not know if I did the right thing. In the afternoon I learned that besides myself and one other *chaver* Rudi was also to go. Now another *chavera* is being sent in my place. That Rudi is going is a sign that it is a good kibbutz, also I would have had a moral foothold in him. But I have forfeited it, I cannot regret because as I said I am unprepared in every respect. In any case the matter really shook me up. What appeared distant is suddenly nigh, what was an uncertain dream wants to become reality. How the organisation is to be without Rudi I cannot imagine. He was the brain and soul of the entire thing. Now it is Erev Pessach, tomorrow the Easter holidays⁶⁹⁵ begin.

⁶⁹⁴ Lecture/presentation.

⁶⁹⁵ Blanka generally refers to the eight-day Pessach holiday (Passover) as Easter (Oster), as was and is customary in some Jewish circles. In Romania today the holiday is often referred to as “Easter” or “Jewish Easter” (paște, paște evreiască).

Chapter 3 – diary excerpt translations

Constanța Wednesday 6 October 1948

It is 6:30 p.m. My things are piled upon the bed. Now I must pack them in the suitcase. My heart is very heavy. I am leaving mama alone. Since mama and I were left alone seven years ago, it is the first time that I abandon her. Tomorrow, God willing, we depart at 6:30 in the morning.

Piatra Neamț Tuesday 25 October [1948]

A few words about our *pluga*. At the moment we are thirty-something *chaverim*. The majority are nice, young people. We have six rooms and a kitchen. I have already described my work, also noted that it is difficult and taxes me greatly. The thick dust and the violent din of the machines, the long distance, waking early and going to bed late, all of this is having a devastating effect on me. At least, I have that feeling. Thank God there is food. I eat more than I ate at home. I have already turned in the papers and photographs and they were sent to Bucharest. It is said that when there is a big *Aliah*, we will all go, if a small one, then we will not. There are *chaluțim*⁶⁹⁶ who have been on *hachshara* already for a year. – I have not yet said a word about how I feel here. Unfortunately, I cannot say well because that would be a lie. It is collective life here, I am on friendly terms with all the *chaverim*, especially those who are more intelligent. But I have no real friend and no connection whatsoever. I suffer from this lack of connection. Sometimes I feel very dejected about it. More than once I have cried because of it. Nevertheless, I do not regret for one minute that I came. This was the last chance and consequently the last chance for me to win a right to *aliyah*.

My biggest worry is that the letter which I wrote to America reaches its destination and a favourable answer arrives. For me, to be or not to be depends on this.

Today I received a letter from mama. She writes that she is well, may God protect her, because I am very anxious about her.

Piatra Neamț 7 November 1948 Sunday

Today is one month since I have been here. A very difficult month, full of difficult work, to which I am unaccustomed, physical and emotional torments. I do not know how it should go on like this

⁶⁹⁶ Pioneers, the word designating those on *hachshara* or on a *kibbuz*.

because it is only getting colder and the draft in the factory is becoming stronger. On both sides there are wide doors that stand open and a strong, cold draft blasts right through me and the other men and women workers. The past days I did not work with casket lids⁶⁹⁷ anymore, but rather had to do other work like carrying planks. Taking planks from a machine and sorting them, and so forth. All things for the constitution of a strong peasant and not for a weak creature like me. The factory is a hell, it is destroying me. At the moment I see no chance of escape, on the contrary we are constantly being told that the “Foresta” factory is the foundation of our existence. There is a group of other *chaverim* working in a different factory, doing work that is much easier and in warmth. Why must I sacrifice myself, why do I always have only misfortune.

As to my emotional anguish, there are days when I feel endlessly miserable. The day before yesterday I had the following affair. I entered the dining room for dinner, after all the *chaverim* had taken their seats at the tables. I asked a *chavera* if she could scoot down a bit so that I could sit down as well. She said there was no room. I tried to find a seat somewhere else and the same thing happened. This filled me with bitterness, all the more so as it was Friday evening and a banquet. I left the dining room and went to the bedroom, threw myself onto my bed and was seized by a terrible crying fit. Not a single person came to check on me, everyone partook happily of their dinner without noticing my absence. After dinner I was found weeping and everyone asked the cause. I did not want to tell anyone, only to one *chaver* whom I trust, did I confide what happened. After dinner there was still an Oneg Shabbat and a meeting of the “council.” I continued to cry without ceasing. I wept without being able to stop for over two hours, it had hold of me and would not let me go. When around 11 Uhr p.m. the “*Aseifa*”⁶⁹⁸ began, then I was summoned. Awadik from *Mechlekat-hachshara*⁶⁹⁹, which is visiting us, gallantly gave me his arm to lead me to the *Aseifa* as if to a court dinner. I politely declined his arm and went to the *Aseifa* with two red, entirely swollen eyes. After several problems were discussed, Misu our *Maskir*⁷⁰⁰ once more took the word and said that several of our *chaverim* were suffering from a superiority complex and in this way prevented a *chavera* from sitting at the table today. Awadik asked me what happened; I

⁶⁹⁷ It is not clear what exactly the *hachshara* members built at this wood factory. Blanka writes *Küstendeckel* (lids or covers of some sort). *Küste* may refer to an antiquated or dialect form of *Kiste*, which could mean an unspecific wooden box or indicate a casket or even coffin. My thanks go to German Studies professor Dr. Astrid Lembke for assistance with the German *Küste*. In the diaries, Blanka does not comment on the work besides the physical strain.

⁶⁹⁸ Assembly.

⁶⁹⁹ This may designate a branch of their *hachshara* or an affiliated *hachshara*. It is also not clear from the sentence structure whether Awadik is visiting or a larger group.

⁷⁰⁰ Leader.

described the incident but without naming names. Awadik wanted to know the names. I refused to name them. Not because I wanted to protect those involved but because it did not suit me [to say] who did not want to scoot down to make room for me. Awadik asked twice and the third time threatened to expel me from the *Aseifa* if I did not name the names and to send me out to the “*Mişmar*” (night watch). Of course I refused this time as well. “Leave the *Aseifa*,” cried Awadik. I rose, took my coat, and went out. My head ached insanely, the fresh night air did me good. I do not know how long I remained outside, whether one hour or more, when a *chaver* came to summon me. They were announcing that I had been appointed a member in the “*Waada Tarbut*.” W.T., translated that means cultural council. This consists of three to four members and is responsible for the cultural life of our *pluga*. After the *Aseifa* we held a short cultural meeting and around 3:00 a.m. we went to sleep in order to get up again at 5:30 a.m. and go to our hard work.

Diary Excerpts: 1 March to 29 April 1949 (English translation)

Constanța, Tuesday 1. March 1949

My position becomes more and more unbearable. I went on *hachschara* in order to go to Eretz [Israel], and now I am neither on *hachschara* nor leaving for Eretz. Time is passing, my strength and my patience ever waning and my nervousness waxing. This seesawing state, by hook or by crook, if only there would be an end to this situation. But no end is in sight and I can no longer torment myself so much. Often I am gripped by the greatest despair, I have nothing left to begin here and if I go, then now, the clock has already struck midnight. But there is still not a hint of [anyone] leaving. The optimists say: anyway, we will go, they are negotiating. Who is negotiating with whom, no one can say. Some of the *chaverim* from Piatra who went home have gone to the new *plugot* assigned to them. Besides me there are plenty of other *chaverim* at home, nevertheless I often wonder if it would be better if I also went to the *pluga* assigned to me (Brașov). On the other hand, letters coming from some *plugot*, for example, Galați, say that they are not safe from being dissolved. A state to make you insane. On top of this is our economic situation. No money, no food, no prospects for improvement, for help. Since we arrived in Constanța it has not been as hopeless with us as it is now.

- A few days ago, on 24. February, on the island of Rhodes the negotiations between Israel and Egypt came to an end. A cease fire was signed. But both parties stayed by their positions. The Jews

supposedly made some concessions as comes to Negev and minor retreats but I do not know any details.

Constanța, Saturday 5. March 1949

I am in a gruesome state. I cannot bear this existence any longer and have no prospects for a change. Death would only be a redemption for me but even to die one must have luck.

Constanța, Tuesday 15. March 1949

Always the same situation or perhaps worse. Never was this sitting around at home so unbearable. I feel desires, needs rising in me, but I see nothing but hopelessness and never has this tormented me such much as now.

All the *plugot* in the entire country have been disbanded; thus my prediction was unfortunately proven true after all. – Antizionist propaganda is being spread ferociously and not even the most blindly optimistic speak about an *Aliah*.

If there is no *Aliah* then there is nothing left for me on this earth. At the moment I cannot completely banish all hope of an *Aliah* from my heart.

Constanța, Saturday 19. March 1949

I opened this book now not because I have anything new to write down but rather because my heart is so darkly burdened and I have no one in whom I can confide. – I am in the same depression. I went to visit a girl with whom I was friendly, who was with me on *hachschara*. She is planning to apply for a job and seems to have come to terms with the fact that she cannot leave. I have learned the same thing from other young people who were on *hachschara*. It is impossible that I resign myself to this result. I have absolutely no prospects for living here normally. And living together with my mother on a permanent basis is also not possible. Stay here, no – leaving not allowed – so what can I even do, lie down and die, but death never comes when one beckons only when it is not wanted, I cannot bear anymore, I fear madness.

Constanța, 25. March 1949 Friday

We now have a hideous worry: up until two months ago my Mama received her pension in its entirety and punctually. The last two months she only received $\frac{3}{4}$ of the pension and this month

she has not received anything yet although one week has already passed since the payment date. There are now reforms to the law regulating pensions which though I do not know them yet, makes me fear the worst because reforms are always disadvantageous especially for those people who are not “working.”⁷⁰¹ Now this grave worry torments us day and night. The pension was small and we had to sell something from the American things every month in order not to starve. Additionally, we still had all different sorts of American foods in the house Now we have nothing left to sell, no food and now this happens with the pension. It looks as if that lot which had us barely escape death from starvation in Transnistria is still lurking in the wings. I hope mama will receive the pension after all, it would be too outrageous, only it is possible it would not be the former one rather a smaller one. I think it will be resolved by the 1st. – Now the question is how we live at all since we are not dead yet and as is well known, without food one cannot live. The matter is as follows: for the past two weeks Mama takes her “lunch” at the canteen in the community. Ever since this kitchen has existed (several months) many people get their food and most of them are not very needy. We did not resort to this means until the last *leu*⁷⁰² was used. We were approved for one portion, namely for Mama, but this portion is enough for both of us. Thus, Mama treks daily (except Saturday) with the basket to the *comunitate* and brings back the little bit of food from which we both take our midday meal. Sometimes the soups are so bad that I can only swallow them down with effort. Sometimes this food is tolerable. As to breakfast and supper, until now we have had coffee; we have coffee for a few more days but the sugar is out. The bread flour which we have from items sold is also nearing its end. In the neighbourhood we have little debts. So, that is the dismal picture of our existence. – As to my health, I have complained about it many times, especially about the ongoing headaches, this affliction is already behind me, only from the constant worries does my head hurt often enough. If it had not been enough until now the matter with the pension had to come too. The decision must come in the next days, I think, what will it be?

Constanța Tuesday 30. March 1949

Nothing has been decided yet, there is still not a trace of the pension. The last drop of sugar has been used, Mama just went to a neighbour to borrow a glass of sugar. Though for that matter there is not even sugar for sale right now. We have also run out of oil and precisely now oil has also

⁷⁰¹ The German original is *werktätig*, indicating ability or ambition to work, into which pensioners would not fall.

⁷⁰² Basic monetary unit in Romania, like the dollar or euro. Singular Leu, plural Lei.

disappeared from the market after it had recently become more expensive. The water has been turned off in the building, already for many days, because there was a tremendous sum to pay (how can one demand so much for water?) and no one could pay it. Now they say that it has to be paid otherwise they will seize [property] and in addition interest (!) is growing. The others in the building are materially better off and will be able to pay, where should we take the money from? We cannot swallow down the soup from the canteen, we gag it up and we have to pour it out. Despite this Mama walks the long way daily, by wind and weather, because we have nothing to eat otherwise. For several days now we have had fierce icy winds and the sky is a monotone dark grey. As in the heart, so also the weather.

Constanța 10. April 1949 Sunday

Yesterday Mama received the “pension,” 1400 lei. Previously she got 2640 lei from which, without taxes and various fees, she could live off barely ten days. Now they brought her 1400 lei, not enough to pay the fees demanded at the moment from her for *Front*⁷⁰³ (our little window looks out onto a small, narrow little courtyard with the outhouse), trash removal (at the most we manage to collect one bucket of trash once every three to four weeks) and the last late-fee notice for the fire department (!). With the water we got off lightly. All the neighbours paid, naturally we could not pay, the water was turned back on and I do not know whether we will receive a late-fee notice for this sum or not. But even without that there are still payment claims, as I wrote, 1400 lei, exactly Mama’s pension and soon other bills will come too, assorted taxes⁷⁰⁴ etc. What can one say about this? Are there even words for such a matter? The room is under Mama’s name, all the claims are directed to her, the plea that she is a retiree, that she has no income besides the pension and also owns nothing else, goes unheeded, pay or we seize [property]. If I write about this matter in such detail it is because these worries are distressing me very much. The spectre of the tax executioner haunts me; what if he appears one day and grabs my few possessions. If we at least had a decent flat and not just a tiny chamber without any air. How can one understand this? All the people are complaining and everyone says these are awful, impossible conditions, but in the papers and in the radio are only songs of praise.

⁷⁰³ Fees for the maintenance of the building’s facade and front-facing windows.

⁷⁰⁴ She uses the Romanian word, *Percepția*, which here most likely refers to assorted fees and taxes. The *Percepția* was the local fiscal authority (tax collectors). My thanks go to Stefan Ionescu for his help contextualising this term.

Yesterday when Mama received this mutilated so-called pension, she began to cry very hard and could not calm herself for a long time. The situation is also really a desperate one. She wants to eat, she cannot go hungry anymore and now with this, we really must go hungry. But old people like little children cannot suffer hunger.

- I have decided to send a call for help to America. I wrote the letter yesterday afternoon and mailed it via airmail this morning. I had hoped to depart and not have to write such letters to America anymore. Ever since the first autumn and winter of being here (1946) I did not have to write any more such appeals for help, but now I have been forced to. Back then possibilities were easy to find, now such things are unfortunately nonexistent. I told the cousin in what manner one could still send something, hopefully the letter will soon be in his hands and find echo in his heart. I also asked if he could definitely answer so that we know what we can expect.

- Today midday I went to the Foleșteanu to inquire about a job. In this regard they cannot do anything else for me. Mrs. F. recommended I go to the C.D.E. A dear address. If the wish to leave did not completely absorb me, I would have already looked for a job a long time ago. But now I am in terrible need of a job. How can I go with this concern to the C.D.E.?

Constanța Thursday 21. April 1949

Today is the last day of Pessach.⁷⁰⁵ Because the question of what to eat is presently a burning problem with us, I want to record here that we ate very respectably for these eight days. Today at lunch we ate the last of the goose. Tomorrow the tide goes out again. There is no more money and as to food we still have a little oil and sugar. But the powdered milk which we received from the *comunitate* for Pessach will be gone in a few days and from the American coffee we only have ¼ kg left. Normally our breakfast and evening meal consists of coffee (as long as there is any). The one portion [of food] from the canteen is our midday meal but three times a week the soup is so bad (at least this is our opinion) that we cannot eat it and have to throw it out. – Now I am giving a lot of thought to the question of whether I should go to the C.D.E. about a job. I have such a difficult time deciding to do this though need drives me. Today I was in the library (C.D.E.) to exchange the book and was planning to talk about this matter with the C.D.E. (the next door). I

⁷⁰⁵ Blanka calls this Easter week (*Osterwoche*), meaning the eight-day Pessach holiday (see footnote above regarding Easter/*Oster* meaning Pessach in more assimilated circles). The women likely received food via the Jewish community, which in turn may have received food or money from the J.D.C. to help the impoverished celebrate according to ritual and law, i.e. with matzah (unleavened bread) and a festive meal.

could not make up my mind. But perhaps this is not right and maybe I will go tomorrow after all. Why for God's sake can one not leave for Eretz Israel, that is the only thing that I still expect from life and only the hope that maybe it will happen after all keeps me alive. I suffer so much and I have bottled my suffering up to such a degree that I do not know whether I am good for anything anymore. I cannot get rid of the headaches and the agony has wreaked havoc with a merciless hand, internally as well as externally. I am going mad with the thought of whether it is not already too late and I have already squandered everything.

Constanța Saturday 23. April 1949

After a long break *Aliah* rumours are running around again. How many times have they already talked about an *Aliah*, even given an exact date and nothing turned out to be true. Now for a long time they did not talk about it anymore and the blackest pessimism seemed to rule in this matter. And now rumours and optimism again. I stay sceptical, experience is to blame.

Constanța Thursday 28. April 1949

Also this rumour was only empty talk.

This morning I was in the *comunitate* in order to put my name on the list of those seeking work. I am not the only stranded *chaluza*⁷⁰⁶ standing on this list, but the last one. Only I hesitated so long to turn away from the Fata Morgana and face reality.

Chapter 4 – diary excerpt translations

Constanța Tuesday 11 October 1949

Today I had a bitter day. Yet another rejection. – Several days ago, on the recommendation of Dr. Diner, I submitted an application and my autobiography⁷⁰⁷ to “Cartea Rusă.”⁷⁰⁸ My hopes had been raised. I inquired a few times, nothing had been decided yet. Today I was told the decision: nothing. A dagger in my heart. Then I also inquired with a man who had promised me he would look into a job for me in the port, result: nothing. A categorical nothing. I went again to the employment

⁷⁰⁶ Pioneer, referring to those who had been on *hachshara* in preparation for working the land in Israel/Palestine.

⁷⁰⁷ With “autobiography” she refers to her curriculum vitae.

⁷⁰⁸ A publishing house of Russian works in Romanian translation. Immediately after the war, Paul Celan/Antschel worked at the Bucharest branch of Cartea Rusă.

office. I stood in line and could not hold back my tears. When it was my turn, what was I told: nothing. Like always, nothing.

We cannot get by any longer. We are starving and cannot bear the hunger anymore. From the kitchen⁷⁰⁹ a single portion, small and thin; in the house no flour, no fat, no bani.⁷¹⁰ No wood, no oil. Outside icy frost. — In a situation such as this, I moved to a larger apartment, with much larger rent und 100 new fees. It is enough to make one mad.

Constanța 28 June 1950 Wednesday

A disaster such as this I did not expect; my file has been rejected. Because the fourth month since submitting the documents had started, I had begun expecting the approval [document] daily and now suddenly like lightning, this terrible message, I almost had a stroke. It is impossible to describe my emotional state. The evil tidings arrived the day before yesterday, today I sent a petition to the ministry of the interior and this is now my only hope. My anguish is made unbearable because I must now fear that the approval could come for Mama. Only over my dead body will Mama be forced to depart alone.

19 September 1950

[...]

Since the passport for Mama has come, there is such an uproar inside me that I do not know how I still have hold of my five senses. It is impossible that Mama travels alone, it could be the death of her and if the mere thought of this eventuality flusters me this much, what would happen if it came to pass. But, however, if the term during which she is allowed to depart runs up and she does not go, then everything is forfeited. If later [the passport] comes for me, can I then go and leave Mama behind with her pain – also not. Thus, everything has been in vain. How cruel, how merciless fate is with me. Other families, parents and adult children, got [their passports] together.

Constanța Thursday 26 October 1950

⁷⁰⁹ She is referring to the Jewish community's "soup kitchen" / canteen described in the diary excerpts preceding this chapter.

⁷¹⁰ Romanian: money, literally pennies.

Exactly one month ago, I put the final period on the last page of my previous diary and hesitated greatly to begin a new one. What meaning can the keeping of a diary have for a person like me. A botched, doomed life, for years I record nothing but misfortune, failure, and suffering. Yet for me, this recording in the diary has become such a habit that I cannot give it up. And so today I start again and begin there where I last left off.

So Mama did not go, with our situation, the state of our health and nerves, neither of us would have survived that. All of our acquaintances tried to convince us with one voice that Mama should go so that she does not lose her passport, I would certainly, later, also get the passport and could follow her. I picked up Mama's passport in the hope that by her departure date the passport could also arrive for me, but unfortunately this hope did not come true and so we were unable to resolve that Mama should depart alone. Until we had irrevocably made this decision, my emotions were in such an uproar, I thought I would go mad. Now I have calmed down, yet a deep, bottomless pain for the lost great dream remains. — In June I was informed that my papers were rejected, I made a statement and a few days ago I received the answer: negative. How good that I did not listen to people and did not let Mama go. — When Mama got the passport, I sent a very eloquent statement to the ministry through the militia and when my second negative arrived, I sent another. Attached to the second I included a confirmation from the hospital that Mama has been interned there since 11 October. In both petitions I pled for the same thing: I want to go together with my Mama. I also requested an audience. I did this to retain a glimmer of hope, even though rationally I know it is futile in light of the circumstances.

Yesterday was two weeks since Mama has been in the hospital. It was extremely difficult for me during this time. Tomorrow or the day after she will come home and I can already hardly wait to see her home.

Constanța Sunday 24 December 1950

Yesterday Mrs. Foleșteanu called me in the office and after a few conventional words she got straight to the point and asked me what the news is with my Israel trip. It is obvious that she is informed about everything and I said that Mama cannot travel without me and likewise I could not

travel without Mama. She began to encourage me strongly to give up the travel project and stay here. Then suddenly she said: you had negative and now you got positive⁷¹¹.

I was in the passport office, the boss was not there, the subordinates did not know anything about it and now it is Saturday and tomorrow and the day after are Christmas. I am very curious what this “positive” could mean, at the same time a great disquiet is in me, this woman better not harm me.

Diary Excerpts: 25 January to 21 September 1952 (English translation)

Constanța Friday 25. January 1952

Mama’s condition has worsened. A week ago she was seized by a severe sharp pain, I fetched a doctor, but he could not make any definite diagnosis. The day before yesterday a different doctor saw her and this one detected “congestie pulmonara.” That is a kind of lung infection, what it means exactly I do not know. The fever is continuous. Who knows if even before the first doctor came she was already running a fever without us knowing and as a result we were not cautious. I find myself in a situation which I would only wish on my worst deadly enemy. I am very worried about Mama and cannot be calm at all. Mama needs care and I have neither anything with which to care for her nor time. The latter is especially bad. Up until now I have crept away from work here and there in order to take care of errands or prepare food for Mama. Now this has been noticed, I was sternly reproached and I cannot allow myself any more escapades, otherwise it can cost me my job. But what should happen to my gravely ill mother when she has to lie alone for so many hours in the cold room. So much misfortune has come upon me. And I have another agitation, too. Today bore all the signs that a devaluation of the currency is to be expected. All the shops were closed, people frantically running around everywhere trying to buy something, but there is nothing to buy. I also have some money, put away in case we should depart. I am very worried because of this. But much worse is the worry about Mama, I measured her fever again and it has climbed. It has never been as high as it is now. I am so unhappy, so distraught that I want to scream out loud.

Constanța Wednesday 6. February 1952

⁷¹¹ Approval or disapproval for emigration applications was expressed by way of “positive” and “negative,” this is seen in various sources from the time.

All misfortune has come upon me at once. Mama is not getting better, she is hovering in danger and it drives me insane.

And the devaluation of the currency in addition. It happened so suddenly. I had a not insignificant sum of money which I never touched. It was meant in case we emigrate to Eretz Israel. If nothing were to come of this hope, I wanted to buy furniture with this money and furnish our place. I lived only from my salary, which was not easy, in order to not use this sum for something other than its intended purpose. Suddenly, this catastrophe, my money has turned to dust. And right at the moment when I need money like never before in my life. I must save Mama, I need penicillin, that is very expensive and I am without a penny.⁷¹² We received a partial payment of the salary in the new money but I used this to buy food. But the worst is that Mama eats so little, almost nothing. She has lost weight in a ghastly manner, she is only a skeleton. For weeks now I have been in an emotional state which cannot be described. Why so much misfortunate always only for the same person. How can I bear it without going mad.

Constanța Thursday 14. February 1952

The day before yesterday and today the doctor made penicillin for Mama. After the first round there was unfortunately no beneficial outcome, hopefully it will not be missing after today's.

I put my entire salary into the penicillin and gave the doctor only a down payment of the fee. I have no money and debts. Now I also have a terrible cold. I have an extremely severe cough, I have never coughed like this before and never heard anyone cough like this. I am completely exhausted and shattered, everything hurts.

Constanța Monday 18. February 1952

I have a dreadful whooping cough which does not give me a moment of peace. I cannot sleep at night and cough incessantly. I have been to the polyclinic twice but neither medicine did anything. Mama is only slightly better, she still has a fever. Today I was absent from work again, the days that I miss are of course deducted [from the wage]. Outside blowing snow howls and we are both sick and without any help. It is enough to drive one mad.

Constanța Friday 22. February 1952

⁷¹² She uses the Romanian "Bani," which is literally "penny" but also means "money."

Today is the saddest of all my sad birthdays. Mama is again very badly off, the fever has risen considerably.

Constanța Thursday 28. February 1952

Today I transferred my dear mother to the hospital.

Constanța Friday 29. February 1952

I long for my Mama very much. I am terribly worried about her. The flat is so empty and sad without Mama, so inexpressibly sad.

Constanța Friday 21. March 1952

Since my last entry and up until today I have gone through the hideous. The last time I recorded Mama's transfer to the hospital. The next day the doctor called me and told me, to my nameless pain, that the x-ray had revealed a serious lung disease and they cannot keep her in the hospital any longer, I should transfer her to the T.B. hospital. A dreadful pain and an enormous disquiet began to rampage through me. I do not want to describe all the details, so briefly: I looked into a spot at the T.B. hospital, but there was nothing free. In the meantime, they absolutely do not want to keep Mama there [at the normal hospital] any longer. Thus, amid bad weather, I had to take my gravely ill mother home again. – Wednesday it was two weeks since she has been in the T.B. hospital. During the first days of her stay there I spoke with the doctor treating her and she told me openly that Mama is seriously ill. I cannot describe what is happening inside me. I am very angry that they are not giving Mama any Streptomycin⁷¹³, I assume they find it too expensive for her advanced age; that my mother, the only person I have on this earth, is precious to me, they are not interested in that. If I had only known, when I had Streptomycin this summer, that I would need it myself! The income from that has gone entirely to the devil. (most recent currency reform) And now a few days ago the head doctor told me I should transport Mama to the Paulești sanatorium, here they can do nothing with her. I would have preferred he hit me over the head with the butt of a gun. I had put so much hope into this hospital and now they tell me they can do nothing. And as concerns Paulești, how should Mama, in her condition, undertake a long journey in the winter.

⁷¹³ Streptomycin, a drug administered to treat tuberculosis.

And additionally, where should I find the money, because I would have to accompany her. Enough for today, I cannot write anymore.

Constanța 30. March 1952 Sunday

I just came from the hospital. Mama is doing worse again. – She had been doing a little bit better, the fever had let up and her appetite had improved. Now the fever has climbed again and again no appetite, only thirst.

I had written in the past about my horrible cough and then due to the excitement about Mama's illness, did not mention it again. After the third bottle of medicine the whooping cough subsided and a normal cough has remained which I will have today and which does not want to yield. I also have sharp pains in my back and have lost a lot of weight.

Constanța Wednesday 2. April 1952

Yesterday I had a big commotion. I received a note that I had been transferred to a shop as a cashier. After multiple years working in an office, such a slap in the face. I went to the head office and protested. I was answered that my position had been disbanded. I was so hurt all the more because I had my suspicions, I could not hold back my tears and cried dreadfully. To no avail, they remained by their decision. At this I went to Ariton but he was in a meeting. My suspicions are the following: I have a coworker, a completely obnoxious specimen, I cannot stand her and between the two of us exists an old antipathy. Saturday we had a conflict which she had provoked. After that she went to our manager and slandered me. He went to head office and said that he had no more use for me. Then the transfer happened. Fortunately I could speak with Ariton yesterday evening. He received me kindly and listened attentively. Then he began to telephone but none of my supervisors could be reached at that hour. But he told me I should not worry and go to my normal desk this morning, he would take care of everything. And thus it happened as well. May a heavy curse strike those who caused this annoyance, in my current state.

Despite the commotion of yesterday I had a lung x-ray done; I was scheduled for yesterday afternoon. The result is good, I have nothing, [it is] normal.

Constanța 6. May 1952 Tuesday

Today it has been one week since Mama has been in the T.B. Sanatorium of Paulești. I brought her Monday evening directly from the hospital to the train and we travelled all night. In the morning we were in Bucharest, debarked, and after a while changed trains and drove on to Ploiești. Mama was completely exhausted. In Ploiești, in order to leave the train station, you have to descend a lot of stairs and then on the other side, go up them again. For Mama, in her condition, this seemed to be an impossible task. With great effort we managed to get to the top. Mama was incapable of going even one step more and we needed to go on a bit in order to reach the front of the train station building. After Mama had rested a short time she also, with effort, managed this bit. I got a car and we drove to the centre to wait for the automobile from the sanatorium. The sun was shining like in July and this waiting was very difficult. Every quarter hour was an eternity and Mama could barely hold up. I wanted to wail. After 11 o'clock I began to become uneasy, what if the car did not come at all? It was enough to make you crazy. Around 12 o'clock I went into an office and called the sanatorium, asked if the car had left for Ploiești. They said yes. That gave me some relief and as I left there and turned to the square again where the cars stopped, then I already saw it. A common truck. I loaded Mama up and we left. The sanatorium is ten km from Ploiești, situated in a forest. When we got out and until I got her into bed, she threatened to completely collapse on me. – When I left her, the sobbing which I had held back with effort began. It really got going once I was already outside. I was tired to death and my feet had begun to swell. I had to walk one kilometre in order to reach the road. I stopped a truck which brought me into the town. I took the bus to the train station, travelled to Bucharest. My feet hurt so much that I could not put weight on them. From Bucharest to Constanța I could only catch the local train which left at 11:00 p.m. I had to wait several hours and then travel all night again.

Today I received the first postcard from Mama. She wrote that she has not come face to face with a single doctor, that you have to buy milk yourself and do this very early in the morning. I do not like that, those are no conditions for seriously ill people. When she was here in the hospital, I could provide her with everything she needed, now she is far from me, sick and helpless and I cannot take care of her.

Constanța 21. May 1952⁷¹⁴

⁷¹⁴ The handwriting for this entry is much darker and thicker than her usual entries, the pencil was ground into the paper, with commas (which she normally leaves out) and diacritics written with emphasis.

Since the 13th of May I no longer have a mother. Today, one week ago, my Mama, the only person I have on this earth, my purpose in life, my everything, was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Ploiești.

Constanța 10. June 1952

Why do my two feet still carry me around on this accursed earth, why, for what purpose, I cannot comprehend it.

Today is one month since I saw my precious Mama for the last time. On 8 May a telegram summoned me to her. Two days prior I had received the first card from her. She had not complained about anything and I assumed her condition had not changed. It must have also been so. I waited for the next message impatiently, hoped for something favourable, at least that her appetite had increased due to the change in air. And suddenly this telegram which had me suspecting the worst. I had no money for the journey at home, it was already 8:00 p.m.. I ran frantically through the streets looking for the head bookkeeper who lives very far away and then, with a note from him, went to the centre, to one of our restaurants, where I was given the money required for the travel, deducted from my payroll account. Sweat was pouring off me.

The next morning around 10:00 a.m. the car with which I had hitchhiked [from Ploiești] let me out on the country road in front of the path that led to Paulești. At first, I walked quickly and then began to run. In front of her door, the unlucky no. 13, I stood still, then I ripped open the door and stared in the direction of her bed. That was no longer the face of my mother, as I had left her a few days earlier, it was a skull; her maternal eyes stared at me from two black cavities. My desperate pain broke, unbridled, out of me. At her admonitions, at her requests made with a strange, weak voice, to calm myself, I tempered myself, with force.

11. June 1952

And then she spoke. After the first appearance of the doctor, they gave her an injection. Several hours later she got pains in her entire body, which constantly increased. She screamed in pain the entire night and called for me. She asked the nurse to summon me by telegram. Tormented by the most hideous physical and emotional pain she had watched the door until I came. I looked for the doctor and asked what had happened with my mother. He declared to me that her condition was

extremely grave and hopeless. I wept in shock. Why, just why was she sent so far away, why sent to this appalling place. How should I have known, I trusted the doctors. When I approached her bed again my heart was one enormous wound in which a thousand enemies knifed about with daggers and poured salt. In this hideous anguish the day passed and the night came. I had already spent one sleepless night in the train and now I sat this night, in agony, on the edge of her bed. Six consumptives hacked the entire night and I sat in this ocean of bacteria. But I did not think about myself. I thought only about this unutterable misfortune which had sought me out and about this site of horror where I had brought my most precious thing with the hope of finding if not a cure, then at least a significant improvement and instead of this I found a camp of horror and death. And then day came and she barely spoke, only screamed out in pain now and then, said once she cannot bear to lie anymore, her bones hurt her so terribly and then once she said, as I bent over her, "I am going mad." I told her it was a crisis that would pass and I would come and take her home. She said, "oh, if only I should see myself in my bed again" and the daggers bore without mercy into my wounded heart. I began to feel that I was losing my mind and breaking down, I did not know what to do but to leave. If I had known how close her end was, I would not have gone to Constanța, I do not know what I would have done in such a state, but one thing is sure, I would not have gone to Constanța. And so the hour of farewell came, farewell from my deathly ill, precious mother and I had to tell myself, perhaps farewell forever. The hardest hour of my life, which does not want for strokes of doom, the worst agony a human heart has suffered on this earth. "Give me a kiss, Mama" and she kissed me three times on the forehead. The final kisses of inmost, faithful mother's love. At the door I looked back and waved, she raised her emaciated arm and waved back. Now I rushed from there. My memory did not let me write, I needed much time to write these few lines. My eyes are raw from weeping, I want to try to hold back the tears but it is impossible to arrest the raging misery inside me.

20. June 1952

I left my mother in that hideous situation because I believed I was close to madness and I was advised to do so. But when I was gone, I was no better. I thought only of her suffering and my agonies increased beyond words. I wanted to go to her again but I had no money and I tried to sell something. On Wednesday, 14 May, in the afternoon, I sold something and determined to leave the next evening. But the same afternoon I received the telegram with the notice of death. My first

thought was only: she is no longer suffering. But only for a moment, then the terrible fact that I had lost my mother began to penetrate my consciousness. Where shall I find words to describe this hurricane of pain and why. And completely alone with this pain and from now on I shall always be alone, alone with my pain.

21. June 1952

That same evening I went to Ploiești. Having arrived in this alien, odious city which I wish I had never seen, where should I go, what should I do. In my muddled brain one thought was clear: I have to bring her to the Jewish cemetery of Ploiești. I went to the *comunitate* and came up against difficulties. I did not have enough money and these days the community has absolutely no funds whatsoever. Moved by my state, the lady clerk at the community lent me the missing money and also took the initiative for what needed to be done. Most importantly she found the people to take care of the transport and the formalities connected to it. Then I went to Paulești. I sat on a bench, looked towards the mortuary and wept, utterly beside myself. I did not go to see her, my nerves would not have survived. I asked the nurses about her last hours and heard what I had feared: she called for me the entire time and knew that her death was nigh. On the last day of her life she asked for her glasses and the two postcards which I had sent her and read them once again. (How can I live with the thought of these horrific agonies of my dear mother, loved beyond everything, and why? For whom?) I entered the forest on the other side of the “sanatorium,” walked about, and screamed, the heavens must hear my accusation, my mother my plea for forgiveness. And then I drove with my mother in the coffin (could that be possible) the same path back which I had taken only a few days before, with her by my side, full of hope and a speedy recovery. It was already too late to bury her on the same day. The next day I stood beside her bier until the rabbi and the cantor arrived. Then she was borne to the grave. My good, dear, sweet mother was sunk into the earth.

C-ța Sunday 21. September 1952

I never would have thought that I would be capable of surviving my mother. Four months have passed since my Mama is dead and I am still living. Yesterday was Yom Kippur, I lit a [memorial] light and candles – that was the holiday within the circle of my family.⁷¹⁵

⁷¹⁵ Presumably with “light” Blanka refers to the Yahrzeit candle lit on Yom Kippur in memory of deceased family members.

Chapter 5 – diary excerpt translations

Excerpt I from “My dear mother” (1954)

First of all, you would not be allowed to do anymore work. Before I went to work, I would take care of going to the market and after work, all of the housework. You would only be allowed to do as much as required for your own needs during my absence. I would be satisfied with small morsels and turn over everything for your nourishment and well-being. You would never hear a loud or ill word from me and I would resent none of your hard words, rising from some ill-humour. I would try to directly shoo away any ill-humour by way of loving words because we two, robbed of our providers and protectors, left on our own in a foreign city, must earnestly and closely cling to one another. Too late – too late. In vain do I listen through the quiet of the night, no breath, not the slightest sound reaches my ear, empty black darkness yawns about me.

Constanța Thursday 29 September 1949

Over the last days our relationship to one another has deteriorated badly. Yesterday morning there was a scene, I began to cry hard at which she got dressed and left. The entire day I stayed in bed, with the most dreadful headache and without eating anything. I thought she would come by the evening. But she has not come, now it is the second evening and she still is not there. I have no idea where she can be, I am very worried and feel horrible.

Excerpt II from “My dear mother” (1954)

When, shortly after your transfer to the TB hospital, the doctors recommended you be sent to a TB sanatorium, several hundred kilometres away, I opposed this. Not because I thought there would be no help there, I was even hopeful about a change of air and after all, why would what the doctors urgently recommended not be good. I opposed it because I was afraid of leaving you so far away from me and without my supervision and because I feared the long journey would be much too strenuous for you, I could not at all imagine how you could undertake such a journey in your completely debilitated condition. But you, mama, you immediately wanted to go, you had an outdated concept of the word sanatorium. You recalled the sanatorium in Czernowitz where your mother was cared for when she fell ill. Elegant rooms with one to two beds, doctors who applied

all the methods available in medical science to assist their patients, exquisite care, and nurses like angels.⁷¹⁶

Excerpt III from “My dear mother” (1954)

Now I close my eyes for a moment and see you before me, my dear mama. I see you sitting upon the chair beside the oven, in your long, thick flannel nightgown. I see your dear hands resting in your lap, the hands which prepared countless delicious meals for me, which countless times sewed and knitted for me, and which rested so softly on my forehead when I was unwell. I see your eyes, your beautiful, dark, long-lashed eyes, whose glance rested on me so often with faithful selfless love. I press you close to my heart.

My brother, 1955 (English translation)

My brother,

You should have been a support, a comfort, a place of refuge in beleaguered times, but you were ripped from me by a murderer’s hand.

Why?

You were twenty-three years old, as beautiful as Apollo, good and kind, talented, our pride and our joy. Despite all the oppression of our people in our country in the pre-war years, one predicted you would have a splendid career. Had you not passed all your tests with “excellent,” were you not already sought out, even while you were still studying, to work with on [projects of] large buildings, and were not all professors and engineers in agreement that you would go far in architecture? But barely was the ink dry on your diploma, you had to leave your young, precious life under the most awful torments.

My brother, for three years now our Mama has been dead and I am entirely alone in this evil world. Oh, how bitter I am, how unbearable my existence. I miss you my faithful brother, how urgently I need you.

During the war Mama and I spent three years in the Nazi⁷¹⁷ extermination camps. We had to endure the most awful agonies there, hunger, cold, vermin, a narrow, hard board to sleep upon, and at the

⁷¹⁶ This passage is quoted in Chapter 5 with footnotes elaborating on some aspects of the context, for example, the sanatorium in Czernowitz.

⁷¹⁷ As I will describe in the following chapter, Blanka was not in a German-run camp but rather a ghetto under Romanian administration. In her writings she uses Nazi and fascist interchangeably and equates the Romanian allies

mercy of hangmen who could string us up at any hour or chase us to a horrific death. But keener than all the agonies was the pain related to you. This pain was the worst, the most unbearable of all. If we escaped with our life despite everything, this miracle was only accomplished due to the powerful will to see the end of our tormenters, to see you, Walter, Papa, our relatives, and millions of our people avenged.

We saw it. I stood on a low rise and saw the Soviet tanks tear down the camp walls confining us, we were free, there were no more barriers between Jew and Christian, between man and man. I saw the long columns of German prisoners, disarmed, in dirty, ragged uniforms, writhe slowly forward with sunken heads. And then I saw the victorious motorised Soviet troops and knew that they would continue their march to Berlin and that the Nazi criminals, criminals such as the blackest medieval ages had not known, would not escape their punishment.

And now, having seen liberation, the suspense dissipated, now there was nothing else to wait for, life, preserved with such effort, lost all value. A horrible emptiness took hold of my soul.

You, my beloved, adored, only brother, how should we now continue to live without you, start something without you, how should we bear the frantic pain of your loss.

--Homecoming. A lovely word, a lovely concept. But for us it could no longer signify anything lovely. We left a site where we had taken part ~~experienced~~ in the hideous and were now to return to a place where we what we had experienced was even more hideous. And of course we no longer had a home--no family, no home. The journey was extremely arduous and associated with numerous hindrances. Once we remained stuck in a barren Bessarabian train station and thought we would not get any further until after many bleak days we went on and the hour came in which we saw in the distance the towers of the Czernowitz archbishop's residence appear. I looked spellbound at these towers and listened inside for a joyful echo. But nothing of the sort. I sensed only my raw, aching heart and worries about the future. I pointed out the residence to Mama. She shifted her gaze to the appointed direction, her facial lines took on a painful expression and her eyes filled with tears.

I knew what she was thinking. She saw again the city in which she was born, had lived, and once been happy. In what state was she returning and what awaited her. I knew how her maternal heart

of Hitler with the Nazis. She may also genuinely not have known who exactly was behind the establishment of the ghetto.

cried out in unbearable agony for her only, adored son, how the cries of pain for her husband, her siblings, her beautiful home, thronged to it, what desperate turmoil roared in her heart.

I tried to cheer Mama up with a bright face and a few optimistic words. But I was not optimistic at all. I saw the future as dark, without the smallest shimmer of light. Now I needed to arrange a refuge, take care of food and clothing, get us, but especially Mama, on our feet again. Mama, our dear beautiful Mama, was only a yellow skeleton that could barely stand up. I felt responsible for her, but did not feel equal to the task. I was not prepared for the struggle ahead of me and was dependent on myself alone, I could not count on any help, any support.

You, dear Bruno, you would have known how to solve this task. You would have been capable of taking good care of Mama, erecting a new home, a new life. You would have wonderfully stood your ground and succeeded in architecture.

But the iron “you must” gave me power to not completely fail. I do not want, dear Bruno, to describe all the stages of our life since the return from the death camps. I want only to tell you that I worked and strove to provide Mama and myself with what was most necessary. We did not suffer destitution. But we felt very poorly in the old home, on the rubble of our life, plagued day and night by the most tortuous memories and among people who were not innocent in our tragedy.

This is why I was very happy when we were able to leave. We moved away, into the unknown, and after a long, difficult journey, arrived in the port town of Constanța. I chose this city for our new home, but my choice was not exactly well made.

I knew nothing about the unfavourable climate and several other drawbacks. I thought of the sea, the harbour, and that it must be a large, interesting city. I had no one with whom I could consult. Nevertheless, having escaped from the tortuous clutch of the old home, we felt significantly better in the new. We settled in quickly and I found a means to provide for us. Day followed day and the years passed, one like the other. I worked and Mama took care of the household. On the outside our existence together appeared peaceful but inside neither of us was at ease, not even for a brief moment. Your loss and the manner in which it took place could neither be overcome nor forgotten. This pain continued on and on incessantly and was the main reason why Mama could not recover. In the camp she had lost thirty kg and become a skeleton. After liberation she improved only slightly and the repeated attempts to increase her weight were without success. When she fell ill in winter 1952 with an inflammation of the lung, the illness found ground where it could spread

and ravage unimpeded. Simultaneously there was a currency reform which stole our last Heller⁷¹⁸ from us and thus also the medications which Mama urgently needed. The worst transpired, I lost my mother, the sole companion of my loneliness. Never had I thought that I would be able to survive my dear, kind Mama, for even one hour. Now it has been three years and I am still alive, but how I live, oh, if you knew, dear brother. My language is too destitute, I am not capable of finding words to even roughly describe my emotional state, my existence, How desperately I need you, my brother. I always thought of you, always missed you bitterly, but since Mama's death and the inevitable aging it is even more difficult and painful to do without you.

As long as Mama lived, we bore our great pain together. Although we never said it outright, it was agreed between the two of us never to speak of you. But our thoughts revolved always around you, the years not only brought no relief to our vast pain, rather they seemed to make it increase, if an increase was even possible. – Usually I recognised when Mama was sunk in her dismal thoughts and tried to cheer her up by various means, yet without touching the sensitive subject. I had the impression that I was successful, but possibly I was deceived, that we deceived each other in these things. And yet, by this means, the one always seeking that the other not surrender entirely to her sorrow, we helped each other to bear our pain and existence. And then suddenly, those horrendous days, where I had to watch, powerless, as a ruthless illness consumed my Mama, then as a shabby coffin holding my everything, was sunk into the earth and I remained alone.

I reproach myself a lot, I must admit to you, my brother. Mama was so infinitely precious to me but I did not treat her with suitable care. She was so gaunt and weak, worn down from suffering, emotional as well as physical, and today I cannot understand how I permitted that she plague herself with the household, beyond her strength. I took care of earning our livelihood, doing the wash, and major cleaning, the rest Mama did.

She went to the market almost daily and I recall that she did not complain once that the to-and-fro and waiting in lines strained her. What did I do to help her? Nothing.

If I had looked for a solution, I would have found one, but I did not make this effort. Today I regret this bitterly. And that is not the only thing I regret, when I reflect (often enough), I remember the

⁷¹⁸ Here Blanka uses the monetary form of the Habsburg monarchy to express “penny” or “cent,” otherwise in her texts she uses the Romanian word(s) (bani, leu, lei).

one thing or the other which I would prefer not to have in my memory and burning sorrow mauls my heart. Why did I not see then, why do I do so today when it is too late.

My brother, almost fourteen years have passed since I saw you the last time. You stood before me, young, beautiful, impeccably dressed, and I looked at you as usual, full of tender, heartfelt sisterly love. Certainly those were abnormal, eventful days, a lunatic dragon ruled Europe, but I did not suspect that I was seeing you for the last time, that the blackest misfortune was at our heels, that the savage end of our peaceful family had begun. Eleven years later I also lost Mama in the most tragic manner and remained alone, the last of our family, alone with my immeasurable agony.

When and how will I end? This thought occupies me greatly. Despite my unbearable existence I have never seriously considered ending my days forcibly. The only thing I still wish for is to die a quick death. I fear illness, fear losing strength. There is no person who would take care of me. And I also fear people. What have my dear fellow humans in their Christian charity not done to me. Even today everyone enjoys striking the defenceless.

Where are you my brother, I need you, your support. I am aging lonely and abandoned and cold chills run down my back when I think about the passage to the other side. For me, death will be a welcome redemption from a life which has brought me nothing but the heaviest sorrows and immeasurable agony. But the passage to it – I fear, before this passage, I shudder.

Forgive me my brother that I have lamented before you so much. I have no one to whom I could pour out my heart and because it threatens to burst, I took up my pen and poured it out to you.

Adieu Bruno, my dear brother

Your sister

Blanka

Constanța April 1955

Chapter 6 – diary excerpt translations

Excerpt from Lieber Walter (1955)

On the 22nd of June 1941 the murderous and thieving Nazi hordes attacked the Soviet Union. Some days later we were chased out of the house, driven to the jail and tortured. My only, splendid brother, across whose beloved face I could not bear to see the slightest shadow fall without startling up, anxious, was killed. Our father likewise. Mama and I escaped death in the last moment due to

the intervention of a Romanian major who appeared suddenly in the midst of the blood-thirsty beasts in human form and stopped the butchery. Had he come one hour earlier, probably we would all have remained alive, had he come a half hour later, none of us would have escaped with our lives. I was prepared to die. I was like a stone. I did not feel the blows any longer. The only thing I felt was disgust. Disgust for this world in which such a thing could come to pass and I did not regret having to leave it.

Mama and I dragged ourselves home and found it plundered. Not a single piece of clothing or linens, no blanket, no food. Only a few weeks earlier this house had been a small paradise on earth, in which happy people lived. And now – now – it was impossible to grasp.

Wednesday, 9 July 1958.

I opened the diary to write about a new mishap but when I wrote down the date I flinched and a frenzied pain overwhelmed me. On this day seventeen years ago my only brother, whom I loved more than anything, and my father were killed by Hitlerist bandits. – Now I also remember that last night I dreamt of my brother. He was on the run from his persecutors and told me that I should hide him. I sent him to the basement; I said to myself, how can I sleep calmly in my bed when I know how terribly my brother suffers.

Diary Excerpts: 3 June to – 25 July 1956 (English translation)

Sunday 3 June 1956

What should I do, I can no longer bear the conditions, which have completely devastated me, here at home. But I cannot help myself alone and no one will support me.

I am so weak that I cannot do any work, the flat and my things are neglected. I cannot read, cannot sit at home, and cannot go around outside.

My dears ones to whom I was precious were torn away from me in the cruellest manner and now I am alone and defenceless at the mercy of such horrible torment.

Thursday 7 June 1956

Now for a change of subject although the horrible matter with the neighbours leaves me not a moment of peace.

I wrote in the past that I had searched for the address of an author (H.L.),⁷¹⁹ that it took a long time before I finally received it and that when I then wrote, I received no answer. Two weeks ago I wrote to another author (I.L.)⁷²⁰ and until now no answer has come. I have not yet given up hope but am beginning to become uneasy.

Although I am in such a horrible state that nothing interests me besides how I could escape from here, nevertheless I have mustered interest for this matter. I would be inconsolable if nothing is to come of it.

I wrote two other letters but addressed them only by guessing and wonder whether they will arrive and if I will receive a response. The one was to cousin Berta, who lived in Solca ten years ago (is she still there today?). The second is to the administrator of that villa in Sinaia where I stayed three years ago. (I think I remember the name of the street though I not sure of it).

- The pains in my right breast which I complained about this winter are beginning to be severe again. I am insanely unhappy.

Sunday 10 June 1956

Yesterday I went to the polyclinic. Because of the pain in the right breast, I was first at the “internal medicine” [department] and then in the surgical section. Thank God there is nothing suspicious. Now I am taking a powder and God should help me to get rid of these pains which have troubled me now for more than six months. Tuesday an x-ray and two blood analyses will be done due to my generally poor state of health.

Yet how should I remove the cause of these evil, my living conditions. I see that I can do nothing and am in despair beyond words.

⁷¹⁹ Most probably she refers to Horia Lovinescu (1917-1983), a playwright whose play *Citadela sfărâmată* (*The Shattered Citadel*) she had recently seen. The play deals with a bourgeois family trying to come to terms with the new world order in post-World War II Romania and may have resonated with her in several ways.

⁷²⁰ This may be Ion Luca (1894-1972), also a playwright, though the connection is not as clear as with Horia Lovinescu. If she indeed wrote to Luca, then her choices of authors continue to complicate her story, both were Romanian nationalist-leaning. At this time, there was no shortage of Romanian authors with Jewish background still in Romania, including those with specific Bukovina roots, but it seems that she did not seek out this circle or else was unaware of them. The most prominent example is Alfred Margul-Sperber (born 1898 in Storozhynets, died 1967 in Bucharest), who was known at the time for helping young German-language writers, especially those from Bukovina. See George Guțu and Peter Motzan, „Editorischer Bericht,” in *Die Buche. Eine Anthologie deutschsprachiger Judendichtung aus der Bukowina*, ed. Alfred Margul-Sperber with George Guțu, Peter Motzan, and Stefan Sienerth (IKGS Verlag, 2009), 21-42. We never learn the contents of her letters to these writers.

- The letter which I sent to Sinaia came back to me. I had written the name of the street based on my memory, without being sure, and not given any house number. I had hoped that since the street did not have many houses the letter would get there, but everything goes wrong for me.

The author does not answer. I am a terribly damned creature.

Thursday 14 June 1956

Three days ago I received an answer from Berta. I had barely dared to hope that my letter would reach her and as a matter of fact I am amazed about it because she does not live in Solca anymore, rather in Suceava.

The day before yesterday I had a lung x-ray, the result troubles me. I do not know what this result means, I only know that I no longer have healthy lungs. The conditions in which I live are destroying my health. I have known this for a long time. I cannot help myself alone and no one pays any attention to me. Not only that, if I ask for something small, which could help me, it is denied me. This is what happened with my petition to the council to give me a different flat in exchange for this one and the petition to the public prosecution office⁷²¹ court to restrain the mob of neighbours which torments me so bitterly.

Thursday 21 June 1956

I am sick. I feel very poorly. I have never been this weak.

Yesterday I went to the steam bath and I think I made a mistake. I did not think about that fact that after the poor x-ray result a steam bath could harm me. During the bath I felt bad and have felt the same the entire day today. I am not capable of standing on my feet. I was in the policlinic today, the doctor said I have to go easy on myself and gave me various restoratives. Hopefully I will be well soon then in my state if I am ill in addition, cannot do anything—what can I begin, what will become of me?

Friday 22 June 1956

⁷²¹ She writes “Prokurator” probably referring to the Romanian “procuratura” which was the institute responsible for investigating crimes. My immense gratitude goes again to Stefan Ionescu, an academic specialist in the legal history of this period, who generously and quickly advised me on these subjects.

Today I was just as poor as yesterday. Despite the medications and means to increase my appetite, I cannot eat anything.

Today I wrote a second letter to the author and in my absentmindedness dropped it in the mailbox without a stamp. In the afternoon I went to the post office and left a stamp there and a clerk promised me to put it on the letter. Hopefully it will arrive.

The second neighbour, the carpenter, has been hammering the entire day. Maybe those spirits tormenting me haven't satisfied themselves, now they have this encore, too. In the radio they are playing the opera "Faust," but in my ears it is only hammering.

A few days ago I posted up a note regarding a flat exchange. A few people have shown up, but nothing has come of it.

Not a shimmer of hope from anywhere and I cannot bear it anymore. I got into this horrible state only due to lack of rest, what now? I am so dreadfully tormented, where is God? Is God only there for those who are happy. – I just went outside and asked the carpenter if he could not imagine stopping. I feel very sick. Dreadful headaches (in my whole head). Stomach aches, nausea, and an unpleasant, gnawing feeling in my heart.

Saturday 23 June 1956

I got into a commotion today with the carpenter. I came home and found him hammering. I reproached him for this with the reasoning that I want to rest after work and with the noise he causes it is impossible, my head is going to burst. He answered me coarsely. In my current state agitation affects me dreadfully. I am completely wiped out. Who knows whether my lung has got worse since the steam bath. For multiple weeks now I have dreadful back pains, but in the last bit of time this pain has increased. These pains and my decrepit state make me fear the worst.

Today I negotiated again for a flat exchange. I am ready to trade my two rooms for one single one; if only I can get away from the misfortunate here. But nevertheless I doubt whether the people in question will want to come here. If they had agreed they would have said yes immediately; at the sight of the hallway and the neighbours everyone cringes and backs off.

Tuesday 26 June 1956

Today I got a card from Berta. She invited me to spend my holiday with her. I am very happy about this.

The letter to the author was not stamped at the post office as I was promised and has been returned.

Constanța Saturday 30 June 1956

I am nauseous. And when I think about that it is only from lack of rest and the agitations with the mob of neighbours that have brought me into this state, all my pain increases. I intend to do another x-ray next week, I am very afraid of the result because I feel very bad. Precisely now, when I have found Berta and am planning the journey to her, I am so in pieces that I can barely muster enough energy to wash myself.

I have never had such severe and long-lasting back pains. And the pain in the breast does not abate. This morning at 4:00 a.m. there was an earthquake. -

Tomorrow afternoon we (office) are going on an excursion on the sea. Hopefully it will be nice weather because it has been raining daily and it is cold. Hopefully my strength will also last.

Sunday 1 July 1956

The excursion was pleasant. We went with the ship "Neptune" far off until we could no longer see Constanța. Then we turned around. It was very nice weather.

This morning I got into a terrible commotion again with the bandit. Of course due to nothing, that is, like normal, he was insane and it was to his delight. I was very agitated, this now, in my state.

Tuesday 3 July 1956

Yesterday and today I was nauseous. What is wrong with me.

What I have to endure would not be possible for someone with the skin of an elephant, so that it is no wonder that I am in this state. But I do not want to be sick, why do I not get better, I am alone, I cannot be sick.

Sunday 8 July 1956

Berta is awaiting me. I am thinking to leave on the eighteenth, that is, in ten days.

Yesterday I went again to the public prosecution office due to the bandit.

Thursday 12 July 1956

Yesterday I wrote to Berta and told her that I will leave here on the eighteen of this month.

I do not know how long the journey will last.

By Saturday I should be finished with my work for the balance sheet. Hopefully I will manage it.

In terms of health, I am still poor. I cannot believe that I am so wiped out.

Sunday 15 July 1956

Today I finished the film manuscript on which I have been working since this winter. Often I wrote nothing for days and then on some days only a little. Now it is finished. After I get back I will look through it again and correct it.

Tuesday 17 July 1956

I am ready for the journey. I also already have the ticket. There is still a bit I would have done, but I am too tired. It is 10:00 p.m. Hopefully I will wake tomorrow morning before 5:00.

Suceava 19 July 1956 Thursday

This morning I arrived in Suceava. Berta and Max received me affectionately. They think I look well, whether this is honest or only friendly words, I cannot know of course. I know that I have aged and that is also normal. Berta and Max have aged significantly, especially the latter; twelve years are no trifle.

Yesterday I looked up Lya in Bucharest. I found out her new address from the old one. She is living very elegantly now. In Bucharest and Constanța it was very hot, here it is cool. I travelled the entire night on the train and it was very bothersome. I tried to sleep this morning but did not manage. Now it is afternoon (I ate very well) and am sitting in the garden in the fresh air. The air is very good here.

Suceava 25 July 1956 Wednesday

Yesterday I went with Berta to Radautz. We visited Uncle Sigmund. This is Berta's father and my father's brother. He is already an old man of eighty years. The sight of the two old people (he has a second wife) impressed me greatly and I was deeply moved. They were very happy with me. When we had to go to the train and take our farewell we all four of us shed bitter tears.

Monday evening we went to a symphony concert. Dvorak's Fifth Symphony and Mendelssohn-Bartoldi's Concerto for Violin and Orchestra were performed; the soloist was the well-known violinist Ion Voicu. I liked the concert very much.

- Am having bad luck with the weather. It is raining every day.

Today in a week I am thinking to leave again.

Chapter 7 – diary excerpt translations

Constanța Wednesday 7 December 1949 (excerpt I)

[...] The cousin writes that aunty is with them, but does not feel well because she is suffering as a result of loneliness. They [the cousins] are both busy the entire day, away from home, and live remotely. No note from aunty, not even a greeting. Very odd, from Brussels aunty had always written very diligently and showed herself to be very interested in us. What is this now supposed to mean? At first we assumed the worst, now we are wondering about other various suspicions, only God knows what is there. [...]

Constanța Wednesday 7 December 1949 (excerpt II)

[...] For some time now new identity cards are being issued in the city. You have to have various documents for this. Since we, after all, lost all our documents, I acquired what was possible, a replacement birth certificate and two certificates of citizenship. Yesterday it was our street's turn. I went to the police yesterday evening with the available papers and the photographs. They asked me where I was from, since when I have been here, and then sent me away saying that I have no documents. In the old identity card they made a notation: has no documents, must present themselves later. They wrote something similar in a register. I did not like the whole thing but do not want to alarm myself. There are so many repatriates in the country, the Transnistria survivors, I am reluctant to believe that there could be designs against us. [...]

Constanța Friday 11 September 1953

A few days ago I received a summons to appear before the police. I could not imagine what for. There I was bidden to sign a declaration of where I have lived since 1940 and what I was doing since then. I felt unwell. Why can they be interested in this. I lead a silent, withdrawn existence, how is it that the police come to be interested in me. In response to my questions, they finally said

it is about a fine on the train. I said I had never received a fine on a train and expressed amazement that one could confuse my unusual name with another. I find the affair strange. On the summons my name was spelled correctly, how is it possible? I do not know what I should think of this.

Constanța Sunday 19 August 1956

I did a big cleaning of the flat. Naturally not all at once, my strength is not enough for that.⁷²² I did most of the work last Sunday and today. The room is like a jewellery box. But no visitors come to me. I feel the loneliness bearing heavily upon me once more.

Sunday 25 August 1957

The torture of loneliness has begun again. For more than two weeks I was together with people who were good to me, now I am again alone. Only two weeks of a year not lonely, and even then with the distressing thoughts and worries about my belongings left behind here without their owner.

16 October 1958

Yesterday I spent the entire afternoon at the police, busy with filling out forms. There were many pages to fill out. I noticed that importance was placed on the relatives which one has in Israel, because the purpose of the emigration is supposed to be the unification of family members. I, poor thing, have neither there nor anywhere else someone who would take me in. But I had to put someone to whom I am going and so I put down cousin Max. I envied the woman sitting next to me when I saw her put the names, one after the other, of her parents and siblings living in Israel.

9 February 1958

The whole week I did not have a chance to report here about the most recent event: Lya has left for Israel. Monday I received her letter with this message and it struck me like an unexpected blow from a club. I began to cry bitterly and wept tears half the night. Now I am even lonelier and have no place to stay in Bucharest. Even though the bonds of friendship which tied us together had grown thin over the years and due to the distance, nevertheless they could never tear. And the

⁷²² Blanka was suffering from an undiagnosed ailment at the time, which she attributed to the psychological stress of constant harassment from the neighbours.

distance was not insurmountable, we could still see each other after all, even if this only happened rarely.

Constanța Sunday 27 September 1953

I had one single friend here in Constanța, Ani Gheorghiu, a nice, very intelligent girl. Since Mama's death she was the only person with whom I could still speak German, the only person with whom I could talk for hours about everything and with whom I got along well. Now Ani has abandoned me, she has moved to Bucharest, and I remain without a friend. Thus is my loneliness complete. [...]

Friday 11 July 1958 (excerpt I)

Ani is here, she has vacation. One week ago today there was a dreadful storm in the night which woke me up. When the storm had let up, suddenly here was a knock on my window. It was Ani with her eight-year old nephew. After they washed their feet I gave them my bed and laid down on the sofa. They were tired and fell asleep immediately. I lay sleepless (outside the storm has begun again from the beginning) and listened to their quiet breathing. For my ears it was an unfamiliar but not disturbing sound.

Friday 11 July 1958. (excerpt II)

We now have an opera in our city. The opening took place with the opera "La Traviata" by Verdi. I believe I have already mentioned that Ani's brother is the director. I saw the opera two times, with two different people playing the main role. The first time was on Sunday. In the intermission, between acts three and four, Ani's sister-in-law led us up to the dressing room of the main actress and introduced us.

Sinaia, 5 August 1953.

I planned to spend the day in Bucharest in order to see the foreigners that are there for the Youth World Festival [...]. Now Bucharest presents a pretty and colourful face. Flags from all the world and slogans in all languages. I spent the afternoon in the Stalin-Park.⁷²³ Here there was a vibrant hustle and bustle of activities and an unintelligible mixture of languages. I spoke with French

⁷²³ Today Herăstrău Park.

women and there was one whom I particularly liked and we kissed. I “spoke” with an Indonesian man, who wrote his address in my notebook and said: “correspondence.” I also “spoke” with Swedes, Fins, and others and saw a great number of representatives from various countries. It was an unforgettable afternoon.

Thursday 18 October 1956

Today it has been two weeks since I sent away my manuscript. What is its fate? Of course I am asking this question but I am very afraid of the answer. There are moments where my imagination sweeps me away and paints me rosy castles in a cloud. But fundamentally I see matters soberly and am anxiously worried. I know that with this sort of work not only quality matters. The competition there is very large and I have heard that a certain circle of authors have a monopoly, so to speak, in the department of film manuscripts.

The idea of my work is original, contemporary, and on “the line.”⁷²⁴ The plot, developed 100% in my own head, could make a very pretty film, but this does not only depend on me and I do not know whether the competent people will share my opinion.

Sunday 21 April 1957

What I lived through yesterday outstrips everything I have gone through thus far with these bandits. Yesterday the one woman wanted to clean the hall, which was completely befouled by the rabble. Then the soldier came out and screamed that she should not clean, I should do it. And everyone together began to insult and threaten me. I did not want to react because I was upset enough from merely hearing them. But a little later I needed to go out and when I left my room the woman of the soldier rushed up to me, telling me I was to clean the hall otherwise they would not let me in anymore. I answered with a refusal to clean all the filth which was not my own. They cursed me and I called them Legionnaires⁷²⁵ in line with their behaviour. With my return, when I opened the door, the quarrel started anew. I had barely entered my room and without knowing how such a thing could happen, the creature rushed in behind me and struck me in the face. When I screamed and called him a criminal, he again lunged at me and twisted the fingers of my right hand. This

⁷²⁴ This references being in line with communist ideology.

⁷²⁵ This was the virulently antisemitic political movement of the prewar and war years who were also, in the postwar period, outlawed and imprisoned by the communists.

hurt so terribly that I thought the thumb and pointer finger were broken. - Such a thing happened to me. From this agitation I felt very ill. I could not sleep all night. More than anything I am tormented with disgust and rage that such a monster touched me. I did not leave my room all day although I have no water. Both fingers hurt dreadfully, they are swollen and the thumb is blue. I wrote with effort. How should I bear my existence? Begin anything?

Sunday 9 March 1958

Then he said: the typical conflicts between intellectuals and workers. [...] I suddenly saw our roles reversed, instead of the accuser, I was the accused. The neighbour grew bolder and again began to lie and slander me. [...] At the end [the president said]: you are an educated person and we make demands of you that we cannot make of him.

Sunday 16 March 1958

In the western countries the victims of Nazism are provided for and honoured, but here, where humanism is spoken of so much, no such thing takes place. No privilege for the survivors of pogroms and camps. For myself, personally, not only have I never been given any assistance of any kind, on the contrary, I have been abandoned without protection or defence to all manner of harassment and menace.

Not that I am of the opinion that it is possible to make up for what transpired, No!!!

The dead remain dead.

I am simply of the opinion that in this country one could behave differently towards the victims of the fascist rule, that dark age of mass murder of innocent people. One never cared for or gave a thought to the survivors and their heavy sufferings carry no weight in any respect before the authorities.

31 January 1954

Barely was I done with my [fiscal reporting] tasks and thought I could breathe more freely for a while when a new trouble arrives. This trouble is caused by a woman who works in the same office as I. Recently she made fascist-antisemitic remarks; I called her attention to her error with a few words and since then I have not spoken to her. For me the matter was over, but not for her. She is making malicious insinuations about me, agitating amongst the other employees against me, and

leading a systematic muck-raking campaign. I feel very poorly in this newly created situation. Yesterday I went to the head of personnel and poured out my heart. She seemed to understand me and to stand by me. But who knows whether she will not let herself be otherwise influenced.

Sunday 7 December 1958

But I had to do what I did. I was driven into this position by miscreants, people who possess no principles of humanity and honour. With the departure of the former head bookkeeper the only dam in this polluted sea was removed, I was overcome and thrown to the ground. Now they are crowing over there, “Higiena” is now *judenrein*.

Friday 24 April 1959

I am trying to control myself in order not to go mad. But it is very difficult. This ghastly loneliness, my illness, and the hideous neighbours. And age, to age in such a way, under such conditions, no youth, not even having had a happy childhood, and now this tragic hopeless aging. Only a criminal or a monster would have deserved such a fate as this. I never did anything evil or dishonest and in my hometown I was considered the prettiest girl.

In 1950 I could not leave even though no one here needed me and over there most likely marriage and family awaited me. And now, when it is so late, why must there be obstacles in the way now. Such a long, frightened waiting for a sign, some sort of stirring in this matter, so that I can again seize hope and courage. But nothing is stirring. The days are so long and the nights are dreadful. I am struggling beyond words. I cannot go on.

Bucharest Wednesday 26 April 1961

Today I took care of customs and procured the ticket up to Vienna. The day after tomorrow, early, I hope to leave.

The liquidation of my things in Constanța was very difficult, I left most everything standing around.

I am very exhausted. The moment approaches to leave the old home and seek a new one. What will I find?? One is not allowed to bring diaries, I could not bring myself to destroy them. I am entrusting them to someone for safekeeping. Will they ever find their way back to me?

Chapter 8 – diary excerpt translations

Sunday 6 April 1958

[...] I found out by chance that it is Pessach.⁷²⁶ Friday evening was seder and shudders ran through my body when I turned on the Radio “Kol Israel” and heard the prayers. Did I ever have family and experience the ceremony of the seder night in the circle of my loved ones? I feel as if this never happened. Now I know only one thing, I am terribly alone and abandoned, namelessly miserable and now at Pessach not only do I eat bread, but pork as well.

⁷²⁶ In German she again writes Easter (*Oster*), see previous footnotes.

Acknowledgments

This project was long in the making and began with the finding of the diaries in 2009. It would be a full ten years before I found myself in a position to turn my attention to them completely, but during those ten years ideas expanded, small discoveries were made, and Blanka's voice never left me at peace. So, beginning with 2009, I would like to thank Jessica Douglas-Home, then the chairman of the Mihai Eminescu Trust (Sighișoara), who first supported and encouraged the cleanup in the Mediaș synagogue and impressed upon me privately at multiple times the potential significance of the diaries. Her conviction of the importance of such private writings was a foundational impetus to pursue this project.

In light of the unlawful dismantling of American foreign aid agencies by the executive branch of the current American government at the time of concluding this work, I would also like to state explicitly that I first arrived in Romania in 2007 with the American organisation Peace Corps, established by John F. Kennedy in 1961. It is no hyperbole to say that the experience unequivocally changed my life, not only due to the acquisition of a new language and forging of intimate relationships with individuals and spaces which remain fundamentally important to me today, but especially as a result of the volunteer work I undertook for various NGOs (alongside my official position as an English teacher at a public school), which led me to my current career path. The volunteers at the Mediaș synagogue cleanup were all Peace Corps volunteers, many of whom have gone on to work as diplomats or in other careers related to foreign aid service. This project was only possible due to the Peace Corps.

Several years later, I joined my partner during his Fulbright grant in Chișinău and there did a regular text exchange and discussion with another Fulbright Fellow, Alice Popovici, both of us exploring structures and directions for our then theoretical projects. Alice, a journalist, always insisted on the importance of including my own voice and search in my research. At the time, I rejected her suggestions, only to find that now, in the end, she was right and there was no way to do it otherwise; I am grateful to her for her arguments at the time which returned to me as I was writing many years later.

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Hirsch was my first foray into working with the diaries in a scholarly setting and formed the academic starting point from which this work grew. I would also like to thank Robert Levy⁷⁷¹, who championed this project at its most nascent stage and whose masterfully written work on Ana Pauker greatly influenced my early understanding of postwar Romania and ensured me that historical writing need not be dull. I wish he could see the end of this project.

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Finding relatives of the women and men about whom I have written occurred only in the latter stages of this project and these connections were, perhaps for this reason, that much more meaningful to me. I am extremely grateful to have connected with the descendants of Chaim (Uncle Sigmund) and Sali Heiss, especially Chaim's grandchildren Shelley Hays and Jonny Heiss and for their willingness to share with me family photographs and stories. Likewise, my great gratitude goes to Jan Deutsch, the widow of George Thomas Deutsch (son of Ernestine Buczaczer and Egon Deutsch), for sharing with me private photographs and details regarding Karoline Windbeutel's incredible survival story. I am also very grateful to Cornelia Gheorghiu for meeting with me personally to share photographs and memories of Ani Gheorghiu and her family.

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Abbreviations

CDE *Comitetul Democrat Evreiesc*, Jewish Democratic Committee

JDC *Joint Distribution Committee*

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Abstract (German)

Das Dissertationsprojekt untersucht und kontextualisiert die kürzlich gefundene deutschsprachige Tagebücher von Blanka Lebzelter, einer Überlebenden des Holocaust in Transnistrien. Die Tagebücher wurden in der frühen Nachkriegszeit in Rumänien verfasst und geben Einblick in die prekären Lebensumstände von Überlebenden nach dem Krieg. Dabei bieten sie vielfältige Ansatzpunkte, um die Erfahrungen jüdischer Überlebender in Rumänien, ihr Alltagsleben sowie ihre Traumata zu untersuchen. Lebzelters Tagebucheinträge zeigen Räume auf, in denen Individuen trotz totalitärer Zwänge Handlungsmöglichkeiten fanden, aber auch solche, in denen die totalitären Staatsstrukturen das Leben von Einzelnen massiv beeinträchtigten. Darüber hinaus geben sie Aufschluss über kulturelle und soziale Praktiken des jüdischen Lebens der Zeit, insbesondere über die Aktivitäten der zionistischen Jugendorganisationen in Rumänien der späten 1940er Jahren. Die Aufzeichnungen sind zugleich eine Quelle, die markant von vergeschlechtlichten Strukturen und Praktiken geprägt ist, und geben Auskunft über das Leben einer jungen, alleinstehenden Frau, die am Übergang von Tradition zu Moderne aufwuchs und in einem zutiefst patriarchalischen Land um ihre Stimme kämpfte. Ausgehend von der Grundannahme, dass Tagebücher als Quellen an der Schnittstelle zwischen Literatur und Geschichte zu verorten sind, wendet mein Projekt interdisziplinäre Methoden an, die auf Biographieforschung, mikrohistorischen Ansätzen sowie Geschlechter- und Frauengeschichte basieren, um Lebzelters Schriften und Leben zu analysieren und zu kontextualisieren. Dadurch wird nicht nur der Stimme einer Überlebenden, die lange Zeit zum Schweigen gebracht wurde, Gehör geschenkt, sondern auch die emotionale Erfahrung von Überlebenden im Nachkriegsrumänien beleuchtet.

Abstract (English)

This dissertation project examines and contextualises a recently found set of German-language diaries written in Romania during the early postwar period by Blanka Lebzelter, a survivor of the Transnistrian Holocaust. The diaries testify to the quotidian struggles impoverished survivors faced in the aftermath of devastation and are a tremendous tool, providing multi-faceted entry-points for examining the experience of Jewish survivors in Romania after the war as well as for analysing manifestations of trauma in everyday life. Lebzelter's writings indicate spaces in which individuals were able to perform acts of agency despite totalitarian strictures and also those places where the cold machinations of the totalitarian state devastated individual lives. They moreover shed light on cultural and social practices in Jewish life at the time, in particular into the operations of Romanian Zionist youth organizations in the late 1940s. Furthermore, as an inherently gendered source, the writings testify to the life of a young, single woman raised at the interface of tradition and modernity, struggling for a voice in a profoundly patriarchal nation. Working from the concept of diaries at the confluence of literature and history, my project employs interdisciplinary methods, grounded in biography, microhistorical approaches, and gender and women's history, to analyse and contextualise Lebzelter's writings and life, bringing to light not only the voice of one survivor long silenced, but through doing so, unearthing the emotional experience of survivors in postwar Romania.