

Nicolae Kallós, A dialogue on Jewish identity, Holocaust, and Communism as personal Experiences,

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What is striking in any exercise of reading a book of interviews is the pithiness of a certain feeling of a spontaneous, almost involuntary witnessing of the disclosure of a personality in its gradual development, in its temporal manifestation. What is even more striking, being more personal, is the inner reflection of this gradual development, the always subsequent interpretation and explanation of one's own life experiences. It is a real art to know how to bring to light the consistency of an inner life. In the book of interviews called *Nicolae Kallós, Crîmpei de viaţă din secolul XX. Un dialog despre evreitate, holocaust şi comunsim ca experienţe personale* [*Nicolae Kallós: A dialogue on Jewish identity, Holocaust, and Communism as personal Experiences*], Sandu Frunză has proved his rhetorical art in revealing the relevancy of subjective opinions. This relevancy consists in the fact that the idea of identity involves a continuous "rapport à soi" that unfolds two main characteristics of one's identity: on the one hand, reflexivity, a certain disclosure of an image of one's self, and on the other hand, an endless search of a peculiar, always new and differentiated system of values. Employing these principles in his discussions with Nicolae Kallós, now a consultant professor and a PhD. supervisor at the Babeş-Bolyai University from Cluj and the author, among others, of books like: *The Political Consciousness* (1968), *Sociology, Politics, Ideology* (1975), and *Politics as science* (1975), Frunză has succeeded in vividly portraying the conducive principle of the life of the intellectual Nicolae Kallós, who has experienced Holocaust, communism, and transition to a democratic society. Regarding his experiences, Kallós states, "I have consciously tried … to cultivate and to 'keep measure' in life, in behavior, and in the intellectual exercises. To keep measure is, in my opinion, a hypostasis of normality. I have tried – I repeat: with eyes open – to keep myself normal in a mad world, in the mad worlds of the XXth Century, not to lose measure of things in a world of all kinds of excessiveness." Due to the art of questioning, and doubtless due to the sincerity and openness that characterizes the answers of Frunză's partner of dialogue, this book represents the best example of transcending the methodological shortcomings of an approach rather pertaining to the field of Oral History. Compared to a more scientific statistical approach, any approach of Oral History could be easily accused of being subjective and of not having objective relevance to an entire community. After reading such a book, which reveals historic truth through the raw example of a life experience, one comes to believe that the words of a survivor of the Nazi concentration camps are emblematic at least of the community from which he came from. A central idea consistently discussed in the interview is that of the relation between belief and Jewishness. Regarding this issue, Kallós draws out the changes that have supervened once with the experience of Holocaust in the identity of the Jewish community of Transylvania. It is

Codruta Cuceu

Researcher, Gh. Barit Institute, Romanian Academy, Cluj Branch. Translator of Leonard Swidler's After Absolute (Romanian edition, 2002).
E-mail: codrutaliana@yahoo.com

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pointless to repeat the fact that the Holocaust brought a major change to the Jewish perception of self-identity, which until that moment was basically religiously constructed. For the Jewish community, religion was, at least until the Holocaust, a meaningful nucleus for the natural or organic characteristic of its identity throughout a history of oppression. After the Holocaust, after the experience of deportation and the accompanying destruction of traditions and identities, "the consciousness of the common fate became one of the main sources of the Jewish identity" and a duty of perpetual remembrance. The remembrance of a life experience is not only relevant for the act of retracing the identity of a certain community, be it a majority or a minority, such as the Jewish community from Transylvania discussed here, but it is also germane to the understanding necessary for reconstructing a certain period of time. One of the most important attitudes that pervade the whole discussion reveals the authentic character of a man who, without consciously assuming prescriptive ways of living or interpretations one's life experiences, offers an illuminating lesson of integrative explanation of his own cruel experiences and political options by revealing his entire past without denying or hiding any of it's parts. Unfolding several elements of his childhood and adolescence within the Jewish community during the inter-war period, Kallós answers the subtle questions of his proponent, Dr. Frunză, thus revealing nuances of the life of the Western Transylvania (Oradea) Jewish community, a community oriented primarily around religion. Besides discovering that Jewish identity was traditionally transmitted and thus built by means of religious education, the reader gains an appreciation of the structure of that community and its relations with the "host" Romanian and Hungarian communities. Thus, among the already existing "branches of the Judaic religion, there were, besides Orthodoxy, and besides the Sephardic community of Spanish origin, two other communities. One of these was the Neolog community, of occidental rite, and the other one was the status quo community." The Neolog community seems to have been a more liberal group, reformative in comparison to the orthodox community, because it introduced some changes to the orthodox sect. It is hard to determine whether these changes were part of a process of secularization or of modernization that came as a break with a rather religious tradition, or on the contrary, if they were meant as a religious renewal, necessary for the maintenance of the religious identity in a world of perpetual change, or if they represent an attempt for a better integration and assimilation within the host community. The fact is that in Transylvania the Neolog community was the most integrated, which is due at least partially to the change of the language of religious practice to the more accessible languages of the "host" communities. In a fascinating descriptive manner, as the narrator of his own life experience, Kallós succeeds in reconstructing an entire atmosphere that has characterized the period before the Second World War in Transylvania, objectively explaining in detail the characteristics of anti-Semitism within this space, and also the life of the Jews in the ghettos. It is interesting to read that the Jewish community in Transylvania, even though segregated, retained the hope that in the Eastern European space the experience of Holocaust could not be repeated. In spite of the fact that between 1941 and 1942 the incredible testimonies of Polish Jewish refugees increased, the Jewish community was not expecting such an unjust experience of Holocaust. The description seems objective, because one could expect a severe criticism of life in the ghetto from a person who has endured the entire experience of segregation and of mistreatment, but in fact Kallós transcends his own identity and

his own unfortunate experiences in this exercise of retelling his life story, thus transforming it into larger, contextual moral or political judgements. One of the most significant and strongest points, because it is unique to this interview, is the fact that the silence regarding relating the experiences of the concentration camps is now broken by the words and testimony of a gifted intellectual, a publicist, who succeeds in describing in detail the deportation process and life in the concentration camps, including the so called "Red Concentration Camp," Buchenwald, which was initially constructed for German Communists. Buchenwald was peculiar, explains Kallós, because it was the only concentration camp wherein the prisoners freed themselves by a mutiny of an illegal communist committee that succeeded in upholding a small number of intellectual Jews and young people. By breaking the silence and daring to remember the experience of deportation, as it really was, without any subsequent mythology that accompanies any description of Holocaust, Kallós assumes the consciousness of the common fate that now characterizes the Jewish identity. This identity is exactly what Kallós has tried, due to a certain nostalgia, to preserve in any way he could, after his return to Transylvania. Thus, the last part of the discussion is focused on his University work and life during communism. He has criticized the myth regarding the Jewish origin of Romanian communism. In explaining his work and publications, Kallós is again appreciable for his sincerity, because he admits that he has worked out the problemat of ideology but has not created an ideology. What might be of special interest to Romanian intellectuals and others is his comment on the story of Lucian Blaga's departure from the University. Kallós explains, thus shattering another myth of Jewish conspiracy according to which two professors of Jewish origin were responsible for Blaga's departure, that this happened because of a Russian clause which had appeared in the peace treaty with Romania. According to this clause no ex-official could occupy important social or professional possitions. Having been an ambassador around 1940, Blaga was required to leave University.

Thus, Sandu Frunză's interview with Nicolae Kallós, is a very important contribution to the history of Jewish identity, a vivid proof of Holocaust experience, and also a remarkable exercise of Oral History.