



Jews in Bessarabia in 18 century – from Demetrius Kantemir

The most famous Moldavan of the 18th century was the Prince of Moldavia, **Demetrius Kantemir**. He was a writer, a political leader and a scientist. He led ten thousand Moldavans on the Russian side in their fight against the Turks. After the Turks were victorious Kantemir fled and settled in Russia. Peter the Great awarded him the title of Prince of the Russian Empire. Demetrius Kantemir wrote *Descriptio Moldaviae* the first and most complete description of Moldavan geography, history, government, and daily life. This work included a description of the life of Jews; their rights, occupations and relations with their neighbors.

In the geographical section of *Descriptio Moldavei*, Kantemir described the town of Kilia in the southern part of Bessarabia, southeast Moldavia. Kilia was a small but famous trade port where ships from as far as Egypt and Venice would be anchored. Kantemir described Kilia as a cosmopolitan town with Turks, Jews, Christians and Armenian living together peacefully. A picture of religious toleration is described in the *Descriptio Moldavei*. “All guests of the monastery, an Orthodox or a Jew, a Turk or an Armenian, would receive not only a cordial reception, but the monks would accommodate and feed guests even if he and his companions regardless of their numbers wanted to remain in the monastery for a even a whole year.” In the political section of the book, Jews were mentioned among other peoples living in Moldavia. According to the author, Jews were allowed to build wooden synagogues but not stone structures. Jews were citizens of the nation but paid an annual tax that was higher than other citizens. Jews were engaged exclusively in commerce and tavern keeping. The author reported that “...foreign traders, Turks, Jews and Armenians keep all commerce in their hands because the Moldavians are not enterprising and show no initiative.”

In the final chapter of *Descriptio Moldavei*, The Customs of the Moldavians, the author recorded a stunning irony describing how native Moldavians on the one hand lived friendly with people of other ethnic and religious backgrounds in towns and villages and had the reputation of being hospitable to every traveler, yet “... they considered it hardly a mortal crime to kill a Turk, a Tatar, or a Jew.”

Yefim Kogan, 2011

Descriptio Moldaviae, Demetrius Kantemir, 1714 (latin), translation in to Russian 1973, partial translation into English by Yefim Kogan, 2008.