

## THE JEWS OF MOLDOVA, 1998

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*Between Romania, Russia, and Ukraine / The Secession of Russian Transdnistr / Jewish Bessarabia / Contemporary Jewish Life / Jewish Education / Welfare and Cultural Services / Israel and Aliya-Related Activity*

### **Between Romania, Russia, and Ukraine**

One of the 15 post-Soviet successor states, Moldova occupies the greater part of the territory known historically from the seventeenth century onward as Bessarabia. It is bounded on the north and northeast by Ukraine, on the southeast by the Black Sea, and on the south and west by Romania. Moldovans consider themselves descendants of the Romans, i.e., unrelated to Slavs. The official state language is Romanian. Between 1812 and 1917, Moldova was under Russian rule. It proclaimed independence from Russia in 1917 and joined Romania in 1918. The territory was seized by the Soviet Union in June 1940 under the provisions of the 1939 Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact. It was retaken by German and Romanian troops in July 1941, recovered by the USSR in August 1944, and declared its independence from the USSR on August 27, 1991. Romania has always considered Moldova to be a Romanian province, although its actual claims to the territory have been dormant for several years.

In common with its Ukrainian neighbor, much of the Moldovan economy exists on a non-cash, barter basis and is difficult to quantify. The largest sectors are agriculture and agricultural industry. The general industrial base is weak and almost entirely lacking in high technology production. The limited industry that was introduced during the Soviet period was linked to industry in other parts of the Soviet Union. When the Soviet Union collapsed, ties were severed and production ceased. A very large sector of the population is impoverished, alongside a small number of very wealthy individuals. The national parliament is riven by ideological conflicts and is unable to formulate a workable economic policy. Elections in March 1998 returned a parliament that is 40 percent Communist, 28 percent Moldovan nationalist, and 32 percent centrist.

Observers predict a sharp devaluation of the Moldovan currency and further declines in the gross domestic product and living standards.

The lack of an equitable and enforced tax system plagues Moldova as it does most of the other successor states; government salaries and pensions are not paid, and various government services are never implemented. Much of the support for the Communists in the last election came from older people who are not receiving their pensions. Many city-dwellers have relatives in rural areas who help out with food. In return, the city-dwellers provide certain manufactured goods that are easier to find in urban areas.

### **The Secession of Russian Transdnistr**

As in other former Soviet republics, Moldovan actions in the late Soviet and early post-Soviet period were influenced strongly by resurgent local nationalism that many residents of Russian ethnic background and members of other ethnic groups found threatening. Apprehension about the future course of Moldova was especially strong in the Transdnistr area, which had been part of Soviet Ukraine before World War II and was transferred by the USSR to Soviet Moldova after the war. With a majority of its population Russian and Ukrainian, Transdnistr served Soviet needs in diluting the ethnic Romanian majority population in Moldova. Soviet policy dictated the establishment of the most advanced sectors of Moldovan industry in Transdnistr and the placement of Moldova-bound oil and gas pipelines through the Slavic-populated region.

A Russian-dominated Dnistr Moldovan Republic was declared in the eastern part of the country and seceded from Moldova in 1992. Armed conflict had erupted between Moldovan security forces and Russian-controlled Transdnistr Republican Guards before secession. After secession, the latter were joined by the Russian 14th Army and Cossack volunteers from Ukraine and Russia. Russia has so far declined to withdraw the 14th Army, citing a lack of housing for troops in Russia.

According to U.S. Ambassador John Todd Stewart (in an April 1998 interview), the Transdnistr situation is a major problem for the new Moldovan government. As he explained, immediately following Moldovan independence, local Russians were justified in their fears of Moldovan nationalism and potential Romanian annexation of Moldova, including Transdnistr. Local "rabble rousers" and "Russian carpetbaggers" exploited the situation in declaring a Dnistr Moldovan Republic that was loyal to Russia. However, Moldovan nationalism and Romanian claims on Moldova have

declined substantially since the heady days of early independence, and justification for the continuing presence of the Russian Army in Transdnistr no longer exists. Russian state policy on Transdnistr seems ambivalent; Russia appears to have no real desire to maintain troops in the area and might cooperate in a withdrawal if a strategy for withdrawal is developed.

In the meantime, Transdnistr has become a haven for organized crime. The Transdnistr leadership has no interest in resolving the issue because they are reaping large profits from illegal commerce in the area. Moldova is concerned because it has no control over its own borders; contraband, such as cigarettes and weapons (for Chechnya and Abkhazia), move freely through Transdnistr.

About 12,000 Jews lived in or near the Transdnistr area (in Tiraspol, Bendery, and Dubossary) at the outbreak of hostilities in the early 1990s. Some were caught in the crossfire and casualties occurred. The Jewish Agency and Joint Distribution Committee, together with indigenous groups, mounted an evacuation operation that brought many Jews from the region to Israel. (According to Jewish Agency statistics, aliya from Moldova increased from 1,470 individuals in 1989 to 11,926 in 1990 and 15,452 in 1991. See Emma Trakhtenberg, "1989-1997 Aliyah from the FSU," *Update on JAFI Activities in the CIS & Eastern Europe*, February 1998: Summary of 1997 [Jerusalem: Jewish Agency, 1998], p. 30.)

## **Jewish Bessarabia**

Moldova, together with adjoining segments of Ukraine, is often known in Jewish history as Bessarabia - the entire area between the Dniestr and Prut rivers. Jews have lived in the region since the end of the fourteenth century, where they were prominent as merchants, traders, and craftsmen. During parts of the nineteenth century, as many as 230,000 Jews lived in Bessarabia, perhaps one-third of the population in small towns and close to one-half of the population of Kishinev. The country was a center of both Yiddish and Hebrew literature. Widespread impoverishment and pogroms during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries led to large-scale emigration. The most notorious pogrom occurred in 1903, apparently with the support of the Russian Ministry of the Interior, led by Vyacheslav Plehve. The attack occurred on Easter, April 6 and 7, spurred by a blood libel campaign in a prominent newspaper. According to official statistics, 49 Jews were killed and another 500 were injured. Material losses from property destruction and looting were enormous. About 2,000 Jews were left homeless. Another pogrom occurred on August 19, 1905, in which 19 Jews were killed and 56 were injured.

Perhaps 300,000 Jews lived in Bessarabia on the eve of World War II. The number of Holocaust victims is difficult to determine due to inconsistent territorial nomenclature among Romanians, Soviet authorities, and Nazi occupying forces. Slightly more than 95,000 Jews lived in Moldova in 1959, a fairly large number of whom are believed to have been postwar migrants from southern Ukraine.

## **Contemporary Jewish Life**

Following heavy emigration over the last 20 years, the contemporary Jewish population of Moldova is about 30,000 in a total Moldovan population of 4.3 million. Some 20,000 to 22,000 live in Kishinev. Other Jewish population centers are: Balti/Beltsy (1,800), Soroky (1,300), Tighina/Bendery (1,100), Tiraspol (1,100), Rybnitsa (900), Orhei/Orgeev (400), Cahul/Kagul (250), Dubossary (120), Kalarash (60), and Edinti/Yedintsy (60). (The first name is Moldovan; the second is Russian.)

Numerous Jewish institutions exist in the country and some Moldovan Jews are well-educated in Jewish tradition and practice. The relatively late (1940) absorption of Bessarabia into the Soviet Union led to a postwar Jewish population that remained conscious of its Jewish heritage, including a strong sense of Jewish communal responsibility. Even younger Jews retain a historic memory of local pogroms and the Shoah. Many Jewish young adults understand Yiddish and some speak Yiddish, a rare phenomenon elsewhere in the post-Soviet successor states.

The Moldovan Association of Jewish Organizations and Communities acts as an umbrella body for Jewish organizations in ten cities and towns throughout the country. The center of Jewish life is in Kishinev, which has a broad array of Jewish institutions, but many smaller Jewish population centers have Jewish cultural societies and welfare services. Some have Sunday schools, veterans groups, and other organizations.

In discussions with this writer in April 1998, experienced representatives of the Joint Distribution Committee observed that Moldovan Jewish leaders regard their responsibilities very seriously and are more community-minded and less contentious than Jews in other post-Soviet states. According to these professionals, different groups of Jews are more likely to work together in a collaborative manner in Moldova than in several Russian and Ukrainian cities (St. Petersburg, Kiev, and Odessa) in which these representatives had served on previous JDC assignments.

Two rabbis serve in Moldova, both based in Kishinev: Rabbi Zalman Abelsky of Chabad has been in Kishinev since the early 1990s and is the Chief Rabbi of Moldova. Rabbi Moshe Budilovsky, who is associated with Agudat Israel, arrived in 1997. He was born in Kiev and graduated from Leningrad State University before emigrating to Israel. He is widely admired among Kishinev Jewry for his outreach efforts and willingness to work with all segments of the Jewish community.

## **Jewish Education**

Two Jewish day schools and a yeshiva high school exist in Kishinev. Jewish School #22 was organized in 1991 by the Israeli government's Lishkat Hakesher (Nativ) as part of its Maavar (Tsofia) program. The school enrolls nearly 400 youngsters in grades one through eleven (the standard configuration for post-Soviet schools) and is growing from year to year. Ninety-seven percent of the pupils are Jewish according to the criteria of Israel's Law of Return.

According to school administrators, about 15 percent of the pupils leave during the school year to emigrate to Israel or another country with their families. About 50 percent of school graduates enroll in Sela, the Jewish Agency's pre-university program in Israel. Teachers, especially those who teach Jewish subjects, are also leaving. Their departure causes serious problems as Jewish studies teachers are not easily replaced.

All pupils in School #22 are taught four hours of Hebrew each week, two hours of Jewish history, and one of Jewish tradition. The curriculum would include additional hours for Jewish subjects if trained teachers could be found, said the administrators. A full secular studies curriculum is also taught, including three languages - Romanian, Russian, and English - in addition to Hebrew. All Jewish and Israeli holidays are observed. In addition, the school offers various extracurricular programs such as Israeli dance, a choir, computer club, etc. The school operates a three-week summer day camp and is well regarded in the city.

Families with children in the school represent a range of economic conditions. However, the majority are single-parent families and are impoverished. A health scan of the pupils conducted at the beginning of the past school year found that numerous youngsters were malnourished and that many suffered chronic health problems, including disorders of the endocrine and nervous systems, cardiac weakness, and ophthalmologic abnormalities. In response, the school strengthened its own nutrition programs. However, the school

cannot provide youngsters with necessary medications that are simply unavailable in Kishinev or are prohibitively expensive.

A second Jewish day school, School #15, operating under Chabad auspices, enrolls about 170 pupils, almost all of whom are Jewish according to *halakhah*. Both day schools operate their own pre-schools. About 40 children are enrolled in the pre-school of School #22 and some 75 attend the Chabad pre-school.

Floundering under previous leadership, the yeshiva high school - Torat Emet - Yeshiva of Kishinev - has been reinvigorated under the direction of Rabbi Budilovsky, an experienced school administrator. The school currently enrolls 30 youngsters - 20 boys and 10 girls in separate programs - in grades seven through eleven. Rabbi Budilovsky expects 50 to 60 adolescents as pupils in 1998-1999, perhaps the capacity of the school's current facilities. Most youngsters board at school dormitories and come from various cities and towns in Moldova, as well as from Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia.

The curriculum focuses on Jewish studies until 1:00 p.m., then on secular subjects until 7:00 p.m. Rabbi Budilovsky, two instructors from a hesder yeshiva in Yerucham, and two female soldiers from the Israel Defense Forces teach Jewish subjects, and a local person teaches Hebrew on a part-time basis. The teachers of secular subjects are all local people. As in other Jewish schools throughout the transition states, such teachers are highly qualified and are attracted to Torat Emet by good teaching conditions and salaries that are paid on time.

According to Rabbi Budilovsky, few parents of pupils have strong Jewish backgrounds. They are attracted to the school by the high quality of its secular education in contrast to the poor quality of the local public schools, and free room and board, as well as free transportation to and from home for vacations. All pupils are encouraged to enroll in Israeli post-secondary yeshiva programs after graduation. Rabbi Budilovsky and his sponsors see no future in Moldova for Jewish young people.

The Torat Emet Yeshiva occupies the same site as a famous synagogue and yeshiva of the pre-World War II era that was headed by Rabbi Leib Yehuda Tsirelson (1859-1941), who had worked in Kishinev since 1910. Rabbi Tsirelson was a respected rabbi, a Zionist, an activist in Jewish communal affairs, and the representative of Bessarabian Jewry in the Romanian parliament. He was killed on the first day of the World War II German invasion of the USSR by a bomb dropped from a German aircraft. The

yeshiva is located across the street from a large sports stadium in which Jews were rounded up and shot during the Shoah.

Eight Jewish Sunday schools operate in Moldova for Jewish pupils between the ages of seven and sixteen. These include three schools in Kishinev (enrolling a total of 230 pupils) and one school each in Bendery (120 pupils), Soroky (50), Beltsy (35), Rybnitsa (35), and Tiraspol (35). Supervised by Nativ, these schools are secular in nature and offer a curriculum including Hebrew, Jewish tradition (from a secular viewpoint), Jewish history, and holiday celebrations.

Two academic institutions in Moldova offer programs of Jewish significance. The Faculty of Judaica, Jewish History, and Literature at Kishinev State University enrolls 40 students in Hebrew, Yiddish, general Jewish history, and Jewish history of Bessarabia. The Department of Judaica at the Academy of Sciences has published several books on local pogroms and other subjects related to Moldovan Jewish history and culture.

A public Jewish University offers adult education courses and lectures in Judaism, Jewish history, and Jewish culture. Its main center is in Kishinev, with branches in Beltsy and Bendery.

## **Welfare and Cultural Services**

As in other post-Soviet successor states, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee supervises a large-scale welfare program that focuses on support of the Jewish elderly. Many Jewish seniors are impoverished, victims of an insolvent national pension system. Serving about 2,500 elderly Jews in Kishinev alone, JDC nutrition programs include hot meals in canteens, distribution of food parcels, and delivery of meals-on-wheels. About 250 homebound elderly receive "patronage services" at home; these include visits by workers who clean, shop, prepare meals, and provide other forms of assistance. Hairdressing at home, repair of appliances, and a telephone contact line are also available.

JDC welfare services in Kishinev are operated from a welfare center called Hesed Yehuda in memory of Rabbi Leib Yehuda Tsirelson (see above). Located in very cramped quarters, Hesed Yehuda hosts various activities for about 300 mobile elderly. These include Shabbat and holiday programs, as well as a variety of interest groups (singing, handicrafts, Yiddish, etc.). The center also rents out medical equipment such as canes, walkers, wheelchairs,

mattresses designed to prevent bedsores, and other items to about 300 people.

JDC has been the catalyst for much of the Jewish renewal in Moldova. Its primary cultural installation is the combined Yitzak Manger Kishinev Jewish Municipal Library and Jewish Community Center in Kishinev. Established in 1991 with Moldovan government support, the library is now one of the largest Jewish community libraries in the successor states. The Jewish Community Center includes a Children's Department offering arts and crafts, Hebrew instruction, dance, etc; and a Jewish Cultural Center offering a Jewish Family Club, Shoah survivors group with 470 members, war veterans association with 500 members, Yiddish Center, Pensioners' Club, dance and music groups, bookbinding, ceramics, a museum of Bessarabian Jewish history, and facilities for a Hillel student group.

The Kishinev Hillel organization dates from 1996 and currently includes 50 Jewish students from 12 different post-secondary educational institutions. It sponsors a discussion club, Jewish film club, Jewish song club, English club, discotheque evenings, newspaper, beit midrash, kabbalat Shabbat program, and other activities. Members have learned about Jewish holidays at synagogues in Kishinev and at Hillel seminars, and then have organized holiday observances for Jewish elderly and for Jews in several small towns. They play an active role in organizing and operating a JDC-sponsored family summer camp and have organized and led several Jewish community events in Kishinev.

The spacious downtown offices of JDC in Kishinev serve as headquarters for JDC operations in all of Moldova. These emphasize welfare services for Jewish elderly, but also include various cultural programs. The downtown offices also house the Kishinev Institute for Social and Communal Workers, a branch of a larger JDC facility in St. Petersburg. Serving southern Ukraine and Moldova, the Kishinev Institute operates various seminars and workshops in social and communal work, management, and Jewish tradition and culture for employees in JDC-assisted programs.

### **Israel and Aliya-Related Activities**

The State of Israel does not maintain a separate embassy in Moldova, but operates a consulate in Kishinev under the direction of the Embassy of Israel in Ukraine. The Consulate is located on the premises of the Israel Cultural Center, an agency sponsored by Nativ, formerly known as Lishkat Hakesher. Nativ is an increasingly controversial Israeli government institution attached to

the office of the Prime Minister. Established in 1952 to manage Israeli government policy toward the then Stalinist Soviet Union, it has yet to define its post-Soviet mission. Its operational methods have been criticized severely in periodic reports of the Israeli State Comptroller, and much of its agenda seems to be invested in turf battles with other organizations better suited to the performance of specific tasks. For example, it is likely that its role in Moldovan Jewish Sunday schools, cited earlier in this report, would be managed more professionally by the Jewish Agency Department of Education, which specializes in Jewish education in the diaspora.

The Israel Cultural Center supervises an ulpan in Kishinev that enrolls about 250 people, and sponsors a youth club, Maccabee sports club, and a women's club, as well as lectures on various topics and holiday celebrations. Its major purpose is to provide information about Israel to local Jews and others in Moldova.

The major purpose of the Jewish Agency (JAFI, Sochnut) is to promote aliya (immigration to Israel). It operates a large mission in Kishinev, sponsoring 10 ulpanim in various Moldovan cities with 450 students at any given time, university student seminars, summer camps for youth and for students, and clubs for youth and for students. It also offers training seminars for Hebrew teachers and youth leaders.

The Jewish Agency sponsors a tutoring course for high school pupils preparing to take entrance exams for Naaleh, a popular high school-in-Israel program. Other specific aliya programs that are popular among Moldovan Jewry are: Sela, a course for students intending to enter Israeli universities; Chalom, a program for high school graduates who intend to pursue vocational or technical training in Israel; Yachad, a program for young adults who will immigrate and proceed through the absorption process in groups; and Aliyah 2000, which recruits individuals for specific positions in Israel and assists participants in finding appropriate housing.

Reflecting the declining standard of living in the country, aliya from Moldova is high relative to the total Jewish population. As in other post-Soviet successor states, the rate of departures is greatest in secondary cities and among youth and young adults. However, even Kishinev is seeing an exodus of young people. Emigration is facilitated by the relatively strong Jewish identity of many Moldovan Jews and by the presence in Israel of many earlier emigres who assist relatives and friends in the absorption process.

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