

Zwi Yavetz

One Year in Czernowitz



1925, born in Czernowitz (formerly Rumania, now Ukraine). 1944, came to Israel (then Palestine). 1950, M.A., Hebrew University, Jerusalem. History, Classics, and Sociology. 1956, Ph.D., Hebrew University, Jerusalem. 1956–58, Lecturer, Hebrew University, Jerusalem. 1959, Senior Lecturer, Tel Aviv University. 1962–64, Dean, University of Addis-Abeba (Ethiopia). 1964, Associate Professor in Roman History, Tel Aviv University. Dean of Humanities, Tel Aviv University. 1966, Chairman, Department of History. 1967, Visiting Professor, Cornell University. 1968, Full Professor, Tel Aviv University. 1970, Chairman, The Graduate School of History, Tel Aviv University. 1974, Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton. 1976, Incumbent Lessing Chair of Roman History. 1977–1984, Visiting Professorships at various universities in Europe, the USA, and Australia. 1989, Distinguished Professor at the Graduate School of the City University of New York, Queens College. 1990, Israel Prize in History. 1990/91 Visiting Professor at the University of Florence. Publications: *Plebs and Princeps* (Oxford, 1969). *Caesar in der öffentlichen Meinung* (Düsseldorf, 1979). *Judenfeindschaft in der Antike* (Munich, 1997). *Der traurige Kaiser: Tiberius* (Munich, 1999). – Address: 89 University St., Apt. 26, Tel Aviv, 69345, Israel.

The working title of my book is still: “One year in Czernowitz, between the two World Wars.” I shall deal mainly with the year 1937/38 because this is the crucial year (in my opinion) concerning the problem that has preoccupied me for many years.

After the downfall of the regime led by two vicious anti-Semites in Romania, the poet Octavian Goga and the economist Prof. A.C. Cuza, many Jews – especially the wealthy ones – could have escaped from Romania. Indeed, the British authorities of Palestine refused to accept poor Jews, but were prepared to issue “capitalist certifi-

cates” (this was the official concept) for emigrants who could open a bank account in Tel Aviv, Haifa, or Jerusalem on the basis of one thousand English pounds (this was a lot of money in those years). I remember those days very vividly – and remain one of the last eyewitnesses to a very sad and precarious situation. My grandfather could have left Czernowitz one year before the outbreak of World War II (i.e., 1938), and two years before the occupation of Czernowitz by Soviet troops (28 June, 1940) in accordance with the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact. However, he refused to move and paid dearly for his refusal. He was deported to Siberia by the Soviets and died in miserable conditions. Many other members of his family who remained in Czernowitz were later killed by the Nazis and Romanian troops headed by General Ion Antonescu – and only very few (I myself among them) survived.

For years I used to put the blame on the conservative attitude of my grandfather – who preferred the “Romanian pots of meat” to an adventurous attempt to emigrate to unknown countries like Palestine or Latin America. But he was not the only one who behaved like this. Very few wealthy Jews from Czernowitz left their so-called “Heimat”. True, no visas for the U.S. were issued to Romanian Jews, and the fear of emigrating to Palestine can easily be explained: there were continuous and bloody Arab assaults on Jewish settlements and Jewish highways in Palestine. Many Orthodox rabbis were convinced in 1937 and 1938 that Viznitz and Sadagura were safer than Tel Aviv or Jerusalem. But why not try to flee to Bolivia, Venezuela, Chile, or Uruguay? Not officially of course, but unofficially, a clever and well-paid go-between in Czernowitz succeeded in arranging such visas, but very few availed themselves of this opportunity. One of them was a restless uncle of mine, and I know exactly how he got his visa to Bolivia in July 1939. He predicted the catastrophe – but nobody took his warnings seriously. As a matter of fact, he was ridiculed in our neighbourhood and chastised for causing unnecessary panic. The so-called “wise” and “evenly-balanced” people kept reassuring the community that Romania would stay out of any conflict in the area and that, as long as Carol II, King of Romania, was in charge, there was nothing to worry about. They could prove their point of view by pointing out the fact that in 1938 the King authorized the execution of Zelea Codreanu – the ferocious leader of the Romanian Iron Guard. And therefore: “Herz, was begehrt du mehr?” It is my intention to describe the atmosphere that prevailed in the daily life of Czernowitz till history went the other way. Hence the shock.