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The Transylvanian Roman Catholic Church during the Holocaust

(Abstract)

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This research was intended to be a comparative analysis of the Transylvanian Catholic Church's position on the territories belonging to the Hungarian and Romanian state during the Holocaust on the so-called "Jewish problem". Though Transylvania was a unique historical and geographical entity, its belonging to states with different laws and cultures defined how Jews were regarded by Christian people and also the attitudes and reactions of the Catholic Church to the actions of these states against the Jews.

The choice of topic is motivated by the lack of extensive work and research in the field, the largest Holocaust theme analysis in these territories being written by foreign historians, and the relations of the Christian churches to the Jews and converted Jews in particular, remain unexplored.

Although some of the most important Archives are not yet available for research - for example The Archives of the Nunciatures in Bucharest and Budapest or the Archives of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Bucharest - we succeeded to use archival and bibliographic sources in the Archives of the Archdiocese of Alba Iulia, the Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Catholic Archives of Bezidu Nou, thus obtaining a more comprehensive and more nuanced picture of the investigated problem.

The Holocaust in Northern Transylvania meant the death of approximately 135,000 people. Their round up and deportation was carried out in a very short period (24 days), while the Red Army approached the borders of Hungary and the Anglo-American armies have already landed in Normandy.

Hungarian Jewry was one of the best assimilated communities in Europe; they considered themselves as "Hungarians of Mosaic religion" and could not imagine that a people so welcoming and tolerant that Hungarians could try to go to their extermination. Although anti-Semitism was quite widespread in Hungary - the first antisemitic law, the "Numerus clausus" appeared in 1920 - until March 1944, Jews lived in relative safety.

However, beginning with the German occupation of the country the Hungarian authorities have put in the service of the Final Solution the gendarmerie and the whole infrastructure of the country. The gendarmes executed the process of ghettoization with an unimaginable brutality. Many of the Jews have died or gone mad during this process. The attitude of the country's population was generally passive towards the deportation, but a large number of Hungarians have worked voluntarily at the ghettoization and deportation.

At the same time, Jews under Romanian administration had to face a different fate. The Romanian society is wellknown for his anti-Semitic excesses throughout history and the first anti-Jewish measures of the researched period were more severe than the first two anti-Semitic laws in Hungary. Although between 1940-1944 Jews of Southern Transylvania were marginalized, removed from all public life, expropriated and were always in danger of deportation, eventually the Jews from these territories were more fortunate than their compatriots across the border.

Although the intention of both countries - Romania and Hungary - was to get rid of their Jewish minority, the method they used trying to complete this goal was very different. While in Hungary, ghettoization and deportation of Jews held over after a definite plan in record time, in Romania, in the absence of an effective plan, the Jews were massacred in pogroms, killed in death trains and sent across the border with the Soviet Union to be killed there.

However, in both territories, the response of the Christian population to the deportations was almost identical, characterized by indifference and passivity. Denunciations of Jews were frequent by people wanting to get their housing and for other economic benefits. We know of only a few examples of humanity, in which ordinary people tried to help Jews - bringing them food, facilitating escape from the ghettos or adopting some Jewish children in order to not be deported.

For the indifferent attitude of the people some of the responsibility lies on the Christian churches, whose embrace of anti-Jewish attitudes have helped shaping the distorted image of Jews in society.

All Christian churches have played an important role in the process of adopting anti-Semitic laws in Hungary. In parliamentary law disputes of the "Numerus clausus" and the first two anti-Semitic laws, representatives of Catholic clergy sustained the necessity of such laws. The "positive Antisemitism" of the Catholic Bishop Ottokár Prohászka, leading figure of that time, was well-known. In his speech on 16 September 1920, he speaks of "racial self-defense", a slogan taken over by other representatives of the clergy also. After passing 18 years, the idea appears in the speeches of the Lutheran and Calvinist bishops Sándor Raffay and László Ravasz. Their opinion was shared by the Catholic Archbishop Seregi Jusztinián and Gyula Glattfelder, bishop of Csanád.

Christian church leaders have offered their support in enforcing the anti-Semitic laws and thus legitimized anti-Semitism, which – on the long term - lead to catastrophic consequences. Their attitude had a special significance from psychological perspective and led to the indifference of Catholics during the deportations.¹

Representatives of churches have intervened only in the interest of Catholics of Jewish origin and only when the third anti-Semitic law jeopardized the interests of many believers - converts and those who were already born Christians. But either this time they did not vote against the law and it was implemented because of their reticence.

In addition to voting the anti-Semitic laws, Christian churches have adopted rules that have hampered the conversion of Jews, thus preventing them to obtain birth certificates, which later could mean even their salvation.

This attitude of the Hungarian Catholic clergy was continued also during the war. In the interests of Jews, clerical leaders have taken only frail, symbolic actions, which were doomed to failure. After a certain period, also these attempts have ceased. The rescue actions and public protests against the deportations were only "private actions" of the Church's personalities such as Catholic bishops Márton Áron and Vilmos Apor, or Margit Slachta, the Mother Superior of the Order "Social Sisters".

Throughout the war, the Vatican, the spiritual center of Christianity, remained in silence. In order not to "jeopardize diplomatic activity undertaken in the interests of (the Jews)"², the Vatican refused to publicly protest against the extermination of Jews. However the telegram of Pius XII from the 25th of June 1944 largely contributed to Governor Horthy's decision to stop the deportations, although it came too late for the thousands and thousands of killed Jews.

The effect of the hesitations of the Pope could not be countered even by the Budapest Nunciature's activity to rescue Jews - especially the activity of Nuntio Angelo Rotta. But without a direct order from the Pope, Catholic leaders did not want to conflict with the Hungarian state. The result of their passivity was the death of approximately 550,000 Hungarian Jews.

¹ Randolph L. Braham, *A magyar Holokauszt*, Editura Gondolat, Budapesta, Blackburn International Incorporation, Wilmington (1988), I, p. 106.

² Ibidem, II, pp. 308-309.

During the research we pursued whether in these six years there have been drastic changes in the Transylvanian Roman Catholic Church's positions to the so-called "Jewish problem." For this we selected three areas in which this attitude can be traced:

- the Catholic Church's policy of baptizing Jews and issues that arose from the legislation on the prohibition of converting Jews to the Christian religion;
- the problem of Jewish education and those of the students learning in religious schools - especially Catholic ones;
- Requests for help from the Jews sent to the bishops, the apostolic nuncios Angelo Rotta, Andrea Cassulo and to Pope Pius XII.

Based on existing literature on the subject, we tried to discover if there was a definite policy of the Vatican in the case of the Jews at the time, and which was the attitude of Catholic priests and the bishop Áron Márton towards the Jews - especially those willing to convert - and if they have complied with the orders received from the Holy See.

To achieve these goals, we analyzed the problem on four different levels:

1. The highest authority - the Vatican and Pope Pius XII;
2. The direct representatives of the Holy See in Budapest, respectively in Bucharest: apostolic nuncios Angelo Rotta and Andrea Cassulo;
3. The Roman Catholic Diocese of Alba Iulia and the Ordinariate of Cluj led by the bishop Márton Áron and Vicar Imre Sándor;
4. The catholic priests, because so much depended on their response to the requests for conversion of the Jews.

Based on these starting points we analyzed the Vatican's relationship with the two countries - Romania and Hungary – to which the Transylvanian territories belonged to during the investigated period. We took into account the different policies of both countries about the "Jewish problem" and tried to highlight to what extent the Catholic Church was subordinated to state institutions and which was the sphere of mutual interests that defined the relationship. We sought to examine whether the Church representatives were in some way able to shape the policy of these states on Jewish conversions.

For this we studied the exchange of letters between the Nunciatures in Budapest and Bucharest, as well as Cardinal Seregi Jusztinián with the representatives of Hungary and Romania - Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Ministers of Religions - to determine topics that are

repeated in the relationship between church and state and to highlight those points of connection that offer the possibility of negotiations for the correlation of the two opposing views: on the one hand trying to get rid of all Jews and striving to defend the church's faithful.

We insisted on anti-Semitic legislation of both countries that influenced the baptism policy of the Christian churches and the participation of representatives of the Catholic clergy in adopting this legislation in Hungary.

In the Roman Catholic Diocese of Alba Iulia we pursued the parallel evolution of the baptism policy of the bishop Áron Márton and vicar Sándor Imre and seek answers to these questions:

- To what extent the Bishop and Vicar have complied with the Vatican's baptism policy - if there was such a policy?
- How lenient was this policy on the period of catechumenate?
- If representatives of the clergy have taken a stand in defense of Jews or if they only wanted to protect the Jewish converts to Catholic religion?
- To what extent has meant that stand an opposition to the position of the bishop's superiors, or to the state representatives?

The last level of the investigation is of the priests, whose recommendation was often decisive in approving the conversion of Jews. At this level we investigated:

- If Catholic priests have shown to some extent anti-Semitic manifestations or helped Jews who wanted to convert?
- To what extent have they complied with the orders from the Episcopo in the cases of baptizing Jews - especially in respecting the period of the catechumenate?
- If there were personal examples to defend the interests of Jewish converts and rescues or negative examples of incitement against Jews amongst the representatives of the Catholic clergy? Here we persist in presenting several cases of rescue of Jews by priests and other dignitaries of the Catholic clergy.

We also analyzed whether the representatives of the Catholic Church - from the highest levels to the ordinary parish priests - were preoccupied in some way with the "Jewish problem" or if they were concerned only of the interests of the Catholicized Jews?

Throughout the paper we compared the views and attitude of the Catholic Church to the Jews with other Christian churches: the Orthodox, Calvinist and Lutheran.

Finally, we reviewed, in short, the evolution of relations between Jews and the Catholic Church after the war from denying any guilt until the adoption of the document "Nostra Aetate" and recognition, to some extent, of the responsibility of the Catholic Church in the deportation of Jews by Pope John Paul II.

Please note that we didn't plan to do a thorough analysis of the relations of the Catholic Church with the Jews - and this is also impossible without access to some important archives for research. Some aspects of this relationship - such as economic relations of the Catholic Church with the Jews and references of the Catholic media to the problem - remain the subject of further research.

Analyzing the Catholic Church's baptismal policy concerning the Israelites during 1940-1945 we have reached the following conclusions:

The Vatican has not developed any explicit policy for baptizing of the Jews. To Jewish conversions was to apply the same rules as to baptism of any non-Catholic adult. Today's baptism rules are formulated in *Ordo initiationis Christianae adultorum* that provides a year of catechumens, as it was true also in the researched period.

In order no. 376/1939, Márton Áron defined the rules of baptism of Jews: half a year of theoretical training and a half year religious practice. The principles formulated by him will be valid throughout the Diocese even after its division.

Although in other dioceses other rules were applied, with the change of the situation of the Jews have been applied facilitations to Jews willing to convert - which may mean, for example, a short period of three months in Budapest or even three days at the Archdiocese of Bucharest (fact that requires more research) - in the diocese led by Márton Áron and at the Ordinariate of Cluj strict rules were applied even when the requests were coming from the Jews in the labor camps. Approval for baptism is given only if the catechumens prove that their intention of conversion is sincere and without any material interest.

The number of Jews baptized in the two parts of the Diocese - Alba Iulia and Cluj - is very different and we did not find a unique trend in the two residences, or a policy that would be sought to exclude Jews from baptism. The only common point available was the order no. 376/1939 of Bishop Áron Márton, on which - with a bit of subjectivism - the requests of Jews for conversion were individually assessed. The decrease of the number of the approved claims

can be explained with increasing suspicion against the Jews at certain times - due to more pronounced tendencies to convert as a result of issuing new anti-Semitic laws and regulations.

In both parts of the border the conversion of Jews was treated very seriously and it fully complied with the orders of Bishop Áron Márton. The exemption from the conditions of order no. 376/1939 were very rare and occurred only in cases very well justified by the priests.

The recommendation of the local priest who was presenting the request played an almost decisive role in approving the conversion: if the priest considered that the Jew was prepared to accept the mystery of baptism, the Bishop or Vicar, in most cases, approved the request.

In our research we also studied the results of the attitude of the Catholic Church's exponential personalities: those of Bishops Márton Áron and Vilmos Apor, Margit Slachta, the Superior Mother of the Order "Social Sisters" and István Ráduly the priest from Bezidu Nou.

"Righteous among the Nations," Bishop Áron Márton demonstrated by his example that the basic principle of the Catholic Church, that all men are equal before God and should be treated as such, is not only part of the Church's intention to gather more believers.

His example of courage, and the fact that he dared to speak when no one wanted to raise his voice for protecting the Jews and when such boldness could have cost him his life, became known worldwide. By his famous speech on the 18th of May 1944, in St. Michael church in Cluj, he showed the world that the Catholic Church should take a stand against deportations of Jews. Sending his letters to Döme Sztójay, Prime Minister of Hungary, and Andor Jaross, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and organizer of the deportation of Jews from Hungary, in which he demanded the stopping of the deportations, he endangered his life, because we know that all those who spoke openly in the interests of Jews were possible targets of the Nazis.

But what is not well-known about Márton Áron is that in many cases he tried to intervene in the interests of the Transylvanian Jews, left on the other side of the border of Belvedere. In particular, he was concerned with the problems of the Catholics of Jewish origins that were considered Jews by the anti-Semitic legislation in Romania and treated as such. The people of his diocese, of which many have converted for more than a decade ago, were seeking support by the bishop in order to avoid ghettoization and deportation.

The problems which Jewish converts faced can be classified into three groups: economic, social and a religious issue, that of the conversion. In the first two problems, the bishop had no influence – he could not do anything about job losses and assets or the wearing of distinctive

signs and passing of the Jewish converts under the authority of Israelite communities. But in religious matters - where he had responsibility - a real battle starts in order to succeed the revocation of the order prohibiting the baptism of Jews. In this fight he mobilized the Roman Catholic Archdiocese in Bucharest, led by Alexandru Cisar, the Apostolic Nuncio, and even the Pope to intervene in the interests not only of those who sent letters, but of all Jewish converts in Romania.

Márton Áron paid attention to every letter, trying to find ways of resolving problems and when he could not help, he sent the requests to the Apostolic Nunciature in Bucharest or directly to the Holy Father in Rome.

The Apostolic Nuncios in Budapest and Bucharest had an important role in protecting Jewish converts. The different laws of the two countries, to that the divided parts of the diocese belonged defined also the modality how the representatives dealt with the problem: while Andrea Cassulo thought it was enough to send memos to the Ministry of Cults and Arts and to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to defend the interest of the Church and of the Jewish converts' - recording a considerable success - the apostolic nuncio in Budapest, Angelo Rotta thought, he had to be involved directly in the rescue efforts. Although initially he thought that the purpose of the Church is only the protection of its faithful, he later realized that he must take personal part in rescue efforts, releasing hundreds of baptismal certificates to save Jews in the last minute from the death marches.

Analyzing the attitude of the representatives of the Catholic clergy from the Bishops and Nuntios to the ordinary priests from the country, we see that most of them tried to help Jews or at least the Catholic converts. We have found personal examples such as Bishop Áron Márton's speech of 18 May 1944, denouncing the deportation of Jews and demanding from the authorities to stop de deportations, continuing with the successful intervention of Margit Slachta in 1941 to stop the deportations, until freeing of 66 sabatarian people from the ghetto of Targu-Mures by the priest from Bezidu Nou, István Ráduly.

It seems that the saving of the sabatarians by Ráduly István was also a priest's private action, which however could not be fulfilled without ministerial secretary Alajos Degré's goodwill, who issued the first certificates of non-Jews based on the law of 1941.

Although Margit Slachta's try to stop the deportations of Jews in 1940 in Miercurea Ciuc to Kőrösmező failed to succeed, she always intervened whenever it was necessary in the interests

of deported Jews and her insistence eventually achieved its purpose: the deportations of 1941 to Kamenets-Podolsk were stopped at her prompt intervention. She succeeded this when the prince primate of Hungary, Jusztinián Serédi, abandoned. During the German occupation of Hungary Margit Slachta had a very important role in housing and protection of Jewish refugees in fifteen cities, using her relations with the Apostolic Nuncio Angelo Rotta, Raoul Wallenberg and other representatives of neutral states. The final number of the people saved by her is about a thousand, of which only twelve were caught on throughout the war. There were people who were taken out of the ghettos in the country or even from the wagons by her.

I found also some negative examples, in which Catholic priests instigated against the Jews and refused their help, though very few in numbers. Unfortunately, the positive examples of personal involvement could not counterbalance the involving of the Catholic clergy in the acceptance of anti-Semitic laws or the passivity that characterized the leadership of the Hungarian Catholic Church at the highest level. In contrast to the work of the Apostolic Nuncio, Cardinal Jusztinián Serédi could not achieve any results in defense of Jews and Catholic converts.

However, comparing with the situation of Jews converted to other religions than Catholic; we must conclude that the Catholic convert status provided some protection to the Jews, and the earnest interventions of the nuncios resulted in saving of many Jews of Israelite religion and converts alike. Although these steps were in fact almost all private actions of exponential personalities of the Catholic Church, their status and the prestige of the Vatican - whose representatives they were, in fact, - has helped them to defend the interests of Jewish converts in both countries. The status of "converted Catholic" in Romania, although some suspicions aroused, offered the Catholic Jews safety and often exemptions under the anti-Semitic laws.

As a last milestone in our approach we hope that, although this subject explored by us is only a section of the topics, our research will contribute to a more nuanced picture of the attitudes of the Catholic Church towards the Jews during the Holocaust. Other aspects of this problem will be the subject of further research.

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