Chapter Three
The Cernăuți Ghetto, the Deportations, and the Decent Mayor

Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer

I

The zeal with which Romanian authorities began deporting Jews in the summer of 1941 into German-occupied territories in the Ukraine, without express orders or requests from the Nazis, has become legendary. Unprepared for the masses of deportees, the Germans sent thousands of them back to Bessarabia and Bukovina, and even blocked several bridges on the Dniester to stop the floods that were streaming in from the Bessarabian region of the country. “German National Socialism was schooled in Romania!” wrote Dr. Nathan Getzler in his wartime diary of Cernăuți and Transnistria (Getzler 1962, 55). The Romanian Fascist newspaper Porunca Vremii presented the Romanian efforts to get rid of Jews as a model to the rest of Europe as early as the summer 1941: “The die has been cast…The liquidation of the Jews in Romania has entered a final, decisive phase…To the joy of our emancipation must be added the pride of [pioneering] the solution to the Jewish problem in Europe…Present-day Romania is prefiguring the decisions to be made by the Europe of tomorrow” (Quoted in Ioanid 2000, 122, 123). In a July 8, 1941 address to the Romanian government, the interim president of the parliament and acting prime minister, Mihai Antonescu, outlined and justified the plan: “With the risk of not being understood by some traditionalists who may still be among you, I am in favor of the forced relocation of the entire Jewish element in Bessarabia and Bukovina, which must be hurled across the border…It is indifferent to me whether we enter history as barbarians. The Roman Empire committed some acts of barbarism and it nevertheless became the vastest and most important political entity of its time…There
has never been a more propitious moment in our history…Shoot with machine guns, if necessary” (Carp 1946, 96).

And yet, despite these “pioneering” efforts, despite an elaborate plan announced in Bucharest in August 1942 to make Romania entirely “judenrein” by sending all Jews to Belzec, and despite a longstanding history of virulent Romanian anti-Semitism, a majority of Jews who inhabited the Romanian Regat—the heartland core—survived the war.

The Jews in the border regions, on the other hand, especially in those regions like Bessarabia and northern Bukovina that had been annexed by the Soviet Union under the Hitler/Stalin pact in 1940–1941, suffered a much harsher fate. The Red Army, retreating from Cernăuți in late June of 1941, had left the northern Bukovina to Romanian troops and the ravages of the German Einsatzgruppe D. In spite of the fact that, only a few weeks earlier, approximately three thousand Jews had been deported to Siberia by the Soviets as “capitalists” and “social/political undesirables,” returning Romanians, inflamed by anti-Semitic propaganda, blamed Jews here especially for facilitating and sustaining the Communist regime that had not long ago ignominiously stripped Romania of its territory and national glory. Many of them viewed Jews living in this region as potential, if not active, “Communist enemies of the Romanian state” and lashed out against them.

Matatias Carp describes the night of July 6, shortly after Romanians re-took the provincial capital:

In Chernovitz, individual soldiers and patrols continued to kill Jews at random throughout the night…In less than twenty-four hours more than 2,000 Jews were killed in the streets, yards, houses, cellars or attics, where the unfortunate were seeking refuge.

The corpses were transported in rubbish carts to the Jewish cemetery, and buried in four enormous common graves (Carp 1946, 251–252).

While these murders were carried out, German and Romanian troops set Chernovtsy’s imposing Jewish Temple on fire, destroying its cupola.

Units of gendarmes also scoured houses throughout the city and took some three thousand Jewish men, women, and children to the central police station under arrest. Approximately three hundred from this group, including Dr. Avraham Mark—the chief rabbi of the city—and other Jewish community leaders, were then transported to the banks of the Prut River and shot.

Hedy and Gottfried Brenner, as well as Gottfried’s mother Paula, were among those who were arrested during the first days of Romanian rule in July 1941. They recalled how their entire street was closed off and all Jews were marched off to the courtyard of the town’s army barracks, where