

The experiences of Romanian women in World War II: family dramas, social status and adaptability

Introduction

History is one of the main subjects of debate in Romanian society. Adapting of the educational system to the new types of transversal competencies implies, in addition to practicing linguistic and argumentative skills, a metamorphosis of the way of teaching in schools. While some specialists point to eliminating some subjects with an "artistic" nuance, others focus on an in-depth study of elements of national and European history.

Romania's status as a member of the European Union shapes both the socio-economic development path and the educational area. Although education is a supporting competence under Article 6 TFEU (*FAQ EU Competences and Commission Powers*, f.a.), activating European citizenship among Romanians is a real challenge for political leaders. Starting from the historical intertwining of Romania's international development with the institution of the European Union, this paper aims to briefly analyze women's experiences during the Second World War. The relevance of the topic is significant on two levels of analysis: the national and the European. Knowledge of such experiences based on personal recollections outlines a unique, often collective dimension of the impact of war on human life. These example provides current and future generations with solid arguments for appreciating peace, predictability, and sustainable foreign policy (centered on non-belligerent national interests). For the European spectrum, this work introduces rural Romanian life, where the memory of the Second World War is only a reflection of a chapter of history. The research question I seek to answer is "How did women's experiences during World War II influence the perception of their role in society?". I conducted a two-hour interview with Ms. Sara, one of the hundreds of Jewish women in Romania who experienced the traumas of the war, the harsh communist regime, but also the fragile post-decembrist democracy.

Portrait: the role of women in Romania over the decades

History teaches us that social relations between men and women have not always been characterized by equality. Even today there are parts of the world where women still lack access to education, freedom of expression, or even territorial mobility. Returning to the example of Romania, immediately after the 1900s, the number of demonstrations demanding the emancipation of women and their political rights began to increase. In this uncertain landscape of fear and reluctance, Sara was born into a Jewish family in 1930 in Moldova. Although her parents had told her about the recent traumas of the First World War, much of her childhood was also spent under the auspices of the internal crisis, the inevitable violence associated with war.

Methodology

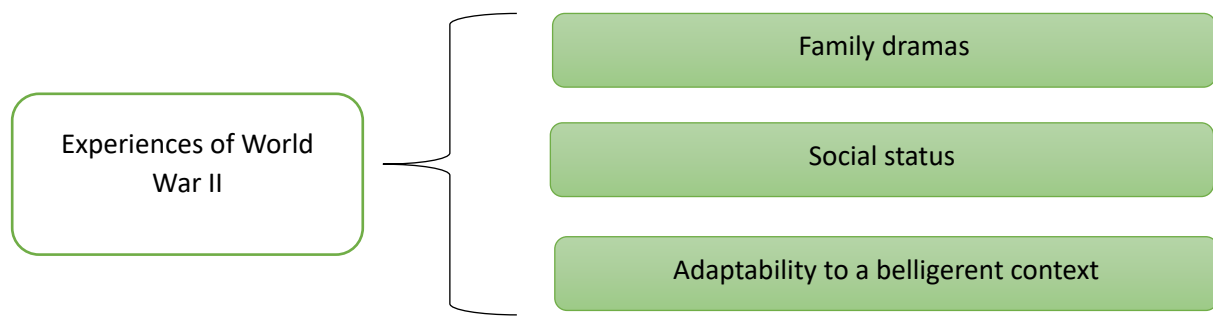
To provide academic rigor to this endeavor, I used the semi-structured interview method to get to know Sara and her experiences. Her selection as the subject of this paper was not random. The World War II period is known for the mass deportations of Jews from various parts of the world to concentration camps in Poland and Germany. Memoirs collected in recent years from survivors document a systematic genocidal action directed against ethnic groups such as the Roma and Jews.

The semi-structured interview is known in the literature for its exploratory character (Zeigler-Hill & Shackelford, 2020, p. 4825). Even if the interviewer has a pre-prepared set of questions (including follow-up questions to explore the topics further), the advantage is that "it allows the subjects' open responses, instead of affirmative or negative brief answers" (Ilovan & Doroftei, 2017, p. 38). Like many other social science endeavors, assessing perceptions, opinions, and memoirs is a highly subjective process. From a methodological point of view, numerous scholars have concluded that memoirs can highlight certain points of convergence within contexts, but cannot fully reconstruct historical truths (Keightley, 2010, p. 55).

Analytical framework

There are various social situations that position women differently, especially in the context of war. Starting from this reality, the figure below shows the main analytical dimensions that are the subject of this paper. The questions of the semi-structured interview were developed according to these conversational frameworks.

Figure 1: Analytical framework



Analysis

Born in the Moldavian region of Romania, Sara is a child of countless hopes, whose fulfillment was often delayed. I met her while she was eagerly waiting for her grandchildren to return home for the winter holidays. Each one of them, now living in foreign lands, represents for Sara a living embodiment of her childhood dreams.

Asked about her first years in Romania, she gave an exhaustive description of places, experiences, and interactions:

The inter-war period in Romania, as I remember it, is unlike any other historical period that I have had the honor to live through. You know, because of my age, a lot of people wonder what it is like to live under so many political regimes and, above all, to be a woman. I was born in Romania and that is a privilege for me. I was able to see how the rulers of this country could generate wealth, but also tension, create external images full of pomp, but also enforce violent internal repression, which brings death (...) When the Second World War broke out, the world experienced a shock. But not just any shock. Surely the world's great leaders expected such a turn of events. For us, ordinary people- citizens who lived in fear of losing fathers, sons, or husbands, war meant death and starvation. I was 9 years old at the time, but the maturity that comes with such experiences follows you throughout your life.

If I look back with my eyes now, the past is certainly a story waiting to be written. But do you know what the most remarkable thing about the Romanian people is? Hope! That's what I learned from my parents who went through wars, crises, and genuine states of despair. Something I cannot forget about my childhood is the relationship with the land. I know, perhaps those who have not experienced it will not understand. My parents told me about it too because I was very young. When I was four or five years old, Romania was going through an acute food crisis. The shops were almost empty. Those who lived in the villages were more privileged. But

even there, the situation deteriorated over time. Without a steady supply of food, survival was difficult. To economize on what they had, both my parents and grandparents decided to exploit natural resources. How? Did you know there are tree roots that can be eaten? Not to mention mushrooms, fruits, or vegetables. My grandmother's saying, "We eat roots to seize the day tomorrow", is deeply etched in my memory. I think that describes the run-up to World War II. Otherwise, like other children, there was no shortage of games in the village lanes or swimming in the waters of the Bistrița River in the summer..

Sara successfully painted the portrait of her childhood. Although marked by many shades of gray and black, her childhood reflects pure authenticity.

In interwar Moldova Jewish families were highly respected, both ethnically and religiously. However, I cannot help but recall the clear echo of the Legionnaire movement. In our region of Moldova, we encountered fewer of these anti-Semitic elements. Certainly, Hitler's policies of racial purity influenced many nations around the world, as well as their relationship with certain ethnic groups. As for the role of women in society -what you asked- it is very difficult to give a simple and comprehensive answer. Although today Marshal Antonescu's policies are widely condemned, I believe that certain historical contexts need to be analyzed with greater depth. Romania was a state dependent on the great powers and their games. Internally, the war meant the mobilization of men and a social life that once again revolved around women.

As a young teenager in training, I can say that the Second World War meant pain, austerity, and a lesson in independence for me. If you look at all this on a personal level, as a Jewish woman, everything seems more complicated. Information back then was hard to get around, and often exaggerated. But the fear of deportation never left me—it is still with me today.. A teenage girl whose dream was to become a "professor" perished during the war. At that time in Romania, women were seen as a pillar of stability for the family. Although emancipation movements were much talked about, in rural areas they were more of a distant ideal. Like any 16-year-old girl, I got married right after the war ended. For us, women, the family was the only shelter against our inability to do anything else. But this protection was not enough in the face of communism and the systematic violence that was to follow in Romania...To sum up, in the Second World War, women represented adaptation, suffering, and death. Even if many women did not die physically, their souls departed with those lost at the front, in prisons, or in camps.

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