

Intellectuals on Politics:

Socialists and Zionists in the Jewish Literature of Romanian

Language of the 1920s and 1930s

During 1920s and 1930s, Ury Benador, I. Peltz and I. Calugaru imposed through their writings a whole new literature about Jewish life in Romania within the culture of Romanian language. At first sight, politics, political debates or actively involved political characters seem to be marginal to a literature focused mainly on the social problems of the community. Extreme poverty, lack of employment, high rate of mortality and morbidity, lack of future perspectives are mainly the topics of this literature together with a strong criticism of the new bourgeoisie about to compromise the Jewish identity with the Gentile society in order to be able to integrate and accused of tentative “assimilation”. Zionist profiles appear rarely while the Socialist characters are rather not credible as portrayed in opposition with the utterly criticized nouveau riches astray from the community and Jewish life. Living an ascetic life, subjected to persecution, imprisoned and transforming the ideology into life principles, Socialists are basically dehumanized speaking doctrines. The question following such a reading would

target this type of literary treatment of the politically involved character. Why the Zionists characters are barely visible? Why the Socialists can not be credible and integrated? What these literary structures can say about the political situation within the community and especially about the political sympathies of Jewish intellectuals as Benador, Peltz and Calugaru?

Coming from poor families with a strong traditional background and a defined Jewish identity, sometimes Yiddish speaking, the three writers present the political options at hand for the Jewish community as well as the critical claims against them. My interpretation to the marginal position of the characters involved in politics points to an internal conflict present in one form or another in the literary works of the three writers. Their literature has a strong social aspect focusing on the difficult conditions of life in the rural and urban communities, on poverty, lack of means, on the everyday struggle for survival and on the separation between the better off and the underdog. At the same time, there is a permanent debate over the identity preservation versus change due to an acute crisis in the modernizing, secularizing conditions of the society exerting pressure to adapt and integrate. The main problem concerning these two issues addressed in the literature analyzed is that usually in order to overcome the economic problems and to climb the social ladder towards a more secure and stable position, individuals and thus the whole community have to alter their identity, to compromise it for the sake of the financial and social development. Actually the topic of I. Peltz's novel *Foc in Hanul cu Tei* follows exactly the identity change and social disintegration of the human connections within the community which accompany the process of accumulating economic means as in the case of Micu Braun, for example. As a result, the two main problems and the possible solution are conflicting from the very beginning, maintaining a tension within the structure of the novel.

Due to this conflict, the actual support for any political orientation is criticized as unable to offer a real solution for the two connected issues. A Socialist movement might offer the solution for the social

and economic situation, but definitely would involve a loss of identity as no ethnic representation is encouraged on the basis that the workers and peasants suffer the same economic and social conditions no matter if they are Jewish or Gentile. On the other hand the identity loss does not get an immediate solution through Zionism either, as for the first decades of the XXth century, the project seemed still far away and the movement was not popular in the former Regat where the UER's influence was the most important political presence. Zionist characters are very rare in the literature mentioned; Calugaru ignores them totally, probably due to his exclusive Socialist sympathy, if ever approaching politics in his novels. I. Peltz introduces a few Zionist profiles, but they are used only for voicing an alternative political option and identity discourse; in this respect, quoting one of the leaders of the community in *Ghetto Veac XX* might be significant: "We all are Zionists, but give me a break with all the stuff about Palestine, with Hebrew, with Judaic culture and all the other trifles. We should first take care of the citizenship rights and to prove the country and His Majesty the King that we deserve them."¹ As the three writers seems to agree that the most natural solution to the economic and social conditions affecting the community is Socialism, these characters are idealized, living ascetical lifestyles, embodying first of all the doctrine and its principles rather than imposing a credible presence in the novel able to voice a certain political interest. Only I. Calugaru seems to embrace Socialism without reservations, mainly because in his literature the identity problem is rather a reversed one. He is not concerned about the lack of identity through modernization and social compromise, but rather he criticizes the stagnation of the rural world trapped in its traditional lifestyle preventing it to progress and its people from earning a better living. Still, when identity preservation and representation is concerned, Socialism is not the best option and the Bund-type solution comes naturally at hand.

Does this literary representation of political options in early 1930s prove a lack of trust in the presented ideological discourses? Were the intellectuals not convinced by Zionism and Socialism or

simply these ideologies were unable to offer a solution for the two problems identified? In order to answer these question, a further analysis on the enlarged frame of social and political history is needed to reveal the political background of the writers as well of the Jewish community in that period; as far as this paper is concerned, I basically intended to signal a problematic area in their literary writings able to be the starting point leading to more relevant conclusions transcending the literary analysis into the historical context generating it.

Notes:

¹ Ghetto Veac XX, pg. 168.