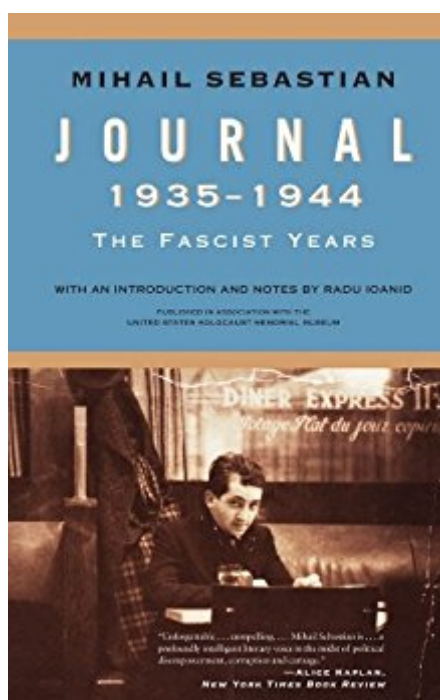


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# Journal 1935–1944: The Fascist Years (Published In Association With The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum)



## 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 "rhinocerization" 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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

After finishing this book over a week ago I find it persists, stays present in my mind. I learned a lot, not specific information but rather from the immersion that I experienced while reading the journal. I was moved. First some general information about the book: The author is an unmarried Jewish writer in his 30s living in Bucharest, Romania. His journal encompasses that period when Hitler was ascendant in Germany and throughout most of the war that ensued. He wrote plays, translated literature and had written a successful novel of his own. He moved in a large circle of friends and acquaintances, some of whom were important public figures in Bucharest. He liked classical music. Poverty was always close at hand, scrambling for money to pay rent is a frequent topic in his day to day endeavors. He's also quite self-critical, does not carry his proportional share of self esteem. Starting at the beginning I read along but became somewhat disappointed. I was just not that interested in how he struggled over the specifics of the writing he was doing. Nor his descriptions of the classical music that he heard on the radio. So I jumped ahead to his 1939 year and continued till the end, December 1944. Throughout there are many people involved, lots of names to make sense of. I had limited success. On average there are probably one or two entries for a week, generally succinct and without excess baggage. His writing drew me in, Day by day he was following the events of the War in Europe, knowing that the stakes were huge. And his observations were often prescient regarding what lay ahead. Present throughout are the difficulties and indignities that he lived as a Jew in Bucharest. And fear. Week after week, year after year there was just meanness in the official edicts that were laid upon the Jews. Sebastian had friends who were both Jewish and non-Jewish, and the reader is struck at how little empathy or care is shown by the non-Jewish ones. I also came to understand how the European Jews failed to flee to foreign places when the danger was obvious and arising. Sebastian had his work and his friends and his family all living in Bucharest. And considering what was going on elsewhere in Europe it is not clear that there was any real, viable alternative. Perhaps the United States, but that was a long ways away and emigration to the US was not easy. Personally I often feel quite critical of contemporary Israel. But this reading really helps me more fully understand the origin of the mindset that endures in the European Jewish community. This book will leave its mark on you, a valuable one..

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. It illustrates a difficult and conflictual internal process of disillusionment, of realigning one's internal alliances, or, perhaps, the creeping realization that your friends are turning into rhinoceroses. As the author discovers during the peak of the persecutions, this is a process many assimilated Jews went through in past centuries under similar circumstances. Sebastian refers to his homeland as "a Balkan swamp," where people change political affiliations like they change their shirts (something at which Ionesco's father was particularly good). He makes some lucid observations about Rumanian Jews' easy optimism and, contrary to common belief, the Jews' short memory of past tragedies. This selective amnesia of prior calamities is an attitude prevalent among Rumanian Jews in Israel, who nurture a sympathetic viewpoint about the events described in this book. Indeed, this book confronts basic notions many people hold about that era of Rumanian history; making it highly controversial. My parents are a perfect illustration of the strong but contradictory feelings it arouses. My mother, deported from Cernauti (Chernovitz) in Bucovina to a concentration camp with the rest of her family, had no problems accepting Sebastian's account. My father, on the other hand, who hails from Bucharest, responded with disbelief to my reports about my revelations from the text. He remembered many of the events reported, for example the confiscation of the radios and the forced labor, but he refused to put it in any special context. His recollection was suffused with what seemed to me like heavy denial of the meaning and purpose of the regime's behavior. He combined this with a peculiar version of the history of those times, and a disturbing set of rationalizations of events ("it was only the Iron Guard,"

or, "everybody I knew survived"). He agreed to read the book, but after he received it, changed his mind and refused. Needless to say, my family, like many others, has never reached an agreement about the basic facts of the period. Another way of understanding the kind of condoning spirit displayed by my father is that it is representative of ethnic minorities' traditionally docile attitude towards authority. This deference, accentuated by fear, may also explain how millions of Jews were gullible enough to allow the Nazis to gas them. The Israelis' intransigence represents a backlash against generations of this servile obeisance, not unlike the kind of militant political transformation experienced by American blacks in the 20th century.

An important addition to understanding of events that occurred in Romania from 1935-44. Sadly, very badly let down by poor proof reading. I mean "Hidler", come on.

Unique, illuminating and touching.

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