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## Preface

My pursuit of ethnic imagology goes back to the early 1990s. My first study, “The ‘Imaginary’ versus the ‘Real’ Jew in Romanian Folklore and Mythology” was published in 1995 in *Revista de Istorie si Teorie Literara* (Journal for Literary History and Theory).

In 1997–1999, the Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem awarded me a research grant for a study on the image of the Jew in traditional Romanian culture, intended as a comparative exploration in the central and eastern European context. My focus on central and eastern European ethnology thus overlapped my interest in the history and culture of the Jews in that same geographical area.

Later, it occurred to me that it would be engaging to search into the ways in which Jewish stereotypes apparent within traditional Romanian culture have or have not survived into so-called high culture. I focused therefore on probing the origin, the evolution in time and space, and the survival (or conversely, the decline and extinction) of the clichés that substantiate the physical, occupational, spiritual, moral, and religious portrayal of the “imaginary Jew,” as well as the manner in which (unconscious and inactive) popular antisemitism has influenced (conscious and active) intellectual and political antisemitism. This is how the title of the research came to be “The Image of the Jew in Romanian Culture.” The sphere of traditional culture was thus included, without, however, its being exclusive. Excerpts from my research have been published in different cultural magazines. The structure of the book improved when, from 2000, I began teaching a course on ethnic imagology for MA candidates at the Center for Hebrew Studies within the University of Bucharest.

It is a pleasure to mention here the names of those who assisted me in various ways as my research progressed. First let me mention the staff of the Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem who supported the progress of my research and made possible the publication of this book. In particular I want to thank Dalia Ofer (former Chair of the Center), Robert S. Wistrich (present Chair),

and Leon Volovici (Head of Research). In addition, I wish to mention Galit Hasan-Rokem and Moshe Idel of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

I am, as always, grateful to my wife Angela, who helped me immensely during the difficult process of developing this book.

*Andrei Oișteanu*  
*Bucharest, February 2007*

## INTRODUCTION

**The Imaginary Jew**

## ETHNIC IMAGIOLOGY

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, only a very few written works appeared in Romania which dealt with the way in which the image of the Jew was reflected in various folkloric mythical productions. In 1887, and subsequently in 1896, Lazăr Șăineanu tried to put together some features of the “mythical Jew,” alias the *Jidov* or the Giant, which he garnered from Romanian mythical legends.<sup>1</sup>

In the second half of the nineteenth century, a Romanian folklorist of high standing, Simeon Florea Marian, and Moses Schwarzfeld simultaneously, yet separately, tried to establish how the Jew was represented in folk works of the comic register, that is, in satires and in anecdotes respectively.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, the folk and mythology questionnaires drawn up at the end of the nineteenth century by B. P. Hasdeu and Nicolae Densusianu included very few questions referring to the Jews (the red man, the sorcerer, the *Jidovs* or Giants). As a result, answers relating to these topics, collected from villages in all regions of Romania from informants who were mostly country teachers and priests, were relatively few. At that time, Hasdeu published in his magazine, *Columna lui Traian* [Trajan’s Column], some of the replies to these questions that were put to country people, questions about the way Romanians perceive “strangers,” or “people of a different stock.” In his turn, Jewish folklorist Moses Schwarzfeld, in his role as first secretary of the Iuliu Barasch Historical Society, compiled and published in 1888 an *Interrogation* [*sic!*] comprising several questions on folk beliefs and traditions about Jews in Romania.<sup>3</sup> However, the results of this initiative were rather humble. The available literature on this research topic is meager, old, and outdated. Moreover, even in the past few years, few surveys have been conducted in Romania (unlike other countries in the area such as Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and Austria), to shed light on the way in which the Jew has been perceived by the native population.

Drafted in 1886, the statutes of the Iuliu Barasch Historical Society stated its purpose in the very first article: “The Society...intends to gather materials concerning the history of the Jews in Romania and the Romanian-Jewish popular psychology.” The founding members of the society understood this to mean not only “collecting the [Jewish] customs of old” and “collecting Romanian-Jewish folk literature,” but also—a novel and laudable act—“collecting Romanian folk literature about the Jews.” This was a sign that the Jewish intelligentsia was interested not only in the traditional culture of Romanian Jews, but also in the manner in which the “real Jew” was reflected in Romanian folk culture.

In this spirit, Moses Schwarzfeld published (in 1898) not only a “psycho-ethnic study” on the image of the Jews “in their folk literature,”<sup>4</sup> but also a “study of folk psychology” (in 1892) entitled *The Jews in Romanian Folk Literature*, in which he attempted to delineate the profile of the Jew as it appears in the Romanian folk literature and mentality.<sup>5</sup> In the Appendix (entitled, somewhat abusively, “The Jew in Universal Folk Literature: A Comparative Synopsis”) the author presented over four hundred sayings and proverbs on the Jews, gathered mostly from Central and Eastern Europe. Schwarzfeld’s study is a relatively small-sized work, outdated today. However, despite the limitations of this “psycho-ethnic study,” which were largely those of its epoch, it did contain some surprisingly modern elements. For instance, the author was aware that the true subject of his work was the Romanian, not the Jew: “[The study] shall highlight the Jew with the qualities and defects that the Romanian sees in him and shall, at the same time, partly unfold the powers of observation, the preconceptions and the weaknesses of the Romanian people.... It shall depict the Jew as the Romanian sees him, believes him to be, and understands him, not as he was or as he is indeed.”<sup>6</sup>

A century later, similar conclusions have been reached by scientists who have studied ethnic imagology or have psychoanalyzed the Christian collective unconscious. “The characteristics attributed to the Jew in antisemitic folklore,” observes American scholar Alan Dundes, “have nothing to do with the historical Jew, but rather with the Christians, who make the attributions in the first place. If folklore is ‘autobiographical ethnography,’ then antisemitic folklore tells us a great deal about Christians and almost nothing about Jews.”<sup>7</sup> For German professor Klaus Heitmann, who has studied the image of the Romanian in the German linguistic area, “as is the case with all images about nations, especially in their distorted forms,

ethnic stereotypes do not allow for a well-founded representation of what they express. More important, instead, is the information that they offer about those who fathered the images.”<sup>8</sup>

In imagology, this is in fact a standard way of defining coordinates of identity. When a community (of an ethnical, confessional, or other nature) tries to define the identity of another, it invariably reflects back the coordinates of its own identity and sheds light on the similarities and—most often—on the differences that exist. The opposite is equally true: we need “them” in order to be able to better define “us.”

A contemporary of Moses Schwarzfeld, Moses Gaster, raised the stakes of the problem by reassigning it from the socio-cultural sphere to the socio-political one. The folklore referring to the Jews is not the only element which is symptomatic; the way in which society, as a whole, treats Jews (minorities in general, it should be added) is a defining attribute for all the layers of the respective society. “The way of treating Jews,” Gaster wrote in 1894, “represents a kind of political and social barometer, with whose help one can, with a certain amount of precision, gauge the intellectual and moral state of each epoch and for all countries.”<sup>9</sup> What Moses Gaster claimed was also reinforced by his own tragic personal experience: in 1885, nine years before the above passage was written, Gaster had been expelled from Romania as an undesirable Jew.

The main purpose of the present study is to establish the origins, the evolution in time, the geographical dissemination, and the survival (or, on the contrary, the decline and demise) of the stereotypes that make up the physical, spiritual, and moral profile of the “imaginary Jew.” In other words, I have inquired into the way in which popular antisemitism was born and matured in the Romanian cultural sphere, together with the way in which (unconscious and passive) popular antisemitism has influenced (conscious and active) political antisemitism from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards.

I have approached the subject from the perspective and with the tools of cultural anthropology. The main method consists in reassembling the profile of the *imaginary Jew* and in evaluating the difference that exists between it and the profile of the *real Jew* (with all the precaution necessitated by generalizations and approximations in the field of ethnic identity). Moses Schwarzfeld, even if in a crude and intuitive form, already made the distinction between the Jew “as the Romanian sees him, believes him to be

and understands him” and the Jew “as he used to be or as he is indeed.” I shall attempt to focus on the way in which mythological beliefs, legends, superstitions, popular traditions, Christian iconography and texts (either canonical or apocryphal), phobias, and prejudices have generated the sizeable gap between the two profiles. The greater the gap between the “real Jew” and the “imaginary Jew,” the greater was popular Judeophobia. A noteworthy discrepancy can be distinguished between the commonly negative profile of the “imaginary Jew”—one composed of largely the same stereotypical elements in Romania and in western Europe—and the usually moderate image of the “real Jew.”

It has not slipped my attention that folk mentality often makes a qualitative differentiation between, on the one hand, the *local, indigenous stranger (Jew)*, from within the community, with whom the Romanian peasant has at times cohabited well and at other times badly, yet in all cases without the excesses known in western and central Europe, and, on the other hand, the *exogenous stranger (Jew)*, from outside the community, a generic, abstract Jew, to whose account the most terrible vices of the “imaginary Jew” (decide, ritual murder, ruining the crop by means of magic, etc.) were laid.

Obviously, the coordinates of the “imaginary Jew” do not overlap those of the “real Jew.” These two terms are rather theoretical and abstract. Their comparison is itself theoretical, for the simple reason that an image of what I have called the “real Jew” cannot possibly be pinned down. Whenever we try to outline such an image, we unavoidably resort to approximations, equalizations, generalizations, and clichés. The result can only be another hypostasis of the “imaginary Jew.”

Surely enough, the imagology equation is an extremely complex one: it has numerous variables and its terms operate on several levels. Paraphrasing a parable by Miguel de Unamuno, I must say that the relationship between *the Jew* and *the Romanian* is not a simple one, but a multi-tiered one:

1. On one level, there is the relationship between the “real Jew” and the “real Romanian”;
2. On another level, that between “the Jew’s self-image” and “the Romanian’s self-image”;
3. And on yet another level, that between the “Romanian’s image of the Jew” and the “Jew’s image of the Romanian.”

I have collected folkloric, ethnological, and pictorial material, no matter how humble and apparently inconsequential, so that, by putting them together in

puzzle-fashion, I might obtain as finely tuned, as full, and as well-drawn an image as possible of both the “real Jew” and the “imaginary Jew” in an attempt to measure the “cultural gap” that separates the two profiles.

Moreover, in the course of my research, I have considered it appropriate to approach the theme comparatively, along four distinct lines:

1. **Comparison in time:** the theme is placed in a diachronic context, by means of which I have attempted to see how clichés and motifs of legends have evolved over time, as well as to highlight the causes that have led to this evolution (or involution);

2. **Comparison in space:** the main theme of the work is studied in a geo-cultural context. In other words, I have intended to see to what extent the profile of the “imaginary Jew” in traditional Romanian culture resembles or differs from that existing in the traditional culture of other European peoples, especially those of central, eastern, and southeastern Europe (Germany, Austria, Poland, Hungary, Russia, Ukraine, Greece, Bulgaria, Turkey, etc.).

3. **Cultural comparison:** I have intended to establish which features and elements of “folk antisemitism” have been taken over by “intellectual antisemitism” (in the cultivated as well as the political literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries). The issue under discussion is that of mental clichés migrating from one cultural medium to another. I have attempted to trace surviving stereotypes, to see why and how they were changed, and to explain the causes for the disappearance of some of them. I have also analyzed cases in which the cliché, after migrating from the traditional rural milieu into the urban cultured one, has been reformulated, reactivated, used for ideological purposes, disseminated by the press, and returned with tenfold power into the cultural zone that had generated it. This phenomenon I have called *cultural feedback*.

4. **Ethnic comparison:** I have attempted to focus on the extent to which, and the causes why the image of the Jew in traditional Romanian culture has differed from the image of other “strangers” with whom the Romanian people have lived or merely come into contact with throughout the centuries: Hungarians, Germans, Gypsies, Turks, Armenians, Greeks, Russians, Ukrainians, etc.

The Jewish community of Romania lends itself well to this type of research. This is not only due to its endurance and size (in 1940 almost 800,000 Jews were living there and Romania had the third-largest Jewish population in Europe—and the fourth-largest in the world after the USSR, Poland, and the United States). Comparative research is also justified by the

fact that, over the centuries, the Jewish community in Romania has been located in a multicultural area, at the point of convergence of important and well-established political, linguistic, cultural, and religious zones. Here, at the interface between central, eastern, and southeastern Europe—between the Habsburg, Tsarist, and Ottoman Empires—there is the confluence between Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox Christianity, as well as that between Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews.

A story from urban folklore, published in 1844 by the Viennese magazine *Der Humorist*, best outlines the status of the Romanian area as a “frontier between empires.” An Englishman, it was reported, wanted to spend the night in three different empires, so he went to the only place on earth where such a feat was possible at that time, namely the strip of land known as *triplex confinium*, in northeastern Bukovina (next to the village of Noua Suliță, on the river Prut), where the frontiers of the Russian, Austrian, and Ottoman empires converged. The English traveler was said to have drunk tea in Russia, wine in Austria, and coffee in Turkey, seated on one and the same three-footed stool, each foot stuck in a different empire.

I am not attempting to theorize the rise, growth (in space and time), and demise or survival of the stereotypes. Other scholars have done so with success. I have chosen to employ the results of their research by applying them to the concrete case of ethnic imagology and particularly to the image of the Jew in the traditional culture of eastern and central Europe. There are those conspicuous mental clichés which send one to conspicuously untrue statements of fact (of the kind that “the Jews have horns”) which survive chiefly in areas where there are no Jews or where they are extremely sparse. In such cases, the profile of the “imaginary Jew” may develop freely and adopt the features of a fabulous being, without the possibility for the “real Jew” to contradict this profile.

There are, moreover, those less conspicuous clichés that do not necessarily express an untruth, but a partial truth raised to the rank of a general truth (of the type: “the Jew is a good tradesman”). To impose upon a whole category of human beings a feature that only part of them possess is the symptom of stereotypical and readymade thinking. The cliché is an ultra-simplified image of a phenomenon, determined by the cultural milieu in which it appears. Moreover, since the coordinates of this medium are commonly rooted in traditional culture (which is archaic and profound), we can well imagine how strong and resistant to change are clichés, even when they are invalidated (or

just partially validated) by reality. “Preconceptions have a metaphysical mainspring,” wrote Romanian philosopher Lucian Blaga. “That is the reason why they can only be shattered and replaced by other prejudices.”

Since our mode of thinking works with categories, it is largely stereotypical (“Preconceptions are the crutches of reason,” André Gide has maintained) and we cannot alter this situation unless we, on the one hand, limit the number of clichés that we use and, on the other, become aware of the degree of deformation that they introduce in reality. Yet, if we cannot possibly avoid partially true and schematic definitions (of the “birds fly” type), we should at least realize that by using them we assume the risk of coming to the wrong conclusions (of the “flies are birds but hens are not” type).

#### ROMANIAN TOLERANCE: BETWEEN MYTH AND REALITY

“It is hardly an exaggeration to say that Romania was the most antisemitic country in pre-war Europe,” Hannah Arendt wrote in the early 1960s.<sup>10</sup> I believe that this affirmation by the distinguished author actually is an exaggeration. However, we might grant Hannah Arendt certain extenuating circumstances. Bearing in mind that the book from which this statement was quoted was written on the basis of reports she sent the *New Yorker* from Adolf Eichmann’s trial in Jerusalem (1961–1962), the sentence reveals its marked “journalistic” intentions. Moreover, it is probable that Hannah Arendt was under the sway of powerful emotions, due to the evidence presented during the trial.

The same type of evaluation, however, and in much the same terms, is to be found in ample (and otherwise serious) scholarly works on Jewish history. Writing about the Holocaust, historian Paul Johnson maintains that “the Austrians were worse than the Germans,” and “the Romanians were no better than the Austrians; worse in some ways.” Judging by such assertions, the Romanians may well have come first in the classification as the most antisemitic of nations, closely followed by the Austrians and then by the Germans. A few sentences below, however, Paul Johnson turns his classification around with a single stroke of the pen: “After the Germans and Austrians, the Romanians were the greatest killers of Jews.”<sup>11</sup>

Such statements are not merely untrue but, above all, inadequate. I do not believe that international rankings could be made in the case of antisemitism, as we would make them in athletics. I do not believe that one has the

authority to speak in such terms of any circumstance, least of all of one so complex and specific (even atypical) as was the fate of the Jews of Romania during the Second World War. Sufficient works exist which have presented the Holocaust in Romania with objectivity, based strictly on documents and facts.<sup>12</sup>

In cases such as this, the shorter and more trenchant the diagnosis, the more mistaken it is. To turn a blind eye to hues and details, to forsake objective and balanced analyses, to overlook specific historical, political, and cultural conditions, to substitute a few tags and morbid classifications for dramatic reality based on the number of murdered Jews, means using the same kind of pigeonholing, rudimentary schemes, and mental clichés for which we reproach antisemitic thinking. It amounts to creating, next to the profile of the “imaginary Jew,” a few new ones such as those of the “imaginary Romanian,” “imaginary Pole,” “imaginary German,” and so forth. Such, as a rule, is the outcome of any “ethno-centric, even ethno-exclusivist, historiographic discourse,” as Leon Volovici defined the species.<sup>13</sup> Such are the discourses that suffer from Jewish-centrism or from Romanian-centrism and which resort to all-enveloping formulas—either vituperative to the extreme, which result in instigation, or flattering to the extreme, which result in an anaesthetic effect. Among the latter, the “Romanian’s proverbial tolerance” is the most widespread mental cliché.

Particularly since the middle of the nineteenth century, Romanian intellectuals and politicians began to prefer discussions about tolerance to practicing it. There was, therefore, tenacious talk, in many voices, about a “proverbial” tolerance that Romanians professed towards other nations and religious denominations, a virtue inscribed in a virtual national “genetic code.” Is this a real quality or simply one of the many clichés that make up the stereotypical profile of the Romanian, which in its turn becomes “imaginary”?

In 1845, out of an excess of *avant la lettre* proto-chronism, Mihail Kogălniceanu wrote that the Romanians “were among the first who consecrated religious tolerance and freedom of conscience.”<sup>14</sup> The Moldavian politician made that affirmation in an era in which, since 1831, the Constitutions, or Organic Regulations, had sanctioned antisemitism in the Romanian Principalities. This new legislation “proclaimed the principle of affiliation to the Christian creed as a condition for granting civil and political rights.” As a consequence, the Jews’ status was changed from *pămînteni*