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# How twin brothers saved a Holocaust memorial from being turned into a car park

Horrors retold by brothers' grandfather inspired campaign which also led to a dedicated museum

By Jenni Frazer

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For decades, the police station in Iași stood as a grim reminder of one of the darkest chapters in Romania's history.

In its courtyard in June 1941, some 13,500 Jews - more than a tenth of the city's population - were rounded up and slaughtered by a mob of police, soldiers and locals, while thousands more were dispatched to die on so-called death trains.

More than 80 years on, Romania is slowly coming to terms with its genocidal past, but few Romanians know much about the massacre that took place in this quiet university town.

The county council had planned to repurpose the police station into offices and turn its notorious courtyard into a car park.

But an unlikely campaign by twin brothers forced the council to rethink its plan, saving the memorial from the bulldozer and leading to the creation of a new museum dedicated to teaching the history of the pogrom.

### **'Rivers of blood coming from police station'**

Alexandru and Andrei Muraru first learnt of the horror of the Iași Pogrom from their grandfather, who witnessed the tragedy unfold as a 20-year old student.

Speaking to his grandsons, he recalled walking down Iași's main street days after the slaughter.

"He told us he saw rivers of blood coming from the police station," Alexandru Muraru told the Telegraph. "A terrifying image".

Mr Muraru, MP for Iași and a historian, said he and Andrei, who is their country's ambassador to Washington, were among the few who were aware of the harrowing history of the 1941 massacre.

Romanians who grew up under Communist rule were never taught about the [Iasi Pogrom](#); survivors barely spoke about it, and Romania's Jewish community, which made up half of the country's citizenship in 1941 and boasted 127 synagogues, today numbers just 300 people.

Keen to learn more about what had happened in Iași, Mr Muraru won a scholarship to the [US Holocaust Museum](#) in Washington DC.

“It was very shocking, because it was easier to do the research in Washington than in Romania, because they had all the Romanian archives,” he said.



Twin brothers forced the council to rethink its plan

It was while studying in Washington that he met Radu Ioanid, Romania’s ambassador to Israel, who he credits with coming up with the idea “to create a dedicated memorial space in the police station building”.

The horror of what he learned about the pogrom only made him more determined to make sure the massacre, and Romania’s part in it, were not forgotten.

### **Bombed in retaliation**

According to Mr Muraru, Jews in Iași were immediately blamed when the Soviet Union bombed the town in retaliation for the invasion of Moldova launched by Ion Antonescu, Romania’s wartime fascist leader and a Hitler ally.

The city’s Jews, he said, made a convenient scapegoat and were even falsely accused of lighting up city buildings to show Soviet pilots where best to drop their bombs.

The museum contains terrible images showing corpses lying in Iași’s streets as locals walk by, apparently unconcerned. Another photo shows Jews cleaning the cobbles of blood and brains.

“The brutality of the killings surprised even the Germans,” he said.

Those who were not shot dead in the courtyard were taken to the nearby train station and forced to lie face down in front of the station. As passengers from an incoming train from Bucharest arrived, Romanian militia forces made them leave the station by walking over the terrified Jews.

Then the Jews, mainly men, were loaded into cattle cars which were boarded up. One survivor would later recall the dead being piled up inside the carriages and used as benches by the living.

### **Individual gravestones**

On one side of Iași’s Jewish cemetery today, hundreds of neat individual gravestones mark the resting places of those who fought for Romania in the First World War.

On the opposite side, however, there are dozens of long slabs of dark concrete topped with the Star of David. Each one is a mass grave for the Jews murdered in 1941, containing thousands of Jewish dead.

More mass graves line the railway lines leading out of Iași , marking the spots where bodies were dumped from the death trains.

An estimated 380,000 Jews were killed in Romania during the holocaust, and the country has never faced up to its role in the atrocities.

But things appear to be changing.

This year, for the first time, Romanian school pupils will have a compulsory addition to the curriculum and will learn about Jewish history and the Holocaust — and, crucially, about Romania’s part in the murder of its Jewish citizens.

The new curriculum is intended to help pupils “better understand the origin and culture of the Jews ... and the memory of the Holocaust in the 21st century,” said Ligia Deca, Romania’s education minister.

In Iași, the magnificent Great Synagogue, built in 1671, has recently been renovated with financial aid from the Romanian government - making it one of only two active synagogues in the city.

And while many of those who survived emigrated to Israel after the war, and though Romania’s Jewish population remains tiny compared with its pre-war size, hundreds of

Israelis have acquired Romanian passports and set up businesses in the country in recent years.

Mr Muraru hopes the new school curriculum and visits to the Pogrom Museum will encourage the growth of the Jewish community.

“A country without minorities is a country without a future,” he said. “We in Romania definitely feel the absence of our Jewish minority.”

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