

Article

A City in *Dérive*: Bucharest in Mihail Sebastian's *Journal 1935–1944: The Fascist Years*

Carmen Levick 

School of English, University of Sheffield, Sheffield S10 2TN, UK; c.levick@sheffield.ac.uk

Abstract: Mihail Sebastian's *Journal 1935–1944* accurately reflects the changing historical realities in Romania in general and in the capital city of Bucharest in particular, before and during the Second World War. As a Jewish Romanian writer, Sebastian records a landscape of ideological change that has a clear impact on him as a lawyer, an intellectual and a member of the city's literary high society. This article proposes a new reading and analysis of Sebastian's work, by focusing on the close relationship between the writer and the city as a vibrant, organic space. My work introduces a new critical vocabulary to the literary analysis of Sebastian's *Journal*, through the use of terminology commonly employed by performance studies. The Situationist practices of walking and drifting, further conceptualised by performance studies scholar Carl Lavery, will be utilised as methods of exploring the visual and emotional richness of Sebastian's work. The intimate relationship between the writer and the city will be constantly framed by the historical and political realities of the time, ensuring a balanced discussion of both literary achievement and historical witnessing.

Keywords: Romanian Jewish autobiographical writing; performative drifting; performative walking; anti-Semitism in Romania; Holocaust in Romania

1. Introduction

In 1935, when he started writing his journal, Mihail Sebastian was a promising young Romanian Jewish writer, used to attending high society soirees, and with an extraordinary circle of friends that included great Romanian cultural figures such as Mircea Eliade, Constantin Noica and Eugen Ionescu. His journal, with the subtitle *The Fascist Years*, maps Sebastian's life in Bucharest between 1935 and 1944, providing a sobering account of growing institutional anti-Semitism and clashes between the government and the increasingly powerful Iron Guard. Sebastian paints a highly accurate picture of the city on the edge: a space to be enjoyed by the detached gaze of the modernist *flâneur*, but gradually and decisively politicised by the ever-changing anti-Jewish laws of both the Goga-Cuza and Ion Antonescu regimes. His narrative successfully combines the private and the public spheres, revealing the angst that defines the later years of the journal, when he loses friends, jobs and writing opportunities because of his Jewish heritage. The city itself changes, becoming dark and menacing, a material representation of what Sebastian calls 'Hitler's spectre' (Sebastian 2003, p. 311). Published in 1996 in Romanian and in 2000 in its English translation, the journal reflects the urgency of writing and the meticulous documentation of everyday life in more than six hundred pages. The Romanian edition generated a widespread discussion about the country's involvement in the Holocaust but also about the ultra-nationalist, anti-Semitic and Christian Orthodox fundamentalist views shared by many high-profile cultural actors featuring in the journal: the highly regarded Romanian novelist Camil Petrescu, the philosopher Constantin Noica and the philosopher of religions and writer Mircea Eliade¹. At a time when these extreme views were re-emerging in the country after the fall of communism, the conversation prompted by Sebastian's journal also revealed a national reluctance to recognise the country's role in the Holocaust and a tendency to regard the period of Ion Antonescu's fascist regime as an almost mythical time of national



Citation: Levick, Carmen. 2023. A City in *Dérive*: Bucharest in Mihail Sebastian's *Journal 1935–1944: The Fascist Years*. *Genealogy* 7: 14. <https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy7010014>

Received: 15 January 2023

Revised: 15 February 2023

Accepted: 21 February 2023

Published: 23 February 2023



Copyright: © 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

emancipation. However, Sebastian's diary entries offer a lucid exposé of the conflicting and complex issues of the time from the point of view of a successful Romanian Jewish writer, playwright and cultural figure. His unmediated access to the voices of the cultural elite and his privilege of living and working in the country's capital city allow for a text that evokes the realities of the time with palpable viscerality. The *Journal* becomes a portal of access to the city and its inhabitants at a time of extraordinary turmoil, gradually revealed through entries that span almost ten years.

2. The City as Performance: Walking and Drifting

Engaging productively with the performative practices of urban drifting and walking, my article employs performance studies as a frame of reference in proposing a new reading of Sebastian's diary as embodiment of historical change, focusing on the fluctuating relationship between person and space. Observed through theories of spatial engagement and performativity, Sebastian's physical and emotional relationship with the city will be at the forefront of my discussion. Moving beyond the analytical close reading of the diary, my work introduces an interdisciplinary investigative vocabulary for analysing Sebastian's autobiographical writing. The critical vocabulary proposed here considers a wide range of theoretical principles contained within the framework of performance studies. As an interdisciplinary field, performance studies has its origins in ethnography and anthropology on the one hand and the philosophy of language on the other. As a discipline, its focus has always been on process and transformation, on doing and becoming, rather than the finished object or the artistic output. Performance studies allows for a layered approach to the reading of human behaviour through the lens of the theatrical, which emphasises the relationship between object and spectator within a dialectical area of performance. Mihail Sebastian's writing engages with the city at a personal, intimate level, creating a living space that continuously responds to and reflects on every important moment incorporated in the *Journal*. Bucharest becomes a living organism, a character in its own right, rather than just a stage where history is played out. The writer converses with the city and feels it constantly change either by reflecting his own feelings onto the building, streets and people, or by interpreting the reaction of the space to volatile historical realities. Sebastian explores the city by immersing himself in it, by establishing a physical relationship with it through walking. This constant interaction with the space transforms the city from a collection of streets and buildings into an emotional map of current historical, political and personal affairs.

Experiencing the city through walking and drifting has long been associated with performative practice, theorised by Ivan Chtcheglov, a prominent member of the Letterist International (1952–1957), as an expression of the emotional engagement between person and space (Chtcheglov 2014). Following in his footsteps, the Situationists through Guy Debord and Asger Jorn advocated raising walking and drifting to the level of concepts, thus allowing their application to a wide range of fields. Distinguishing the nineteenth century *flânerie* from the practice of drifting, they turn the city into 'a theatre of operations' (McDonough 1994, p. 73) where theatricality becomes a medium in itself 'that makes meaning and identity drift' (Lavery 2020, p. 166). Rather than having a complete freedom of movement, where the *flâneur* can employ the luxury of a detached and observing gaze, the drifting body encounters a resistant city and thus must interact with it in order to *dérive*². The drifter is acting against a feeling of lack of belonging and wants to disrupt and fragment the city in order to consciously appropriate it. Unlike the *flâneur*, 'the drifter does not have the luxury or the means to keep to himself' because the *dérive* takes place 'on a terrain organised by the law of a foreign power' (McDonough 1994, p. 75). While the Situationists identify this power as belonging to the capitalist space, the vocabulary used to describe the drifter and the process of drifting within this space can be easily transferred to a discussion of the body, the Jewish body in Sebastian's case, in *dérive* in an adverse space that sets up multiple barriers to movement. Inhabiting the city becomes a political use of the space where the walker assesses the dangers through emotions

derived from the senses of sight and hearing. Colours, sounds and emotions abound in every entry, moving from light to dark, depending on how the writer feels: 'It has been perhaps one of the last magnificent days of autumn. And how many colours! I didn't know there were so many red houses in Bucharest.'; 'My first day back in Bucharest, an exhausting day. I was awakened early by the buses, the street shouts, the suffocating heat. Where are my good nights in Bran? Where are the mornings with the smell of the forest?' (Sebastian 2003, p. 172). The city acquires a material presence through which the changes in laws and environments are reflected: 'the city is only experienced in time by a concrete, situated subject, as a passage from one unity of atmosphere to another, not as the object of totalised perception' (McDonough 1994, p. 64). It is the physical experience of the city that matters and its translation into text(s). The *dérive* through urban environments becomes not only a way of emotionally and performatively inhabiting the space of the city, but also an embodied way of writing about the city. The richness of the theoretical and performative vocabulary used by the Situationists merits a more meaningful application in the critical analysis of spatial relations in literature. The concept of the *dérive* can be used retrospectively to explore the relationship between writers and space and the ways in which this relationship is revealed in the materiality of their writing. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, for example, employ the Situationist conceptualisation of space in their analysis of Franz Kafka's work, arguing that his writing displays the emotional representation of the *dérive* through 'blocks of intensity' and 'assemblages of percepts and affects' (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, p. 78). The social geography of the city is mapped through points of intensity, interrogating the affective relationship between individual and space. The connection between these points of intensity is made through drifting. The walker experiences urban space as an assemblage of social, political, economic, biological and aesthetic fragments. This experience is then transposed into the materiality of writing. Much like the focal points in Kafka's writing, Sebastian's connection with the city is reflected through the style of the journal, meandering between moments of explosive emotional intensity. However, the essential aspect of the relationship between the walker and the city is its embodied character, or, according to Deleuze and Guattari, 'the immanent power of corporeality in all matter' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 411). This physical and emotional interaction between individual and space is further developed and discussed through performance studies. Leo Charney and later Carl Lavery reinforce a view of drifting and *dérive* as accumulations of empty and potent moments, advocating for a more significant use of the Situationist vocabulary in the analysis of both text and performance. Drawing on Carl Lavery's metaphorical reinterpretation of *dérive* as a drifting text, characterized by flow and sedimentation, my reading of Mihail Sebastian's journal reflects the friction that is embodied in the texts between moments of leisure and non-productive behaviour and instances of visceral historical and political potency. Acknowledging the importance of historical and literary analysis in the examination of Jewish Holocaust diaries, present in recent works by Alexandra Garbarini (2006) and Amos Goldberg (2017), this article proposes an exploration of Sebastian's journal as an embodiment of place and identity. The work is approached as a performative piece that in its content reflects its author's experiences in the city he inhabits, and in its form and style exposes the drifting text as 'one in which not all of the meanings are accounted for in the main body of writing, but, on the contrary, fold back into it via deposits left in footnotes, evocative of an alluvial, meandering type of thinking characterized by flow and sedimentation, stoppage and movement' (Lavery 2018, p. 1). The city becomes bodily plays of surfaces, textures and atmospheres. The entries in the diary come in quick succession, heightening the feeling of chaos and disbelief. The horror is deeply connected to place. The journal, written in the midst of constantly evolving pressures, demands a new critical vocabulary that takes into account all the radical energies of living in historically dynamic times. The performative and theatrical language of *dérive* allows for syncopated interpretive rhythms that account for the entanglement and unpredictability of life in a capital city before and during the Second World War.

3. Mihail Sebastian: Romanian Jew, Writer, Witness

Born Iosif Mendel Hechter in 1907 in the city of Brăila, Mihail Sebastian was a successful novelist, playwright and literary critic. He moved to Bucharest to study law, and started to become involved with the high society literary circles in the city, including the famous Criterion literary group, whose members were, among others, Mircea Eliade, Emil Cioran and Eugen Ionescu. Always aware of his Jewish heritage and the ways in which it could influence his literary career, Sebastian started using the pen name Mihail Sebastian from 1927. His friends, however, never let him forget his Jewish origins. Philosopher Nae Ionescu, Sebastian's mentor, who he asked to write the preface to his second novel, *For Two Thousand Years*, published in 1934, voiced his doubt that a Jew could be part of a national community: 'It is an assimilationist illusion, it is the illusion of so many Jews who sincerely believe that they are Romanian . . . Remember that you are Jewish! Are you Iosif Hechter, a human being from Brăila on the Danube? No, you are a Jew from Brăila on the Danube' (Sebastian 2016, p. 12). In his *Journal* Sebastian often discusses and reflects on Ionescu's anti-Semitic ideas, observing that a lecture by the philosopher that he attended in Bucharest in March 1935 'was suffocating. Iron Guardism pure and simple—no nuances, no complications, no excuses' (Sebastian 2003, p. 9). The fallout from the publication of his novel was catastrophic for Sebastian. Left-wing and Jewish voices in Romanian newspapers like *Facla* on 23 June 1934 and *Adam* on 1 June 1934 accused him of being an Iron Guard sympathiser and an anti-Semite due to his agreement to publish Ionescu's *Preface*. At the same time, Romanian anti-Semitic newspapers like *Gândirea* in October 1934 accused him of being a Zionist agent and decried his attempt at writing a 'Romanian novel', highlighting bad grammar and calling Sebastian a shameless 'exotic dabbler in our national literature' [my translation] (Sebastian 2019, p. 116). As a response, Sebastian wrote *How I Became a Hooligan*, an anthology of essays that addressed the constant anti-Semitism surrounding him:

I was born in Romania, and I am Jewish. That makes me a Jew, and a Romanian. For me to go around and join discussions demanding that my identity as a Jewish Romanian be taken seriously would be as crazy as the linden trees on the island where I was born to come together demanding their rights to be linden trees. As for anyone who tells me that I'm not Romanian, the answer is the same: go talk to the trees, and tell them they're not trees [my translation]. (Sebastian 2019, p. 35)

In *For Two Thousand Years*, Sebastian identified what was for him the core of Romania's problem with anti-Semitism. It all started with the fact that: 'To put it crudely, Romanian culture has remained stuck with the same intellectual problems which arose when the first railroad was built in 1860. With the problem of identifying with the west or the east, with Europe or the Balkans, with urban culture or the spirit of the countryside. The issues have always remained the same' (Sebastian 2016, p. 130). What Sebastian perceives as a tension of structural binaries in Romanian culture also informs many of the state's anti-Semitic ideologies voiced, among others, by Nae Ionescu. His concept of nation emerges from a view, popular at the time, which identifies Romanians as a self-contained Christian collective. In a short essay entitled 'How to Be a "Good Romanian"', Ionescu argued that although a 'good Romanian' is a vague and complicated notion, it still contains 'a moral, political, and ultimately spiritual component' [my translation] (Ionescu 1990, p. 195). Thus, '*to want to be Romanian does not actually mean to be Romanian*' [italics in the original, my translation] (Ionescu 1990, p. 197). In a follow-up article on the same topic, entitled 'Us and Catholicism', Ionescu concluded that in order to be Romanian, one 'had to be orthodox' [my translation] (Ionescu 1990, p. 201). According to this essentialist approach, 'it is practically impossible to change, or to pass from one collective to another, since each individual is defined by the collective to which he belongs, both in nature and in his social circumstances' (Idel 2015, p. 45). Given that Romanian Jews were not considered part of the national collective, Ionescu argued that there was 'a categorical incompatibility between Christians and Jews that will disappear only when one of the two religions disappears' (Idel 2015, p. 45).

Anti-Semitic attitudes have a long history in Romania, stretching back to the sixteenth century and a view of Jews as ‘a non-Christian people with nebulous and often suspect external loyalties’ (Ioanid 2000, p. 8). At the beginning of the twentieth century however, as we moved closer to the Second World War, Romanian politicians became increasingly vocal in their attempt to legally curtail the rights of Jewish citizens, stressing their non-Christianity and alleged close connections with Bolshevism. In 1938, the then Romanian Prime Minister, Octavian Goga, noted that Romania could only accommodate ‘the Jews of the pure Semitic type, with olive skin, black eyes, black hair, fairly fine features, and reasonably good looks’ (Ioanid 2000, p. 18), and not the ‘barbaric Jews, with their reddish skin, slanted eyes, and flattened faces’ (Ioanid 2000, p. 18) who came from Poland and Russia.

Taking up a position against these views in his *Journal*, Sebastian champions the individual as a human being rather than an abstraction, who has ‘passions and—whatever one may say—an instinct for freedom, an awareness of [his] own individual existence’ (Sebastian 2003, p. 9). In his work, the ‘instinct for freedom’ is overwhelmingly embodied in his engagement with the streets of the city. If the state was adamant to see the Jews as a homogenous mass of bodies, Sebastian defies this view by consciously experiencing and appropriating the public space of the city through walking. He inhabits the role of the drifter, exploring the geography of the city ‘as made and remade every day; at each instant modified by men’s actions’ (Ross 1988, p. 91). Sebastian’s in-depth involvement with the city happens alongside a self-evaluation of his position as citizen, intellectual and friend, but what transpires very clearly from the beginning of the diary is the author’s intimate relationship with the city. Bucharest is mentioned in almost every entry, usually in an update on the weather which may or may not impede his frequent strolling through the city centre with a variety of high society ladies. On the 31 April 1935 he writes: ‘Went for a walk with Leni and a friend of hers, Jeni Cruțescu, on the Șosea [sic]. The first spring morning, after so many rainy ones. It was warm; a lot of green, a lot of yellow. We had vermouths and snacks at the Flora. Leni was delightfully dressed. People turned their heads at us, and I was again proud to be walking beside her’ (Sebastian 2003, p. 12). His feeling of legitimacy and pride is in opposition with already alarming signs of both verbal and physical attacks against the city’s Jews. By September the same year, when he invites his actress friend, Lilly, for a walk on the Corso, ‘all the stares directed at us had a kind of shocked and aggressive surprise’ (Sebastian 2003, p. 22). The writer projects his own anxieties onto a city that gradually becomes the microcosm of a country on the brink of a nationalist revolution, where Sebastian begins to question his position as an individual, a Jew and a Romanian.

4. Bucharest, a Drifting City

The narratives Sebastian constructs while walking in Bucharest reflect the fragmentation and disorientation caused by the changing boundaries that render him an alien in his own city: ‘I realise that we no longer have anything to win, anything to defend, anything to hope for. All is virtually lost. There will come prisons, dire poverty, maybe escape, maybe exile, maybe worse’ (Sebastian 2003, p. 135). ‘It is hard to believe that a Cuzist regime will tolerate a Jew in a “cultural position”—even one as lowly as mine’ (Sebastian 2003, p. 137). The Situationist practice of *dérive*, as ‘a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances, as a playful-constructive behaviour and awareness of psychogeographical effects’ (Debord 1981, p. 50), fits Sebastian’s complicated relationship with the city. In his journal he often talks about experiencing Bucharest as a performative process, almost as what Guy Debord describes as ‘people letting themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there’ (Debord 1981, p. 52). On 21 December 1937 he notes: ‘it was a bright sunny morning, and in the streets, out in the open air, there was a kind of *allegresse* in which I allowed myself to be heedlessly caught up’ (Sebastian 2003, p. 135). The city centre, with Calea Victoriei, la Șosea, where he can easily access the restaurants, theatres and music halls, and parks like Cîșmigiu, are part of what Debord calls the city’s ‘psychogeographical contours’ (Debord 1981, p. 50). They are the fixed points

within the vortexes that provide a constant and familiar flow. However, like in Debord's framework, the city contains certain zones (Bucharest's black zones) which included the old Jewish districts of Văcărești and Dudești, as spaces that strongly discourage entry into or exit from. These become zones of conflict during a period of Legionnaires' unrest in 1936. On 24 June, Sebastian notes:

We may be heading for an organised pogrom. The evening before last, Marcel Abramovici was knocked down in the street by twenty or so students, who then dragged him unconscious into the cellar of their hostel and only "released" him a couple of hours later, with a deep head wound, his clothing torn and bloodied.

Yesterday evening there was a street-fighting atmosphere on Strada Gabroveni. The Jewish shopkeepers had lowered their shutters and were waiting for their attackers, determined to resist them. I think that's the only thing to do. If we're going to kick the bucket, we might as well do it with a club in our hands. It's no less tragic, but at least not so ridiculous. (Sebastian 2003, p. 59)

The only escape is represented by frequent visits to the countryside for hiking, skiing and writing: 'A fine day, which took me out of Bucharest and allowed me to breathe. It made me aware again that the earth is bigger than the three square kilometres on which I live, fret, and talk' (Sebastian 2003, p. 62). However, the pull of the city is too strong. This is the space where history happens and any recreational activity that is taking place outside of the city feels like a personal betrayal: 'I can't be so irresponsible as to ski while the whole of our lives from now on is being decided' (Sebastian 2003, p. 136). He feels nostalgia for the city immediately after leaving it, and although the city itself causes him disorientation, fear and anger, it is the space where he defines himself as an individual. Clay Routledge argues that 'nostalgia is about the self, when we engage in nostalgia we reflect on past experiences through the lens of the self' (Routledge 2016, p. 18). As a personal feeling, it is triggered by a psychological threat or a negative affective status, and in Sebastian's case the pressures of the new anti-Semitic laws provide this negative atmosphere. The institution of the state is dismantling the writer's self, layer by layer: he is not allowed to be a lawyer, a playwright or a journalist anymore. He questions his identity as a writer in the city: 'Writing in Bucharest becomes more and more impossible. The creativity is stifled and the radio is mediating public space' (Sebastian 2003, p. 53). He is now only a Jew: 'The first measures of state anti-Semitism are expected for tomorrow or the day after: a citizenship review, probably elimination from the Bar and in any case from the press. In these conditions, is it not a childish stupidity to be writing literature?' (Sebastian 2003, p. 137). Sebastian is seeking comfort by walking in the streets of the city where he used to feel complete, supported, admired. However, Bucharest has changed and his personal need to belong to the community of the city's inhabitants is not met with a positive response: 'I don't know what the atmosphere is like in town. Consternation, bewilderment, alarm, or fear? The papers are lifeless, inexpressive, without any note of protest. I think it is only now that we will start learning what censorship means' (Sebastian 2003, p. 137). The city, which in this case stands in for the nation, is not opposing the dangers that Sebastian is feeling so keenly. The initial inertia of the streets, followed by open aggression, force the walker to retreat inside: 'For two years I have not been to the theatre or gone to restaurants: I avoid walking around the city centre; I don't see anyone or try to get in touch with anyone; I keep to myself as much as possible and let others forget about me' (Sebastian 2003, p. 518). The writer longs for the possibility to become invisible, to hide from the relentless attacks on his identity. However, the city does not allow hiding and forgetting. Anti-Jewish laws become ever present in the streets through Jewish bodies lined up for deportation, through a cacophony of voices discussing the continuous legal changes and the need for their imposition, through soldiers marching on the boulevards, through the destruction of Jewish spaces. If until this moment Sebastian's walking practice attempted to navigate, experience and appropriate the cityscape through writing, drifting now becomes almost impossible through alienation and othering. Discussing the relationship between

the ethnically alienated citizen and the nation, another Romanian survivor of the Holocaust, Norman Manea, writes that ‘the homeland unveils its ambiguous meanings especially during the violence of rupture, which renders more intense the need for self-questioning. The world of estrangement also means alienation from self as well as from others’ (Manea 2012, pp. 7–8). Sebastian tries to keep to himself by limiting his walks in the city and isolating himself socially and physically. He does not recognise himself anymore because the identity he forged in and through the city has disappeared. This makes him question his own existence, limited to the claustrophobic space of his flat. Thus, his apartment becomes his world, one enhanced by imagination, four stories above the streets and the violence of the people: ‘The terrace is quite spacious—easily enough for three open chaises longues—and from there I have a semi-circular view of half of Bucharest. It is reminiscent of the entrance to New York harbour. I float among buildings’ (Sebastian 2003, p. 190). Nevertheless, he feels trapped and he makes a very conscious decision to get out, to observe, using his journal as a way of documenting the realities of a world at war both externally and internally: ‘I find it hard to stay indoors, so I walk in the street, pay visits, wander around’ (Sebastian 2003, p. 352).

5. Witnessing Change

In his *Journal* Sebastian often muses about the importance of being a witness, of documenting the realities of living as a Jew in Bucharest immediately before and during the Second World War. The visceral need to write comes not only from being personally hurt by the words and ideologies voiced by some of his friends in private conversations, but also from the view that the city itself, which he considers a trusted ally, is turning into a menacing presence. On Tuesday, 2 March 1937, he writes:

Mircea [Eliade] said: All who are not Iron Guardists, all who engage in any other kind of politics, are national traitors and deserve the same fate.

One day I may reread these lines and feel unable to believe that they summarise [Mircea’s words]. So it is well if I say again that I have done no more than record his very words—so that they aren’t somehow forgotten. Perhaps one day things will have calmed down enough for me to read this page to Mircea and to see him blush with shame. (Sebastian 2003, p. 114)

He foresees the adverse atmosphere that might follow in a country that shows open anti-Semitic sympathies through the rise to power of the Iron Guard and the National Legionary State that will govern Romania between September 1940 and February 1941. On Friday, 7 January (1938), he notes: ‘I realise that I am becoming a little apprehensive about what I write in this journal. It’s not impossible that I’ll be awakened one day by a house search, and there can be no more “scandalous” evidence than a personal diary’ (Sebastian 2003, p. 144). However, the signs of anti-Semitic laws are already present in the *Journal* as early as February 1935, when Sebastian voices concern about a deterioration of his working life as a Jewish lawyer in the city: ‘For a week now, beginnings of revolution at the Bar. A few meetings campaigning for a ‘*numerus clausus*’ (Sebastian 2003, p. 6). As a concept, the *numerus clausus* or closed number (and later *numerus nullus*), reflected openly anti-Semitic regulations imposed on Romanian Jews. It was first introduced in 1923 as a way of limiting the number of Jewish students at national universities (in Cluj, Iasi, Bucharest and Chernivtsi, then part of the Kingdom of Romania)³. Sebastian himself writes about it earlier in his novel *For Two Thousand Years*: ‘I received two punches during today’s lectures and I took eight pages of notes. Good value, for two punches’ (Sebastian 2016, p. 23). His character in the novel is gradually obstructed by representatives of the Association of Christian Students and the National Christian Defence League from entering University buildings. This leads him to express a feeling of complete and utter loneliness: ‘I am in fact absolutely, definitively alone’ (Sebastian 2016, p. 16). By the time Sebastian starts his journal, the quasi-legal term of *numerus clausus* is also used in government institutions. This is part of the nationalist revolution he often mentions,

which responds to what Norman Manea calls ‘the centripetal need for belonging’ (Manea 2012, p. 3). The Romanian version of fascism was intrinsically about finding identity and constructing a national mythology, based on the Romanian language and Christian Orthodox fundamentalism. This necessitated the bringing into existence of the other, the foreigner, the stranger who had to be expelled from this national vision. The Romanian Jews became an easy target for laws that found clear support in fascist states across Europe. While initially assimilation was suggested and encouraged through baptism into the Orthodox church, leading revolutionary voices like Nae Ionescu argued that this was not a valid choice due to the essential incompatibilities between the two religions. Notwithstanding the refusal of the state to recognise Romanian Jews as part of the Romanian nation, cultural leaders like the novelist Camil Petrescu still voiced their concern that Jews were, ironically, ‘too nationalistic’ (Sebastian 2003, p. 60). Sebastian documents a conversation with Petrescu in the aftermath of anti-Semitic attacks in the city:

He went on to say:

“My dear man, the Jews provoke things: they have dubious attitude and get mixed up in things that don’t concern them. They are too nationalistic.”

“You should make up your mind, Camil. Are they nationalists or are they Communists?”

“Wow, you’re really something, you know? Here we are alone and you can still ask questions like that. *What else is communism but the imperialism of the Jews?*” [italics in the original]. (Sebastian 2003, p. 60)

The association between Jews and communism became another way of defining the other within the country’s nationalist discourse. Romanian politicians were increasingly vocal in their attempt to legally curtail the rights of Jewish citizens, stressing their non-Christianity and alleged close connections with Bolshevism. The December 1937 election brought the shock result of the National Liberal Party, supported by king Carol II, not gaining a majority of the votes. As a consequence, the king chose the National Christian Party, an uneasy alliance between the National Christian Defense League and the right-wing National Agrarian Party, to form a government. Although the Goga-Cuza government only survived forty-four days in power, its legislative policy had a determining impact on Romanian Jews⁴. Subsequently, on 21 January 1938 a new constitutional law was adopted, defining members of the Romanian nation by blood, ‘distinguishing between Romanians by race and by residence’ (Ioanid 2000, p. 8). According to Radu Ioanid, the Goga-Cuza government wanted to deport 500,000 Jews to Madagascar, with Istrate Micescu, the minister for foreign affairs, arguing that: ‘it is urgent that we sweep up our courtyard because it serves no purpose to tolerate this garbage’ (Ioanid 2000, p. 18) The government’s proposal to send half a million ‘illegal’ Jews from Romania to Madagascar was not a new plan. It was connected to much earlier projects put forward by French and British scholars at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. Modern day Kenya, Uganda and Madagascar were all considered as potential spaces to relocate European Jews. The Madagascar Plan was considered again in 1937 by the Polish government, which was reluctant to accept the repatriation of Polish Jews from Germany (Nicosia 2008). This widespread anti-Semitic discourse and ‘the aggression of the environment’ (Manea 2012, p. 7) had a decisive impact on Sebastian. He feels ashamed and disillusioned, although still adamant to document the violence in the streets. His only dissatisfaction is that the journal cannot fully express the distress that he is feeling: ‘This journal is not much use to me. I read it over sometimes and am depressed by its lack of any deep resonance. Things are noted without emotion, dully and inexpressively. Nowhere is it apparent that the man writing it goes from day to day, hour to hour, with the thought of death alongside him, inside him’ (Sebastian 2003, p. 416). This is a strange evaluation of the potential impact that the journal might have on the reader, when the actual process of reading provides emotional insights into the situation of the country at the beginning of and during the war. Although not satisfied with it as a writer, Sebastian uses the pages of his journal to

restore a sense of meaning to his everyday life. He tries to make sense of the violence that surrounds him in the streets by observing and describing what he sees and by using the radio and newspapers as important mediators of the public space. However, anti-Semitic laws slowly strip him of every information resource other than his own walking practice: 'I am worried about the anti-Semitic tension that is being fuelled by the press, radio, and the street posters. Why? Why? I know perfectly well why, but I can't break the habit of asking this silly question' (Sebastian 2003, p. 373). When he is asked to hand in his own radio to the police due to a new government decree in May 1941, the sound of the neighbours' radios still reach him through the walls, with menacing tones: 'snatches of the broadcast drift up from the floor below, or maybe from across the way. I can't make out what he is saying, but I easily recognise Hitler's guttural voice and especially the cheering that constantly interrupts him: cheers and roars that are quite simply insane' (Sebastian 2003, p. 179). The signs of war are reflected in the streets of the city as early as 1938 through centrally organised defence exercises, which had 'plunged the whole city into darkness and given it a sinister appearance, with streetlights off, windows blacked out, sirens wailing, bells tolling, and so on' (Sebastian 2003, p. 186). Within this hostile atmosphere, Sebastian's urban drifting tries to respond to what Carl Lavery calls 'the contemporary spectacle's destructive and contradictory impulses' (Lavery 2018, p. 5). These are materialised in street violence, the pageantry of the German army and an animated and excited city.

Friday, 24 January (1941)

Yesterday at about 11 a.m. (just after I had written the previous entry) a procession started along Calea Victoriei and on toward the Șosea—long motorised German columns, with rifles and machine guns at the ready. They certainly made an impression. And it was crystal-clear that the German army was on the side of General Antonescu against the insurgent Legion.

I see tangible evidence of revolution. On Calea Victoriei, below National, there was an air of complete desolation. Tanks, machine guns, and army patrols on a deserted main street with shutters drawn. I heard from Alice that the Văcărești and Dudești districts had been set on fire and looted during the night. (Sebastian 2003, p. 308)

The escalation of violence and military activity in the city represents the physical manifestation of what Deleuze and Guattari call 'blocks of intensity' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 40), framed by empty moments of wandering. From 1939, the journal contains more and more politically and historically potent moments which become the norm. The only escape from the extraordinary everyday is imagining himself in a place where he is 'unknown and alive': 'I looked up from the street to the sky. It brought tears to my eyes: a clear blue sky, with some weightless white clouds floating across it; a southern sky, you might say. It could have been somewhere else: in Annecy, Geneva, Lisbon, or Santa Barbara. I could have lowered my head and no longer found myself in Bucharest, in August 1941, but in a free city where I could move about freely, unknown and alive' (Sebastian 2003, pp. 393–94).

This focus on the extraordinariness of the ordinary brings to mind a larger body of work that discusses the philosophy and aesthetics of the artistic object in connection with the spectacle of everyday life. Using the example of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Purloined Letter*, in which a letter cannot be found precisely because it is placed in plain sight, Siegfried Kracauer argues that any historical and sociological investigation should recognise and perhaps focus on 'surface-level expressions' which can 'provide unmediated access to the fundamental substance of the state of things' (Sieg 2010, p. 104). Kracauer's notion of the 'mass ornament' is useful for a performative reading of the public space in so far as it sheds light on the various types of relationships between people and the public environments they engage with. He includes in his definition of the mass ornament the public engagements that are imposed from the outside. These are planned by the institutions of power and those participating are seen as mere elements who are unaware of the whole picture or do

not have a critical insight into the agency they possess (Krakauer 1975). His image of the ornament is similar to what Guy Debord later calls 'the society of the spectacle' (Debord 2010). He considers spectacle 'the reigning society's method for paralysing history and memory and for suppressing any history based on historical time' (Debord 2010, p. 90). For Debord, spectacle is a way of controlling memory by constantly rewriting the past and making the masses validate it through a relationship with the public space, mainly through mass commemorations and pageantry. Sebastian writes:

Yesterday morning, candles were burning opposite our building at the corner of the Thoiss pharmacy, where one of the soldiers fell. Passers-by stopped and asked about him. Agitated little groups looked toward our building, running their eyes up its nine floors and down again, with a strange expression of wonder and menace . . . a stuttering half-wit was telling how "a yid woman fired with a revolver last night, from the roof of that building over there—and a trooper was hit". (Sebastian 2003, p. 309)

The spontaneous shrines to fallen soldiers bring together individuals in the public space to commemorate and share stories which create false narratives that nobody seems to contest. By the time Sebastian returns to his apartment 'the "yid" was a man, not a woman; some said he had been captured, others that he had not; some specified that he fired from the fourth floor, other that no one knows where he fired from. Later I spent a little while at the window, watching how the news spread, how the groups became larger and more agitated. Look, that's how a pogrom begins' (Sebastian 2003, p. 310). For both Krakauer and Debord, the viewing masses can take back control by disturbing the rules set for them by the powers of the state; however, the occurrences in the city confirm that in this case the masses reinforce and escalate the violence: 'The tragedy is that no one has anything to do with it. Everyone disapproves and feels indignant—but at the same time everyone is a cog in the huge anti-Semitic factory that is the Romanian state, with all its offices, authorities, press, institutions, laws and procedures. The bloodying and mocking of Jews have been public *entertainment par excellence*' (Sebastian 2003, p. 391).

Following a period of intense political instability—marked, among other things, by the dismissal of the Goga-Cuza government by King Carol II, the naming of the Orthodox patriarch Miron Cristea as the new prime minister and the assassination of Cristea's successor as prime minister, Armand Călinescu, by the Iron Guard—Ion Antonescu was named prime minister in September 1940. The period of Ion Antonescu's governments between 1940 and 1944 became of particular importance in recapturing the essence of a new Romanian identity. This was a period of Romanian territorial expansion, aided by its German allies, incorporating Bessarabia, Bukovina and Transnistria to the old Romanian 'Regat' (Kingdom) of Wallachia and Moldavia. It also saw state-sponsored colonial practices, like the process of Romanianization which was aimed mainly at Romanian Jews, and the Hungarian and Ukrainian minorities in the Old Kingdom and the newly annexed regions. The process was based on the philosophy of Romanianism, described by Mac Linscott Ricketts as an ideology that ordinarily 'signified chauvinism, anti-Semitism, policies for restraint of minorities, anti-communism, and enthusiasm for Italian fascism and German National Socialism' (Linscott Ricketts 1988, p. 55). The legal basis of this ideology originated in a decree issued by Ion Gigurtu's government, which was dismissed just before Antonescu became prime minister. The Jewish Statute of 8 August 1940 'created a new legal definition of Jewishness based on racial criteria' (Michelbacher 2020, p. 15). The ritual murders of 200 Jews in the Străulești slaughterhouse and the mass killings in the Băneasa forest during the 1941 Bucharest pogrom were clearly connected to this ideology by the perpetrating Iron Guard, arguing that Romania's cultural identity was sacred and beyond politics, and it was available only to those of Romanian blood, mirroring the anti-Semitic laws brought in by the Goga government. Once again, the city accommodates the atrocities: 'The Jews butchered at Străulești abattoir were hanged by the neck on hooks normally used for beef carcasses. A sheet of paper was stuck to each corpse: "Kosher Meat" (Sebastian 2003, p. 316) and Sebastian's desperation knows no limits. Violence becomes spectacle, spilling into the

streets through tortured bodies, dead and barely alive. Jewish bodies become part of a power display, reinforcing Michel Foucault's discussion of public torture as theatricality: 'But the body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs' (Foucault 1977, p. 25). The *Journal* documents 'small groups of pale, famished, ragged Jews, carrying wretched bundles or sacks' (Sebastian 2003, p. 390), paraded in the streets and rounded up for deportation and extermination.

Later in the year, in June 1941, Ion Antonescu announced that Romania would begin a holy war to liberate Bessarabia and Bukovina, alongside Germany. The country's territorial expansion was seen as a rebirth of the nation through the force of arms and religious faith, which was also used to cement Romanian extremism. Christianity in general and the Orthodox religion in particular, were a determining part of the war, led by dangerous ideologies containing elements of antisemitism, anticommunism, nationalism and religious fervour. The country's colonial and anti-Semitic ambitions are materialized in the city through the overnight appearance of posters by famous graphic artist Ion Valentin Anestin, portraying Stalin as 'The Butcher of Red Square'. Yet again, the propaganda for the war against bolshevism is connecting the Romanian Jews with communism and thus anti-Romanianism: 'The second—with the text: "Who are the masters of bolshevism?"—shows a Jew in a red gown, with side curls, skull cap, and beard, holding a hammer in one hand and a sickle in the other. Concealed beneath his coat are three Soviet soldiers. I have heard that the posters were put up by police sergeants' (Sebastian 2003, p. 370). However, Romania's holy war was mainly about the country's imperial ambitions: Mircea Vulcănescu, the then finance minister, made a speech about the Romanian ambitions in Transnistria that is quoted by Sebastian in his *Journal*: "'This is a unique opportunity for our imperial ambitions. Transnistria means the first experience of colonisation in Romanian history. By planting forests in the whole of Transnistria, we'll be able to stop the icy north wind ever blowing on us again'" (Sebastian 2003, p. 593). The close connection between Romania's imperial ambitions and the ethnic cleansing of the Jews in Bessarabia and Bukovina is also highlighted by Antonescu himself at a meeting of the Council of Ministers in July 1941: 'The Roman Empire committed acts deemed barbaric by contemporary standards, and nevertheless it established the greatest political system. This is the most opportune moment in our history. If need be, use machine guns.' (Ioanid 2000, p. 92) However, the lack of national military success and the approaching Red Army are signs that Romania's alliance with Germany is coming to an end. Towards the end of his journal, although happy to survive and regain his 'freedom', Sebastian struggles with the possibility of forgiveness: 'It is not right that Romania should get off too lightly. In the end, this opulent carefree, frivolous Bucharest is a provocation for any army coming from a country laid waste' (Sebastian 2003, p. 611).

6. Conclusions

In reading Sebastian's *Journal* through the lens of his relationship with Bucharest, this article proposes a rethinking of the politics of drifting. In Situationist works, drifting appears as spectacle: the openness of the city streets invites the *dérive* from all citizens. Anyone can *dérive*, or can they? In Sebastian's work, the initial freedom of *derive* is curtailed by the political realities of the city. What is in *dérive* is the legal framework within which the *dérive* can happen. There is a lack of organisation. Anything can happen unexpectedly. 'There are no brakes, no rhyme or reason' (Sebastian 2003, p. 430), Sebastian notes. The primarily urban character of the *dérive*, in its element in the great industrially transformed cities, could be expressed in Debord's quote of Marx's phrase: 'Men can see nothing around them that is not their own image; everything speaks to them of themselves. Their very landscape is alive' (Debord 1981, p. 53). Sebastian's physical and emotional connection with Bucharest reflects this identification with the city in a process of mirroring. The writer walks, drifts through the city in an attempt to find images of himself, but instead he faces a negation of the self, epitomised by the very present anti-Jewish violence in the streets.

However, the documentation of his personal and public struggles unveils a controversial and complex period in Romanian history that must be fully understood in order to facilitate a meaningful conversation about Romania's role in the Holocaust. This is by no means an exhaustive consideration of Sebastian's *Journal*. The work contains so many more extraordinary entries that powerfully reflect on the position of Jewish Romanian citizens in the capital before and during the Second World War. The *Journal*, together with other examples of autobiographical writing, like Emil Dorian's diary, for example, are a treasure trove for those interested in reconsidering Romanian cultural politics in the 1930s and 1940s, providing an opportunity to re-read the process of nation-making as a performative interaction between space and individual, between place and identity.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: This research did not need ethical review given the fact that it did not involve human participants.

Informed Consent Statement: No human participants in this research.

Data Availability Statement: No research data has been produced as a result of this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ The publication of Sebastian's *Journal* also prompted the publication of contradictory critical works about the writer, focusing on his relationship with philosopher and mentor Nae Ionescu. (Petreu 2011) and (Iovanel 2012) show the complexity of the writer's public image but also reinforce the need for a much wider national conversation about Romania's role in the Holocaust.
- ² For further reading about the applications of *dérive* in connection with film and performance art about the Holocaust in Romania, see (Baker 2021).
- ³ For more information about citizenship and the anti-Semitic laws in Romania before and during the Second World War, see (Dumitru 2016) and (Iordachi 2019).
- ⁴ For more detailed information about the complicated political situation in Romania just before the Second World War, and its impact on Romanian Jews, see (Deletant 2006) or (Anceal 2012).

References

- Anceal, Jean. 2012. *The History of the Holocaust in Romania*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Baker, Emily-Rose. 2021. Postcommunist Constellations: Memory Cultures of the Holocaust in Central and Eastern Europe. Ph.D. thesis, University of Sheffield, White Rose online eTheses. Available online: <https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/31334/> (accessed on 20 February 2023).
- Chtcheglov, Ivan. 2014. Formulary for a New Urbanism. In *Situationism: A Compendium*. Edited by Guy Debord, Ivan Chtcheglov and Asger Jorn. Bred and Circuses: pp. 1–13.
- Debord, Guy. 1981. Theory of the *dérive*. In *Situationist International Anthology*. Translated and Edited by Ken Knabb. Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, pp. 50–54.
- Debord, Guy. 2010. *Society of the Spectacle*. London: Rebel Press.
- Deletant, Dennis. 2006. *Hitler's Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and His Regime, Romania 1940–1944*. London: Palgrave.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. 1986. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Dumitru, Diana. 2016. *The State, Antisemitism, and Collaboration in the Holocaust*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 1977. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. London: Random House Vintage Books.
- Garbarini, Alexandra. 2006. *Numbered Days: Diaries and the Holocaust*. London: Yale University Press.
- Goldberg, Amos. 2017. *Trauma in First Person: Diary Writing During the Holocaust*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Idel, Moshe. 2015. A Controversy Over a Preface: Mihail Sebastian and Nae Ionescu. *Modern Judaism* 35: 42–65. [CrossRef]
- Ioanid, Radu. 2000. *The Holocaust in Romania*. Chicago: Ivan R Dee.
- Ionescu, Nae. 1990. *Roza Vânturilor*. București: Editura Roza Vânturilor.
- Iordachi, Constantin. 2019. *Liberalism, Constitutional Nationalism and Minorities—The Making of Romanian Citizenship, 1750–1918*. Leiden: Brill.
- Iovanel, Mihai. 2012. *Evreul Improbabil: Mihail Sebastian, o Monografie Ideologică*. București: Cartea Românească.
- Krakauer, Siegfried. 1975. The Mass Ornament. *New German Critique* 5: 67–76. [CrossRef]
- Lavery, Carl. 2018. Rethinking the *Dérive*. *Performance Research* 23: 1–15. [CrossRef]

- Lavery, Carl. 2020. Theatricality and Drifting in the Anthropocene: Reading Asger Jorn and Guy Debord's *Mémoires* as 'Earth Book'. *Nordic Theatre Studies* 32: 159–78. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Linscott Ricketts, Mac. 1988. *Mircea Eliade: The Romanian Roots*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Manea, Norman. 2012. *The Fifth Impossibility—Essays on Exile and Language*. London: Yale University Press.
- McDonough, Thomas F. 1994. Situationist Space. *October* 67: 58–77.
- Michelbacher, Dallas. 2020. *Jewish Forced Labour in Romania*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Nicosia, Francis R. 2008. *Zionism and Anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Petreu, Marta. 2011. *Diavolul și ucenicul său: Nae Ionescu–Mihail Sebastian*. Iași: Polirom.
- Ross, Kristin. 1988. *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Routledge, Clay. 2016. *Nostalgia—A Psychological Resource*. London: Routledge.
- Sebastian, Mihail. 2003. *Journal 1935–1944*. Translated by Patrick Camiller. Pimlico: Random House.
- Sebastian, Mihail. 2016. *For Two Thousand Years*. Translated by Philip O. Ceallaigh. London: Penguin Classics.
- Sebastian, Mihail. 2019. *Cum am Devenit Huligan, [How I Became a Hooligan]*. București: Cartex București.
- Sieg, Christian. 2010. Beyond Realism: Siegfried Krakauer and the Ornaments of the Ordinary. *New German Critique* 37: 99–118. [[CrossRef](#)]

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.