



Yefim Kogan, June 2006, 2011

Geo-historical and cultural overview of Jewish life in Bessarabia/Moldavia region up to the beginning of 19 century (*Moldavia Principality until 1812*).

Introduction

I decided to engage in the course study of the “Through Their Eyes”: Rabbinic Responses to the Emergence of Modernity” with Professor Jay Berkovitz in spring of 2006 at Hebrew College because of my interest in the Jewish life in the 18 century and earlier. Such interest came from the learning and researching my family history. The course exceeded all my expectations even though I may not enlarge my family genealogy tree from it but it definitely broader my view on the history and culture of Jews in Europe from 15 to 18 centuries.

Unfortunately the region of Moldavia that I am interested to study was not on the scope of our course. From my prior study I knew that there is not much information available about Jewish life in Moldavia at that period but I wanted investigate further. In addition, I did not trust a statement from Jewish Encyclopedia that “...In the cultural sphere, Bessarabian Jewry in this period (15-18 century) was not advanced” despite the fact that several other sources agree with it. I found pieces of useful material which prove that Jewish life in the region of Moldavia was diverse and similar to the Jewish life in the neighboring Poland-Ukraine. Jews fully participated in the building of the Moldavian principality and improved or even established commerce and trade in this region. At that time most of the Rabbis who lived and served in Moldavia were originally from Poland and were connected to Jewish life their. They lived in Moldavia but they traveled to Poland and published books in Poland.

For the purpose of Bessarabia Special Interest Group web site only two chapters were included: “Rabbis and other famous figures lived in the region or traveled through it” and “What was unique in Moldavia for the Jews?”

Rabbis and other famous figures lived in the region or traveled through it

A Jewish Philosopher, mathematician and physician Josef Salomon Del Medigo visited Moldavia on his way from Constantinople to Poland (1618-1620). In Jassy he met Rabbi Salomon ben Araja from Yemen who lived in Jassy and carried out the function of rabbi

for 40 years. According to Dr. Samuel Josef Schulsohn article, Josef Del Medigo lived in Moldavia himself for 11 years. Josef Del Medigo was a student of Galileo Galilei. He visited Leon de Modena in Venice many times.

Documents showed the presence of Jewish physician – Cohen (unknown given name) in Prince Vasile Lupu's court in 1640. He was in favor of Sultan of Turkey and played a crucial role in helping Vasile Lupu transmitting secret documents from Turkey concerning secret alliances between Sweden and Russia. It was probably influence of Cohen that enactments in favor of the Jews in Moldavia were issued by Prince Lupu.

Hayyim ben Solomon, of Czernowitz was also known as Hayyim ben Solomon of Mogilev, Hayyim ben Solomon Tyrer and Hayyim Chernovitzer (1760-1813). He was a Rabbi and a cabalist, a Tzadik, and a pupil of reb Israel Ba'al Shem. After he had been a rabbi in five different towns among which was Mogilev, Chernovitz and Kishinev, he settled in Jerusalem where he died in 1813.

Hayyim ben Solomon was an author of: "Sidure shel Shabbat", cabalistic homilies on Sabbatical subjects, Poryck 1818; "Sha'ar ha-Tefillah", cabalistic reflections on prayer, Sudilkiv, 1837; "Erez ha-Hayyim" in two parts: (1) a homiletic commentary on the Prophets and Hagiographa, and (2) novella on the treatise Berakot, Czernovitz, 1861. Hayyim was mentioned by Sender Margalioth in his response on the Shulhan Aruk, Eben ha-Ezer. Devarim Hayyim: Davarim Nifla'im u-Meshalim Na'im", Cernauti (Chernovitz), Schulim Silber, 1923 which is a commentary to the Torah portions read in the synagogues. One of Hayyim ben Solomon's main work "Sefer Be'er Mayim Hayyim", novella on the Pentateuch, in two parts, Czernovitz, pt 1, 1820, pt 2, 1849. Part of Be'er Mayim Hayyim (The Well of Spring Water) was translated into English. An excerpt from this book is presented below. It is a commentary on Numbers 15-39 and shows a traditional interpretation of the Torah at that time.

"Do not follow after your heart and after your eyes": Lest a person think that it is impermissible to experience corporeality and that one must only walk, day and night, involved in Torah and the commandments, therefore Torah says, it is not thus, for "do not follow after your hearts...according to your desires." The explanation is that in truth, you do desire these [corporeal] things. But the word "desire" (*zonim*) is from the word for food (*mazon*), as it is explained in the case of Rahav the harlot (*zonah*) in her inn (cf. Targum Yonatan on Joshua 2:1). That is to say, you are permitted, and indeed you must be fed (*nizon*) by them, and enjoy all of the delights of this world. Only do not let the lusts (*ta'avah*) of your heart and your eyes become a bodily craving which would lead you to come to a house of prostitution and to expand your "food" to the lusts of your heart.

Hayyim ben Solomon's works "Be'er Mayim Chaim" and "Siddurei shel Shabbos" are quoted in the Stone Edition Chumash, The Torah, Haftoros, and Five Megillos with commentary from Rabbinic writings, by Rabbi Nosson Schermand.

David Solomon Eibenschutz was a Rabbi and a cabalist. He was a pupil of Rabbi Moses Zebi Heller, author of “Geon Zebi”. He was a rabbi in Buzhanow, Volynia, Soroki and Jassy in Moldova. From Jassy he moved to Palestine where he died in Safed in 1812.

David Solomon Eibenschutz was author of many Talmudic and cabalistic works, majority of which exists only in manuscripts. He wrote “Lebushe Serad”, first part – commentary on the Shulhan Aruk, Orah Hayyim, which comments on Dabid ben Samuel’s “Ture Zahab” and Abraham Abele Gumbinner’s “Magen Abraham” (Mohilev, 1818), the second part is on Shulhan Aruk, Yoreh De’ah (Mohilev, 1812). “Ne’ot Deshe” is a compilation of 138 responsa, first part published in Lemberg in 1861. “Arbe Nahal” is a treatise on the Pentateuch and sermons (Kopust, Sdilkov, 1835; Krotoschin, 1840; Jitomir, 1850 and Lemberg, 1856). “Ne’ot Deshe” also includes two responsam written by Solomon ben Judah Aaron Kluger, chief dayyan and preacher from Brody, Galicia.

Jacob Leib Frank (1726-1791), the Jewish false messiah who claimed to be the reincarnation of Shabbetai Tzevi (1626–76), uses an influence from Podolia, Poland. Town of Khotin in Bessarabia became a center for Frank and his adherents (1760-1770). The Frankists caused trouble in Moldavia by their propaganda, and the hakam-basha of Jassy was forced to appeal to the pasha of Khotin to prevent Frankists from moving and seeking refuge in Moldavia.

What was unique in Moldavia for the Jews?

Jews settled in Moldavia at least a few hundred years after they lived in Poland. At the end of 18 century, by many accounts Jewish population in Moldavia was about 30 thousands which is 25 times lesser than number of Jews in Poland. In a same time the general population of Moldavia was much smaller than in Poland at that period.

I think that the borders of the countries and principalities in the 15-18 centuries were not enforced. People in close by towns could freely visit each other. For example, a town Mogilev in Podolia, which was Poland right across the Dnister river and a town of Soroki was on another side in Moldavia. Rabbi Hayyim ben Solomon from Mogilev moved to be a Rabbi in Soroki and later he published his works in Czernowitz and Lemberg, Poland. It appears that Jews could travel across borders. This was not unique for Moldavia. The Jewish life in Italy, France, Germany and Poland was similar in this regard.

It is possible that Turkish influence made the Moldavian Jewry a little unique from Jews from other countries, although that idea would need to be investigated further. Also Jews in Moldavia spoke a dialect of Yiddish language close to a Ukraine dialect. Yet some linguists name it Bessarabian or Romanian Yiddish. In Moldavia Jews also spoke

Romanian language which is close to Italian language as part of the Roman language family.

In conclusion I firmly believe that Jewish life in Moldavia in 15-18 centuries was very much diverse and culturally developed and it was very similar to the Jewish life in other places in Europe, especially close to the Jewish life in neighboring Poland.

I agree with Simon Dubnov and present here a quote from his book “The Newest History of Jewish people”, volume 1 (1789-1815) (Dubnov, 2002): “Newcomers from neighboring Ukraine and Galicia colonized this sparsely populated Danube region, where in the second half of 18 century the princes invited the Jews and Armenians. Character of Jewish settlements was pure Ukrainian: Jews lived not only in towns, but also in the villages, as tenants of landlords. In both principalities number of Jews at the end of 18 century was not less than 30 thousand. Main population lived in towns and villages of Moldavia (Jassy, etc.), close to Ukraine, and in Walachia were only a few thousand Jews. ... New Chadism found a good foundation in remote corners of Moldavia, among people, who run from Haidamak or Galicia’s poverty. In economic and cultural relationship future Romania was an outskirt of Podolia and Volynia, which were included into Russia after second division of Poland (1793)...”

In my opinion, the Jewish life in Moldavia was very much similar to the Jewish life in part of Ukraine which belonged to Poland at that time. There were very good times for Jews in Moldavia and Poland when they were invited by Kings and Princes, got the privileges from Kings and Princes, participated in the building of trade in the countries, and created commerce from the very beginning. There were times when Kings and Princes expelled Jews from the territories or limited their privileges and rights. Yet after a while Jews were invited into the country again.

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