

## THE JEWS OF BESSARABIA

### THE HOLOCAUST PERIOD

#### RETREAT OF THE ROMANIAN ARMY FROM BESSARABIA (1940)

There were two phases before the Holocaust period in Bessarabia which provided a hint to the future that was to come: the German army retreated from Bessarabia at the end of June 1940 and the Soviets immediately conquered the area for the first time. There are not many details available about these events simply because there is a lack of documentation. After the war, during trials of war criminals in Romania, many of the cruel deeds and murders committed by Romanian soldiers during their retreat came to light. There were also some books published in Romanian which give a description of what had happened.

These phases are somewhat complemented by the testimonies of those who went through the horrors, but only a few of them survived. There are many locations in Bessarabia where not one Jew remained alive. Those who were able to save themselves did so by crossing the Dniester much earlier.

When it comes to various actions by the Romanian units during their retreat, we have a general picture based on comparison with what happened in villages near the border in Bucovina and northern Moldova.

The slaughter committed by the soldiers of the Romanian army was justified by rumors spread by the public asserting that the Jews received the Red Army with open arms and even attacked Romanian soldiers during the retreat. Even the authorities believed these rumors. General Ion Antonescu, the leader of Romania, wrote a letter about this matter. It was distributed by the Germans in order to rile the Romanian public against the Jews.

The Romanian press did its share in this tale of denunciation by publishing articles full of venom against the "Turncoat Jews". Several Romanian authors, such as K.

Ghiorghiu, wrote books in which they gave exaggerated descriptions of the despicable and miserable Jews. These authors also openly accused the Jews of espionage and other evil deeds. No wonder that the brainwashing rampant in all communication channels, whether public or private, caused the cruel murders of Jews by Romanian soldiers during their retreat from Bessarabia.

#### ENTRY OF THE SOVIET ARMY

The Soviet Union published an official pronouncement in which it demanded that Romania begin negotiations on returning the province (June 1940). The government of Romania announced its intention to enter these negotiations and the German authorities even agreed to Soviet terms. Immediately afterwards, the Soviet Union sent an ultimatum to Romania ordering the Romanian army to retreat from Bessarabia and northern Bucovina within 4 days, starting on June 28. On the evening of June 27 the Romanian government accepted the Soviet ultimatum and on the following day units of the Soviet army began to move towards Bessarabia. In many cases, the Soviet units arrived in some locations before the Romanians had left. As a rule, the Soviets conquered these areas within 48 hours of the announcement of the ultimatum.

The Romanian units were given orders to retreat, but many soldiers had deserted even before that. At that point the incitement against the Jews proved its influence and the road of retreat was strewn with Jewish victims. This happened in villages such as Mihorent (Dorohoi district), Chiudei and Strozhnits district; in villages in the Suchieva district– Sherbautz, Costina, Zakhareshti, Guarani, etc. Jews were tortured and massacred. Even in Dorohoi in the Ragat district 63 Jews were murdered by the army.

During the retreat from Bessarabia Romanian soldiers behaved in a similar way, but not much information is available about it. The massacre in Secureni is well-known and went on during the three days of retreat. There were many cases where Romanian soldiers threw Jews off the trains they were riding and so killed them.

## PREPARATIONS FOR WAR AGAINST THE SOVIET UNION

Romania gave up Bessarabia in June 1940 after pressure exerted by Germany. On June 25 Ribbentrop told Molotov that Germany accepted the Soviet ultimatum, but he added that Germany kept the right to intervene on behalf of Romania in economic matters. Molotov accepted these conditions and as a result of these negotiations Germany advised Romania to surrender on June 27 and to retreat from Bessarabia within 4 days.

The surrender caused great disappointment in Romania and there was resentment against the Germans. However, the Germans managed to direct this resentment against the Jews.

Soon Romania moved towards joining the Berlin–Rome axis pact. On June 27 the first representative of the Fascist Iron Guard joined the government and on July 2 a German army commission was invited. It appointed a pro–German government headed by Gigurtu who announced his joining the Axis. Romania left the League of Nations on July 11 and on September 6, 1940 Antonescu, the leader of the Iron Guard, came to power with the help of the Germans. In this manner, Romania became a satellite of Germany—as a result of a pact between Antonescu and Hitler. There was no formal agreement between the two nations. This will become an important fact in view of what happened later in Bessarabia. Germany never included Romania in its military plans and definitely not in its intention to break the entente with the Soviet Union.

## SITUATION OF THE JEWS OF BESSARABIA WHO REMAINED IN RAGAT

When Romania ceded Bessarabia to the Soviet Union there were many Bessarabian Jews in Ragat— some due to business dealings and others because they had settled there many years earlier. They were allowed to return during a short interval, but many of them did not make it in time. Those who requested to return to Bessarabia were placed in camps. A year later, when war broke out between Germany and the Soviet Union, they were all taken to Transnistria.

The fate of the Jews who did go back to Bessarabia was not any better. The transfer was done under difficult conditions. Although there was an agreement with the Soviet Union for their return, the border authorities had not been informed and many of the Jews were shot by Russian soldiers when they tried to cross the border. Some died

when they stepped into mine fields and others who tried to turn back were shot by Romanian soldiers.

Those Jews who originated from Bessarabia, but resided for many years in Romania and did not wish to return, were accused of being Communists and were threatened with expulsion to Transnistria. The citizenship of those who did wish to return to Bessarabia after June 28 was cancelled.

587 Jews who wished to return to Bessarabia were transported to Transnistria at the end of 1942 and were shot by Germans near Rashtadt.

## **THE JEWS OF BESSARABIA UNDER SOVIET RULE (1940–1941)**

### **THE ANNEXATION**

On June 28, 1940 units of the Red Army entered Bessarabia, as previously described. Soon a large part of Bessarabia was annexed as a Republic of the Soviet Union.

This fertile area encompassing 44 500 sq.m in the northeastern part of the Romanian kingdom, between the Prut River and the Dniester, was one of the last European areas to be annexed by the Soviet Union during WWII. At the time the population of Bessarabia was about 3,000,000 people including about 206 938 Jews (7.2%).

It can be assumed that the Sovietisation process of Bessarabia (and of northern Bucovina) was based on lessons learned during the takeover of the Baltic countries two weeks earlier and former Polish areas (western Belarus and Ukraine), 250 days earlier. The Jews of Bessarabia had some knowledge of what had occurred in the parts annexed previously– either from press publications or from refugees who escaped. At the beginning, many factory and property owners as well as community leaders, tried not to remain under Soviet rule. However, not enough is known about their efforts. Before the Red Army entered Bessarabia and Bucovina there was much discussion –in youth and Zionist circles– about what was coming with the annexation in light of what happened in Poland.

Bessarabia was one of the last areas to be annexed and there were still some interesting events during the Sovietisation process which touched the lives of the Jews. Firstly, the northern area including Khotin and its villages, the southern area including Akkerman (Cetatea Alba) and its villages were annexed to Ukraine. The remaining central area (Kishinev) went to the Moldovan Republic across the Dniester. This plastic surgery resulted in the Soviet Socialist Republic of Moldova with Kishinev as its capital. In this manner many Jewish families could no longer be in touch with each other.

As a result of the repatriation agreement between the Soviet Union and Romania and due to illegal border crossings, ideology or family reunions, many Jews arrived in Bessarabia from other Romanian areas in the summer of 1940. However, hundreds of Jews born in Bessarabia who approached the Romanian and Soviet authorities were refused entry. A small number of Jews who were stuck in Bessarabia managed to escape. Some were caught, arrested and exiled deep into the Soviet Union. Others escaped west across the Prut River. These were people of means who had good contacts with the Romanian authorities and they had good reason to fear the new authorities. Although there was an interest in family reunions, many Jews from Bessarabia understood that they were unwanted in Romania. In addition, there were no proper ways to travel since the Romanians used any wagons, horses and oxen available to move government property out of Bessarabia.

The general uncertainty about the future was also supplemented by fog surrounding the Soviet ultimatum. There was indication that the Soviets gave at least 48 hours for the retreat from Bessarabia, but some units of the Red Army arrived in Kishinev on June 29. For this reason the Jews really hardly had any time to make a decision about leaving.

During the annexation of Bessarabia by the Soviet Union there were many instances of attacks by the retreating Romanian soldiers. Actually, few Jews suffered from these attacks since they also joined in attacks against the Romanian militia and soldiers. On the other side of the border attacks and pogroms against Jews were starting and some people from Bessarabia were hurt.

In addition to the story of the retreat, there should also be a discussion of the political reality existing in Romania since the anti-Semitic campaign in 1938 of the Goga-Kuza

government. Many Jews in Bessarabia had suffered from it. The new citizenship law affected them when they had to prove their eligibility. They were always under the threat of expulsion or extra taxes. During this time of fear and search for proof many of the merchants and free professionals lost their livelihood. Others were pressed to pay more taxes and suffered as a result. As well, there was a systematic push to eliminate all cultural and public Jewish institutions. Many of these closed or had to change their plans and/or titles. The only daily Jewish newspaper in all of Bessarabia, "Our time", also closed. The united party of Zeirei Zion and Poalei Zion (operating under the new name of "Building Our Land") did publish some issues from time to time. In essence, the Jews of Bessarabia at that time and as the Red Army entered, remained without any newspaper. There was bitterness, disappointment and a lack of purpose among the leadership, especially in Zionist circles when they discovered that it would not easily be possible to move activists to Bucharest and then to Eretz Israel.

It is no wonder that in this atmosphere the influence of Communism grew especially among the younger Jews. Some of them who were left-leaning attempted to cross the Dniester (with some success). Even among the Zionist youth groups, especially Hashomer Hatzair, there was a switch to the Communist crowd. Even ordinary people, as well as some merchants and free professionals, felt an affinity with the Soviets. Many Jews in Eastern Europe, as in Bessarabia, wished to cast their lot with the great Soviet state fearing a German invasion. The youth groups, Zionist and politically aware, still encouraged the preparatory kibbutzim, but they were cognizant of a possible need to go underground in case the Red Army was in charge.

The entrance of the Red Army in Bessarabia found the Jews in an unstable and uncertain position from an organizational point of view. It seems that aside from the difficult times, many of the Jews of Bessarabia were not really surprised by events.

Little is known about the fate of the Jews and how they managed in the year that passed between the arrival of the Red Army and its retreat under German pressure. The next three chapters discuss three paths in the lives of the Jews of Bessarabia during that year: civil and political, economic and social and cultural.

CIVIC AND POLITICAL PATHS

As a rule the entrance of the Red Army in the villages and towns of Bessarabia went quite smoothly and it was orderly and perhaps even festive. Young Jews, mainly leftists, stood out among the crowds happily welcoming the soldiers of the Red Army. These young people were delirious, climbed the tanks and hugged and kissed the soldiers. Others from the Zionist youth movements followed them– so excited with these sure-footed soldiers. The excitement generated by the soldiers engulfed many people. They were craftsmen, laborers and the poor; but they were also members of the wealthier Jewish community who saw salvation in their new redeemers. A well-known community leader from Romaneshti wrote to his relatives that the Soviet regime freed him from a terrible fate since he had been blacklisted by the Romanians. This reaction represents the feelings of many strata of the Jewish community. They were happy with the coming of the soldiers and with the pronouncements of the civil authorities that “the new regime will bring peace and quiet to the population without any religious or linguistic prejudice”. The Jews were quite hopeful for a great future.

These expectations brought about a wave of dozens of repatriated Jews who arrived from the other side of the Prut River, i.e. Ragat. The authorities were interested in publicizing this fact as it emphasised the human and political facets. In the Jewish Soviet newspaper “The Star” there was a story about a young Jewish doctor named Jon Feinstein who managed to escape from Bucharest after he completed his studies. He had been attacked by a group of students who were members of the Iron Guard. When he reached Bessarabia he declared that he was ready to put all his knowledge and energy in order to serve this newly redeemed homeland.

At first, many Jews, mainly former political prisoners and young people from prominent families, were integrated into the local government. Some of them were appointed as heads of municipal communities: in Soroki, Edinets, Bricheva, Lipkany, etc. Lower positions were occupied by local non-Jews who had been brought over from the eastern banks of the Dniester, especially from Ukraine. Some of them were Soviet Jews and they had some contact with the local Jews. The fact that so many Jews had high positions was a source of national pride and was proof for the possibilities available to any Jewish citizen in the Soviet Union.

In essence, at the beginning, many Jews tried to rationalize events with a positive point of view and to ignore any difficulties with the new regime. The First Secretary of the Ukrainian Communist Party, N.S. Khrushchev, announced at a large meeting in Kishinev, that no resident of Bessarabia would be punished for his past. The Jewish Soviet poet, Itzik Feffer, also appeared in Kishinev in July and spoke along the same lines. Although he disparaged the Bundists and the Zionists, he still followed the party line then popular in the annexed areas.

During the “honeymoon period” there were some– in the Yiddishist or the Zionist camps– who encouraged a belief in the new regime. The former felt the authorities had a preference for Yiddish culture while the latter tried to sense the reaction to their views. However, except for one incident, there were no real results to the attempts by the Zionists to clarify their positions. The members of the agricultural preparatory farm Masada near Balti had lengthy negotiations with representatives of the Communist Party and the authorities about continuing their professional activities. In the end they were forced to concede and to close the farm. They began clandestine operations by sneaking their members across the border to Romania. This was the end of their “romance” with the authorities.

The “honeymoon period” did not last long in other areas, such as economy, culture, etc. It was discovered that although there were many Jews who were active in the elections for central institutions of the Republic of Moldova (January 1941), the number of Jews elected was smaller than their percentage in the population. In addition, many veteran party faithful felt that the authorities were beginning to prefer Soviet functionaries in important Moldavian areas over Jews. Only a small number of Jews who had been political prisoners and veterans of the party were trusted by the leaders and they were appointed to important positions. They were involved in publicity, information, etc. One of them was named editor of a department in the newspaper “Socialist Moldova” and another was in charge of propaganda in the central committee of the party in Kishinev.

The disappointment of many on the left and others from the rest of the population was speeded up by the sanctions the new regime ordered from time to time. There was no visible reason for these sanctions, such as the change of passports. It seemed as if



this was an ordinary administrative order to change the Romanian identity cards of the population to Soviet documents. However, it caused much unrest and fear. Those who did not receive new documents were fearful, but so were those who did obtain them. In section 39 they were told that they could no longer reside in large cities and certain other areas and they were forced to move.

Another phenomenon, that was really not well-known, but indirectly caused great difficulties, was the lengthy inquests. Some people, among them those who had been previously active in different parties, were invited to come to the authorities. They were then subjected to lengthy inquiries, with threats, mainly during the night. They were asked to reveal details about their previous activities and to denounce others. In spite of the fact this was a secret inquest, the details were soon well-known. In some cases some people managed to evade the inquests by running away. There were also several suicides.

It is no wonder that this tragic situation brought about many rumors about forced denunciations. Many people feared they would be involved as well.

In addition to the inquests, there were also many arrests. Those arrested were exiled to Siberia and other locations deep in Russia. One of the first arrested was the Director of the Joint in Bessarabia, Yitzhak Milstein. His arrest on July 7 shocked the Jewish world since he had been known as a loyal Soviet citizen. A week later, on the eve of the 13<sup>th</sup> of July, other leaders of the Zionist parties in Kishinev and other towns were arrested. In addition to the Jewish prisoners, there were also Romanian politicians and previous holders of government positions in Romania. There were even some people who had served in the gendarmerie. Even Jews who had been active Communists in the past were now accused of having Trotskyite leanings. However, the chairman of the Zionist Cooperative in Bessarabia, Shlomo Berland, the president of WIZO, Yehudit Geller, and others were not touched. It is estimated that during the year of Soviet rule hundreds of Jews were arrested. Among them were some who were crossing the border and others who had been accused of economic crimes.

## EXPULSIONS

On the night between June 13 and 14 1941, before the Germans took over, the Russians began to exile hundreds of people to Siberia and other eastern areas. Among the thousands of Jews taken out of their homes that night and during the following week were many who had been active in different parties and associations. They were placed on wagons, trucks and railway cars and taken over the Dniester to an unknown location. Some of these Jews were among the wealthy and all the exiles were accompanied by their families.

The criteria for exiling people and the actual execution were all done by orders of the central defense ministry of the Soviet Union. For that reason, some of those exiled were Communists who had been suspected in the past and others were quite poor.

The deportees spent many days in crowded cars traveling through the Soviet Union. Then new cars were brought and filled. However, the war broke out on June 22 and it was impossible to activate mass deportations as previously planned. They still continued even when the arrival of the Romanian and German armies was imminent.

In total about 8,000 Jews were exiled from Bessarabia by the Soviet authorities during that year.

#### ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL PATH

On August 15, 1940, about seven weeks after the Soviet takeover of Bessarabia and about two weeks after its annexation by the Republic of Moldova of the Soviet Union, a new regulation was published. It dealt with loans to factories and businesses, transportation by land and by sea and communications in Bessarabia. However, within the Jewish community there were considerable economic changes already noticeable when the Red Army entered. The soldiers and the numerous Soviet functionaries bought everything they saw without caring about the price. This was followed by a buying frenzy among the local population. The shop owners were afraid of being accused of speculation and sold all goods in their possession. As a result there was very little left in the warehouses and the stores. Almost immediately there was a lack of basics such as shoes, clothing, kitchen supplies, etc. It was even difficult to obtain bread without waiting in a long line.

Another serious outcome was the fact that the shop owners accumulated a great deal of cash, but they had no more goods to sell. This situation became worse due to the big difference in the exchange rates between the Romanian lei and the ruble. Although the official rate was 40 lei to the ruble, many Soviet citizens exchanged at the rate of 100 lei per ruble. Even those shop owners and small businessmen who tried to stay open were eventually forced to close their stores due to the heavy taxes levied by the new authorities.

There was a limit to the amounts of money to be withdrawn from the bank and general banking activity was frozen. The small savings and loans funds that had helped many poorer Jews in the past also had to discontinue their services.

The new situation caused thousands of Jewish family heads and main earners to be without any income. In addition there were thousands of Jewish young men and women in towns and villages who were chronically unemployed and who represented a large percentage of the population. They presented a serious problem for the new authorities.

Another issue was that of Jews who had formerly owned businesses now nationalized by the authorities. According to the new criteria these people were considered as “users” and “anti-socialists” and the authorities had no moral or governmental obligation towards them. Some of them remained in their positions temporarily in order to train those who would replace them. They were constantly watched by the commissars since they were thought to be anti-government.

There was a sudden appearance in Bessarabia of hordes of officers, clerks, teachers and other Soviet experts who came, ostensibly, to “help” the new young Soviet Republic. This phenomenon prevented many local residents from obtaining government positions and it also created a housing shortage. The solution to this problem was the nationalization of large buildings and the expropriation of entire apartments or rooms. In general, those who suffered the most from these events were former property owners and middle class people in villages and towns who had to share their homes “for the good of the state” or to leave their apartments. Even people in the lower classes had difficulties.

In addition to the loss of their homes through expropriation, former property owners and the unemployed (through no fault of their own) also were deprived of food vouchers or identity papers. Sometimes their identity papers included section 39 which forbade them from residing in larger cities. No wonder that those who were forced to be unemployed made efforts to find any position without paying attention to the quality of work or the salary. In order to obtain a government job one had to complete a detailed personal application indicating social status and political past. Not only was this quite uncomfortable for the applicants, but there was some danger involved in being exposed as “criminals” or “undesirables”. As a result, there were Zionist activists, property owners and former merchants who preferred physical work such as loading and unloading lumber, carrying luggage in the train station, wood cutting for institutions, bakeries, armories, hospitals, etc. In these positions they were able to remain almost anonymous– which would not have happened if they had stayed closer to their former occupations.

Those who enjoyed better integration in government jobs and could earn more were the craftsmen. The authorities organized them in a cooperative called Artels. Those who were especially encouraged were the small craftsmen who were nicknamed Kostarniki. The first cooperatives were usually the shoemakers, tailors, carpenters, bakers, etc. In many instances these cooperatives were housed in buildings of Jewish institutions. For example, the cooperative bakery in Bricheva was located in the Tarbut School. In Lipcani the “Artels” for carpenters and tailors were located in synagogues. In place of the former stores there were cooperatives for transporting groceries, textiles and other needed products. There were also cooperatives for barbers and others.

In the new situation, where the lands were nationalized and the agrarian reform in 1940, very few Jewish land owners could continue to earn their living by farming. They were restricted in the size of land they could keep according to the number of people in the family. The head of the family who was permitted to keep his land (or a portion of it) had to prove that he and his family actually worked the land by themselves. There was a very rigid oversight of the produce. In spite of these issues there were still some Jewish families earning their living by farming, although sometimes it was within a cooperative.

One of the most popular occupations at the time for Jews, especially young ones, was teaching. The new regime made great efforts to develop the educational system without omitting any village and hamlet. There was a great need for qualified teachers. Hundreds of young Jews, among them even those who had not completed their studies, participated in a short course of study of several weeks. Upon completion they were sent to different educational institutions in Bessarabia. Those who did obtain teaching positions felt their lot was better than that of their unemployed brethren.

The lack of employment and the need to use up meagre savings forced the educated people, especially those who had once taught, to look for teaching positions.

Jewish young men and women also found employment in factories and public service such as transportation and health. Families with many children were fortunate since their adult offspring could help with income. However, not all young Jews were able to find work either because of lack of skills or due to competition from the Soviet clerks brought in or simply because there were not enough positions in a lagging economy.

The young Jews who could not find employment had no choice but to deal in the black market and price gouging. This caused clashes with the authorities and led to trials in the Public courts. These people were severely punished. The dire economic situation brought even admirers of the Soviet regime to a conflict with it.

One of the solutions offered by the authorities to the unemployed was to go to other areas in the Soviet Union, in particular the industrial center of Donbas in Ukraine. Only a few young singles and couples were absorbed in new places. However, they were thus saved from the Holocaust that soon befell the Jews of Bessarabia which was conquered by the Germans and the Romanians.

## EDUCATION, CULTURE AND ATMOSPHERE

**EDUCATION:** The Red Army entered Bessarabia during summer holidays so the authorities had enough time to reorganize the school system before reopening. There were two aspects to the reorganization: one was to broaden the system and the other was force Sovietisation. About 5000 people, mostly young educators (some of them Jews), were sent to special speeded-up courses. An additional 1000 were brought from

Ukraine and Russia. Experienced teachers, except for those who were fired for political and other reasons, also underwent a preparatory course before they entered the classroom.

On August 12, 1940 when the new school year began, an announcement was made on behalf of the government (local Commissars committee) of Soviet Moldova and the Communist Party, about the reorganization of the schools of Bessarabia according to the Soviet system. There was special emphasis on free tuition for those 8–14 of age. In the school year of 1940/41 there were 1833 elementary schools (1183 Moldovan, 400 Russian, 227 Ukrainian and 23 others). "Other" must have included 11 Jewish schools. In 1939/40 before the Soviet annexation there were 37 Hebrew schools with 4803 students and they represented the majority of Jewish institutions. With annexation the teaching of Hebrew was cancelled in the new schools. Supposedly, pupils were spoken to in their preferred language, but everything was really prearranged without any chance of change. Even schools where Yiddish was taught had to follow government curriculum. Also, Jewish parents did not always want to send their children to Jewish schools. They preferred schools where the local language, be it Moldovan or Russian, was taught so their futures would be easier.

For the above mentioned and other reasons it is a fact that the number of Jewish educational institutions decreased considerably. For example. Jewish schools were not established in areas where there had previously existed schools in which Hebrew had been taught such as Lipcani, Bricheva, etc. On the other hand, there were, in Kishinev, 4 Jewish schools– 2 elementary and 2 high schools. Among them was a technical school where Yiddish was used. In Balti there was also a Jewish high school that accepted so many new students (many of the students came from poor homes) that it had to be enlarged. In these schools there were sections for music and technology.

In Romanovka two Russian schools and one Jewish school were opened. (The Jewish school replaced the Hebrew school). There were also Jewish schools in Kalarash, Teleneshti and Orhei. In Edinets there was only one school replacing the three previously there.

As a rule, the principals of these schools were brought from the other side of the Dniester, mostly Ukraine. They had great professional experience and the appropriate

political outlook. This was especially true of those who were in these positions in the school in Kishinev. They supervised curriculum and its content so it would follow the official lines. They also carefully watched the veteran teachers and their integration into Soviet norms. Sometimes they required reports from the teachers about their colleagues and turned them into tattle-tellers.

The textbooks, in Yiddish, were brought from the Soviet Union. Many had been translated from Russian. The translation was poor and the books were thus difficult to read. Some original texts came mainly from Tiraspol and other places where there had been Jewish schools in the past. There were some books written by well-known Jewish Soviet authors such as Kipnis, Brednitsky, Epstein and others. However, there was very little Jewish value in these books.

The major changes in curriculum and in the language of learning caused many problems among the students and the veteran teachers. They all had difficulty writing in the Yiddish-Soviet script. There was no mention of Jewish history or Jewish holidays and this caused anger among the students, especially the seniors. Many of them had been members of Zionist movements and they suffered when during history classes there was emphasis on the need to fight against Zionists and Bundists. This was a problem for the students.

It often happened that the veteran teachers – especially who had been active in Zionist and Bundist movements – were forced to cut themselves off from their former followers in the movements at least outwardly. It was very hard for them to deny their previous beliefs. There were some teachers who stood up against this – such as the teacher who refused to teach her students about Khmel'nitsky in a positive way.

The Jewish teachers also had to – together with their non-Jewish colleagues – take part in elections propaganda and in anti-religion campaigns.

In spite of these difficulties the teachers tried to instill Jewish cultural and literary values in their students as they felt this was very important.

At the end of the academic year 1940/41 there was a rumor that the Jewish schools were to be closed. The Hebrew and Yiddish teachers feared the worst. At the same time Jewish parents were more interested in sending their children to non-Jewish

schools either because they were not pleased with the Jewish schools or because they were being realistic.

## NEWSPAPERS

At first, the Yiddishists (especially the Bundists and the Communists) saw somewhat of a progress in the establishment of the 11 Jewish schools. However, they were disappointed in the Jewish press in Bessarabia. There were signs that a Jewish newspaper, in Yiddish, was to be published in the near future, but it soon became evident to the Jewish intelligentsia and the lovers of Yiddish that, for various reasons, it was not going to happen. There was no vehicle in which Jewish writers in Bessarabia could have their creative works published. Anyone interested in a Jewish newspaper had to be satisfied with reading "Shtern" (Star) from Kiev. It reached Kishinev and other locations in Bessarabia. The 50 or so Jewish writers were advised to write in Moldavian or to send their articles in the Yiddish press of the Soviet Union. A few of them tried to do so, but only some were published. The others had difficulty following the official Soviet lines.

## CULTURAL LIFE

There were very few opportunities for expressing anything from the Jewish culture that was developing. There were radio broadcasts in Yiddish from Kishinev at the beginning of the new regime. These broadcasts featured Jewish authors and they represented a novelty within the Jewish population. There was thus a pretense of Yiddish culture. Another vehicle for the Jewish authors was the meetings, literary evenings, concerts and other assemblies organized by the authorities as part of the workplace. They were intensified during the times before elections or Soviet holidays. At some of these sessions the writer Yankel Yakir was invited to lecture to Jewish workers who were the majority at their places of work. Most lectures were dedicated to Shalom Aleichem who was remembered that year in the Soviet Union. There were other authors who lectured to Jewish audiences such as Feffer, Zuskin, Shulman, etc. The writers association in Kishinev organized a literary evening in Yiddish that was dedicated in honor of the poet Rifkind (Eisner).



Two other places for celebrating culture were the clubs and the libraries. Many of them, especially those that had previously belonged to the Culture League (leftist-Yiddishist) continued to operate under Soviet rule after they had had gone through a thorough inquest. These clubs had different programs such as plays, cinema, parties, etc. There were also some private libraries, newspapers and games.

Books that were not approved from a political point of view– most of the Hebrew books– were taken out of circulation and sometimes even burned. This occurred in Edinets, Bricheva, Soroki, Parlitza and other locations. As a result, many people hid their private libraries. In Kishinev there was a large public library originally created by the Culture League. There, and in other big cities, it was possible to buy Yiddish books, for a low price, that were imported from the Soviet Union. The Soviet authorities began to publish books in Moldavian, in Cyrillic script, but there were no new books in Yiddish. There were not even any propaganda brochures before the elections.

The JEWISH THEATER was re-established in Kishinev with the help of the well-known Yaakov Sternberg and it was housed in one of the largest halls in town. The Jewish Theater also traveled to other towns. It even reached Tiraspol on the other side of the Dniester. Its repertoire included classic plays such as “The Witch” by Goldfaden and an altered version of “Red Oranges”. The latter pleased the Soviets. The Jewish theater from Ukraine came to visit various locations in Bessarabia and presented “The Two Kunilemels”.

In some towns there were local amateur theater troupes. In Edinets there were actually two such groups that performed in Yiddish until the war broke out. Still, there were many places in Bessarabia that were deprived of any Yiddish theater performances. The youth was not too interested in Jewish culture and they tried to integrate into Russian culture.

## RELIGIOUS LIFE

The negative attitude of the Soviet regime towards religion was well known within the Jewish community. There were many rabbis and other religious Jews who escaped from their towns for that reason. Sometimes these people would welcome the

incoming Russian soldiers together with the rest of the population. Still, it was obvious that it would be almost impossible to practice religion under the Soviets.

Soon enough, those Jews in Bessarabia who tried to keep the Sabbath were in great difficulties. They were forced to work on the Sabbath and other Jewish holidays or else they would lose their jobs. In addition, the authorities turned the synagogues into workshops, warehouses and party rooms. In Bricheni and Parlitza there was an attempt by the Jewish population to oppose these changes. Those synagogues that remained open continued to be used for daily prayers. Those who participated were mainly the elderly and others who had lost their jobs. Some came for social reasons—to meet and to talk. Young people, who used to attend services, stopped completely. In some locations the authorities prohibited kosher slaughter of beef, but they still permitted the ritual slaughter of fowl. The ritual slaughterers were required to pay a tax to the authorities. In several places the Rabbis tried to continue religious Jewish life. In Edinets, for example, the local rabbi prepared a Hebrew calendar that was distributed, secretly, to dozens of Jewish families so they could celebrate Shabbat and holidays. At Passover time, it was possible to obtain matzos and many families conducted a traditional Seder.

Although circumcision was not prohibited by the authorities, there were some Jews who did not enter their sons into the Covenant of Abraham. There were some restrictions on performing Jewish weddings, maintaining Mikvahs and other ritual activities. The local community heads were dismissed and the institutions were dispersed.

In spite of the anti-religious campaign by the authorities and the Communists in Bessarabia, as in other annexed areas, there were hardly any incidents of attacks on the local rabbis. Even the chief Rabbi of Kishinev, R. Yehuda Leib Tsirelson—well-known as a leader of Agudat Israel in Europe and as being close to the former Romanian authorities—was not disturbed by the Soviets. However, in reality, his importance as a political and spiritual leader decreased and only some people continued to pay him homage as he deserved. Rabbi Tsirelson became an isolated figure.

Many Jews in Bessarabia felt hurt and disappointed by the new regime when it came to cultural life, education and religion. Others among the Jews –especially the young and those who were assimilated– did not feel deprived as a people. They did not believe that they should be given special consideration. They were attracted to the equality of rights and personal advancement now open to them. They were truly immersed in the new ways. Here and there, there were some groups of Zionist youth– some of it in secret. Gordonya and Hashomer Hatzair amalgamated for a short period of time. However, all these activities paled in comparison with the dynamic Sovietisation. The Zionist youth were few in number and had to function in secret and the general public was not really interested in them. Except for a few branches of Hashomer Hatzair, the secret groups functioned mainly with the purpose of getting their members out of the country and on their way to Eretz Israel. Soon, most of their leaders were arrested and deported and the others were dispersed.

When the Soviet regime fell as the German–Romanian armies entered the Soviet Union, the Jews of Bessarabia were left leaderless, lacking confidence and lost.

#### THE REFUGEES UNDER THE SOVIETS

On June 22, 1941 the German forces surprised the Soviet Union with an attack along the German–Soviet border. Their Romanian collaborators joined them along the Prut River. The surprise attack and the sense of helplessness within the Soviet command that followed it caused the defense to be quite slim along the border. Some units of the Red Army and border patrol tried valiantly to repel the attackers to the other side of the Prut, but they were not successful. Soon many villages and towns saw the German–Romanian armies advancing towards them. They were heavily bombarded, especially Kishinev, the capital. On July 3 the village of Storojineti was conquered. On July 5 Noua Sulitsa and Edinets fell. July 6 saw the conquest of Khotin and July 9 –Balti. On July 16 the Red Army retreated even from Kishinev. Within a few days, i.e., 4 weeks after the war broke out, the German–Romanian armies had complete control of Bessarabia. They still continued pursuing the retreating Red Army east to the Dniester. At first the local military and civil authorities tried to overcome the difficulties. They organized a civil defence. This was in addition to the draft of all those born in 1905–1918 (also in Odessa and Moldova). Special course in first aid were also opened.

These were mainly filled by women. Soon an engineering battalion was announced and thousands of men began to build defences, to dig anti-tank trenches, etc. There were also some strike forces formed by those loyal to the regime and active in the party. They were to fight diversions and sabotage. The government institutions conducted a constant publicity campaign urging the residents of Moldova to fight for their homeland together with their Soviet counterparts. There were orders from Moscow to prepare partisan activities and to evacuate the families of the thousands of clerks and army personnel from Bessarabia to the east. On July 4 and 6 official instructions about evacuation were published by the government and the Communist party.

From that point on the mass escape of the Jewish residents began. They ran away, fearing the conquerors, east of the Dniester. They followed the Red Army in its retreat.

The sudden beginning of the war found the Jewish population of Bessarabia still in despair and fear from the revolutionary conquest in the previous year. They were still reeling from the mass arrests and deportations that had taken place. They were left without any leaders. They had also heard the threatening declarations on radio Bucharest about a "holy war against Jews and Bolsheviks". The Jews who lived in the villages of the western banks of the Prut, especially in northern Bessarabia, were among the first to be confronted by the new reality. In Khotin district the conquerors moved very quickly. The Jews discovered that the Red Army was unable to stop the invaders. The Khotin district (especially the village of Bricheni) was quickly isolated from the rest of Bessarabia. The retreat routes of the army and the civilians were blocked. Some were able to escape in time even though the authorities tried to calm the population and to stop panic from setting in. However, the authorities were making plans to save themselves at the same time. In Edinets some local residents approached the Party headquarters to obtain permits to cross the Dniester. They were refused with the excuse that the Red Army would soon liberate the town. On all, by July 13, only 15 Jewish families were able to leave. Some had been drafted earlier by the army and they were able to return after the war.

JEWISH SETTLEMENTS IN BESSARABIA



DEPORTATION LOCATIONS IN TRANSISTRIA OF THE JEWS OF BESSARABIA AND BUCOVINA

צירי גירוש לטראנסניסטריה של יהודי באסאראביה ובוקובינה



This same supposed feeling of calm existed in other towns, as well. While the authorities actively planned the evacuation of Soviet clerks, their families, army personnel and local party activists. It was only two weeks after the war broke out that the authorities permitted the population to go east and even opened bridges over the Dniester. By then, a large part of Bessarabia had been conquered by the enemy. Most of the Jews of Bessarabia – mainly the residents of larger towns such as Kishinev, Tighina, Orgeyev, Kalarash, Soroka and others – were still in their homes. Even now, when it was obvious the Germans and Romanians were closing in, many people could not leave their homes and go to an unknown place. Among them were many elderly, disabled and sick people and families with young children. Many people closed their eyes to the future and hoped nothing bad would come to them.

This was true of a small portion of the Jewish public. In most communities the decision makers were able to convince the others. They organized methods of travel and went on their way with their belongings. Those who could not find wagons went on foot.

The road was not easy for the escapees. In some places they were heavily bombed by the Germans and were killed. In other places Jews were killed by local peasants when they came to a village looking for lodging. Those who reached the Dniester and managed to cross to the other side were helped by the Soviet authorities who gave them trains cars and transported them east.

The number of Jews who managed to escape in time to parts of the Soviet Union is estimated to be about a third of the population in Bessarabia at that time. They were able to save themselves from the Holocaust that came to the rest of the Jewish population of Bessarabia.

#### FIRST PART OF THE WAR

There were several causes for the onslaught of the Holocaust on the Jews of Bessarabia. One was the attitude of the German commanders who under the influence of Nazi propaganda were convinced Germany's purpose, in addition to conquering the world, was the destruction of the Jews wherever they resided. The second cause was the discriminatory laws in Romania, influenced by the Germans. These laws had

brought the Jews to a lower status where it was possible to attack them without fear of punishment. The official Romanian propaganda accused the Jews of being Communists and so they became the collaborators with the Soviet enemy when the war broke out in 1941.

It is essential to emphasize the close connection between the pogrom in Iasi at the end of June 1941 and the massacre in Bessarabia. The German and Romanian troops that took part in the massacre were soon transferred to Kishinev where they continued their actions. From Kishinev they were sent to Tighina (Bendery) and to Akkerman where again they performed their horrible deeds.

The Romanian soldiers and the civil service personnel that were sent to Bessarabia were given exact instructions from the leaders about how they should act towards the Jews. It was emphasized to them the Jews were traitors and disloyal. The soldiers and government clerks were ordered to gather the Jews of Bessarabia in ghettos and to use cruel methods on them. In the speeches of Count Ion Antonescu and his people it is obvious that there was distinct Nazi influence. They imitated Hitler himself.

#### ROLE OF THE ROMANIANS IN THE DESTRUCTION OF THE JEWS

There was an atmosphere of Jew-hatred and there were massacres by the German soldiers. The Romanian units contributed to the slaughter of the Jews of Bessarabia. These units of the "Secret Service for Information" were organized along similar lines to that of the Einsatzgruppe of the Nazis.

In the introduction to the first volume of Romania it was described how these units operated in Iasi. Few details are given in the trial following the pogrom in that town.

It can be surmised that in the secret archives of Romania there is more information that is derogatory about many Romanian soldiers. They were given a free hand in their dealings with the Jews along the orders to the German soldiers. There were no consequences to any of the murders, robberies and abuse.

The first Romanian troops to enter Bessarabia were those who came to Noua-Sulitsa on July 2, 1941. 800 Jews were killed under the pretext that they had fired at the army. On July 8 the commander of the gendarmerie in Bessarabia, situated in Kishinev,



ordered all Jews still residing in villages to be arrested. This is how Romania took over Bessarabia. There are very few official documents remaining. Three days earlier Edinets was conquered. Within two days 500 Jews were murdered there and many women and girls were raped. Some of them committed suicide. There are three large common graves there which are a testament to the massacre.

On July 8 1000 Jews were killed in Markuleshty and a few days later the same occurred in Floreshti, Gura-Caminca, Kaushany and Gura-Caminca. On July 12, 300 Jews were slain in Climautsi (Soroka District) and on July 11, 12 Jews who were hostage died in Lipkany, 40 in Lenkautsi (Khotin district), 160 in Cepelutzi (Khotin).

In the trials of war criminals that took place in Romania a few more villages are mentioned: Nigoreni- 16 Jews were arrested in July 1942. They were all residents of the village. Some were killed by strangling so that gunshot would not be heard. The order to kill was given by the assistant commander of the gendarmerie in Orgeyev, Lt. Konstantin Popoy. He had been the governor of the area in the times of Goga-Koza. In July 1941, in the village of Dereneu (Orgeyev district), 40 Jews were shot in an anti-tank trench and they were buried there. A similar even happened in the village of Colibka where 18 Jews were shot by the gendarmes. In the village of Ghirisheni 22 Jews were killed. In Kalarash 250 Jews who had remained were brought to the forest to be shot. They were buried in a trench that had been prepared. This was done by the gendarmes by order of Col. N. Carcass. These atrocities only represent a small part of all the horrific deeds committed in other places in Bessarabia.

#### CONCENTRATION OF THE JEWS IN GHETTOS

The documents and orders found indicate a great confusion within the Romanian authorities. The order to arrest all the remaining Jews was not entirely clear. It was also unclear what was to be done with those arrested. In some places they were put into camps. In Balti such a camp was prepared about 12 km from town in the Rautel forest. Here the Jews were placed in rundown shacks surrounded by a barbed fence and some of them died of hunger.

In a report from July 17 by General Jon Topor to his superiors we find that Jews were sent to various concentration camps. Falesht received 1500 Jews; Balti-1235 and

another 500 to come; Limbeni–Noui –700 Jews. In the report it is noted there is no food for these people and there are not enough soldiers to guard them. Topor suggested that they be sent further inland.

On July 22, 1941 General Topor informed the gendarmerie command in Kishinev that he was ordered by the assistant to the Secretary of the Interior to send these Jews to work so there would be a way to feed them. In the meantime the Germans executed their own destruction plans. There is testimony about what happened in the Falesht district. Several Jews from the village of Skompia (Balti district) escaped to Falesht and there they met a unit of Romanian horsemen. The commander gave them a letter and advised them to return to the village. Soon the Germans arrived and forced them to dig trenches. They were buried alive– some with their heads down and others with their heads up. They all died after terrible torture. The local residents were brought to watch. In a nearby Jewish cemetery there were two trenches in which the Germans buried 300 Jews who had been shot. Witnesses tell about terrible acts such as the splitting of babies while they were still alive, raping of women and cutting off their breasts, etc. Many Jews were buried alive in order to save ammunition. In the chicken slaughtering area, Jews were hung on hooks and skinned alive.

All this happened in July in the first stage of the conquest of Bessarabia. On August 1 all Jews still alive in Khotin were sent across the Dniester.

At the beginning of August, after the first wave of killings, all the Jews were put into camps. In mid–August, when caravans of deportees passed from Storozhinetz, Bukovina to Ataki, there was not one Jew left in the settlements of Riscani, Nuoaa–Solitza, Lipkany, etc.

Vă rugăm stăruitor să interziceți imediat  
totul de ceti și de survență pentru obținerea  
unei călătorii gratuite, să fiuți trimeși nești un  
lagăr suedez cu mijlocul de transport peste carua  
data și este posibilă altă soluție mai favorabilă.

Vă veh multiplici deperanțe noastre și  
Vă rugăm mea odată Salvați-ne din  
ghimarele mortii în altmura  
para.

Spunem, salvarea un popor  
fi eficace decât data vie  
telegrafic

În informațiunea noastră relativă la  
în ubinele cele transportului evacuare cu  
soare aci, și ca se presupune o dispoziție  
noastră care oprește continuarea evacuării evreilor  
Președinții, și introduc me afacere mea aci  
reșterii să fiu și un incadrati în această  
dispoziție noastră.

Cu toată stima

Maclis 22. Octombrie 1941.  
Dr. Fielderman, Președinte  
al Federatiei U. E. R. Pruceni, Str. Purgelii 3.

“Save us from the claws of death” – a group of Jews from Bessarabia write on the eve of their deportation to Transnistria in a secret letter from Ataki on 22.10.1941 to the president of the Federation of Communities, Dr. Fielderman.

## BALANCE SHEET OF THE LOSSES

In some locations the number of victims can be found by comparing those remaining alive in August 1941 with the census information from 1930. In the town of Khotin, 1981 Jews were murdered while in the entire district the number was 13,334. From 50,603 Jews in 1930 in Lapusna – including Kishinev– only 10,311 were alive on September 1, 1941. In Balti 8941 Jews were alive from a total of 31,916 in 1930.

In December 1941 Ion Antonescu appointed a special committee to “investigate irregularities in the Kishinev ghetto”. The committee reported that Jews were placed in camps as follows:

Vertuzhen – 25,000 people; Markuleshty– 11,000; Edinets and Scureni–25,000; Kishinev–11,252; Orgeyev, Cahul, Ismail, Kilia–Noua and Bolgrad had about 1000 people each. The total was thus: 75–80,000 Jews were arrested and sent to camps and of those 55,867 were deported. The explanation for the difference in totals is explained by “They died a natural death, escaped or were shot”.

In order to understand these totals there must be some explanation. When the detention camps were organized there were at most 80,000 Jews in the whole of Bessarabia. In the 1930 census the total was 206,958 Jews. It is obvious that 126,958 people are missing. This is the minimum number of people killed from the time the German–Romanian armies entered and the opening of these camps. The tragic events happened in 1941 and the official census had been taken in 1930. It is certain that the number of Jews also grew in those 11 years. In addition, in 1940, thousands of refugees from Ragat and Transylvania arrived in Bessarabia.

If we add to the 126,958 people who were murdered in the first stage of military operations the 25,000 killed in the stage of sending people to detention camps and from there to Transnistria, the total of victims in Bessarabia is 151,958. This is an estimated figure and it is probably lower than the actual total since the number of refugees from Romania and natural growth do not figure.

There is no doubt that many Romanian soldiers took part in the massacre, but they often followed the German troops who served as an example to them. The Germans also had the plans, the initiative and the command for these atrocities. The Romanian



troops followed orders, but they still contributed to the destruction of the Jews of Bessarabia.

#### ROBBERY OF JEWISH ASSETS

When the Romanian army entered Bessarabia the soldiers began to steal. The Romanian troops had followed the Germans. Their task was to identify the Jewish homes and to rob them. While doing so they killed any Jews found in the homes. This happened in the villages of Parlitza and Taura–Noua. When the German command found out what happened it distanced itself from these acts. When the terrible massacres committed by the Einsatzgruppe became known, it was understood that the Germans were worried that the Romanians did not know how to properly camouflage their activities.

Since robbery was not included in the “political activities” of the Germans, the Romanian army and police felt free to do as they pleased in this area. In addition to the soldiers there were also the gendarmes and the peasants who denounced the Jews hiding nearby so that they could obtain their belongings.

In addition to robberies committed by the gendarmes, soldiers and civilians there was also a systematic loss directed by the government supposedly based on the law. A law was published on September 3, 1941 which delineated the Romanization of Bessarabia and northern Bukovina. According to this law the Romanian government received everything belonging to Jewish individuals or institutions. An inquiry committee decreed that in the case of the confiscation of homes belonging to Jews in Bessarabia, payment would have to be made according to accepted legal procedures. Some difficulty occurred and the authors of the law announced that the procedure could not be followed since it was unknown where the Jews had been deported. In other words, the deportation of the Jews across the Dniester was not part of the law since they did not leave of their own accord. In this situation the legal authorities would have to find a solution for the problem. It turns out that the authors of the law felt that one day they would have to own up to their deeds and therefore it was essential to have an inventory of all that was stolen. An order was issued to have reports on all the towns and villages where Jews resided, which houses were found to be in good condition and

which lands were owned by Jews. Due to the order given, detailed reports remained about the lands, the gardens, number of factories and private homes, etc.

In order to do the official robberies, emissaries were sent to the camps where the Jews of Bessarabia were concentrated until they were deported to Transnistria. Some of these emissaries were representatives of the National Bank and their task was to collect all the gold and the jewellery. On October 10, 1941 Ion Antonescu ordered that in exchange for the gold and jewellery taken from the Jews the National Bank would be required to pay in rubles or German Reichmarks, but definitely not in Lei, the Romanian currency.

The exchange of Romanian and Russian currency or checks drawn on German banks was in itself robbery. In July 1940 the Russians exchanged Romanian currency with rubles at a rate of 40 Lei per ruble. In July 1941 the Germans returned and the Russian currency was exchanged at a rate of one Lei per ruble. In October they again exchanged money belonging to Jews at a rate of one ruble per 40 Lei. In Transnistria the rate was 60 rubles per one German mark. To understand the value of what remained in the hands of the Jews it must be noted that a loaf of bread cost 10 marks—equivalent to 1 million lei in 1940!

There was testimony that the representatives of the Romanian bank who were to pay for the gold and jewellery took everything for themselves without paying anything to the original owners.

On December 9, 1941 the Romanian treasury ordered all gold and silver coins as well as raw precious metals were to be given to the National Bank. Gold and silver jewellery was given to an auction house to be sold. Two years later, on July 15, 1943, the treasury ordered all valuables to be sent to the government mint to be recast and sold to military institutions. Gold in the watches was melted and the inside works were given to a school for watchmakers of the Labor Ministry. In this way many government departments enjoyed Jewish valuables. In addition to robberies described earlier, it is known that after the conquest of Bessarabia many merchants and adventurers arrived to take over Jewish factories and rob their homes. In some factories the machinery was dismantled and transferred to Romania. People became wealthy by abusing those slain

or deported. No one thought about the morals involved. "If we do not take, someone else will" – this is how the thieves calmed their conscience.

After the war there were trials in Romania of war criminals, military and civil, who operated in Bessarabia. As in other countries, so too in Romania – it took some time to arrest all the criminals. The legal system was full of anti-Semites and some of the accused did not come to trial until 1948 or 1949. In 1955 all the killers received a general pardon given to all war criminals. Obviously not all the guilty were brought to justice and the truth was not really known among the general public. After Romania surrendered it turned against Germany and fought along Russia on August 24, 1944. Many soldiers and officers who had been guilty of robbery and murder in Bessarabia were now considered to be war heroes and were not sent to trial for their deeds. The Romanian army that had fought in Stalingrad alongside the Germans now became their enemy and chased them to Czechoslovakia. There were enough reasons to forget the years 1941–1944 and to only remember the 260 days that followed.

Many Romanians believe that what their army accomplished in Eastern Europe is grand. They know the war against Communism was actually against the Jews and this is why the terrible massacre in Bessarabia is justified. For that reason alone we must discuss the role of the Romanian army in the blood bath of Bessarabia.

#### ROLE OF THE GERMANS IN THE DESTRUCTION OF THE JEWS OF BESSARABIA

In addition to their direct role in the killing spree the Germans had another one in the fact that they guided the Romanian army in the massacre and led by example. At the beginning the Romanian military and civil leaders were disappointed and confused by the horrible deeds performed by the special German units. However, they very quickly learned the job and imitated the Germans quite successfully.

There are Romanian documents which describe some of the atrocities committed by the Germans: 420 Jewish intellectuals were taken out of the Kishinev ghetto and shot by the Germans; 187 Jews from Mostovoi were killed by the SS, etc. Several testimonies by Romanians about German atrocities were given during trials of war criminals. One testimony was a description of the massacre committed by the Germans on 8,000 Jews in Cetatea-Alba.

The Germans themselves also left some documents from which the general framework of their activities can be observed. Many details are written in reports by the Einsatzgruppe– the infamous murder groups.

In the first volume about Romania, in the introduction to the Province of Transnistria, there is a detailed account of the “Final Solution” and how it was done. What follows are some facts that deal with atrocities in Bessarabia.

The commander of the SS unit in Bessarabia was Ohlendorf. In the Nuremberg trials he clearly mentioned that he was told, orally, to eliminate the Jews. When he was asked what “eliminate” meant he replied: “To eliminate means to kill”. The German commanders not only knew about the killings, but were given orders to help with them.

The Einsatzgruppe D functioned in Bessarabia and had 5 commando units: 10a headed by Setchen, 10–Forester, 11a– Zapp, 11b–Muller, Werner Braune, P. Schultz and 12a – Gustav Nuska and later Muller.

During the Nuremberg trials Ohlendorf described the technique used to commit the atrocities: there were secondary units for some of the activities. When forces arrived in a settlement they immediately gathered all the Jews in order to deport them. The Jews had to turn over to the commander all jewellery and valuables in their possession. Before they were executed they also had to remove their clothes. Men, women and children were usually brought to an antitank trench where they were shot. The bodies were thrown into the trenches. Ohlendorf emphasized that the executions were done by specific units so that there was no personal responsibility. He added that 90,000 men, women and children – mostly Jews were so killed. The actual number is most probably even higher.

There are detailed reports about the events with descriptions by the perpetrators in different town in Bessarabia. In Khotin –commando unit 10b, in Balti– commando unit 10a were in charge. It turned out these reports did not always give the full picture and the number of people massacred was actually higher.

A report from August 7, 1941, written by the officer in charge of commando 11 in Kishinev, says the following: “Up to now 551 Jews have been eliminated. Of these, 151



had participated in sabotage and 400 in retaliation for shots on military ambulances and signals to Russian airplanes. The Jews have been placed in the ghetto so they would not escape". In other locations in Bessarabia the Jews were accused of spying for the Russians and in Bucharest there almost was a pogrom for this reason. However, Antonescu himself denied the accusations and announced that it was the Romanian anti-aircraft defenders that had sent up flares.

In the reports by the commando it was written that the Russians had left in place people loyal to them, members of the NKVD and KGB. They were given specific tasks such as signaling the Russian pilots and small sabotage. They were given light arms, hand grenades, demolition equipment. This explanation was necessary since it is difficult to understand how anyone not knowing the compass could signal pilots. It is impossible to do sabotage without appropriate equipment. It is not easy to believe that the Russians chose only Jews for these tasks. Bessarabia had only been annexed a year earlier. Even the names mentioned, except for one, were not Jewish.

In another report it is mentioned that a ghetto had been set up in Kishinev with 9,000 Jews. They were organized into work details and were at the ready for different units of the Romanian and German armies to clear ruins, etc. When Kishinev was conquered there were only 4,000 Jews left from the 60–80,000 who had lived there earlier. The explanation that the remainder had escaped with the Russians does not make sense. It is only to be used to camouflage the massacres. In addition, there were 9,000 Jews in the ghetto, i.e. 5,000 more than there had been when the army conquered the city. This can be explained by the fact that Jews came from other places, but probably not of their own free will. They were brought to be locked up in the ghetto.

The German historian Brozati points out that in relations between the Romanian authorities in Bessarabia and the commandos of Ohlendorf the Germans always had the upper hand and they were the ones who decided what the Romanians would do. The Germans forced their collaborators to use harsh methods against the Jews and were not really content with way the Romanians executed the "final solution". Even the infamous SS General Reinhardt Heidrich complained during his visit to Bessarabia that the Romanians were too friendly with the Jews. This complaint served the general purpose of Germany that wished to make Bessarabia into a German territory and to

wrest it away from Romania. Einsatzgruppe D served this purpose well in Bessarabia. It, perhaps, even initiated it. Its basic strategy was to destroy the Romanian administration. It was not a difficult task since the Romanian clerks were prone to corruption. The German reports indicate that the Romanians were not anti-Semitic enough and that the local population received them much more happily than they had the Romanians. As a result, there was a sort of competition between the Germans and the Romanians to see who could be crueler towards the Jews. This fact explains the terrible behavior of the Romanians towards the Jews as they did not want to give up Bessarabia to the Germans.

The Einsatzgruppe were not reticent and robbed belongings of the deported Jews. In February 1942 watches and valuables were confiscated during a mass execution. Some of the valuables were sent to Berlin and the rest was divided among the Einsatzgruppe members and their collaborators in the Wehrmacht. Some of the watches were sold and the money was used to pay salaries.

#### DEPORTATION OF THE JEWS OF BESSARABIA TO TRANSNISTRIA

The deportation of the Jews of Bessarabia across the Dniester was done in two stages. The first stage, in July–August 1941, was full of cruel acts. The Tighina agreement about Transnistria was signed on August 30 of that year. The Romanian authorities were clear in their intentions. During a speech given on July 3, 1941 by the vice prime minister Mihai Antonescu, to government functionaries, it was announced that the ethnic cleansing – these are his words–will be done by deportation or isolation in labor camps. This would be done to the Jews and to other nationalities whose loyalty is in question. There could also be enforced emigration, if necessary. This would be announced by the provincial authorities and would be directed at the Jews.

From the end of July 1941 the Jews of Bessarabia were deported to the eastern banks of the Dniester. The commander of the gendarmes in Czernowitz reported that 20,000 Jews were deported from Khotin district to the other side of the Dniester. At the beginning of August the gendarmes from Soroka sent 12,000 Jews to the eastern side of the Dniester.

At the same time the Romanian reports inform us that the Germans were refusing to accept the Jews in Mogilev Podolsk and that those sent across the Dniester were being sent back to Bessarabia. Einsatzcommand 10b reported that on August 26 6,000 Jews from Mogilev were returned to Bessarabia and many of them were murdered. The actual number of those killed during August will probably never be known. The Germans shot them in place and the Romanians shot them when they returned from the other side of the river so there would be very few Jews left.

The reason given for returning the deportees to the other side of the Dniester, according to historian Brozati, is that the area on the eastern banks of the river (soon to be called Transnistria) was closer to the front and there was still military activity there.

In spring 1942 the Germans tried to repeat the event. This time they attempted to send the Jews from Transnistria across the Bug River to areas held by the Germans. Eichmann himself intervened since this was against the systematic destruction philosophy of the Germans. On April 14, 1942 Eichmann demanded from the German Foreign Ministry to inform the Romanian government that, with the assistance of the secret police, he will stop all "illegal" transports across the Bug. Eichmann also stressed that the German army would suffer great losses if hordes of Jews would arrive there. There were also difficulties in providing supplies and all this would undermine the plan to rid Germany of Jews.

There is not much information about the first stage of deportation. One witness account describes the concentration of the Jews of Bricheni and Lipkany in Edinets towards the end of July 1941. They were sent on foot through Ataki to Mogilev. They walked for three days, including the children, a distance of 55 km. In the villages of Rusan and Climausti they were robbed by local peasants and Romanian gendarmes. Many died on the way. At the end of the month the caravan reached Mogilev where there were Jews from Secureni and Noua-Sulitsa. In Mogilev there were about 20,000 deportees. They were left outside of the town, without any guards, without food or a place to sleep. A week later saw the arrival of SS men and Ukrainian police. They evicted the witness and other deportees a distance of 6 km to the village of Scazineti. There they were put in abandoned barracks, without guards. They had to find food in

the fields. Two weeks later they were brought back to Mogilev to again cross the Dniester back to Bessarabia. The Romanians opposed their return. The deportees found out that the first groups that were returned to Bessarabia were shot by the Romanians. The group was sent back to Scazineti where they remained until the end of August. Again the SS men arrived and sent them through winding roads back to Bessarabia. This time they crossed the Dniester at Yampol. After 4 days of marching along the river, many of the deportees were murdered by the SS men. Another witness reports that the waters of the Dniester were filled with bodies of those murdered and those who drowned.

In Bessarabia the returnees were received in Coshautsi by Romanian gendarmes. They again robbed the deportees and raped the women. The next day a commission from Soroka arrived in Coshautsi and confiscated any valuables still left. They were then divided into groups and transferred in various ways to Vertujeni. Their escorts did not even allow them a drink of well water and they had to satisfy their thirst from the puddles along the road.

On August 30 the “agreement to cleanse” was signed in Tighina– to deport Jews to the new territory which would be under Romanian watch, but supervised by the Germans. It will be called Transnistria. This was the beginning of the second phase of evacuation, planned by the Germans. According to the Tighina agreement the Romanians were obliged to lock the Jews in concentration camps.

The Romanian military government only began to function in September and October of 1941. The area was under German supervision before that. On September 1, 1941, the general commander of the police sent a secret telegram to the commander of the gendarmes in Tighina telling him that as of September 6 the evacuation of the Jews would begin. They would go in groups of 1,000. Gendarmes were needed to accompany them as well as wagons for baggage. The Romanian military command demanded from the gendarmerie to give an exact number of Jews in the camps of Bessarabia. The exchange of letters about the topic indicates that there was an order, probably given orally by Antonescu, to begin evacuation on September 15. In fact the evacuation began on September 16, 1941 when a caravan of 22,150 Jews left Vertujeni according to the plan. The rows of evacuees moved along previously designed routes.

The first group went north through Cramenia, Gora–Kamenka, Soroka, Coshautsi. The second group was directed east through Tamlausi, Vashkauts, Koshmirka, Mateusz, Rezina. It was only on October 10 – after 25 days– that the first groups arrived at the Dniester and crossed it at Rbnitza. From there they were sent to the ghetto in Grozovska in Transnistria.

The conditions of this death march were horrible. It was decided in advance that the evacuees had to travel 30 km per day. This was after two months of starvation and suffering in the Vertujeni camp where they had to do hard labor. About 50 Jews died every day in this camp.

The caravans had 1600 people – 800 per direction. Instead of the 50 wagons required to transport baggage and the sick, there were hardly 4–8 wagons. They had been hired by the evacuees themselves. Many families were separated since every group was sent in a different direction. Many of them were never reunited. Thousands of evacuees died on the road. Their escorts robbed them. Those who had better clothes were shot by the gendarmes who sold the clothes to the peasants. The miserable evacuees had to trade a watch, a gold ring or another valuable item for a cup of water. The evacuation from Vertujeni ended on October 8, 1941.

On October 2 the evacuation of 10,356 Jews from Secureni began. This also had two directions and caused the separation of families. Before they left the Jews were searched and finally they had nothing left. On October 5 the second group left Secureni.

On October 4 the evacuation from Kishinev began. The first group of 1,600 went towards the Dniester through Orgeyev and Rezina. In Kishinev it was easy to see how worthless the orders of the Romanians were. The Vice–premier of Romanian ordered, after intervention by Dr. Fielderman to stop the evacuation, to do a selection and to keep out of the group evacuated the intellectuals, merchants, craftsmen and owners of urban or rural property. This order was not followed and the evacuation included the entire Jewish population.

The groups from Edinets left on October 11–12 and included 11,762 evacuees. Before they crossed the Dniester they were placed in a camp in Markolesht which had been

erected early in October. The camp commander terrorised the evacuees and many of them were killed after being hit and abused. The camp existed until November 10.

The number of victims on the road will never be known. People died of exhaustion or they were killed while being robbed. The number of those who perished in Markolesht or those who drowned in the Dniester on the way to Transnistria or to the ghettos will also remain a secret.

Only a total of 55,867 Jews arrived in Transnistria from Bessarabia of the 80,000 who had been alive during the first wave of massacres when the German–Romanian armies entered the area between the Prut and the Dniester. The difference between the two totals represents the number of victims who died in various ways on the way to Transnistria, when being returned by the Germans or during the final evacuation. Until the end of summer 1943, 61% of the evacuees died in Transnistria according to a report given by Dr. Fielderman to the Romanian government upon his return from exile in Transnistria. These numbers are also found in a secret report by the police in 1943. From that report it seems the total number of evacuees was 11,033 and of those 50,741 died.

We know about what occurred in Transnistria from various sources, but it is impossible to separate the Jews of Bessarabia from the rest of the victims. There were many evacuees from other areas in the camps and the ghettos.

#### POLITICAL STRUGGLE TO SAVE THE JEWS OF BESSARABIA

News about events in Bessarabia barely reached Bucharest where there was one group representing the Jews – the union of Jewish communities. The difficulty in sending the news was as a result of lack of proper transportation especially for Jews who were not permitted to go from place to another. There was no way to escape from Bessarabia to old Romania. The first fragmented reports arrived in mid–August. It was then that it was discovered that Jews were being locked up in ghettos and camps. Sources of information were the Romanian soldiers and officers who arrived in the capital on vacation or for their jobs. Soon news came from Bukovina about the Jews being evacuated to Bessarabia. They were able to communicate with Jews from Czernowitz

who had not yet been evacuated. In Bukovina there were reports that somehow made their way to Bucharest.

The first appeal by the union of Jewish communities in Bucharest dealt only with getting permission to send parcels to the evacuees. The seriousness of the situation was discovered only later with the news of the massacres and the evacuations from Bessarabia. The first appeal by Dr. Fielderman, the chairman of the union of communities, came on October 9. Dr. Fielderman sent an official letter to Antonescu asking him to stop the evacuations. Two days later, on October 11, Dr. Fielderman sent a second letter to Antonescu in which he described the dire situation of the Jews of Kishinev as he had heard it. He begged him to do something for the evacuated Jews. His reply is mentioned above.

In spite of this the Jewish leaders did not give up. On October 14, 1941 Dr. Fielderman managed to get a meeting with the vice-premier, Mikhai Antonescu, He received from him a promise to stop evacuations from Bukovina and Bessarabia of the intellectuals, merchants, craftsmen and land owners. There was now hope for a rescue. Dr. Fielderman sent another letter to dictator Antonescu asking him to stop evacuations of all Jews and returning those who had been evicted from their homes. He explained that two months earlier the Germans had brought back the groups that had been sent from Bessarabia to Transnistria. Dr. Fielderman's conclusion was that the Germans had returned some evacuees and therefore the act could not be considered to be against the state. He added that among the evacuees there were Jews from Ragat who did not have a chance to return to their homes as well as veteran soldiers, war invalids and orphans.

It is now known that Antonescu's order to stop the evacuation was not heeded in Bessarabia where all the Jews were involved. In addition, by the time the order from Bucharest arrived most of the evacuations had already taken place. The evacuations were stopped in Bukovina and anyone still in Czernowitz on November 15, 1941 - about 20,000 Jews - was saved. However, the evacuation of Jews from villages and small towns continued. On November 7 the Jews were evacuated from Dorohoi and surroundings since the town belonged to Bukovina.

There was repercussion against Dr. Fielderman. The Germans were upset by his letters and his intervention on behalf of the Jews of Bessarabia and wanted him removed. The Association of Christian–Romanian lawyers published a protest and demand sending Dr. Fielderman to trial for anti–patriotic activities. In the end, the denunciation was successful and Dr. Fielderman was not allowed to continue to be a member of the Association of lawyers. Prior to that, on December 16, 1941 the union of Jewish communities was disbanded and was replaced by the “Jewish Center”, according to the German model and with the participation of Gustave Richter, the emissary of Eichmann in Germany.

In the meantime, at the end of October. Before it was disbanded, the union of Jewish communities tried once more to help the evacuees. Hundred of bogus telegrams arrived in Bucharest announcing illness in the family hoping that those sick would be released or they could receive medications. There were private attempts to save individuals. One of the leaders of the Kishinev community, Attorney Shapiro, managed to reach Bucharest and knocked on many doors in despair trying to save his neighbors. He was unsuccessful. He was given an opportunity to stay and to save himself, but he preferred to return to Kishinev and was never heard from again.

The union of Jewish communities tried to intervene directly with the central authorities in Bessarabia. They sent to Kishinev Attorney Musat, a Christian in their employ. Not much is known about his actions, but he did send a telegram announcing his failure.

Another attempt was planned to save the Jews of Bessarabia who survived the evacuation to Transnistria. It was during the negotiations about the return of the evacuees. This began at the end of fall 1942 in Bucharest. The plan included immediate emigration– a condition presented by the Romanian representative. After the Germans found out about the plan, through their ambassador in Bucharest, all attempts to return refugees from Transnistria or to allow them to immigrate were unsuccessful.

During the summer and fall of 1943 the negotiations for repatriation were renewed, but slowly, due to the inquests in Transnistria and a decision about who had preferred rights.



In the meantime the military situation of the Germans and Romanians worsened. There was a retreat on the southern front. In the summer of 1943 the Germans lost Kharkov, Stalino and the Doenitz Basin. In November of that year the German and Romanian armies were surrounded in Crimea. Romanian leaders began to accept reality and became more flexible. The negotiations about the fate of the Jews were renewed at that time. The Jewish leaders in Bucharest began to prepare detailed plans.

One of those who was involved was Fred Shraga— an important figure in the attempt to save Romanians Jews in Transnistria. He went to Transnistria in January 1943 as head of a delegation of the help committee organized by the Jewish Center. In the report he presented on November 12, 1943 he gave some practical suggestions on how to save the evacuees of Bessarabia. There were about 7–8,000 people involved. He thought they should be brought back to Moldova or Bukovina, as close as possible to Bessarabia. A few days later there was a high–level consultation with the participation of Antonescu and his advisers, including the governor of Bukovina. They discussed moving the Jews from Transnistria in a way that would not put them in the path of the retreating German army who would massacre them. One of the participants at the meeting informed those present that the Jews had a suggestion for the preferences in the moving of the evacuees, beginning with 5,000 orphans. They also discussed with Antonescu the problem of the Jews of Bukovina and Bessarabia and how to deal with them. Antonescu offered to gather them in Vizhnitza in Bukovina (as suggested by Fred Shraga). The governor of Bukovina did not accept this suggestion.

In the meantime the front came closer to Bessarabia. In February 1944 the Russian army reached the banks of the Bug, crossed the river, entered Transnistria and went over the Dniester north of Kishinev. On March 28, 1944 the army reached the northern Prut, near Iasi. As a result of these activities a large part of Bessarabia—its northern section—is now in the hands of the Russians. In southern Bessarabia there was still a German force that stood its ground until Romania surrendered. This stubborn stand had no military value, but it was following an explicit order by Hitler.

The evacuees of Bessarabia returned home. Some of them went to old Romania and from there to Eretz Israel. This is an important additional story in itself, but documentation is still incomplete.

T.I.L.

## THE FATE OF THE JEWS OF BESSARABIA IN AREAS OF THE SOVIET UNION

On July, 1941, when the conquest of Bessarabia by German and Romanian armies was completed, there were about 50, 000 Bessarabian Jews in areas of the Soviet Union that had not been conquered. Some were political prisoners who had been exiled before the war to distant areas, a few were military and the majority were citizens who arrived after the war broke out either on their own or as evacuees. After they crossed the Dniester and arrived in the Soviet area it was difficult to distinguish between the refugees and the evacuees since all were given help by the authorities. A few had a specific destination and tried hard to reach it, but the majority were refugees who simply went east using trains that had space for them, following instructions by the authorities or just escaping the Germans.

Many of the Jewish refugees from Bessarabia were caught by the German army at different stages during their escape and their bitter fate was the same as that of the Jews of Ukraine under German rule. Even among those who managed to escape the advancing German army there were many victims of starvation, illnesses and exhaustion.

The testimonies available inform us that the refugees from Bessarabia were centered mainly in Tashkent, Pergana, Stalingrad, Frunze, and Uffa and in collectives in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan or in Sverdlovsk, Ural, Caucasus, etc. Many were absorbed in factories or collectives where they found jobs as day workers or peddlers. The women worked in cotton harvesting or other agricultural tasks. The pay was usually quite low. Still there were some instances where talented or professional refugees found employment in top positions in administration. (The former bank manager of Edinets was appointed as chief accountant of a large construction and electrical company in the Novocherskoy district).

When the number of Jews in villages and collectives in Uzbekistan grew there was a rise in anti-Semitic sentiment among the Uzbeks, encouraged by the Poles. In spite of the harsh economic conditions and the difficult living situation, social life and culture

among the Jewish refugees were lively and there were even weddings performed. In general, there were good relations between the Jews of Bessarabia and those from Poland residing there.

In general, the public and government authorities in Soviet Moldova did not show special interest in the refugees from Bessarabia. In larger concentrations of people from Bessarabia and Moldova there were “agents” representing the political and government entities of Soviet Moldova whose task was to help in finding work, providing food and petrol and in propagating political ideas among them. The refugees did not know much about these activities and some of them were not even aware they existed.

One of the main activities that these institutions assumed in April 1942, aided by the agents, was local fund raising to purchase tanks for Soviet Moldova. At the end of the year a special Moldovan department was established within the broadcasting system of Moscow. There was also a renewal of the newspaper “Socialist Moldova”. In February 1943, in Tashkent, there was a conference of refugees from Bessarabia that was dedicated to “the struggle of the Moldovan people against the German conqueror and his Romanian servants”. Most important for the refugees from Bessarabia was the work of the Moldovan republican institutions that prepared a cadre of government workers prior to the anticipated liberation from the Germans. Craftsmen and experts in various fields among the refugees as well as the unemployed were part of this program that began to function at the end of 1943. There was great participation in courses in different locations in the Soviet Union.

## POLITICAL EXILES

The fate of the Jewish political evacuees that had been exiled into interior Russia during the Soviet regime of 1940/41 and especially June 1941 was quite bad. About 10,000 Jewish souls wandered in packed freight cars going eastward. The prisoners who had been found guilty and those who were deemed “dangerous” to the regime were treated in a similar manner.

Some of the political prisoners, among them those who were caught crossing the border to or from Romania illegally, as well as Jewish leaders, were sent in early 1941 to various locations in Russia—some to miserable Archangelsk. From the few letters received from them it was discovered that the elderly and the weak became ill immediately while younger people did hard labor – mostly cutting down trees. Other prisoners, among them members of a Zionist underground, either imprisoned in Kishinev before the war or arrested later, were transferred at the end of June to interior Russia. They were heavily bombed by the enemy while on route. At the beginning of the trip they were put into a prison in Tiraspol across the Dniester. From there they were taken through the town with heavy escort to the train station. At the station they were placed on locked freight cars with only tiny barricaded windows. They were brought in these cars to Irkutsk in Siberia after a voyage of 5 weeks. They suffered greatly from the terrible crowding, hunger and thirst, and the insufferable heat. In addition, hordes of fleas and lice attacked them and they never had a chance to bathe.

When the prisoners were brought to their destinations in Ural, Siberia and other God-forsaken places, they were subject to lengthy investigations. They were abused and tortured to force them to admit to political crimes such as spying, slander or carrying on propaganda against the Soviet regime, etc. Many were sent to labor camps for lengthy periods of time. They did forced labor and lived in harsh conditions. Very few of them remained alive as a result of this. One of the female prisoners who stayed at a camp near Sverdlovsk reported that they were forced to work 14 hours a day cutting trees and sawing them. They were poorly fed. Soon many contagious illnesses hit them due to the poor healthy conditions. From 1,800 prisoners brought there to work only about 300 remained a few months later. Many who succeeded in remaining alive were disabled for the rest of their lives.

The prisoners who fulfilled their time or those who became disabled were liberated from the labor camps, but they remained under the supervision of the government. They found other work in various places and were fortunate to return to Bessarabia or Czernowitz. Some even succeeded in leaving the Soviet Union.

In June 1941 there was mass evacuation of thousands of families and their methods of transportation were not any different from those of the prisoners. Many travelled for

weeks in locked freight cars with two holes on the floor instead of toilets. There were 70–80 people in every car. They rode mostly in daytime and stopped at night on side tracks, far from a station. This was done so no one would notice them. Two or three people from every car were sent to find food for the others. The food was poor and minimal. Almost immediately the men were separated from their families and were interrogated and tried as prisoners. Most of them were found guilty according to Soviet law and they were sentenced to five years and more. They did hard labor in the taiga of Siberia and other locations. Family members had to live apart from them, up to 20 years at times, in distant places across the Ural Mountains and in central Asia. Many of them died due to harsh conditions and climate and poor living conditions. Many of the heads of families who did the hard labor far away from their families died not knowing the fate of their dear ones. After many months there was permission for the reunification of families, but very few succeeded in doing so. After the war a few families returned to Bessarabia.

#### THE JEWS OF BESSARABIA IN THE WAR AGAINST THE GERMANS

REGULAR ARMY: The Jews of Bessarabia were able to participate in the war against the Nazis and their collaborators when they were able to join the Soviet army either directly or indirectly. Although there was an official draft in Bessarabia early in the war, the enlistment offices were not really prepared to receive them. In some locations the enlistment operated on a need basis and as a result many Jews were able to join the army at the beginning of the war. In general they were placed in special units that were almost completely Jewish and they were sent to the front at the Dniester.

In addition to the Jews who were drafted in the beginning, many of the refugees joined the Red Army at certain stages of the war. There were cases, especially in the beginning, where Jews from Bessarabia and other areas were not accepted by the Red Army and were sent to the Labor Army or other civilian organizations. They received protective documents. The evacuees and the prisoners were never permitted to serve in the army.

Many Jews from Bessarabia who survived the German and Romanian conquest were drafted into the Red Army when it reached them in Ukraine, Transnistria or Bessarabia early in 1944. Some enlisted looking for revenge for the terrible times they had

suffered during the conquest. Many of them were refugees that had just returned from exile in Transnistria. A Jewish soldier who was drafted upon his return from Transnistria testified that after he was injured and lost his eye in a battle in Poland he continued to serve in a field engineering unit in Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Germany before it surrendered.

It is difficult to estimate the number of Jewish soldiers from Bessarabia who fought in WWII; there is no doubt that there must have been thousands of them. Many were killed or injured during battle. A considerable number of them received decorations and medals including the highest award in the Red Army – Hero of the Soviet Union.

**PARTISAN ACTIVITY:** The Jews of Bessarabia played an important part in political military activities on the home front during the German and Romanian conquest. They were members of the Soviet partisan movement. Prior to their retreat the Soviets planned to leave in Bessarabia loyal members, especially from among the Communist Party and the Comsomol, to do underground work in partisan and other spy groups. The program was not always successful due to time pressures and other reasons. It was sometimes activated by the government and party institutions of Soviet Moldova that retreated after the Red Army. In August 1941 some active Communists infiltrated conquered Bessarabia. In September another group was sent by the central committee of the Moldovan Communist Party (in Donetsk). It was to contact the underground and included several Jews. At the same time other Jews were sent to Bessarabia and one of them was Barukh Moshe Deutch. He went to the Kishinev area and made contact with the ghetto. According to one version he tried to form a secret cell there and to find Jewish youth for the partisans. Deutch was caught by the authorities and was hung. All the other activists were caught and killed or they died during their sorties. Very few of them, among them several women, remained alive after the war.

Jews from Bessarabia were active as partisans in Ukraine, Crimea, Transnistria and other places. They were part of the Moldovan partisan movement or other movements.

#### RETURN OF THE REMNANTS

The Soviet forces began to return to Bessarabia during March 1944. At the time they only controlled the northern section of the province. They passed through Transnistria

where only a small part of the thousands of Jews, evacuated there by the Germans and Romanians, remained alive. Kishinev was conquered by the Red Army on August 24. The army was followed by units of activists sent by the authorities and the Party of Soviet Moldova. These units were established in areas of the Soviet Union that had not been conquered. They consisted of administrators, security, and economics experts. Their main task was to re-establish Soviet rule in all liberated areas and to begin rebuilding. As happened in 1940/41 there were many clerks and specialists who were brought from other areas of the Soviet Union, mainly Ukraine.

When the Red Army returned to Bessarabia there were only remnants of the local Jewish community that had existed before the war. Some died in attacks, mass murders and others were evacuated to Transnistria or the Soviet Union. Those among the evacuees who were fortunate enough to see the Red Army returning to their homes saw in it a liberating force and received the soldiers warmly.

Soon a feeling of bitter resentment developed among the Jewish survivors against the military and civil authorities. There were rumors that the Jews survived because they had cooperated with the conquerors. Some were upset because the survivors were sent by the authorities to do military service or work in mines as soon as they returned.

Soon the survivors were permitted to return to their homes in Bessarabia. They were followed by the refugees who had been in Ukraine, interior Russia and even Ural and central Asia. Those who returned found their house empty and ruined. In many cases the survivors were the only ones who remained from their families. The survivors did not stay in small communities, but went to larger towns and cities. Some left Bessarabia and went to Romania, Eretz Israel or America.

Many survivors settled in Kishinev and soon their numbers grew to over 500. There were attempts to organize cultural life with literary evenings and a Jewish theatre group. However, communal activity was mainly centered in the synagogue and the religious community.

The conditions in smaller towns were far worse. There was no organized Jewish life, whether cultural or religious. The only concerns were making a living. There were

hardly any young people and the representatives of the Soviet authorities were new and were not known to the veteran Jewish Communists. Even in these towns life centered mainly around the synagogues, but only for a short time. The authorities allowed meetings in synagogues and the keeping of Jewish customs and traditions, but there was no official recognition or financial support.

In spite of the absence of cultural and educational institutions and the fact that Jewish writers were unable to publish their work, there was still some semblance of Jewish culture even under these conditions. The use of Yiddish was popular and the attitude to the language was respectful. Even 14 years later (1959), in the census, 48,000 (50.5%) of the 95,000 Jews in Moldova declared Yiddish to be their mother tongue.

T.L.V.