

Youth in Action 1.2 project “A Jewish Inheritance Against Intolerance”



Advanced Planning Visit

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## Mihail Sebastian's Works



*Cultural Association Europea - 2008*

Mihail Sebastian (born Iosif Hechter; October 18, 1907—May 29, 1945) was a Romanian playwright, essayist, journalist and novelist. He was born to a Jewish family in Brăila. After finishing his secondary studies, Sebastian went on to study law in Bucharest, but was soon attracted to the literary life and the exciting ideas of the new generation of Romanian intellectuals, as epitomized by the literary group Criterion which included such luminaries as Emil Cioran, Mircea Eliade and Nae Ionescu. Sebastian published several novels, including *Accidentul* ("The Accident") and *Orașul cu salcâmi* ("The Acacia Tree City"), heavily influenced by French novelists such as Marcel Proust and Jules Renard.

Although initially an apolitical movement, Criterion came under the increasing influence of Nae Ionescu's own brand of philosophy, called Trairism, which mixed jingoistic nationalism, existentialism and Christian mysticism, as well as that of the fascist paramilitary organization known as the Iron Guard.

As a Jew, Sebastian came to be regarded as an outsider within the group, even by his friends. In 1934 he published another novel, *De două mii de ani...* ("It's been two thousand years..."), about what it meant to be a Jew in Romania, and asked Nae Ionescu, who at the time was still friendly with Sebastian, to write the preface. Ionescu agreed, generating uproar by inserting paragraphs both antisemitic and against the very nature of the book they introduced.

Sebastian "decided to take the only intelligent revenge" and publish the preface, which only heightened the controversy. Sebastian's decision to include the preface prompted criticism from the Jewish community (notable Jewish satirist Ludovic Halevy, for instance, referred to Sebastian as "Ionescu's lap dog"), as well as the far-right circles patronized by Ionescu and the Iron Guard. The anti-semitic daily newspaper *Sfarmă*



Piatră (literally "Breaking Rocks") denounced Sebastian as a Zionist agent and traitor, despite the fact that Sebastian vocally declared himself to be a proud Romanian with no interest in emigrating from his Romanian homeland.

In response to the criticism, Sebastian wrote *Cum am devenit huligan* ("How I Became a Hooligan"), an anthology of essays and articles depicting the manner in which *De două mii de ani...* was received by the Romanian public and the country's cultural establishment. In the book, he answered his critics by holding up a mirror to their prejudice, detailing and assailing the claims of both his right-wing and left-wing detractors. He addresses the rabid antisemitism of the former in a clear and unaffected manner, underlining its absurdity:

I was born in Romania, and I am Jewish. That makes me a Jew, and a Romanian. For me to go around and join conferences demanding that my identity as a Jewish Romanian be taken seriously would be as crazy as the Lime Trees on the island where I was born to form a conference demanding their rights to be Lime Trees. As for anyone who tells me that I'm not a Romanian, the answer is the same: go talk to the trees, and tell them they're not trees.

Yet for all the sharpness and clarity of his response, he could not help but feel betrayed and saddened by Ionescu's vicious preface:

What hurt me was not the idea that the preface would be made public - what hurt me was the idea that it had been written. Had I known it would have been destroyed immediately afterwards, it still would have hurt me had it been written...



Sebastian became known in Romanian literature mainly for his plays, such as Steaua fără nume ("The Star Without a Name"), Jocul de-a vacanța ("Holiday Games"), Ultima oră ("Breaking News").

### Diary of the fascist years

For 10 years, he kept a journal that was finally published in Bucharest in 1996 to “considerable debate” and in America under the title Journal, 1935-1944: The Fascist Years. It records the mounting persecution he endured and documents the disdain former friends began showing him in Romania's increasingly antisemitic socio-political landscape. A friend of Mircea Eliade, he was deeply disappointed when the latter supported the fascist and anti-Semitic Iron Guard. Despite this ominous tone, the diary also reveals Sebastian's unflagging sense of humor and self-irony. A fundamental testimony of anti-Semitism in Europe prior to, and during, the years of World War II, the "Journal" has been compared to those of Victor Klemperer or Anne Frank.

He was a great lover of classical music and often attended concerts. In his Journal, there are many references to various classical composers and reviews of radio broadcast concerts.

After being kicked out of his home due to the new antisemitic laws, Sebastian moved into a tenement slum where he continued his writing. On August 23, 1944, the Romanian Fascist government of Ion Antonescu was overthrown, and Romania joined the Allies



(see Romania during World War II). He died in a truck accident on May 29, 1945, just weeks after the Soviet Army occupied the country. Had he lived, he would have probably been imprisoned by the new Soviet-backed authorities, who viewed him as a reactionary element due to his links to the old regime.

## Legacy

In the 2000s, Sebastian's Journal gained a new audience in Western countries due to its lyrical, evocative style and the brutal honesty of its accounts. In 2004, American playwright David Auburn wrote a one-man play based on Sebastian's diary titled, *The Journals of Mihail Sebastian*. It debuted the same year in New York City and starred Stephen Kunken in the role of Mihail Sebastian.

Sebastian's niece, Michelle Hechter, a French writer and translator, published in 2000 an autobiographical work titled *M. et M.* dealing extensively with her uncle's life and writings.

In 2006, Mihail Sebastian was posthumously awarded the Geschwister-Scholl-Preis for *Voller Entsetzen, aber nicht verzweifelt*.

## Bibliography

### Novels

- \* **Femei (1933) / Women**
- \* **De două mii de ani (1934) / It's been two thousand years...**
- \* **Oraşul cu salcâmi (1935) / The Acacia Tree City**
- \* **Accidentul (1940) / The Accident**



## Theatre

- \* **Jocul de-a vacanța(1938) / Holiday Games**
- \* **Steaua fără nume (1944) / Star Without a Name**
- \* **Ultima oră (1945) / Breaking News / Stop News**
- \* **Insula (1947) / The Island**

## Other

- \* **Fragmente dintr-un carnet găsit (1932) / Fragments from a Found Notebook**
- \* **Cum am devenit huligan (1935) / How I Became a Hooligan**
- \* **Corespondența lui Marcel Proust (1939) / The Correspondence of Marcel Proust**
- \* **Eseuri, cronici, memorial (1972) / Essays, chronicles, memorial**
- \* **Journal, 1935-1944 / published in America as Journal 1935-1944: The Fascist Years (trans. Patrick Camiller. Ivan R. Dee, Publisher, 2000) and in Britain as Journal:1935-1944 (London: Pimlico, 2003)**



## References

1. ^ Sebastian, Mihail. Cum am devenit huligan
2. ^ Sebastian, Mihail. Cum am devenit huligan
3. ^ Sebastian, Mihail. Cum am devenit huligan
4. ^ Radu Ioanid, director of the Archival Program Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, noted that the Romanian publication of the diary “caused considerable debate... which showed once again that anti-Semitism remains a fundamental element.” Ioanid, Radu, ‘Introduction’ to Mihail Sebastian’s Journal 1935-1944, London: Pimlico, 2003, xix.
5. ^ Philip Roth wrote that the work "deserves to be on the same shelf as Anne Frank's Diary and to find as huge a readership." Quoted from his review on the cover of the British edition.



# Mihail Sebastian

By Loredana Dima

Almost a decade ago, a book written in the 1930's and 40's by a Romanian Jewish writer led to a vivid polemic that has not faded yet. The contested book is *Journal. 1935-1944* and its author is Mihail Sebastian (Iosef Hechter, after his Jewish name). The nine notebooks of the diary were kept by the writer's brother, Benu , who agreed with their publication after many hesitations. In 2000 the *Journal* was also published in English, translated by Patrick Camiller and with an introduction signed by Radu Ioanid.

The *Journal* has been considered a mixture of diaries by most of its commentators and as such was divided into a few distinct journals (mainly a private diary, a writing one, a diary of war and anti-Semitism).

The entire book is in fact a testimony of a moral and intellectual consciousness and also of the troubled years before and during the Second World War, an authentic document of a period that continues to arouse contentious and adversarial debates. It is the attempt of a Jew who deeply assumes his Jewry to talk with no inhibitions about his condition as a minority. There are 600 pages of journal entries that chronicle the Romanian Holocaust and the Second World War.

Born in 1907 in a town on the Danube, Mihail Sebastian was constantly marked by his Jewish identity. Paradoxically, his characters never acknowledge this inner struggle of the author. Even the text of the diary is not an indictment of the inter-war period, but a credible and profound analysis of the progressive stages of humiliation and discrimination that Sebastian is obliged to pass. Keeping a diary is for the writer a way to survive and to prove to himself that he can move on. It is also an attempt of its author to hide from himself and from the others; he reveals himself in many of his daily notes as being tired, disgusted and resigned in front of a world that seems to lose its bench marks. Despite his busy life in a crowded

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Bucharest (as a lawyer and writer), he feels alone, in a space of solitude. His confessions become a desperate attempt to preserve his intimacy and the right to absolute difference from the others.

In a way Sebastian recreates the apology of loneliness that Descartes had done more than three centuries ago in a letter to his friend Jean-Louis Guez de Balzac, who was advised to find his peace and rest not in the country but in the middle of the city, in the crowd, in the noisy streets. It is the same kind of solitude that Sebastian looks for, the one that helps him find time for himself, time for writing, the one that helps him get rid of the bitter taste of losing friends and loves. During some explosive years, marked by a sharp escalation of anti-Semitic attitudes, an authentic and untroubled loneliness is all that Sebastian could hope for.

A reading of his works (especially his *Journal*) outside the inter-war political context is very difficult (if not impossible). So this is, very briefly, the political background of Sebastian's *Journal*.

The first part covered by his notes, 1935-1938, is marked by tough confrontations between the democratic forces and the dictatorial ones, in an extremely unstable European political context, where all states of Central and Southeast Europe had dictatorial or authoritarian regimes (Mussolini in Italy, Salazar in Portugal, Hitler in Germany and a bit later Franco in Spain). In Romania, King Carol II deposed his government and instituted a royal dictatorship on February 10, 1938, after dissolving all political parties and abolishing the Constitution.

As the international political situation continued to deteriorate with the signing of Molotov—Ribbentrop pact, through which the Soviet Union and the Third Reich divided the spheres of interest, and with the obligation of Romania to cede Bessarabia and northern Bukovina to the Soviet Union, then with the Vienna Awards of 1940 that gave Northern Transylvania to Hungary and eventually by ceding the southern of Dobrudja to Bulgaria, King Carol II, accused by the entire country and compromised, abdicated in favor of his son Michael who had only a decorative role, the country being governed in practice by the pro-German



regime of Ion Antonescu. Romania was proclaimed a National Legionary State, with a military and legionary majority in the government. In the first phase, Antonescu approached the Iron Guard, but the situation radically changed when the latter tried to monopolize the power. As the Iron Guard did not have the support of Germany, their rebellion on January 21, 1941 was crushed.

Sebastian describes in the notes of those days the way that the rebellion turned into a pogrom, the atmosphere of fear and insecurity in the streets, in the people's hearts.

Romania's entrance into the war in June 1941 against the Soviet Union led to the reoccupation of the lost territories with a huge human sacrifice and also with victims behind the front (like in the pogrom of Iasi).

In August 1944 Romania turned against Germany and joined the Red Army, while Antonescu was arrested. The separation of Romania from Germany happened after a long process, although Antonescu had been aware that the politics of Berlin had no chance any longer. It is sure that the act on August 23, 1944 led to the collapse of Germany half a year early, but unfortunately led to the entrance of Romania under the control of the Soviet Union, following the meeting of Churchill and Stalin. It is the moment when Romanian history radically changes again, but also the moment when Sebastian's *Journal* ends. The writer died in an unfortunate accident a few months later.

His *Journal* defines the plurality and complexity of its author's interests and preoccupations, who is also well-known as a journalist, translator, playwright and novelist, all stages of his formation as a writer and of the evolution of his modalities to express.

The journalist Mihail Sebastian was extremely prodigious, writing as a literary, music and theater critic for many of the inter-war publications, focused especially on the analysis of the European modern novel, always connected to the ideas and attitudes in the European literature and literary theory.



However, Sebastian became famous for his plays, revealing an apparently fragile world, with characters who find refuge in illusions. *Star Without a Name*, *Let's Play Vacation*, and *The Last Hour* are all marked by a note of interior tragism and refined irony.

As a novelist, Sebastian constantly emphasizes the authenticist principle of lucidity and sincerity. I enumerate the novels here in the chronological order of their publication, not the one of their writing: *Fragments of a Found Notebook*, *Women*, *For Two Thousand Years* (together with the essay *How I Became a Hooligan. Texts, facts, people*), *The Town with Acacia Trees*, *The Accident*. Actually, not all of them are novels in the traditional sense of the word, since neither the theme nor the compositional structure belong to the traditional novel. They are works dedicated to confession, to the fiction of confession.

If Sebastian's work could be defined with just one word, undoubtedly that word should be "diversity". Everything he wrote was the answer of a vocation, a literary form widely opened toward public life and inner life as well. Sixty years after the writer's death, his books continue to fascinate, a sign that he reached "the only kind of eternity that matters".



## Holiday game

The action of the play starts in a sunny day at the beginning of August, in a solitary zone of mountain. The protagonists are: Mr. Bogoiu, a poor intellectual, Ștefan Valeriu, a public servant, Jeff, a young man who has to go in for a second exam at mathematics, a retired major, the lovely Corina and Mrs. Vintilă, a young woman of about 30 years old.

These people decide to spend their vacation at the Weber's pension, their contact with the external world being interrupted. At the beginning, this group of people can't get used with the absence of the phone, of the radio or of the post, appearing certain misunderstandings between the guests of the pension. Corina even brings a mechanic to repair all the deteriorated objects. But, after only few days, listening to the advice received from Ștefan Valeriu who stimulate the others to take part in a holiday game, all of them forget about the communication with the external world and try to enjoy the silence which is given by this dream place. Mrs. Vintilă refuse to read any received letter, Mr. Bogoiu stop writing the day, the temperature, the pressure on the blackboard daily, Corina renounce at the radio and the phone.

The inhabitants from the Weber's pension spend their time in different ways: they play ping-pong, they go bathing, they care with the appropriation of mathematics' notions, they navigate imaginary in different sides of the world. In this way they lose count of time. They deliver from the pressure of their social position, discovering the amenity of human dignity in which money has no value. In this climate appears the love of Ștefan Valeriu, Jeff and Bogoiu for Corina, love which is manifested in different ways and which leads to some disputes between Ștefan and young Jeff.

The calm of the pension's guests is disturbed by the apparition of a man and his wife. They also want to spend their vacation at the pension. But Jeff locks Mrs. Weber in her room, while the others persuade the new-comers to leave.

The liaison between Ștefan and Corina becomes more and more deep. This is why, after a conversation with Ștefan, Corina decides to leave even if vacation hadn't finished



yet. All of them suffer because of the decision taken by the young woman and they try to change her mind.

But, finally, Corina leaves and so, the holiday game ends.

## “The town with acacias”

“The town with acacias” is a novel about love, but also about decisions that can change a man’s life.

Adriana Dunea, is the daughter of some highly educated bourgeois. Adriana is a teenager and her world seems to be transforming at the same time she does. The games stop being funny, and the boys become more interesting. She makes acquaintance with Gelu, her best friend, Cecilia’s cousin. They will be bound by a strong friendship and by a fragile love.

Adriana leaves one winter for Bucharest, to the young married cousin’s house; she forgets about the life in the province the same as she forgets Gelu.

After returning home, she realizes the loss of Gelu, so that later she encounters him in Bucharest. Their love consumes in a few days, but then the break up comes.

After each one living their drama near unfitted persons, the two of them, Paula and Adriana get together in D... town.



“The town with acacias” is the story of the transition from childhood to adulthood of a provincial girl, starting with physiological changes to the change of the feelings.

*Adriana Dunea becomes an adolescent and the world seems to transform at the same time with her, the games were no more important and the boys become more interesting. She gets to know Gelu the cousin of her best friend, Cecilia. Those will have a very long friendship but also very innocent and shy at the beginning, and at the end their love will consume itself in Bucharest.*

*Adriana Dunea grows up in a provincial town, was the daughter of a bourgeois family, with a certain education, fact that some rules and habits are imposed from afternoons in “Via Moarta” to theatre pieces in every week. Adriana’s parents aren’t so good outlined in the novel, those being existent in a second plan. Gone to Bucharest, the life from province becomes boring and Adriana forgets it quickly, the same way that she forgets Gelu too. The youth of Adriana is saying its word and her reaction are sometimes of a spoiled child who wants to obtain what she considers she deserves, sometimes of a sad and lonely, bored and after all mysterious, lost in little family business.*

*The love between Adriana and Gelu is innocent; it links some gestures and sweet kissing. It’s the specific teenager love that passion which can hold for years, but at the little shaking can demolish. In fact of all that, Adriana ties herself up with Gelu in soul, the same way does this too, as is each one of them need one another. Adriana goes in one winter to Bucharest in her cousin house newly weeds and she forgets Gelu. When he turned back, she felt that she was losing Gelu, and later re-found in Bucharest. Their love consumes in few days and after that she goes forever from Gelu’s life; although loves him, she chooses to marry with Cousin Paul.*

*It’s a sad novel about loves and reencounters, but also about decision that people must take. Adriana leaves home wishing “to get back to a settled life, with moments and obedient and love”. As she knows that this man was her first love, she understands though*



*that this is nothing, but a passion that consumed itself in the first and the last night spend together.*

*I warmly recommend the novel "Acacia city" a fulfilled love, but which among with the first sunbeam breaks apart.*

### The ACCIDENT

The novel "The accident" written by Mihail Sebastian describes two different love stories which are developing on the background of the inter-war Bucharest. On the one hand, the author presents the relationship between Paul-the protagonist- and his girlfriend, Ann-the materialist painter. On the other hand is situated the young teacher-Miss Nora, who meets Paul in very awkward circumstances, after she becomes the victim of a tram accident.

Paul and Nora have a platonic relationship because although they have compatible natures, they can only make one compromise: Paul is going to accompany Nora on a mountain trip so that she won't be alone, and in exchange, being fond of ski, she will give her fellow-travel the first indications on the track.

However, this camp seems to be full of intrigues and secrets. Little by little, Nora found out about Ann, the famous painter who was supported by some very influential men, so she was always the subject of the most interesting gossips. Although Paul made a huge effort to maintain this relationship, the young artist didn't have enough time for the

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modest lawyer because of her pretentious star-life. That's why each of them is becoming more and more distinct, concerning their social statute, and they are starting to separate one from another. The question is: why does Paul hesitate to be more intimate with the beautiful Nora?

The lady teacher and the attorney took advantage of the spare time spend at the mountains by doing ski and lots of trip mountain until one incident occurred. The two of them got lost during one dangerous storm. All the night long Paul and Nora have spend some terrible moments of panic and struggled to reach to a chalet located on the top of the mountain. The owners were a couple of mysterious Germans; there were many rumors about them but eventually they offer Paul and Nora a shelter and they proved to be nice hosts. In the same night, Paul has confessed Nora about his love for her and despite all the unpleasant moments that they have passed through, they spent a wonderful night together.

Two days later, Paul meets Ann at Brasov but he decided to put an end to their relationship in order to start a new life with Nora.

Therefore, the last pages of the book offer us a pleasant view about two lovers that have spend their winter holyday on the snowed up streets of Brasov, in crowded shops and in romantic restaurants.

The bad luck that had followed Nora when she felt down on the stairs of the tram nr. 16, the troubles that she and Paul had during the trip , all that is changing at the end of this novel into a wonderful adventure that convinces the readers that true love always wins.



## THE MOON IS DOWN

*The Moon Is Down* is a play written by Mihail Sebastian. In the story, an invading force arrives at a coal mining town in Europe and takes it over. Their goal is simple: to control the coal mine and organize increased production and exportation of coal. The occupiers soon find themselves in conflict with the people who live in the town and a resistance movement begins. They try to combat the resistance and force the inhabitants into submission.

The conflict starts at the beginning of the occupation as an illusion of a friendly relationship and both the invaders and the locals try to maintain it. At first, things go well even if the locals are stunned and confused, and the invaders plan to carry out expansion of coal production. Soon enough, a slow, burning anger replaces the people's fear and a resistance movement forms. Random acts of sabotage occur against soldiers and the coal mine. The invaders, under orders from above, impose repressive measures to keep the production going. Their commander follows his order knowing that, in fact, there is little hope of stopping the sabotage for more than a few days at a certain time.

Soon, all semblance of harmony is ended and the occupiers feel isolated and surrounded by hate. As several of the invaders are murdered, they begin to realize that their hopes to be accepted as good people are coming to naught. The people from the town are starving rather than cooperate with the invaders and because of that the officers and leading citizens are pawns in a fruitless ritual of death.

### Characters

- Mayor Orden-the mayor of the town
- Doctor Winter - friend of Mayor Orden, the doctor from the town
- Joseph - a servant of the Mayor



- Annie - the Mayor's cook
- Madame Orden - wife of the Mayor
- Alexander Morden - A miner, kills Captain Bentick and is sentenced to death.
- Molly Morden - The wife of Alexander Morden
- George Corell - popular storekeeper and spy
- Colonel Lanser - the head of the local battalion.
- Captain Bentick – Is killed by Alex Morden in a fit of rage while trying to protect Captain Loft.
- Major Hunter - The engineer
- Captain Loft
- Lieutenant Prackle
- Lieutenant Tonder

