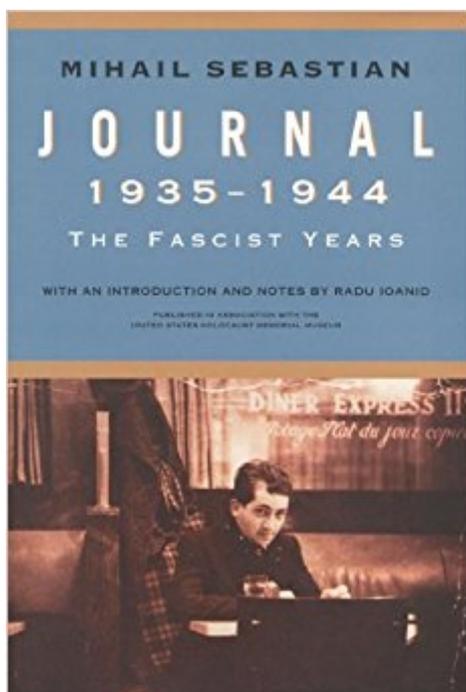


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Journal 1935-1944: The Fascist Years



Synopsis

Hailed as one of the most important portrayals of the dark years of Nazism, this powerful chronicle by the Romanian Jewish writer Mihail Sebastian aroused a furious response in Eastern Europe when it was first published. A profound and powerful literary achievement, it offers a lucid and finely shaded analysis of erotic and social life, a Jew's diary, a reader's notebook, a music-lover's journal. Above all, it is an account of the "dehumanization" of major Romanian intellectuals whom Sebastian counted among his friends, including Mircea Eliade and E.M. Cioran, writers and thinkers who were mesmerized by the Nazi-fascist delirium of Europe's "reactionary revolution." In poignant, unforgettable sequences, Sebastian follows the grinding progression of the "machinery" of brutalization and traces the historical context in which it developed. Despite the pressure of hatred and horror in the "huge anti-Semitic factory" that was Romania in the years of World War II, his writing maintains the grace of its perceptive and luminous intelligence. The legacy of a journalist, novelist, and playwright, Sebastian's Journal stands as one of the most important human and literary documents of the climate that preceded the Holocaust in Eastern Europe. Published in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

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Customer Reviews

This is a unique document from any perspective you approach it. I found it particularly revealing about my father's background; Bucharest's middle class before WWII. The author came from a Jewish community who regarded itself as an assimilated part of a basically friendly Rumania. The

amicable feelings towards Rumania have always run deep in its Jewish expatriates. Those who immigrated to Israel recreated a piece of pre-war Bucharest in Tel-Aviv. The book's description of a specific social set fascinates, with its elegant frivolity and gregarious bonhomie that was stifled under Ceausescu, but survived in my parent's social circle and in that of the Rumanian Jewish community. Sebastian parades a delightful set of characters. From the comical Prince Antoine Bibescu, who walks to theatre among the barbarians "en pantoufles," to the playwright Eugène Ionesco, Sebastian's pen never fails to capture the essence his friends' personalities. Ionesco is mentioned only in passing but his predicament is sobering, if not unique. He was not able to keep his job because of his mother's Jewish background. Ionesco, who never identified himself as Jewish, had not experienced life as a minority and had difficulties dealing with his new status. Apparently he had an emotional breakdown before he finally succeeded in returning to France. I do not think that Ionesco or his biographers ever expounded on that chapter of his life from this perspective. What he had experienced in Rumania at the time may explain the inspiration for his play, *Rhinocéros* (1958). This amusing social tapestry is but a background and introduction to the real drama of this diary. The author portrays the gradual evolution of a very sinister external reality, and more significantly, his own reactions to it.

Mikhail Sebastian was the Romanian Walter Benjamin. Trained as a lawyer and a literary critic, Sebastian published a highly-regarded novel at the age of 23. He held one of those literary-functionary jobs requiring very little actual work or presence at the office which Europe once awarded to its philosophers and artists. Like Benjamin, Sebastian was a skittish, highly personable writer: a professional skeptic, an independent thinker, who could amuse himself indefinitely with his own thoughts and company. To see the War through Sebastian's eyes in this diary is to finally understand it. The journal - together with Radu Ioanid's recently published history of the Romanian holocaust - certainly explodes the myth that Romania was a "good" place to be Jewish during WW2. In fact, the Antonescu's wartime government - reactive always to the country's popular ultra-fascist Iron Guard - annihilated half the country's Jews, some 150,000 people. The "cut" was purely geographic: Bessarabia and Bukovina, two cities bordering Odessa with large Jewish populations, were targeted for ethnic cleansing; whereas the Jews of Bucharest were merely subject to statutes barring their employment, use of amenities, etc. But what's most extraordinary about the Journals is the way that it gives this kind of victimage-by-chance a human face: curious and halting. Over the course of two years, Sebastian is exiled from the inner circles of the Bucharest literati. His close friends and mentors, Nae Ionescu and Mircea Eliade, have become intellectual leaders of the Iron

Guard.

That Sebastian would have never thought of becoming an international name through his diary rather than his plays is something that should provoke some meditations. Why is Sebastian's diary so important in the end? Besides his intellectually compelling narrative, the historic substance traversing his account is highly dramatic. And although the diary is much more than a historic testimony, unfortunately, it is this side of it that has been stressed in recent Romanian-French polemics, downplaying the cultured style and general Bucharestian climate of the 1930s and 1940s described. And if today it is fashionable in Romania to uncritically publish inter war fascist intellectuals such as Mircea Eliade, Emil Cioran, and Constantin Noica (in this last case the author being accompanied by his disciples' cult recounts from Paltinis) hand in hand--that is, by the same publishing house--with Sebastian's diary (a Jewish victim of Romanian inter war fascism) one wonders if this is not a sign of ignorance over the Jewish Holocaust or a tendency to aestheticize history. After all, all four intellectuals mentioned here were highly prestigious and brilliant in their domains, although Sebastian had to ultimately "pay" for his "foreignness." The publication of Sebastian's journal in Romania, France, and the US should mark a starting point for a realistic debate over the Jewish Holocaust in Romania--marginalized or obliterated by the Romanian national-communist historiography.

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