

Article

Reconfiguring Biographical Identity Through an Anti-Semitic Lens: The Case of the “Marginal Writer” Mihail Sebastian

Arthur Viorel Tulus

Department of History, Philosophy, Sociology and International Relations, Faculty of History,
Philosophy and Theology, Dunarea de Jos University of Galati, 800201 Galați, Romania; arthur.tulus@ugal.ro

Abstract

Personal experiences, even when recounted as autobiographical novels, can deepen our understanding of the past, as they present a lived history of real events. In the novel *De două mii de ani* (*For Two Thousand Years*), Iosef Mendel Hechter, using the literary pseudonym Mihail Sebastian, recounts his experience as a young Jewish intellectual, born and raised in Romania, in a society divided by ethnic tensions driven by ultra-nationalism and anti-Semitism. Our study aims to critically examine, through a historical perspective, the socio-political realities depicted by the author, the collective mentality, and the typological stereotypes of his fictional characters. These reflect the actual choices and paths taken by Romanian Jews in their responses to the anti-Semitic pressures of the era. We believe that adopting this less frequently explored perspective will enrich both our understanding of that period and the depth of the novel itself. Thus, autobiographical literature and history engage in a meaningful dialogue, where microhistory, represented by the individual experience of the main character, Ștefan Valeriu, can verify or refine macrohistory, particularly the social, political, and economic context in which interwar Romanian society developed.

Keywords: Romania; anti-Semitism; interethnic relations; Jews; Romanian literature

1. Introduction

Mihail Sebastian is the literary pseudonym of Iosef Mendel Hechter, a Romanian writer of Jewish heritage. He was born on 18 October 1907 in Brăila, a significant port and commercial hub on the Danube, and died on 29 May 1945 at the age of just 38 in a car accident in Bucharest. Although regarded as one of the most promising writers of his generation, Iosef M. Hechter's life and entire literary body of work—comprising prose, plays, novels, essays, journalism, and translation—published under the pseudonym Mihail Sebastian, were influenced by the internal and international context of the time, marked by anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism created and sustained a divide in Romanian society between Jews and the majority population, even though the 1923 Constitution guaranteed civil and political rights to all ethnic minorities equal to those of Romanians.

Iosef Mendel Hechter exemplifies the Jew willing to become a good Romanian citizen, with all the rights and responsibilities this status entailed. Beyond his literary pursuits, integration into Romanian society appeared successful: he earned his baccalaureate in 1926 at the “Nicolae Bălcescu” High School in Brăila, with a thesis particularly appreciated by Professor Nae Ionescu (1890–1940), the head of the examination board.

Received: 29 November 2025

Revised: 1 February 2026

Accepted: 6 February 2026

Published: 11 February 2026

Copyright: © 2026 by the author.

Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland.

This article is an open access article

distributed under the terms and

conditions of the [Creative Commons](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

[Attribution \(CC BY\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) license.

Their destinies would become intertwined from that point onwards, as this study aims to demonstrate. Later, he graduated from the Faculty of Law at the University of Bucharest in 1929 and earned a doctorate in Paris between 1930 and 1931. Between 1927 and 1934, he was an editor of the newspaper *Cuvântul*, which was managed by the same Nae Ionescu one of the most significant intellectual figures of the interwar period (Mezdrea 2001). This greatly influenced the new generation of Romanian intellectuals, among whom were Mircea Eliade, Constantin Noica, and Emil Cioran, as well as Iosef/Hechter/Mihail Sebastian (Costantini 2001). Nonetheless, as remarkable as Nae Ionescu's personality was, his ideas were equally controversial and harmful, advocating ultra-nationalism, anti-Semitism, and the extreme right (Drăgulin 2010, pp. 60–65).

The relationship between mentor (Nae Ionescu) and disciple (Iosef Hechter/ Mihail Sebastian) fluctuated between admiration and hatred following the publication, in 1934, of the novel. *De două mii de ani...* [*For two thousand years...*], whose preface was written by Nae Ionescu. The antagonism between the novel's essence, which can be described as autobiographical, psychological, social, and even ideological, and Nae Ionescu's preface sparked a significant scandal (Pricop 2016a, pp. 7–8). Mihail Sebastian addressed the issue of Jewish identity amidst growing intolerance towards Jews in Romania during the interwar period. In contrast, Nae Ionescu's preface was composed in a vehement anti-Semitic political style and bears little resemblance to literary criticism. There are other controversial moments surrounding the novel's publication. Apparently, when he wrote the preface, Nae Ionescu had not read the text. Mihail Sebastian, although appalled by the virulence of his mentor's preface, decided not to discard it, a fact mentioned by Mircea Eliade in his memoirs—"Sebastian was pale, almost disfigured. 'He brought me the preface,' he told me. 'It's a tragedy. It's a death sentence,' he added, handing me the professor's manuscript" (Eliade 1997, p. 197, my translation).

After the scandal broke, Mihail Sebastian faced widespread criticism from both anti-Semites and his own peers, the latter criticising him for accepting the publication of Nae Ionescu's startling preface. Mihail Sebastian responded to everyone in an essay completed in December 1934, titled *Cum am devenit huligan* [*How I Became a Hooligan*] (Sebastian 2016a), and, at the same time, began a diary in February 1935. This diary was published posthumously as late as 1996 (Sebastian 2016c, pp. 5–8).

2. Literature Review and the Novelty of the Study

Amid the rise in anti-Semitism and the impact of the Great Depression of 1929–1933, which further radicalised Romanian society, the publication of the novel *De două mii de ani* in 1934 provoked strong reactions. Its publication was noted at the time by Mircea Eliade, Mircea Vulcănescu, Gheorghe Racoveanu, Tudor Teodorescu-Braniște, and others. Their views were recently analysed by Lucian Pricop in an introductory study accompanying the 2016 reissue of Sebastian's work, *Cum am devenit huligan* (Pricop 2016b, *Vendeta intertextuală*, pp. 7–14). Other literary critics and/or philologists have also written serious and increasingly objective treatises as we approach the present day, such as George Călinescu (Călinescu 1985, pp. 963–64), Dorina Grăsoiu (Grăsoiu 1986), Nicolae Manolescu (Manolescu 2008, pp. 870–71), Marta Petreu (Petreu 2009), Mihai Iovănel (Iovănel 2012) and others. They are influenced by the professional background of those who authored them, reconstructing Mihail Sebastian's biography, literary work, and journalistic activity, and often highlighting his relationship with Nae Ionescu and the controversial newspaper *Cuvântul*. Similarly, his novel, *De două mii de ani*, has undergone philological analysis, and his characters have often been approached with psychological sensitivity.

The vast majority of studies have placed great emphasis on the real relationship between the novel's author, Mihail Sebastian, and his intellectual mentor, Nae Ionescu,

which is reflected in the novel through the relationship between the main character, Ștefan Valeriu, and Professor Ghiță Blidaru. Among the characters in Mihail Sebastian's novel *De două mii de ani*, we also encounter other members of the majority Romanian ethnic group: Ștefan Pârlea and Marin Dronțu, young Romanians fascinated by ultra-nationalist and anti-Semitic ideologies. We will not dwell on them, as their role is to translate the writer Mihail Sebastian's personal experiences into narrative and to deepen the drama of a young Romanian Jewish intellectual trying to integrate into an increasingly anti-Semitic society. Our study aims to explore the typology of Jewish characters and the background to anti-Semitism in the novel *De două mii de ani* (*For Two Thousand Years*), not in a literary or literary-critical manner, nor even from a psychological perspective. Our approach is historical. Although the novel is fiction, the drama of the Romanian Jew is real, and the typology of Jewish characters in Sebastian's novel reflects both the heterogeneity of the Jewish community and the multiple choices some are forced to make amid anti-Semitism and internal social and political pressures. Thus, a thorough historical analysis from an objective perspective, considering the socio-political realities, collective mentality, and the typological stereotypes portrayed by Mihail Sebastian in his novel, introduces a new element to both the understanding of the era and the depth of the novel.

3. Realities Mirrored in the Novel *De Două Mii De Ani...*

As the novel is autobiographical, the main character and narrator is Ștefan Valeriu, Mihail Sebastian's alter ego. Like the author, Ștefan Valeriu is a young Jewish intellectual, born in Brăila and raised in Romania, who struggles between his Jewish identity and integration into Romanian society, dominated by nationalism and anti-Semitism. The childhood of the narrator, Ștefan Valeriu, is marked by his experiences in Brăila, the city and the Danube. However, he also recalls the fights he had with the Greek children: "No, I don't think I was ever fearful, even though the Greeks from the big garden, who threw stones at us when they caught us there, shouted it at me every day for as long as I can remember, and even though I grew up with that shout, thrown behind me like a spit: cowardly kike" (Sebastian 2016b, p. 55).

Childhood fights are rooted in the socio-economic and demographic dynamics of Romanian ports on the Maritime Danube during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Jews migrated in large numbers into Romanian territory, taking over a significant share of trade previously controlled by Greeks. This caused fierce rivalry between the two ethnic groups, which persisted through successive generations. In the first decade of the interwar period, Jews owned four wine warehouses, two of the city's distilleries, the only rope factory, the only paper-and-cardboard factory, and the only furniture factory. They also owned seven bakeries, two mills, 27 clothing stores, 10 grocery stores, 15 restaurants, seven printing houses, and seven other manufacturers of various products. Between 1913 and 1933, the Jews of Brăila managed to own 11 of the 14 hotels in the city, and in the financial and banking sector, many of the management structures were Jewish (Teodorescu 2004, pp. 22–24). In fact, after the Romanian majority, Jews and Greeks were the largest ethnic groups in terms of population structure according to the 1930 Romanian census, the only one conducted during the interwar period: 68,347 people (100%), of which 51,516 were Romanian (75.37%), 6655 were Jewish (9.74%), 4559 were Greek (6.67%), and 5617 were of other ethnicities (8.21%) (Manuilă 1938, pp. 80–81). The Greeks and Romanians share and continue to share the Orthodox Christian religion, a fact that has brought the two ethnic groups even closer together in their opposition to anti-Semitism. The Greeks' economic rivalry combined effectively with the fierce nationalism of the Romanians, characteristic of a newly formed state (Tuluș 2016, pp. 104–6). Another interesting element described by Mihail Sebastian is the family of the main

character, Ștefan Valeriu, which reflects the heterogeneity of the Jewish community and, at the same time, the degree of integration of Jews into Romanian society:

The differences between our ancestral branches are very peculiar. On my father's side, we can count at least a century of Romanian life in the city and the county, living with Romanian neighbours, working with them and maintaining ties. How many decades or centuries ago we were here, isolated from each other, I do not know. But in the town register for 1828, my great-great-grandfather's name is clearly listed. It cannot be a matter of assimilation, of course, but I sense a certain harshness in this family line, undoubtedly caused by the Danube, near which four generations grew up. That great-grandfather from 1828, Mendel from Gropeni, as he was called, spoke and wrote Romanian, wore boots and a surcoat. As for my grandfather, I still remember how strange he looked in the evening when he returned from the docks, with his heavy boots studded with nails and horseshoes, his hands calloused, white from head to toe from the dust of wheat and corn sacks he breathed in all his life, fourteen hours a day, from dawn to dusk. He had something harsh and angular about him: a bit of the boatman, the cart driver, the day labourer. He would read from huge Hebrew books on festive evenings, but he did not put into his reading the passion that I felt shaking my other grandfather, my mother's father. He was an intellectual, but this one was not, although he, too, was said to be very well-read. He lived outdoors (...). A man from the Danube. On the other hand, my mother's family left the ghetto much later. Bukovinians and Moldovans from the north, they were all people who lived at home, by lamplight, reading their books. They always lived near synagogues. Perhaps that is where they inherited their dark eyes, long, thin hands, and pale cheeks. They have poor, restless health, which they sustain more through nervous tension than physical activity (...). This may explain the deaf misunderstanding that has always divided them: some too indifferent, others too overly sensitive; the vigour of some may seem uncouth to others, and their sensitivity, in turn, may appear affected. The disagreement between the Danube and the ghetto (...). It seems entirely meaningful to me that all our relatives are gathered closely together in two compact groups: those on my father's side here at the bend of the Danube, and those on my mother's side up in northern Bukovina. (Sebastian 2016b, pp. 99–100, 102)

Beyond Mihail Sebastian's literary talent, the analysis of the two rising branches of the main character uncovers another reality commonly found in the port of Brăila: the heterogeneity of the Jewish community. Firstly, Jews from the two major branches, Sephardic and Ashkenazic, settled around the mouth of the Danube. In Wallachia, where Brăila is situated, the local population first encountered Sephardic Jews, speakers of Ladino and descendants of the ancient Spanish Jews expelled from the Iberian Peninsula by the Reconquista, who entered Wallachia and Dobruja through the Ottoman network. Although the lineage is not explicitly mentioned in his novel, the narrator Ștefan Valeriu's father exhibits all the characteristics of a Sephardic Jew. On the other hand, the Ashkenazim, who were much more numerous than the Sephardim, first entered Moldova, including Bessarabia, and gradually migrated from north to south, ultimately settling in southern Moldova. After the disappearance of internal borders following the formation of the Romanian Principalities in 1859, the Ashkenazim, who were overwhelmingly more numerous, assimilated the Sephardim, or, at least, there was a growing tendency for the two groups to come closer. The process of intermingling and merging took place throughout Romanian territory. However, it is most evident in the Danube port cities near the river's mouth, where the two groups intersect. On the mother's

side of the main character, Ștefan Valeriu, the clues are much clearer for including them in the Ashkenazi branch, simply because the character Baba, the narrator's maternal grandmother, was very familiar to Yiddish, a Germanic language characteristic of this branch, as she would read and speak fluently in Yiddish.

However, some differences in attitudes between Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews—also evident in the quote above—were maintained during the interwar period, regarded as “Spanish separatism”: the desire to preserve the Sephardic tradition, temperance, modesty, avoidance of extremes, and the synthesis of tradition with openness to modernity. The linguistic and socio-cultural traits of the Sephardic community, when compared to those of the Ashkenazim, made the former not significantly different from the Romanian majority. The Judeo-Spanish language (Ladino) was closer to Romanian, and the clothing and behaviour of Sephardic Jews appeared less foreign to Romanians. Furthermore, Sephardic Jews were more receptive to modernity than the conservative Ashkenazim, who remained loyal to the past. Through language, clothing, and behaviour, Sephardic Jews seemed more willing to integrate into Romanian society and accepted the process of acculturation and linguistic Romanianisation more readily. Although smaller in number, in areas where both groups coexisted, the Sephardim influenced the Ashkenazi majority, encouraging the latter to embrace modernity and its impact (Herșcovici 2003, pp. 25–59).

By extracting and analysing the types of Jews in Mihail Sebastian's text, we can observe a pattern of the Jew willing to integrate, who lives and behaves like a local, and the traditionalist Jew, intellectual and religious, passionate about the Talmud and prone to self-isolation within the ghetto. In reality, the two psychological models are merely extremes between which Jewish lives and human patterns fluctuate. Making a distinction between Western and Eastern European Jews, Victor Neumann stated that the faith is always the same, regardless of the geographical area in which the communities live. Particularities, however, from clothing to food, from building synagogues to practising traditions, from the interiors of the houses to the language spoken, are present in unusual variety (Neumann 2006, p. 94). Essentially, Neumann observed that there was great diversity within the Jewish diaspora in Europe, but there is nothing to prevent us from applying this observation to the Jewish community in interwar Romania.

Another intriguing aspect is the novel's chronological sequence. Aside from a few references to his childhood in Brăila, Mihail Sebastian, through the autodiegetic character Ștefan Valeriu, progresses through and mainly depicts two major phases characterised by nationalist fervour and, consequently, escalating anti-Semitism. The first phase, roughly spanning 1919 to 1923, is confined to the urban, intellectual, university environment. Against the backdrop of Jews gaining equal political and civil rights following the implementation of the 1923 Constitution, Romanian students, professors, magistrates, and professionals in liberal fields responded with street protests, strikes, and student unrest marked by violence and the physical intimidation of young Jewish students. Ethnic Romanians fear a potential increase in the number of Jews in universities and liberal professions. Simultaneously, Romanian parties and nationalist organisations with protectionist-ethnic aims were established, and Corneliu Zelea Codreanu emerged as a future figurehead of the ultra-nationalist movement. At this stage, “anti-Semitic incidents mainly occur around universities and involve fights and brawls between young Romanians and Jews, many of whom have migrated from the provinces to study” (Tuluș 2016, p. 126). One of the Jewish students assaulted in December 1923 is the narrator Ștefan Valeriu, alias Mihail Sebastian, who writes:

I attended the Roman law class in the morning (...). Someone loudly calls my name from behind (...). Get out! (...) I slip out of my seat and walk uncertainly towards the door between two rows of watching people. Everything unfolds

politely, ritually. Only someone near the door throws a punch at me, but it only grazes me. A delayed punch, comrade. (Sebastian 2016b, p. 57)

A period of calm follows, brought about by relative economic prosperity, during which the novel's main character also develops and achieves professional success at Rice S.A. Mining Company. But anti-Semitism, which had never disappeared and remained latent in Romanian society, re-emerges in a public and violent form against the backdrop of the devastating effects of the World Depression of 1929–1933. Initially slow and isolated until 1933, it then accelerated and spread nationwide, encompassing all social categories and no longer confined to the intellectual or academic circles. Anti-Semitic pamphlets, the destruction of Jewish shops, beatings, and physical violence against Jews became tools of political propaganda for Romanian ultra-nationalist groups on the extreme right (Volovici 1995, pp. 73–74).

The rekindling of anti-Semitism is cynically portrayed in the novel by Mihail Sebastian, through the voice of the main character, Ștefan Valeriu, who symbolises both the refusal of interwar Romanian society to accept Jews as Romanian citizens with full rights and the failure of Jews who had opted for integration/assimilation:

I was heading to the workshop to see the foreman (...). On the corner with Elisabeta Boulevard, a group of boys in uniform were selling newspapers. 'The mysteries of Cahal! Death to the Jews!' I don't know why I stopped. I usually walk past quietly because this cry is old, almost familiar. This time I paused there, taken aback, as if I had just understood the meaning of these syllables for the first time. It's strange. These people are talking about death—specifically, my death (...). If I think about it, it's not serious that three boys can sit at a street corner and shout 'death to the Jews', but the fact that their cry can go unnoticed, unchallenged, like a tram bell. (Sebastian 2016b, pp. 239–40)

The novel's chronology spans the decade between the two anti-Semitic peaks, 1923 and 1933. Mihail Sebastian constructs his entire narrative and, above all, a typology of characters, especially those of Jewish origin, notable for its historical accuracy. Broadly speaking, anti-Semitism in Romanian society, regardless of its phases—more intense or more subdued—is mainly responsible for each Jew's choice of one or another of the six principal orientations.

(1) Integration of Judaism into the Diaspora as a distinct element without assimilation:

Both Mihail Sebastian and the novel's main character, Ștefan Valeriu, are followers of this movement. This was the stance promoted by most of the Jewish cultural and economic elite, who were in favour of "openness" to new ideas and to interwar Romanian society. Until World War I, Jews fought for equal civil and political rights, and after their recognition by the 1923 Constitution, advocates of this stance became actively involved in culture, politics, and all other sectors of interwar Romanian society. Broadly speaking, supporters of integration opposed self-isolation through ghettos and may have had Zionist sympathies, but their support for the restoration of Jewish status was purely financial. They advocated for the revival of the Hebrew language as a symbol of Jewish unity and identity. This orientation is characteristic of the first interwar decade, when Jews, especially young people, were enthusiastic about obtaining full civil and political rights and aspired to integration into Romanian society. However, ten years later, in the 1930s, the rise in anti-Semitism and anti-Semitic violence led to a decline in the appeal of this stance in favour of Zionism and self-isolation (the ghetto) (Tuluș 2016, pp. 236–37).

The opposite of integration is isolation. Of particular interest is the dialogue between Ștefan Valeriu and Abraham Sulitzer, another character in the novel, the latter being a fervent supporter of self-isolation through ghettoisation:

(Ștefan Valeriu): I don't really see the millions of Yiddish speakers, nor do I see the Jewish ghetto. Instead, I see large groups of Jews wholeheartedly adopting the culture of their adopted country: French Jews, German Jews, American Jews, Romanian Jews. A hundred years ago, Yiddish was their language. Today, they have forgotten it. Tomorrow, their children will not even remember that it ever existed. And how fragile, no matter how beautiful, is a culture that one tries to bind to itself.

(Abraham Sulitzer): Are you forgetting that, fortunately, there are still anti-Semites? And that, thank God, there are still pogroms from time to time? The more you assimilate in a hundred years, the more a single day of pogroms sets you back tenfold. And then the ghetto, poor thing, stands ready to welcome you back. (Sebastian 2016b, p. 130)

Another character in the novel is Pierre Dogany, a Hungarian Jew who, like Ștefan Valeriu, aims to integrate into the Diaspora in his adopted country, Hungary. However, his integration is also refused, as anti-Semitism in Hungary is supported by legal frameworks that are more stringent than those in Romania, as the text points out:

(Pierre Dogany): I am a Hungarian. Jew, of course, but also Hungarian (...). You have to understand. These are my memories, my language, my culture (*reference is made to the Hungarian language and culture*)

(Ștefan Valeriu): A culture which, as I've heard, does not claim you as joyfully as you claim it.

(Pierre Dogany): I was expecting that objection. I was wondering why you didn't remind me that in Budapest, at the university, there is numerus clausus. Of course, it's not pleasant. Sometimes, it's humiliating. But when you truly love something, you love it with all its good and bad sides. This too shall pass, one day. You wouldn't be any different. (Sebastian 2016b, p. 158)

The characters in the novel, Ștefan Valeriu and Pierre Dogany, experience the drama of Jews denied integration into the Diaspora, a reality increasingly common in Europe as the outbreak of World War II approaches. The Jew is deprived of the option of living alongside others (non-Jews) and is forced to return to his people (in the ghetto). The ghetto, following the Nazi model, takes on a whole new meaning. It is no longer a form of self-isolation chosen by Jews, a personal choice, but rather serves as a prison, with the aim of preventing any form of ethnic mixing deemed degrading by the new theorists of racism and the anti-Semitic far right.

(2) Assimilation or loss of Jewish identity:

By assimilation, we mean the individual's refusal, whether expressed or actually carried out, to belong to the Jewish community. Assimilation necessarily involves integration, but integration does not necessarily lead to assimilation. Jews' assimilation in interwar Romania took two forms. Firstly, the Jews preserved the Mosaic religion but declared their membership of another ethnic group (probably, most declared themselves Romanian). At least, this is what emerges from the data of the general census of December 1930, when 756,930 people of the Mosaic religion and only 728,115 Jews (according to their declared ethnicity) lived in Romania. This results in a difference of 28,815 people who are Mosaic but have a declared ethnicity other than Jewish (Manuilă 1938, p. XXIV). Secondly, assimilation went as far as the conversion of Jews to Christianity, a phenomenon that is much more difficult to observe from a statistical point of view. In the novel *De două mii de ani*, we do not encounter such a character. Still, the extent to which the majority population accepted Jews who converted to Christianity is evident from Sebastian's *Diary*: "Tuesday, 12 February 1935: (...) Something that reveals how the case is perceived in the public consciousness was recounted to me by Samy Hershcovic on

Sunday in Târgoviște, where I was attending a conference. The bookseller selling tickets for the event offered a ticket to a teacher from the teachers' college: Sebastian? Aha! That Jew who was baptised" (Sebastian 2016c, p. 19). Neither his biographies nor other sources mention the Christianization of the writer Mihail Sebastian, but assimilation or melting away of Jewish identity did not constitute a source of salvation for those who chose such a path in the context of increasingly violent anti-Semitism and the Holocaust.

(3) Salvation through self-isolation, through the revival of the ghetto and Yiddish culture, just as Jews had resisted for centuries:

In general, this lifestyle was adopted by the relatively impoverished ranks of the Jewish community, who were less inclined towards "openness". The exponent and supporter of the ghetto is the character Abraham Sulitzer, the archetype of the Wandering Jew as described by Mihail Sebastian, a Yiddish book dealer who connects Jewish printing houses in Germany and Poland with readers of this language in Romania, especially in Moldavia, where most Ashkenazi Jews live. Mihail Sebastian, a proponent of integration, somewhat caricatures his features: "that short, lively man with a restless gaze and strange features in the middle of the word (...) was a comical figure, and everyone smiled at him" (Sebastian 2016b, pp. 94–97).

Traditionalist Jews who preferred Yiddish over Hebrew often embraced salvation through isolation. Simultaneously, rising anti-Semitism increased ghetto populations, as groups denied fundamental rights and access to certain professions find it impossible to integrate. This exclusion is ironically enforced by the very authorities insisting on their integration.

(4) Emigration:

It was somewhat of a radical solution to save themselves until the advent of modern Zionism, amidst a backdrop of a lack of civil and political rights, as well as widespread pogroms in Tsarist Russia and anti-Semitic violence in Romania. Mihail Sebastian mentions in his book.

An uncle of his mother who left for America in 1900. It's somewhere in an old album, a photograph of him from that period: a young face, almost adolescent, with a bold pioneer's forehead (...). He departed with a few pennies in his pocket and a lot of crazy ideas in his mind (...). It appears that during those years, many people left, in small groups, from all parts of the country, heading for Alaska and California. Some were in search of gold; others were chasing illusions. Shortly before the war, a letter arrived via the American legation, carrying news of his death in a small town in Texas, where he had, I don't know how, ended up working on a plantation. (Sebastian 2016b, p. 102)

Emigration to the United States, Argentina, or elsewhere was a lifeline for Jews until the advent of Zionism, especially for those in Russia and Romania, who only gained civil and political rights after the end of World War I.

(5) Adherence to Zionism:

The restoration of the Jewish nation-state on its ancient biblical foundations became an appealing alternative, guiding migration towards Palestine. Zionism is the realisation of nationalism by Theodor Herzl at the end of the 19th century. The alternative was popular among Jewish communities around the mouth of the Danube from the early stages of Hovevei Zion (lovers of Zion), that is, practical Zionism, which foreshadowed Herzl's political Zionism. Sebastian recalls in his novel this great-grandfather, a follower of Hovevei Zion, who,

One day, well over 90 years old, gathered his belongings, called his children, divided what needed dividing, kept a few coins, a couple of books, and some papers, put everything in a bag, and said he was leaving. Where? To Eretz Is-

rael! Home. With whom? Alone (...). They begged him, tried to hold him back by force, and fought to persuade him to accept an escort to Jaffa. One of his sons would have taken him there and found him a house. All in vain. He was unyielding. He gave them everything he had, left behind what little he kept, and descended towards the port, followed, as in a biblical scene, by his sons, daughters, and grandchildren, all crying; only he remained calm, clear-headed, and at peace. Fiery old man. He died in Jerusalem a few months after arriving there. (Sebastian 2016b, pp. 100–1)

After 1918, Zionism remained equally popular within the new borders of the Romanian state. Generally, Romanian Jews supported Zionism financially through collections and fundraising for the *Keren Kayemet le-Israel* (National Jewish Fund) and *Keren Hayessod* (Palestine Construction Fund) foundations, perhaps giving less thought to the option of leaving personally, at least until the mid-1930s (Tuluş 2016, pp. 162–200).

The alternative to Zionism is illustrated in Mihail Sebastian's novel through the character of Sami Winkler. Like Ştefan Valeriu, the archetype of the Jew inclined towards integration, he experiences a formative journey during the decade depicted in the novel (1923–1933). In 1923, Sami Winkler, a medical student, was supporting the cause of Zionism by collecting donations and organising meetings with Zionist personalities. Later, we see him preparing young people to be sent to Palestine, working himself on a farm in Bessarabia to become accustomed to working the land after abandoning medicine, and towards the end of the novel, he boards a ship in Constanţa bound for Haifa (Palestine) (Sebastian 2016b, pp. 115–16, 179–80, 244).

The words spoken by Zionist Sami Winkler in his dialogue with the main character foreshadow the later Holocaust:

“The question for me isn't whether the Jews can create a Palestinian state, but whether they can do anything else. Do you understand? It isn't the chances of success that matter, but the necessity of doing it. If we don't do it, we die. If we do, you say, we still die. I don't know. Maybe yes, maybe no. And for that maybe, it's still worth setting out on the journey. Don't ask a nation that has set out to build a country to count their money, take out accident insurance, and book a hotel by telegram (...). I am a soldier, a bricklayer, a miner. I listen, and I work”. (Sebastian 2016b, p. 121).

Zionism was an important option, but the recognition of political rights after 1918 led Romanian Jews to support financially the international foundations that backed this movement rather than emigrate to Palestine themselves, at least until the first anti-Semitic laws appeared in 1938.

(6) Joining the revolution, the communist ideology:

It was, after all, a process of assimilation, but one rooted in atheistic humanism that aimed at radical de-Judaisation. The Bolshevik Jew ultimately became a 'non-Jew' because he viewed matters solely from a social perspective, with the ethnic or national aspect no longer present (Tuluş 2016, pp. 201–33). The Jewish communist S.T. Haim, who frequently debates with the Zionist Winkler in the novel, also undergoes a formative journey between 1923 and 1938. For Haim, a maths student in 1923, resolving the Jewish problem in terms of the national ideal was an aberration: “I don't know any Jews, I know workers and bourgeoisie. I don't know of any national problem in Palestine. I know of an economic and technical problem in Syria, Palestine, and Mesopotamia, which is no more interesting than the problems in Cuba, Indochina, and Eastern Rume-lia. The rest is myth, idyll, deception” (Sebastian 2016b, p. 120). If Winkler emigrates to Palestine, Haim ends the decade 1923–1933 in prison, eagerly awaiting the revolution (Sebastian 2016b, p. 218). The controversy between the two is revealing, with the former

viewing national objectives as a way to save Jews from anti-Semitism, and the latter seeing the communist revolution as offering a potential social solution.

Communism did not have many active members in interwar Romania, but among them, Jews were the most involved ethnic minority after Eastern Slavs (Russians and Ukrainians). This image is distorted, as only a tiny percentage of the Jewish population in Greater Romania was active in the extreme left-wing movement. After listing the six possible ways of acting or reacting to anti-Semitism, we can say with certainty that the vast majority of Jews in Romania sought to integrate into Romanian society between the two world wars.

4. Conclusions

The autobiographical novel is a more literary form of memoir or diary, all of which can provide the reader with insight into the author's experience of historical events. In the novel *De două mii de ani*, Mihail Sebastian enriches historical understanding through everyday details and the emotional and psychological weight they carry, which complements the existing factual framework. Although historical reality is intertwined with fiction (such as the inclusion of political speeches, allusions to anti-Semitic laws, and disregarding chronology—for example, placing the visit to Romania by the great Zionist leader Vladimir Jabotinsky much earlier), such a narrative attracts the uninformed reader, allowing them to experience history through the eyes of an individual, thereby understanding the human impact and moving beyond historiographical reductionism. Clearly, the role assigned in this study is that traditionally taken by history and the historian, namely, to distinguish what is real behind the literary façade, to separate reality from fiction. From this perspective, Mihail Sebastian precisely and objectively depicted the social and political environment of interwar Romanian society, characterised by ultra-nationalism and anti-Semitism, and, through his fictional characters, illustrated the collective mentality of the period, the heterogeneity of the Jewish community in Romania, as well as the six possible ways in which a Jew could react to anti-Semitism.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analysed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

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

References

- Călinescu, George. 1985. *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent*. Bucharest: Minerva.
- Costantini, Emanuela. 2001. *Nae Ionescu, Mircea Eliade, Emil Cioran, Antiliberalismo nazionalista alla periferia d'Europa*. Perugia: Morlachi Editore.
- Drăgulin, Sabin. 2010. Nae Ionescu și legitimarea extremei drepte românești. *Sfera Politicii* 8: 60–65.
- Eliade, Mircea. 1997. *Memorii (1907–1960)*. Bucharest: Humanitas.
- Grăsoiu, Dorina. 1986. *Mihail Sebastian sau ironia unui destin*. Bucharest: Minerva.
- Herșcovici, Lucian-Zeev. 2003. Între specific și general: Mișcarea iluministă (haskala) și procesul de modernizare în rândul evreilor sefarzi din România. *Studia et Acta Historiae Iudaeorum Romaniae* 8: 25–59.
- Iovănel, Mihai. 2012. *Evreul improbabil. Mihail Sebastian: O monografie ideologică*. Bucharest: Cartea Românească.
- Manolescu, Nicolae. 2008. *Istoria critică a literaturii române. Cinci secole de literatură*. Pitești: Paralela 45.
- Manuilă, Sabin. 1938. *Recensământul General al Populației României din 29 decembrie 1930*. Bucharest: Monitorul Oficial, vol. II (neam, limbă maternă, religie).
- Mezdrea, Dora. 2001. *Nae Ionescu. Biografia*. Bucharest: Universale Dalsi, vol. I.
- Neumann, Victor. 2006. *Tentația lui homo europeus. Geneza ideilor moderne în Europa Centrală și de Sud-Est*. Bucharest: Polirom.
- Petreu, Magda. 2009. *Diavolul și ucenicul său: Nae Ionescu — Mihail Sebastian*. Iași: Polirom.

- Pricop, Lucian. 2016a. Prolegomene la o estetică a conflictului. Cazul *De două mii de ani*: 7–14. In *De două mii de ani*. Edited by Mihail Sebastian. Bucharest: Cartex.
- Pricop, Lucian. 2016b. Vendeta intertextuală: 7–14. In *Cum am devenit huligan*. Edited by Mihail Sebastian. București: Cartex.
- Sebastian, Mihail. 2016a. *Cum am devenit huligan*. Bucharest: Cartex.
- Sebastian, Mihail. 2016b. *De două mii de ani*. Bucharest: Cartex.
- Sebastian, Mihail. 2016c. *Jurnal. 1935–1944*. Bucharest: Humanitas, Ediția a II-a.
- Teodorescu, Maria Elena. 2004. Comunitatea israelită din Brăila (II). *Florile Dunării* 4: 22–24.
- Tuluș, Arthur Viorel. 2016. *Aspecte din viața comunităților evreiești din jurul gurilor Dunării (până în 1938). Mituri istoriografice, percepții contemporane și realități istorice*. Brăila: Istros.
- Volovici, Leon. 1995. *Ideologia naționalistă și «problema evreiască» în România anilor '30*. Bucharest: Humanitas.

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.