

“As to my emotional anguish, there are days
when I feel endlessly miserable”:

Hachsharot in Early Postwar Romania and the Limits of Belonging

by Julie Dawson

Abstract

This paper looks at the hachsharah activities of Zionist organizations in early post-war Romania, examining the context and motivation of participants. Whereas the hachsharot in central Europe have been recognized as spaces of empowerment and agency for displaced persons, the contrasting Romanian war-time experience and divergent social structures called these very features into question in the Romanian context. Following a macrohistorical basic outline, a microhistorical approach is taken to probe the experience of one individual through a set of recently found diaries. Here the limits of Zionist propaganda and community-building work and the ramifications of failing to address the psychological and physical needs of Holocaust survivors are explored: despite apparent inclusion in a cohesive and sympathetic group, the diary author experiences alienation and marginalization within her own ranks.

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Introduction

*... 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...¹*

On November 7th, 1948, Blanka Lebzelter, a young woman and survivor of the Transnistrian Holocaust, picked up her pencil and recorded the following words in a simple schoolgirl's notebook, describing her first month on a *hachsharah* (Zionist training camp for manual labor) in the small Romanian market town of Piatra Neamț, situated on the eastern slopes of the Carpathian mountains. She wrote:

Today is one month since I have been here. A very difficult month full of difficult labor, to which I am unaccustomed, physical and emotional anguish. I do not know how it can continue because it is only getting colder and the draft in the factory is constantly getting stronger. There are wide open doors on both sides and a strong, cold draft blows right through me as well as the other workers, men and women. The past days I did not work with casket lids² anymore, but rather had to do other work like

¹ Paul Celan, "Conversation in the Mountains," in *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, trans. by John Felstiner (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 399.

² German: *Küstendeckel*. It is not clear what exactly the *hachsharah* 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 coffin. There was a significant Jewish community (not

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 *haverim*³ working in a different factory, doing work that is much easier and in warmth. Why do I have to sacrifice myself, why do I always have only misfortune? As to my emotional anguish, there are days when I feel endlessly miserable.⁴

Lebzelter went on to describe a recent Friday evening experience during which several of her fellow hachsharah comrades refused to make space for her at the communal Sabbath table, after which she retreated to her bed and wept. The *hachsharot* established by and for Displaced Persons (DPs) in Germany, Austria,

devastated during the war) in Piatra Neamț, where according to local legend, the Baal Shem Tov, founder of Hassidism, prayed in his later years. Jews were very active in the lumber industry throughout the heavily forested Carpathian mountains, especially in the neighboring former Habsburg regions of Maramureș and Bukovina and it is thus conceivable that the hachsharah members worked at a Jewish-owned or operated factory constructing wooden coffins for regional needs (according to Jewish ritual, burial is to take place in simple and unadorned wooden coffins). In my past work with Romanian Jewish community archives, I came across anecdotal documents indicating that hachsharah work sometimes took place on the grounds of Jewish-owned farms or factories. Archival visits which would have substantiated this theory and potentially resolved the matter of what exactly the hachsharah constructed, were not possible at the time of research as a result of the 2020-2021 covid pandemic. My thanks go to German Studies professor Dr. Astrid Lembke for assistance with the German *Küste*. I cannot speculate on whether working daily with symbols of the grave would have been an additional psychological strain on a survivor such as Lebzelter, who had recently witnessed the violent and traumatic deaths of countless individuals, intimates and strangers, buried lacking coffins and ritual rites. In her diaries, she does not comment on the work besides the physical strain.

³ Hebrew: friends. The word *haver* or *havera* for “friend” 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 commonly understood and used in today’s Vienna). In the diaries Lebzelter adopted the vocabulary used by the leaders of the Zionist organization for members and thus she employs it consciously and exclusively to describe her colleagues at the hachsharah or within the organization; in other words in this context it means “fellow members” and does not necessarily denote personal friendship.

⁴ Blanka Lebzelter’s Diary, “Piatra Neamț, 7 November 1948, Sontag,” Blanca Lebzelter Collection, AR 25437, box 1, folder 2, Leo Baeck Institute, New York City. Unless otherwise noted, translations from German and Romanian from the diaries and other sources are my own.

and Italy following World War II have been lauded 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.⁵ What was the Romanian hachsharah context and what were this young woman's personal circumstances which gave way to an experience of such drastic contrast, one of social isolation, marginalization, and physical strain onerous for a Holocaust survivor, who had remained impoverished and undernourished since her release three years earlier, in 1944?

In this article, I will sketch the landscape of Romanian Zionist organizations and hachsharot in the early post-war period, examining the context of and motivation for participation, until 1949 when they were formally and terminally shut down by the communist regime. Following a basic macrohistorical outline using, among other sources, archival material held by the archives of the Securitate (the communist secret police) and an extant 1947 report by one of the Zionist organizations themselves, I take a microhistorical approach, probing the experience of one individual through the diaries quoted above.

Whereas the hachsharot in central Europe have been recognized as spaces of empowerment and agency for displaced persons, the contrasting Romanian war-time experience, precarious political post-war reality, and divergent social structures called these very features into question in the Romanian context. My particular aim in this paper is to peer beyond the numbers and place names and draw attention to the individual experience of one hachsharah participant. Beyond brief mentions in memoirs or oral histories, we know remarkably little about daily

⁵ There is not space to go into 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 experiences with those in Romania. See for example, Avinoam Patt, *Finding Home and Homeland: Jewish Youth and Zionism in the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2009); 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* (New Brunswick: 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.

life and individual experience on the Romanian hachsharot.⁶ Lebzelter's humanizing voice provides a stark contrast to the bureaucratic information available in the archives, facilitating an intimate portrait of a hachsharah and one of its troubled members. The structure of the paper is as follows: after introducing the diary writer, her works, and my analytic lens, I move to a description of the Jewish position in post-war Romania, give a brief overview of Romanian Zionist activity and outline additional "outsider" (Securitate reports) and "insider" (Zionist organization report) sources mentioned above, before turning to Lebzelter's impressions of her own experience.

Blanka Lebzelter and her Writings

Since I reference the diaries throughout the present paper, a bit of brief background on Blanka Lebzelter, her diaries, and my methodology is required.⁷ The diaries were discovered in 2009 by volunteers cleaning up the document-littered women's balcony of a shuttered synagogue in a small Transylvanian town.⁸

⁶ One exception is Ruth Glasberg-Gold's memoir in which she wrote several pages about her experience on a Romanian hachsharah in 1946. Beyond the significant difference in form of a diary versus memoir, her social circumstances differed from Lebzelter considerably: Glasberg-Gold was an orphan and five to ten years younger than Lebzelter. Despite this, some of her impressions and experience overlap with Lebzelter. I will highlight these differences and consistencies in my text above. For Glasberg-Gold's hachsharah experience, see the chapter "From Communism to Zionism" in *Ruth's Journey: A Survivor's Memoir* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), 154-161. Oral histories sometimes briefly mention hachsharah experiences, but the focus tends to be on the war-time period.

⁷ Four diaries, three letters written to deceased loved ones, her Transnistrian identity cards and one letter to a cousin were found. The letters to the deceased provide biographical details without which many key events of her life would have been impossible to reconstruct.

⁸ I discovered the diaries and associated papers in the Mediaș synagogue in 2009. They are now held at the Leo Baeck Institute: Blanka Lebzelter Collection AR 25437, Leo Baeck Institute Archives, New York City.



Fig. 1. One of the diaries and other assorted archival material in the women's balcony of the Mediaș synagogue. Photo Credit: Michael Nork, 2009.

Containing over 800 entries, they stretch from 1948-1961 and record the post-war life of grief and limited triumph of a young survivor of the Transnistrian Holocaust, Blanka Lebzelter. The diaries testify to the quotidian struggles impoverished survivors faced in the aftermath of devastation and are a tremendous tool to researchers, providing multi-faceted entry-points for examining the experience of Jewish survivors in Romania after the war as well as for analyzing manifestations of trauma in everyday life.

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."⁹ Working from this concept of diaries at the confluence of literature and history, my larger research project employs interdisciplinary methods, grounded in biography and microhistorical approaches, to analyze and contextualize Lebzelter's writings and life on two intertwined planes: as a singular testimony representing survivor narratives that have been little probed and as a source allowing hitherto unexplored insights into

⁹ Jochen Hellbeck, "The Diary between Literature and History: A Historian's Critical Response," *The Russian Review* 63, no. 4 (2004): 628-629.

social and cultural history considerations of post-war Romania.¹⁰ I pair 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 Lebzelter's day-to-day life, attempting to reconstruct social, cultural, and political contours which characterized her environment.¹¹ From a theoretical standpoint I 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."¹²

For the purpose of the present article, I will provide a basic sketch of Lebzelter's life in order to contextualize where she was, geographically and emotionally, in 1948-1949, the high point of hachsharah activity in Romania and the years during which she participated in one. Blanka Lebzelter was born near or in Czernowitz in the early/mid-1920s, thus during the hachsharah period in question, she was probably in her mid/late twenties.¹³ Her father, Josef Lebzelter, was a civil servant

¹⁰ For an overview of the diaries as a source and my analytical lens(es), see 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*, eds. Natalia Aleksion and Hana Kubátová (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2021), 299-311. Dr. Gaëlle Fisher also drew on the diaries in her article "Between Liberation and Emigration: Jews from Bukovina in Romania after the Second World War," *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 62 (2017): 115-132.

¹¹ On the need to employ "intertextual analysis" simultaneously to studying the text itself, 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" see Christa Hämmerle, "Diaries," in *Reading Primary Sources: The Interpretation of Texts from Nineteenth and Twentieth Century History*, eds. Miriam Dobson and Benjamin Ziemann (Oxon: Routledge, 2009), 151.

¹² Antoinette Burton, "Foreword: 'Small Stories' and the Promise of New Narratives," in *Contesting Archives: Finding Women in the Sources*, eds. Nupur Chaudhuri, Sherry J. Katz, and Mary Elizabeth Perry (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), viii.

¹³ Lebzelter's birth year remains a mystery as I have not been able to locate her birth record. Her Transnistria identity cards list her age as twenty-two in 1942. She herself refers to her "twenty years of life" when recalling incidents of May 1941, when she became engaged (see "Lieber Walter," Blanka Lebzelter Collection, AR 25437, box 1, folder 1, Leo Baeck Institute, New York City). However, the birth book for her hometown of Waschkoutz records three entries for her parents, all for boys: Bruno born in July 1918; Maximilian born in February 1921 (he must have died young, Blanka refers to Bruno as her "only brother"); an unnamed boy born in September 1922 who died within a few days, prior to the circumcision and ritual name-giving. Blanka is not listed in this book, which contains births to 1928. Her birthday, noted in her diary, is February 22, meaning she

during the Austro-Hungarian empire period, fulfilling official clerical duties in several Bukovina villages and towns. Her mother, Anna, grew up in Czernowitz, where her family overlapped with the social circles of Paul Antschel, later Celan: Lebzelter's first cousin, Gustav Chomed, was close boyhood friends with Antschel and in post-war correspondence Celan and Chomed wrote nostalgically of Chomed's home in the Töpfergasse—the home of Lebzelter's aunt, uncle, cousins, and grandparents.¹⁴ The Lebzelter family were entrenched German-speaking Central European Jews; her older brother completed his degree in architecture at the University of Prague shortly before the war, her fiancé studied medicine there.¹⁵ Her father, most recently secretary of the Waschkoutz town hall, was in his sixties at the start of the war, living in quiet retirement in a home with a garden full of fruit trees, in a small riverside town, a short train ride from Czernowitz. When the war broke out Lebzelter was probably nineteen or twenty and well-educated, speaking besides her German mother tongue, Romanian, Russian, and English; most likely she understood Yiddish and Ukrainian.¹⁶ She had a deep

could feasibly have been born in 1920, if her mother afterwards became pregnant again quickly, unusual but not impossible (Maximilian was born in Feb. 1921) or she was born in 1924 (the third baby was born and died in Sept. 1922, so she cannot have been born in 1923). It seems implausible she could have passed for twenty-two years old if she was much younger than eighteen in 1942, which would put her birth year as 1924 and her age as seventeen in 1941. This seems young to become engaged—which she did shortly before the pogrom and deportation (1941)—in light of her family's educated background, so the birthyear of 1920 appears most likely. Regarding the missing birth record, she may have been born in Czernowitz, her mother's hometown, 40 km and a direct train ride away, though she is also not recorded in these birth books. She may have been born in a nearby town or village, as her father appears to have moved several times due to employment during this period (Bruno's birth place is recorded as Zamostia, a village less than 10 km from Waschkoutz). Or, the parents may have simply neglected to register her birth with the authorities for a variety of reasons. Jewish Birth Records for Waschkoutz am Cheremosch 1918-1928, record group 1245, series 1, files 932, Chernivtsi State Archive, Ukraine.

¹⁴ Paul Celan and Gustav Chomed, »*Ich brauche Deine Briefe*«, eds. Barbara Wiedemann and Jürgen Köchel (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag: 2010).

¹⁵ The fact that Lebzelter's brother and fiancé studied in Prague can probably be attributed to the antisemitic *numerus clausus* laws put in place in interwar Romania rather than to an affinity for intellectual centers of the former empire, though Prague may have been high on their list as a result of its German-speaking tradition and common imperial cultural history. Many Bukovina Jews who came of age in late interwar Romania were forced to seek places of study outside of Romania.

¹⁶ Except for English, the other languages were not unusual for the educated Jewish class of Bukovina. Regarding English, see Lebzelter's Diary, "2 July 1948," on cancelling her English lessons. It seems she writes to her relatives in the USA in English (her mother notably does not write the letters, even when Lebzelter is away on *hachsharah*) and she speaks English with visiting emissaries

appreciation for theater and the arts, a distinct distaste for manual labor and was deeply ashamed of depending on charity. In her writings, she gives no indication that Zionism ever played a noticeable part in her family's life prior to the war.¹⁷ In the summer of 1941 after the Barbarossa operation began, the Romanian army invaded northern Bukovina, which had been occupied by the Soviet Union the previous year. During the first few weeks of July 1941, pogroms were carried out in countless villages in the region, perpetrators included Romanian soldiers, Ukrainian or Romanian peasants, as well as a German Einsatz troop. In Lebzelter's home of Waschkoutz the Jews were pulled from their houses and gathered at the gendarmerie. A group of prominent men was selected for execution, marched to a low hillside outside the town and shot. Among these were Lebzelter's father and brother, Josef and Bruno; her fiancé was similarly murdered, in a different location.¹⁸ Lebzelter and her mother, Anna, were later deported to Transnistria, where they spent three years in the ghetto of Moghilev-Podolsky.

during a communist youth festival. She is responsible for the American, British, and Soviet films at her cinema job, it appears this responsibility is linked to understanding the language, see Lebzelter's Diary, "28 February 1948" and "1 April 1948." She also seeks employment at the Russian-Romanian publishing house, Cartea Rusă, noting "that would be something for me," Lebzelter's Diary, "19 September 1949." Even if German was the preferred language in the home, Yiddish was commonly understood by Jewish Bukovinas and the family was most likely one generation, if that, from speaking Yiddish at home. She only references the language once explicitly, in a sentimental remark about a radio broadcast of Yiddish songs in the 1950s. In multilingual Bukovina and especially in the villages and towns of the countryside where she grew up, at least a general understanding of Ukrainian was commonplace.

¹⁷ In fact, the social circle of her first cousin, Gustav Chomed, (b. 1920, thus the same age), which included Paul Celan, explicitly refused to associate with Zionist youth movements, supporting instead the Soviet cause. Gustav Chomed left Czernowitz for the Soviet Union in summer of 1941 when the Red Army retreated. Edith Silbermann, *Czernowitz – Stadt der Dichter. Geschichte einer jüdischen Familie aus der Bukowina (1900-1948)*, ed. Amy-Diana Colin (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2015), 351; for details on the non-Zionist left-leaning activities of this youth circle, see Silbermann, *Czernowitz*, 93-98.

¹⁸ Lebzelter describes these events in two letters to her murdered brother and fiancé, respectively: "Mein Bruder" and "Lieber Walter," 1955, Blanca Lebzelter Collection, AR 25437, box 1, folder 1, Leo Baeck Institute, New York City. Lebzelter does not specify who carried out the executions, though she does state that a Romanian major arrived and halted the bloodshed ("Lieber Walter"). Her words are corroborated in a slender volume published in 1945, which contains what seem to be (uncited) personal testimonies: Marius Mircu, *Pogromurile din Bucovina și Dorohoi* (Bucharest: Editura Glob, 1945), 49. Lebzelter's father and brother are mentioned by name therein. Today a rudimentarily hand-carved stone in Yiddish, dated 1946, still stands in a ring of trees in a

Upon their release in 1944 they returned initially to Czernowitz. Regarding this homecoming Lebzelter wrote “the hour arrived where we saw appear in the distance the towers of the Czernowitz archbishop’s residence. I gazed, spellbound, upon these towers and listened inside for an echo of joy. But there was nothing of the kind. I sensed only my raw, sore heart and worries about the future.”¹⁹ She went on to explain the motives for their subsequent departure from Czernowitz: “we felt poorly in the old home, upon the ruins of our lives, plagued day and night by the most horrid memories and amongst those who were not innocent in our tragedy.” The two women left, making their way eventually to the Black Sea port town of Constanța. Here the diaries begin, in January of 1948 and until 1961, when she finally received her longed-for exit visa, Lebzelter recorded more than 800 entries, detailing the humiliations and minor triumphs of daily life under the communist regime, her mother’s eventual death from tuberculosis in 1952, and always a penetrating grief.

When Lebzelter left in 1961, she passed the diaries to her cousin, Babette Chomed (Gustav’s sister) who had settled after the war in the small southern Transylvanian town of Mediaș. The last recorded words are

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?²⁰

This paper focuses on an early chapter of Lebzelter’s postwar life, one which lasted little more than a year: her membership in a Zionist organization and participation in a hachsharah. In the context of the diaries’ span this “Zionist period” is brief, yet the year was one of tumult and fevered emotion as she sought to overcome various fears and hesitations, deriving from the traumatic experiences of the Holocaust and nervous anticipation, believing herself to be on the eve of “beginning anew.”

small wood outside of Waschkoutz, the site of the executions, with the names of the murdered men, including Josef and Bruno Lebzelter.

¹⁹ Blanca Lebzelter, “Mein Bruder,” April 1955, Blanka Lebzelter Collection, LBI Archives.

²⁰ Lebzelter’s Diary, “26 April 1961.”

The Post-War Stage

The Jewish population in post-war 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. Numbering between 350,000-400,000, this group was fundamentally diverse, not only in their pre-war background, linguistic, and cultural affiliations, but also, and of great significance, their war-time fate.²¹

Some of those from northern Transylvania, the few survivors of Auschwitz and other Nazi camps, returned to their Transylvanian homes. Not infrequently, they returned initially, perhaps to seek for family and friends, but then moved elsewhere. Many remained, at least for a time, within the country.²² 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 traumatized certain areas more than others.²³ 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,

²¹ From 1946-1948 population estimates range between 372,000-428,000 according to various sources in Table 1, Hildrun Glass, *Minderheit zwischen zwei Diktaturen: Zur Geschichte der Juden in Rumänien 1944-1949* (München: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2002), 311. A 1949 Securitate report gives the population as 350,000. Fond documentar Constanța, CNSAS D002873, vol. 4, Consiliul Național pentru Studierea Arhivelor Securității, Bucharest, Romania.

²² See “Registers I and II: Jews from Sighet who returned from work detachments and deportation camps,” Sighetu Marmăției Jewish Community Collection, Box R1, Archives of the Sighetu Marmăției Jewish Community, Sighetu Marmăției, Romania. Within a relatively short period, many returned deportees moved away from Sighet, but stayed within Romania (most eventually did emigrate).

²³ Particularly brutal killings took place in Bucharest and Iași. On Iași see Radu Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania: The Destruction of the Jews and Gypsies under the Antonescu Regime, 1940-1944* (Chicago: Ivan Dee, 2002), 63-90 and on Bucharest, *Ibid.*, 57-60.

drawn to the Black Sea port where there was always the hope—and sometimes the genuine possibility—that a ship would leave for Palestine.

The years immediately after the war were chaotic and little has been written about the reestablishment of the Jewish community.²⁴ 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.²⁵ The leadership was taxed primarily with attempting to provide welfare and relief to the destitute and broken survivors of Transnistria and the German camps. 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 from within the local community as well as aid from international organizations, such as the Joint Distribution Committee.²⁶

Despite assistance, most survivors were, as a group, in shambles. Thousands were displaced, suffering from illness, malnourishment, grief, dispossession, trauma, and dire poverty.²⁷ For many, if not most of the young, one idea consumed their thoughts—to leave Romania and begin anew elsewhere. Those with the physical,

²⁴ A notable exception is Glass, *Minderheit zwischen zwei Diktaturen*. The volume deals primarily with the elites and leadership of the community. See also 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*, eds. Yisrael Gutman and Avital Saf (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1990), 143-167. Ancel provides a useful synthesis of this precarious period, while also focusing primarily on community leadership.

²⁵ Alexandre Safran, *Resisting the Storm: Memoirs, Romania 1940-1947* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1987), especially chapter 10 "Conflicts and Rivalries," 189-206.

²⁶ Many post-war community archives contain lists of those who received welfare and notes on whether aid was provided by outside organizations. See, for example, "Welfare lists. 1946," Sighetu Marmăției Jewish Community Collection, Box R2, Archives of the Sighetu Marmăției Jewish Community; Sighetu Marmăției, Romania or "Chart of individuals receiving assistance (1946)," Mediaș Jewish Community Collection, box SA44, folder F1, Archives of the Mediaș Jewish Community, Mediaș, Romania. Lebzelter explicitly mentions applying for medical assistance for her mother through the Joint, Lebzelter's Diary, "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.

²⁷ See 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* (Jerusalem: Berghahn Books and Yad Vashem, 2005), 231-256.

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.²⁸ Young and unattached young women also left, if they found the means.²⁹ 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 Lebzelter and her mother, as impoverished and physically frail female survivors lacking male protectors, must be counted. Lebzelter was, moreover, tasked with the responsibility of caring for her ill mother, a grave concern of which she was constantly aware.

Zionist Organizations in Romania

Providing a desperate outlet for the postwar energies, frustrations, and aspirations of the youth and young people were numerous Zionist organizations active in

²⁸ In fact, motives for leaving prior to the 1948 communist assumption of power deserve more research. The description of Bucharest from 1945-1947 in Solomon Petre's memoir *Paul Celan: The Romanian Dimension*, trans. Emanuela Tegli (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2019) records an artistically, intellectually, and socially vibrant setting for young Jews in Bucharest, complicating the (standard) narrative of Jews desperate to get out. Lebzelter notes in 1948 that she was only just beginning to mull emigration, perhaps the initial years after the war were experienced with a sense of euphoria and hope by some and skepticism arrived later. In his oral history interview Norbert Nadler (1922-2017), a survivor of the same ghetto as Lebzelter, suggests that immediately after the war there was a collective feeling of guilt amongst the Romanians and that it took "three to four years [for them] to realize that they are still the masters [...] and then [to] start being antisemit[ic]." Norbert Nadler, HVT 0536, Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

²⁹ 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 16 or 17 (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. Likewise, Ruth Glasberg-Gold, an orphan, left in 1946 with a group of other young people, see Glasberg-Gold, *Ruth's Journey*, 161.

every part of the country. Very little has been written about the activities and operations of Zionist organizations in Romania, at any point in time.³⁰ During the interwar period activity and participation differed from region to region 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.³¹ Memoirs by Bukovina Jews often recall involvement in

³⁰ 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 (New York: 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 organizations in the post-war 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 (Bucharest: 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 (Bucharest: C.S.I.E.R., 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 zwischen zwei Diktaturen*, 34-42. She also comments on the "multitude" of the groups and their many splinterings, noting "especially in the area of youth work, new [organizations] 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 organizations in which Lebzelter took part, in a list of groups (Busselia was the youth arm of Gordonia), Glass, *Minderheit zwischen zwei Diktaturen*, 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 (Tel Aviv: 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* (Rehovot: Balaban Publishers, 2001). Regarding Romanian hachsharot specifically, nothing extensive has been written to my knowledge. My own research was hampered by the closure of archives and travel restrictions due to the 2020-2021 covid pandemic; the archival sources used here were accessed prior to the pandemic and unfortunately at this time it was not possible to augment the material with new sources (little to nothing of Romanian archival material is digitized). Other sources on the development of Zionist thought and ideology in Romania in general exist, but are not cited here for lack of space and relevance to the paper's specific context.

³¹ For a summary of these differences, see Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews in East Central Europe between the Wars* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1983), 192-194. He describes the situation as "highly fragmented" (193). Unfortunately, there are no detailed studies on the number of and participation in Zionist organizations during the interwar period. Glass summarizes the

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.³² 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.³³ 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 socializing rather than in any pragmatic preparations: “In our “ken” [literally “nest”] the good dancers were more appreciated than those who had mastered Hebrew grammar,”³⁴ he recalled.

interwar situation in two sentences, providing further sources on the movements in individual regions. Glass, *Minderheit zwischen zwei Diktaturen*, 34.

³² The two-volume tome, *Geschichte der Juden in der Bukowina* contains detailed information on the establishment, members, leaders, and activities of Zionist organizations 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. Gaëlle Fisher, *Resettlers and Survivors: Bukovina and The Politics of Belonging in West Germany and Israel, 1945-1989* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2020), 141; Dr. Leon Arie Schmelzer, “Geschichte des Zionismus in der Bukowina,” in *Geschichte der Juden in der Bukowina*, ed. Gold, 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* (Wien: Böhlau Verlag, 1995). She links the left-wing political atmosphere amongst craftsmen specifically to Yiddish: “For me, Czernowitz means the symbiosis of Yiddishism and revolutionary thinking,” (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 Israel Chalfen, *Paul Celan. Eine Biographie seiner Jugend* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1979), 60-64. References in memoirs or testimonies to participation in Zionist youth groups are too great to list, see for example Gaby Coldewey et al., eds., *Zwischen Pruth und Jordan: Lebenserinnerungen Czernowitzer Juden* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2003).

³³ On Bessarabia and Bukovina as Zionist centers in relation to the rest of Romania, see Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe*, 193.

³⁴ Zvi Yavetz, *Erinnerungen an Czernowitz: Wo Menschen und Büchter lebten* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2008), 123. For more on Zionist organizations specifically, see also 70-73, 101-102 and 121-123.

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.³⁵ 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."³⁶ 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 1938.³⁷

This situation of relative ambivalence towards Zionism changed dramatically after the war, as the Jewish population began to mobilize to leave en masse, and the key to departure was often believed to be held by Zionist organizations. In any case, the organizations asserted or encouraged such belief. Where pre-war 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. Aliyah seemed a reasonable bet for "starting a new life" as Lebzelter 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.³⁸

Lebzelter herself writes in 1948 of joining a youth organization with departure in mind, emigrating to Palestine is framed as a novel idea, rather than one long harbored: "Since for a few weeks now I've been mulling over the idea of going to Palestine, I joined one of the local Zionist organizations last month," she writes.³⁹

³⁵ 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*, ed. Gold, 145-152. The first hachsharah was established in 1924.

³⁶ Yavetz, *Erinnerungen an Czernowitz*, 176.

³⁷ Ibid., 48-74.

³⁸ Lebzelter's Diary, "1 August 1948."

³⁹ Ibid., "28 January 1948."

Her ambivalence, whether on ideological grounds or other, is explicit: “I joined this movement because I have nothing to lose and not out of conviction. I wish my heart could be in it, but unfortunately this is not the case.”⁴⁰ The participation of many may have been similarly motivated, in any case one contemporary report on the situation in Romania noted that the Transnistrian survivors wanted not to go to Palestine per se but simply to get out of Romania.⁴¹ The Zionist organizations, especially 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 hachsharah centers across the country, placing trainees in both agricultural and factory work. It is not possible to reliably reconstruct membership numbers across the many organizations, 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.⁴² The number of youth participating in hachsharah work in early 1949 is given as 7,000 in one report.⁴³ 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 and factory workers and preparing for a new life. Two sources give us insight into the operations and expanse of Romanian Zionist organizations during the late 1940s: documents created and gathered by the Securitate and a report on a 1947 annual conference of the Gordonia and Busselia (youth arm of Gordonia) organizations.

⁴⁰ Ibid., “7 February 1948.”

⁴¹ According to 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.

⁴² Glass, *Minderheit zwischen zwei Diktaturen*, 39 and 42.

⁴³ Ibid., 42. Besides Glass’ pages on Zionist organizations in general during this period there are no studies on these Romanian Zionist youth movements in the postwar years.

“The Jewish Problem”

The whirlwind of Zionist activity interested the Securitate greatly. The prevalent attitude of the Romanian state, despite any communist ideals, was to view the Jewish population as an inherently foreign element.⁴⁴ The Securitate files for the county of Constanța, where Lebzelter was living, contain over 1,500 pages on the Jewish community, most of which relate to Zionist activity and stem primarily from the years 1945-1949. Often labelled “The Jewish problem” or “the Zionist problem” these files contain a wide variety of material, from internal Securitate reports, some made in the mid-1950s, significantly after the heyday of Zionist activity, to hundreds of documents created by the organizations themselves and apparently seized—these include registration forms, minutes of meetings, and internal correspondence between organizations or branches.

The multitude of organizations operating apparently baffled secret police agents, as attested to by numerous hand-drawn charts, almost always with mark-outs and re-writes.

⁴⁴ For a brief overview of Jews as the “other,” see Lucian Boia, *History and Myth in Romanian Consciousness* (Budapest: Central Europea University Press, 2001), 170-174. For a longer read, see Andrei Oișteanu, *Inventing the Jew: Antisemitic Stereotypes in Romanian and Other Central East-European Cultures* (Lincoln, WI: University of Nebraska Press, 2009).

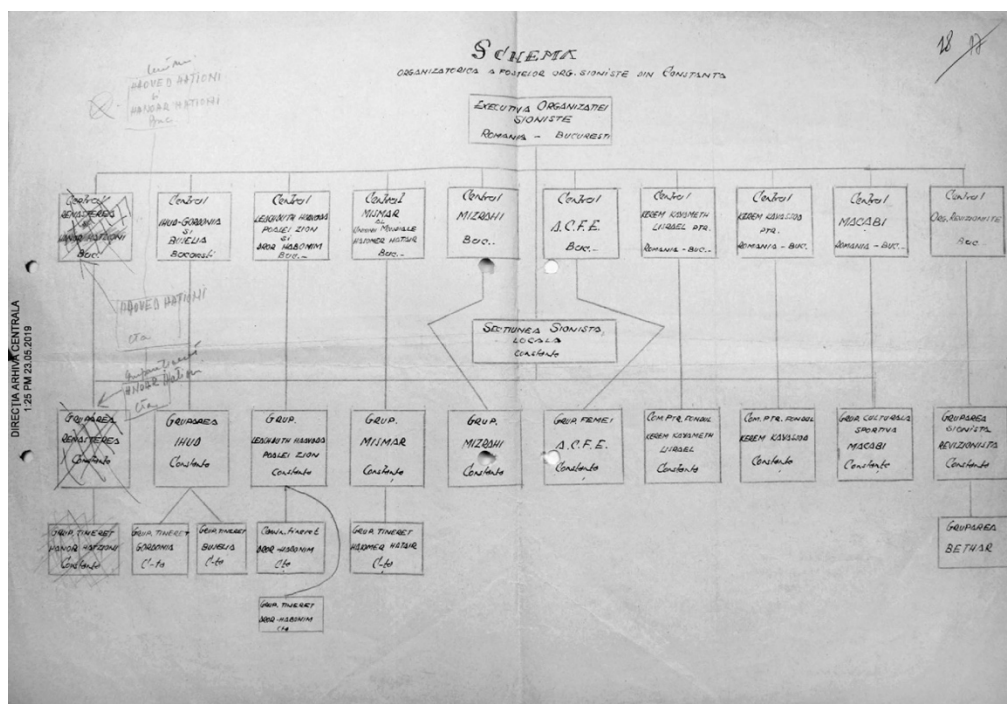


Fig. 2. Organization of former Zionist organizations in Constanta." Source: "Probleme Sioniste: Scheme și Mat. Documentar," p. 21 (no date, 1950s), Fond documentar Constanța, CNSAS Doo2894, vol. 1, CNSAS, Bucharest

One item, a more concise Securitate report from 1949 is helpful for trying to understand some of the internal administration, though not everything in the report can be taken at face value. The report, entitled "The Jewish Problem" and stamped "top secret," is fifteen pages long and contains various statistics on the Jewish population (regional breakdowns, employment, professions) and an overview of the Zionist organizations and their operation.⁴⁵ It is clear the informant(s) or author(s) were privy to certain concrete facts and information, but other statements conflict significantly with alternate sources or emphasize a degree of suspect secrecy unlikely at the time.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ "Problema Evreeasca," 1949; Fond documentar Constanța, CNSAS Doo2873, vol. 4, Consiliul Național pentru Studierea Arhivelor Securității, Bucharest, Romania.

⁴⁶ For example, the 1949 report states that the largest Zionist organization, Ihud, counts 25,000 members (p. 3). Glass suggests that total Zionist membership totaled as much as 200,000 in 1949. It is difficult to say which source is (closer to being) correct. The report also suggests there are essentially no differences in what members of the organizations, acknowledged to range from far-left to far-right politically, are taught (p. 3) and asserts that all leaders take code names (not corroborated in other sources). Though certain facets of the Romanian Zionist movement

This report also lists Zionist organization branches—fifty in all—and hachsharot locations (nine). From other sources (see below), not least Lebzelter’s own diary, we know this list of organization branches and hachsharot locations is far from complete. Still, mapping these locations provides a visual representation of the far-reaching spread of organizational activities.

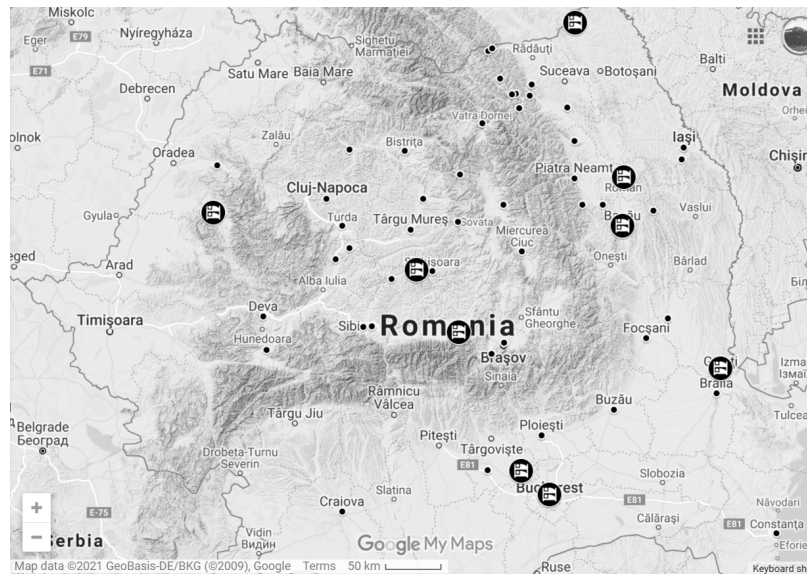


Fig. 3. Map of Zionist branches and hachsharot locations according to 1949 Securitate report. A dot (●) represents a branch location, a bunkbed icon, a hachsharah. “Problema Evreeasca,” 1949, Fond documentar Constanța, CNSAS Doo2873, vol. 4, CNSAS, Bucharest. Map by Julie Dawson ©2021 GeoBasis-DE/BKG (©2009)

The 1947 Conference Report

The 1947 report by the Gordonia and Busselia organization provides an alternative view of the activities, focusing as it does on one of these organizations or, more properly, two sister organizations for youth.

involved espionage, it was hardly a secretive undertaking for the many thousands of members who met frequently in public and community spaces. “Problema Evreeasca,” 1949, Fond documentar Constanța, CNSAS Doo2873, vol. 4, Consiliul Național pentru Studierea Arhivelor Securității, Bucharest, Romania.



Fig. 4. Gordonia, Macabi Ha-zair, Busselia of Romania: The Proceedings of the Third Convention in the Year 5707 [גורדוניה, מכבי הצעיר, בוסליה ברומניה], National Library of Israel (Jerusalem).

The booklet, held by the National Library of Israel, is a 152-page report detailing the activities of the organizations and reprinting select speeches and lectures from the conference.⁴⁷ Though the cover is in Hebrew, the entire contents of the booklet are in Romanian and provide unparalleled insight into the activities and

⁴⁷ *Gordonia, Macabi Ha-zair, Busselia of Romania: The Proceedings of the Third Convention in the Year 5707* [גורדוניה, מכבי הצעיר, בוסליה ברומניה], 1947 (n.p., s.l.). Held by the National Library of Israel.

ideologies of the two organizations in the late 1940s. It is the only source of such comprehensive nature I have found thus far.

The contents include reprinted speeches from the three-day conference, historical overviews of the movements, and of notable interest for reconstructing the Romanian situation, reports on the history and location of individual Gordonia and Busselia branches and hachsharot locations.

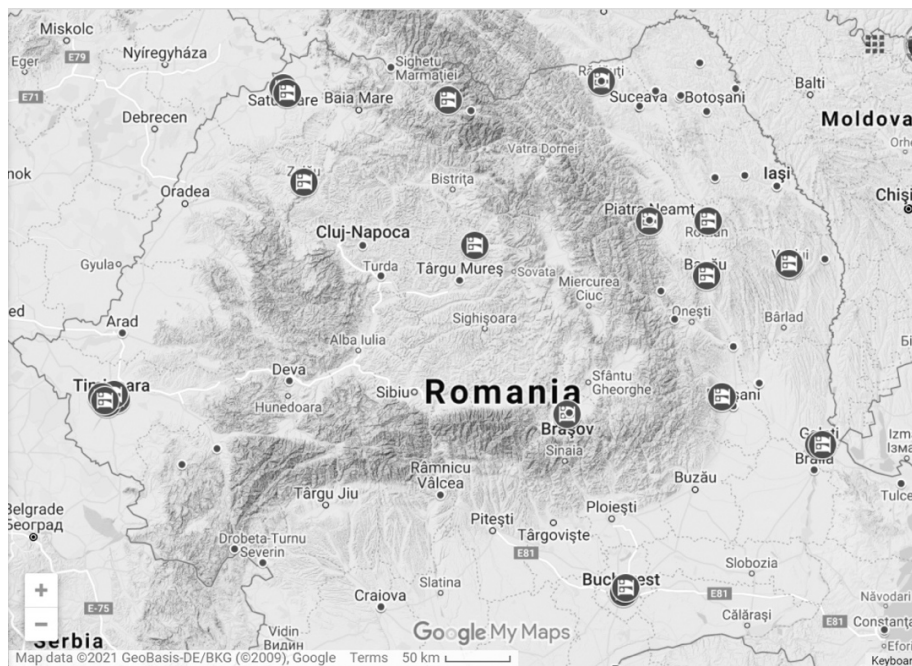



Fig. 5. Map of Busselia and Gordonia branches and hachsharot locations according to 1947 report. A dot (•) represents a branch location, a bunkbed , a hachsharah. Map by Julie Dawson, created using Google Maps, Map data ©2021 GeoBasis-DE/BKG (©2009).

A total of fifty-four branches and twenty-three hachsharot are listed, most of which do not overlap with the sites provided in the Securitate report.⁴⁸ The booklet also helps to distinguish the rapid expansion of the organization: at the time of publication, sometime after April 1947, there is not a branch in Constanța,

⁴⁸ I include in this number of hachsharot, the three sites mentioned by Lebzelter in her diary. These are not listed in the Gordonia/Busselia booklet, indicating they opened sometime after spring 1947. Indeed, the remarks on each location show that it was not uncommon for a location to operate, shut down (for a variety of reasons), only to open again or even relocate, with the same members, elsewhere. Despite these irregularities, the site lists provide a useful snapshot of this particular moment.

though one is planned. Lebzelter joins the Constanța branch in early 1948. Presumably additional branches opened in other cities and towns around the country in the course of 1948. Similarly, from the diary we know that Lebzelter's hachsharah was newly established and she writes of two others, one of which is not listed in the booklet. The process of establishing hachsharot must have continued apace throughout 1948: the locations cited here are for only one organization of many. From this we can conclude that indeed, the 1949 Securitate report citing only nine hachsharot countrywide, none of which overlap with the Busselia hachsharot, was in fact severely uninformed.

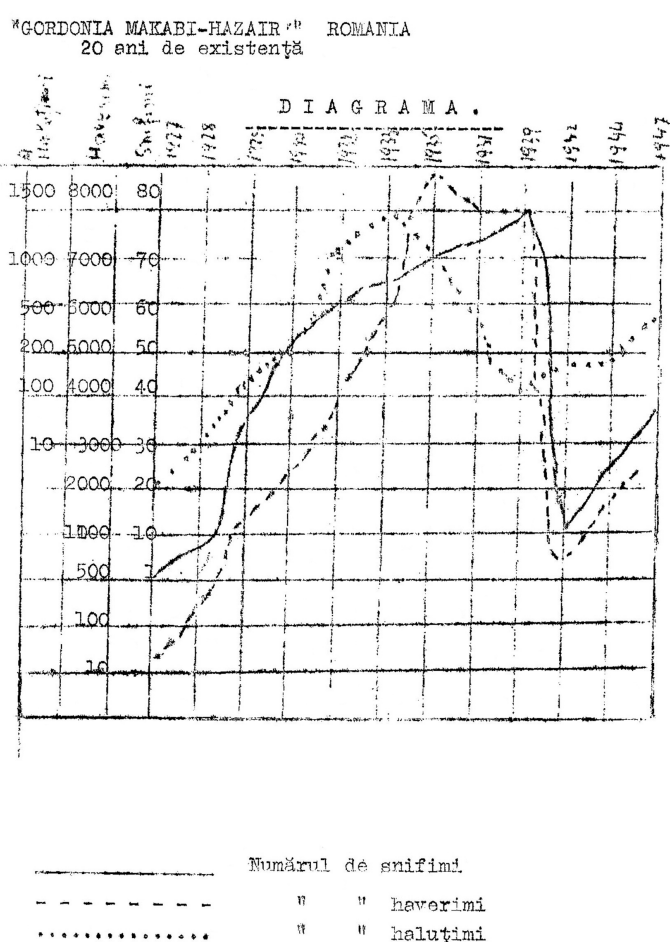


Fig. 6. Hand-drawn chart of Gordonia branches (*snifimi*), membership (*haverimi*), and pioneers (*haluțimi*). Gordonia, Macabi Ha-zair, Busselia of Romania: The Proceedings of the Third Convention in the Year 5707, National Library of Israel (Jerusalem).

Participation in *Hachsharot* in Romania: Lebzelter's Experience

Hachsharot in Germany and Italy were filled by displaced persons: 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, 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.⁴⁹ 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 hachsharah or kibbutz offered to survivors. The environment “could provide a sort of replacement family while offering its members shelter, security, and education.”⁵⁰

Such a situation was often a far cry from the Romanian setting, where the social and political landscape was drastically different. Despite the poverty, most of the Jewish population 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 hachsharah 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 strangers in a communal lifestyle with little privacy—a lifestyle partially reminiscent, for those who had survived Transnistria, of the war. Without a doubt, 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 by joining a Zionist organization and participating in a hachsharah, she could achieve independence and cement a supportive social-structure, all while facilitating her departure from Romania.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Marzano, “Relief and Rehabilitation of Jewish DPs after the Shoah,” 320.

⁵⁰ Patt, *Finding Home and Homeland*, 89.

⁵¹ Glasberg-Gold, *Ruth's Journey*, 157.

For Glasberg-Gold, participation came as a relief, a welcome escape from unpleasant relatives. For Lebzelter, however, participation meant unwilling separation from her mother, the sole survivor of her immediate family. Her mother was moreover ill, participation therefore meant consciously putting her mother's well-being in danger. And participation was, furthermore, not offered as a choice for those ideologically attracted. Instead, it was mandated as obligatory to be considered for aliyah. From her words, Lebzelter clearly 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 imperiled. She was cognizant of her complex circumstances and felt that they differed from those of other members, not all of whom had suffered deportation, illness, and the pressures of caring alone for an ill parent. She believed her situation merited special consideration and exemption.

In September 1948, the same day on which she wrote of nursing her mother who had lain two weeks in bed, she noted "Today I wrote a letter to the central branch and asked whether in my case hachsharah is absolutely necessary or whether an exception can be made."⁵² She had written once before asking similarly, and received a "very unfriendly answer, a preachy sermon, the beloved slogan being that the organization is not an emigration office and without hachsharah aliyah is impossible."⁵³ Her second inquiry elicited the same response: "without hachsharah, there is no aliyah."⁵⁴ The cold answer from the head office left her in a familiar state—one of powerlessness vis-à-vis an authority claiming influence over her fate. And yet, the organizations did not hold the power to grant aliyah, as would become distressingly clear.

Daily Life on the Piatra Neamț *Hachsharah*

Despite her great unwillingness and concerns about leaving her mother alone, after twice turning down spots, Lebzelter finally accepted a hachsharah position offered in October 1948, believing herself to have no other choice if she desired to emigrate.

⁵² Lebzelter's Diary, "4 September 1948."

⁵³ Ibid., "13 August 1948."

⁵⁴ Ibid., "12 September 1948."

On Oct. 4th she wrote, “Today the hachsharah assignments came—to Piatra Neamț, in a new group. A group of 12 *haverim* will go, already this Wednesday evening or early Thursday.”⁵⁵ Two days later, Wednesday evening she recorded:

It is 6:30 in the evening. My things are piled on my bed. I need to pack them in the suitcase now. My heart is very heavy. I am leaving mother alone. In the past seven years, since she and I were left alone, this is the first time that I have left her. Tomorrow, god willing, we depart at 6:30 in the morning.⁵⁶

She spent the next three months in Piatra Neamț, recording twenty entries describing her daily work, social interactions, worries about her mother and her own precarious health, and increasingly depressed spirits. Her group was the vanguard of a new hachsharah, 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 wood factory or sawmill. The factory was a two kilometer 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. Evenings were occupied with meetings and they went to sleep after midnight. I will cite one entry in full, written about two weeks after her arrival:

A few words about our group. At the moment we are thirty-something *haverim*. Most are nice, young people. We have six rooms and a kitchen. I have already described my work, also noted that it is difficult and very strenuous for me. The thick dust and tremendous roar of the machines, the long way there, getting up early and going to bed late, all this is having a disastrous effect on me. At least, I have that feeling. Thank god there is food. I eat more than what I ate at home. I have already turned in the papers and photographs and they have been sent to Bucharest. They say if

⁵⁵ Ibid., “4 October 1948.”

⁵⁶ Ibid., “6 October 1948.”

there is a big aliyah, then we will all go, if a little one, then we won't. There are *halutzim* here who have already been on hachsharah for a year. I haven't yet written a word about how I feel here. Unfortunately, I cannot say I feel good as that would be a lie. It is collective life here. I am friendly with all the haverim, especially with the more intelligent ones. But I have no real friend and no connection at all. I suffer from this lack of connection. Sometimes I feel very dejected about it. More than once I have cried because of it. And yet, despite this 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.⁵⁷

The entry touches on the quintessential features of her experience: her struggles with her work tasks, the concrete link between hachsharah 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 other camps, but it does seem that Lebzelter, as opposed to the experience of hachsharah participants farther west, did not perceive in the other members a shared war-time experience. Glasberg-Gold also notes 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.”⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Ibid., “25 October 1948.”

⁵⁸ 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 Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

Unlike Glasberg-Gold, Lebzelter's social isolation grew and climaxed on the evening described at the start of this paper, when two members refused to make room for her at the Sabbath table. The incident acted as a trauma trigger, alone in her room she was unable to cease weeping: "I wept without stopping for over two hours, it had seized me and did not let go."⁵⁹ Her breakdown drew the attention of the leadership who now at the latest perceived the gravity of Lebzelter's marginalized position within the group. Attempting to mitigate the situation, that night they made her a member of the cultural council, responsible for cultural life in the group, certainly an appropriate placement for a woman devoted to theater and literature. 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, that experience did seem to improve her confidence. Physically, however, she continued to weaken. After three months of hard labor she was ill, suffering from debilitating migraines daily. The local doctor ordered for her to be removed from factory labor.

In mid-January the Piatra Neamț hachsharah groups were suddenly shut down by the local police, all participants were immediately sent home with assurances of either an imminent aliyah or placement in a different hachsharah. Neither took place. On March 1st 1949, back in Constanța, Lebzelter wrote:

My situation becomes more and more unbearable. I went on hachsharah in order to get to *Eretz* and now neither am I on hachsharah nor am I going to *Eretz*. Time is passing, my strength and my patience wane and my nervousness increases. This way or that, by hook or by crook, if only this situation would end. But no end is in sight and I cannot continue to torture myself so much. Often I am gripped by the deepest despair, I cannot begin anything here and if I go, then it must be now, because the clock has already struck midnight. But there is still not a hint of departure.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Lebzelter's Diary, "7 November 1948."

⁶⁰ Ibid., "1 March 1949."

Conclusion

After the dissolution of her hachsharah group Lebzelter returned to Constanța to wait, initially fully expecting aliyah. As this hope evaporated her disillusion grew, she wrote less and less of any interaction with the Zionist organization or Jewish community in general, certainly she was no longer active as when promised “no aliyah without hachsharah.” When emigration was suddenly permitted in 1950 and she and her mother applied for visas, she made no mention of Zionist organization affiliation, support, or involvement in the procedure.

Inexplicably, Lebzelter’s emigration application was rejected, though the governmental regulations at that time specified that all applicants were to be permitted to leave. Hundreds of thousands of others departed over the next few years. The Securitate, ever paranoid, has reports on Zionist activity in Constanța from the mid-1950s, including lists of former leaders from various Zionist organizations: noted next to most of the names are the words “*plecat in Israel*,” left for Israel.

Lebzelter was not permitted to leave. Her diaries never again mention her hachsharah time or the organization, 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 hachsharah, rather than forming an anticipatory coda to her ruptured youth in Romania, composed an incongruous prelude to the next twelve years of unwilling confinement within the communist state.

The aim of this introductory examination of one individual’s experience within the Romanian hachsharot system is not to criticize the actions or messages of the Zionist organizations active at that time who were working within the framework of possibility at a difficult historical moment. Rather I wish to highlight how the drastically different context in which hachsharot and Zionist organizations operated in Romania as compared to central Europe resulted in divergent experiences for participants. These insights should offer space for exploring alternative or muffled narratives, those which might run counter to a general acknowledgement of early postwar European Zionist enterprises as exclusive spaces of renewal, rehabilitation, or nurturing cradles of Zionist ideology; they

should complicate, diversify, and enrich the historical narrative and our understanding of the postwar period.

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Keywords: Romania, Diaries, Trauma, Bukovina, Hachsharot

How to quote this article:

Julie Dawson, "As to my emotional anguish, there are days when I feel endlessly miserable": *Hachsharot* in Early Postwar 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. Journal of the Fondazione CDEC* 21, no. 1 (2022), DOI: 10.48248/issn.2037-741X/13306