

# History of Jews in Bessarabia in the 15th to 19th Centuries

## Geography, History, Social Status

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The following is an overview of the general geography and history of the Bessarabian region from the 15<sup>th</sup> century to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, including the governments and the powers that ruled the area throughout the centuries. It contains the origin of the names Bessarabia and Moldavia/Moldova and the ways historians are using these names.

The history of the Jews is described from the earlier years to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is mostly presented in the chronological order and with the focus on the laws and regulations concerning the Jews of Bessarabia. You find the answer on a question - who were the Jews in Bessarabia, their social status, citizenship, profession, education.

### Overview of the region history and geography

Bessarabia and Moldavia are two distinct geographical regions with different histories. The name Moldavia came from the Moldova river whose waters traverse the region and flow into the Danube River. The name Bessarabia is derived from the Wallachian princely family of Bassarab that once ruled territory of South Bessarabia. The name is of a Cuman or a Pecheneg origin and most likely meant “father ruler”. The term Bessarabia has been loosely used, sometimes covering even all Romania, sometimes Wallachia, sometimes Moldavia, but in the later centuries prevailing either the whole district between the Prut, Dniester, Danube rivers and Black Sea (this is how we are using it) or the southern part of this region – the Budjak.

Moldavia (Moldova in Romanian) was one of the Danube River principalities established in the beginning of the fourteenth century. In the late fifteenth century, it became a vassal state of Turkey. By 1858, Moldavia and another principality, Wallachia, constituted the Kingdom of Romania. Two regions of Moldavia were excluded from this new confederation: Bessarabia,

occupied by Russia in 1812, and Bukovina - the northern part of Moldavia – which became part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1774.

<Map1-Principality of Moldavia 1483>

(from Wikipedia)

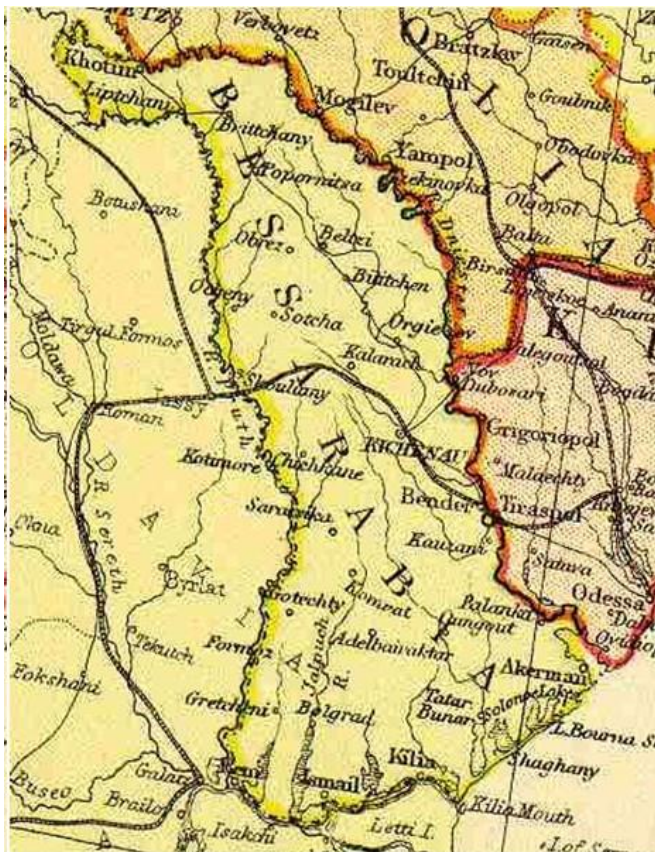




<Map2-Moldavia 1500-vassal of Ottoman Empire> The southern part of the region was under direct Ottoman rule.

(from Wikipedia)

Bessarabia lays between the rivers Prut, a tributary of the Danube, the Danube, the Dniester and the Black Sea.



<Map3-Bessarabia 1882>

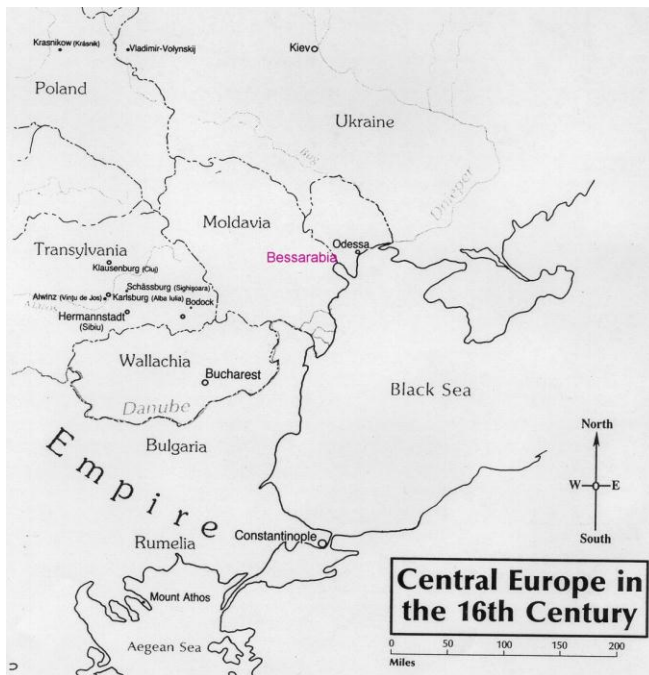
From FEEFHS - The Federation of East European Family History Societies.

## Powers and Governments of the region of Bessarabia

### Moldavia Principality



From the 14 century to 1812, almost the entire region was part of the Moldavia Principality. The south districts were under Tatar and Turk control. When, in 1538, the principality surrendered to Sultan Badjazet of the Ottoman Empire, the sultan provided for its inhabitants the undisturbed exercise of Christian Orthodoxy. The Ottomans also granted privileges to Moldavian merchants permitting them 'to come by sea in ships belonging to merchants in Akkerman, and trade freely in Edirne, Bursa and Istanbul' <sup>1</sup>. Moldavia remained under Ottoman rule for three centuries. In the beginning of their coexistence with the Ottoman Empire, the Moldavian territory operated as an external vassalage within the empire. Moldavians paid an annual tribute to the sultan, and were expected to adhere and be loyal to Ottoman foreign policy. Turks established fortifications in 5 towns in Moldavia and the governance was in the hands of local princes from the territorial dynasties.

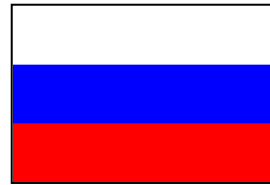


<Map4-Central Europe 1648>

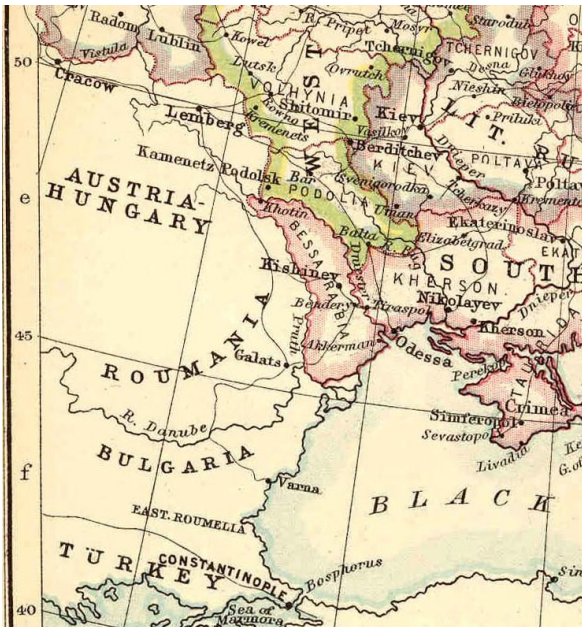
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At the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the situation in the principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia changed when the Ottoman Turks imposed a humiliating government in the region. Greek princes from Phanar, quarters of Constantinople, governed Wallachia and Moldavia for a century. The Phanariot period began in the two principalities with the reign of Prince Nicolae Mavrocordat. He was imposed as the titular head in 1711, replacing the Moldavian Dimitrie Cantemir who fled to Russia after the Russo-Turkish War. We will talk about this personality later. During the Phanariot period, the Austrians annexed the Moldavian province of Bukovina in 1774, and the Russians annexed Bessarabia in 1812.

## Russia, Bessarabia Gubernia



By the Treaty of Bucharest of May 28, 1812, the Ottoman Empire ceded to the Russian Empire the eastern part of the Principality of Moldavia and the southern part that was under direct Turk control. That territory constituted Bessarabia district and later province.

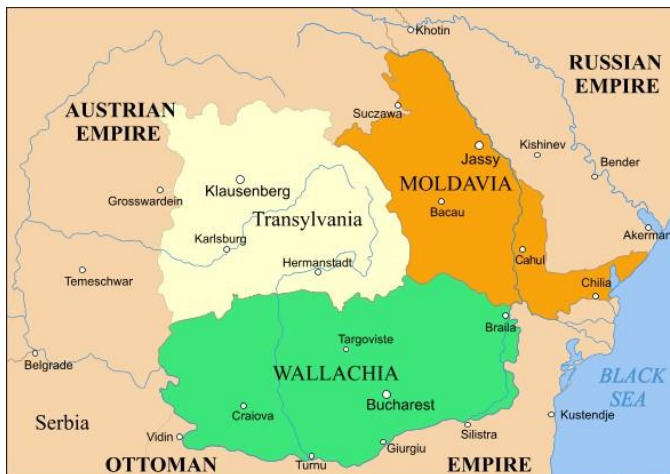


Map5-Central Europe 1887

From FEEFHS - The Federation of East European Family History Societies.

It belonged to Russia from 1812-1918, except from 1856-1878, when, by the Treaty of Paris, the southern part of Bessarabia – Budjak region - was allocated to the Moldavia Principality / Romania (after Crimean War). It was handed back to Russia in 1878 as compensation in the Dobrudja. Also from 1828-1834 Russia administered all future Romania: Moldavia and Wallachia.

Southern Bessarabia - Budjak region, or New Bessarabia (Cahul, Chilia, etc.) was under Romanian rule from 1856-1878.



Map7-Southern Bessarabia 1856-1878 - part of Moldavia Principality/Romania.

## Romania



From 1918 the region was part of Romania until the Soviet Union annexed the region in 1940. During World War II German-Romanian occupation started on July 17, 1941 until Soviet Union re-entered the area on August 24, 1944.

## Soviet Union, Moldavskaya SSR



The USSR occupied the region in 1940, June 28, and after German-Romanian occupation re-entered Bessarabia on August 24, 1944.

## Moldova Republic



In May of 1990, it became an independent state of Moldova. The most northern and southern sections of Bessarabia are now located in the Ukraine.

<Map7-Moldova Republic>

Two small regions, the Dniester Republic (Transdniestria/Transnistrian Republic) with mostly Russian population and Gagauz-Yeri with a majority of Gagauz-Turkish speaking people have separated themselves from the state of Moldova and are trying to achieve independence.



<Map8-Transdniestria Republic>

Formally the small territory on the left side of Dniester river was never part of Bessarabia. It was part of Kherson gubernia, Odessa gubernia and later part of Moldova.

Some Romanian researchers will refer to Moldavia region of current Romania as 'Inner Moldavia', and Bessarabia as 'outer Moldavia'. Other researchers write Moldavia for part of Romania and Moldova as a Moldova Republic, but both of these names are the same origin: Moldova is in Romanian and Moldavia is in Russian language.

## **Jews in Moldavia before 1812**

The history of the Jews in Moldavia remains vague until the 15<sup>th</sup> century when Turkish sultans began to rule the area. Yet some evidence exists of a Jewish presence in the region long before that time. Near the town of Chotin in Bessarabia, engraved coins were discovered depicting Yehuda Maccabeus of the second century before the Common Era. Some historians have claimed that during the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE Moldavia and Wallachia were vassal states of the Jewish kingdom of the Khazaria. Khazars settled in the territory of the future Moldavia. So, there is a speculation that Romanian Jews are partly descended from Khazars.

Records confirm that hundreds (1500 in some sources) Jews lived in Moldavia during the reign of Prince Roman I (1391-1394) and Alexander Bun (Alexander the Good) (1401-1433). The Jews came to the region mostly from Poland and became influential in Moldavian trade and commerce. It is important to note that during this period the Jews were granted the privilege to live and do business anywhere in the province.

During the reign of Stephan Chel Mare (Stephen the Great, 1457-1504) the Jewish merchants were active in the cattle trade and other businesses. There are several examples of Jewish involvement in Stefan Chel Mare's government and in the court system. Isaak ben Benjamin Shor of Jassy, a Jew, was an attended steward to Stefan Chel Mare. Isaak advanced to the rank of Logofat (from Latin: *logotheta* "one who accounts, calculates") to Chancellor, one of the highest positions in the internal affairs of medieval Moldavia. From 1473-1474, Isaac Berg (Beg), a Jewish physician in Stefan Chel Mare's court became the Moldavian emissary to the court of the Persian Sultan Uzun Hassan. He sought an alliance between Moldavia and Persia against the dominant Turks. In 1498, Stefan Chel Mare wrote a letter advising the Polish King Alexander Jagiello that his ambassador should pay a 1200 gulden ransom for a Polish noblewoman who had been freed by Jews from a Tatar prison.

### **16 century**

In the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries Jewish emigration to Wallachia consisted mostly of Sephardic Jews expelled from Spain and Jews from Constantinople. At this time Moldavian Jews were mostly of Ashkenazic descent having emigrated from Galicia, Poland and Germany. From the 15th century onward, Jewish Sephardic merchants from Constantinople began to reside in Bessarabia. Trade routes at the time crisscrossed the territory connecting Black Sea nations with Eastern Europe. Later, Jewish merchants from Poland also began trading and settling in Bessarabia laying the foundation of the first Jewish communities in northern and central Bessarabia. Jewish communities in southern Bessarabia had been in existence since the 15th century.

By the 16<sup>th</sup> century many Moldavian princes started to limit privileges previously granted to Jews. In 1545, Jews complained to the Polish King that the Moldavian Prince Petru Raresch prevented them from taking Turkish horses to Poland and Lithuania, a common trade item at the time. In 1579, Prince Peter Schiopul (Peter the lame) ill-treated Jews and expelled Polish born Jewish merchants from Moldavia. The Encyclopedia Judaica<sup>3</sup> states that Jews were completely expelled from the region in the last decades of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. On January 8, 1579, the sovereign of Moldavia, Peter Schiopul (Peter the lame), ordered the banishment of

the Jews on the grounds that they are ruining the merchants and had a total monopoly on Moldavian commerce. There is no evidence that the decree was enforced.

In 1591-1595, Prince Aron the Tyrant (Emanuel Aaron) was placed on the Moldavian throne due to the influence of Solomon Ashkenazi, the well-connected Jewish court physician of King Sigismund II, Augustus of Poland. Several sources claim that Emanuel Aron was of Hebrew descent, but there is no verifiable proof. However, Emanuel's cruelty to the Jews is infamous. In despotic fashion he ordered the decapitation of 19 Jews of Jassy without due process of law. By his command the entire Jewish community of Bucharest was exterminated.

### **17 century**

By 1612, Jews were well established once again in Moldavian commerce. To encourage their participation, Jews were invited by the boyars, great Moldavian landowners, to settle in Moldavia, establish cities and markets, administer estates, run taverns and build distilleries. These invitations to develop the Moldavian economy paralleled the economic expansion of Poland in the 16th and 17th centuries when Jews were invited to promote regional business.

Prince Stefan Tomşa (1611-1615, 1621-1623) wrote to the Magistrate of Lemberg requesting that regardless of religion, merchants be allowed to settle in Moldavia to promote trade and to do business without disturbance. To attract Jews to the area, he declared the expulsion order of Peter the Lame null and void.

Through 1634-1653, Prince Vasile Lupu treated Jews with consideration until the appearance of the Cossack leader Bohdan Khmelnytsky. In 1652, the Cossacks came to Jassy to claim Vasile Lupu's daughter Ruksanda for Timush, the son of Bogdan Khmelnytsky. On his way, Khmelnytsky massacred Jews. According to the chronicle of Neta Natan Hannover, a Jassy Rabbi during late 17 century, between 1648 and 1653, many Ukrainian Jews sought refuge in Moldavia fearing death by Cossacks.

At the end of the 17th century, the first town founded by the Jews was Onitcani in Orgeev district.

### **18 century**

The most famous Moldavian of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was the Prince of Moldavia, Demetrius Kantemir. He was a writer, a political leader and a scientist. He led ten thousand Moldavians 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*<sup>4</sup> the first and most complete description of Moldavian 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 Moldaviae*, 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 Armenians living together peacefully. He

refers to Kishinev as a “small market-town of slight importance,” with a population “of Christians, Armenians and Jews.”

A picture of religious tolerance 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.”

By the early 18th century, permanent Jewish settlements had been established in several commercial centers: Iasi, Onitcani, Suceava, Kishinev, Bendery, Kiliya. Toward the end of the century relatively large numbers of Jews were living in most of the urban settlements and in many villages.

In the middle of the 18 century, Jews from Poland were invited to settle in Moldavia. They were expected to found new towns and quicken the economic development of the country. They were offered: land on which to build synagogues, religious schools and ritual bathhouses, free cemetery plots, and several years exemptions from all taxes! Thousands Jews came to settle in Moldavia. They found 63 towns and villages! The peasants and small town people found the Jews indispensable, because Jewish merchants and shopkeepers provided them with the prime necessities of living. They sold to Moldavians iron utensils, rope, pipe tobacco, salt, rice, and leather boots. Jews also build small-scale industries.

By mid-century there was not a single Moldavian town or village without an established Jewish community.

At the end of 18 century, Russia took control of part of Moldavia territory, as a result of a petition from Moldavian princes. Formally the Moldavia/Bessarabia was not yet part of Russian Empire, but Russia influenced Moldavia/Bessarabia a lot.

In Moldavia, the first census, organized by the Russian military authorities of occupation during the war with the Turks in 1774, recorded 1,300 Jewish families. <sup>5</sup>



## 19 century

1803 – 30000 Jews lived in Moldavia Principality.

1801-1825 – Russia, Alexander I, (liberal).

1812 – Bessarabia, the entire territory between Dnister, Prut and Danube rivers was annexed by Russia. Territory occupied by the Russians included 5 cities (towns with fortresses): Akkerman, Soroki, Bendery, Hotin and Ismail, some 14 or 15 market towns, and 500-600 villages, with a total population of 500,000, according to official Russian Census on 1816. <sup>6</sup>

According to “Jews in Romania” by Carol Iancu, <sup>7</sup> “There was a considerable increase in the Jewish population to Moldavia (*he meant Moldavia Principality, without Bessarabia*) from the beginning of the century due to immigration from Bessarabia following its seizure in 1812...” Most scholars believe that Bessarabia lost about one-third of its population during the first year or two of the Russian occupation. <sup>6</sup>

According to a number of sources: 20,000 Jews (5,000 families) lived in Bessarabia, many engaged in commerce and liquor distilling. Jews constituted 4-4.5% of total population (1816).

1818 - Laws concerning Jews were issued by the Russian government in 1818 in “Regulations of establishing Bessarabia district”. Jews were required to join one of three estates, classes: merchants, petty bourgeois (townsmen), or farmers. In the same “Regulation” was stated that “...privilegias (privileges) given to Jews by Moldavian princes (gospodars), will be kept by entirety”, while the existent Russian legislation concerning the Jews did not apply, since Bessarabia had autonomous status. The regulations even authorized Bessarabian Jews to reside in the villages and engage in leasing activities and innkeeping, in contradiction to the "Jewish Statute" of 1804. They even could buy a piece of empty land for farming. Because of this regional autonomy, the Jews of Bessarabia were spared several of the most severe anti-Jewish decrees issued in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

1818. 86% of Jews worked in trade and 12% in handicraft. Several industries were almost entirely held by Jews: Grain Trade – 85%; Markets in Major cities -90%; Post Office – 100% Jewish; Vodka production and trade – 100% Jewish.

Russian Jews were allowed to move to Bessarabia, as Bessarabia became part of the Pale of Settlement (April 1835). Jews, as well as Gypsies were excluded from taking part in government (public) service. Jews who were removed from closed cities of Sevastopol, Nikolaev and moved to Bessarabia were given privileges (1830) as an exception from common rulings. Jews-doctors from these places were able to hold a government position.

It was most likely that after 1818 Jews were required to have hereditary surnames. Before that, in both Moldavia and Turkey, last names were not required. I found in some records that in second part of 19 century, the citizens of Moldavia (Romania), Turkey did not yet have surnames.

1824. Russian government forbid the settlement of foreign Jews in Russia and even ordered the expulsion of those that had already become Russian subjects. The government gave generous

support to the pioneers in this new branch of commerce “in the hope that the example of the foreign Jews would inspire their Russian coreligionists to give up their petty commercial transactions for those of a broader character and greater usefulness to the community.”

1825-1855 – Nicholas I, (reformer).

Delineation of the Pale of Settlement (April 1835)

From the Law:

A permanent residence is permitted to the Jews: (a) In the provinces: Grodno, Vilna, Volhynia, Podolia, Minsk, Ekaterinoslav. (b) In the districts: Bessarabia, Bialystok.

By 1835, when the liquidation of Bessarabian autonomy began, the "Jewish legislation" in Russia was equally applied to Bessarabian Jewry, although the prohibition on Jewish residence in border regions was not enforced in Bessarabia until 1839 and compulsory military service until 1852-53.

Jewish farming was very much developed especially since 1835, when the government gave different privileges to people who wanted farming. According to the new status, Jews could freely cross over into the farmer class without any restrictions. The new farmers could settle on crown, purchased, or leased land. Crown lands were set aside for Jews for an unlimited time for their sole use upon payment of taxes. In addition, in areas without much free crown land, Jews were permitted to lease or buy lands from private owners that they could select themselves. In this event, by investing their capital, they joined the rural community and became owners or renters of land.

In 1835, Russia mandated keeping Jewish Metrical (*metriki*) records in two copies: one local and one for the government. Beginning in 1857, a state employed Crown rabbi kept the registers with the purpose in mind of improving the completeness of the registration. <sup>8</sup>

1836 – Jews 43,062 lived in Bessarabia.

At the beginning of 1840 the petition of eight Austrian Jews, for the privilege of retail trade in timber along the entire course of the Dniester river, was transmitted to the government. The governor-general of New Russia, M. S. Vorontzov answered that "since there was great need for timber all along the lower Dniester, and the supply from Austria insufficient, he thought it advisable to permit the petitioners, as well as all foreign dealers in timber floating their merchandise from Austria down the Dniester, to sell it unhindered all along the course of the river."

1830-40. Haskalah began to penetrate to Bessarabia and from end of 1840 – Jewish Government schools were opened.

1844 – 49,000 Jews lived in Bessarabia and 44,000 Jews lived in all other North Black Sea regions – NovoRossia - Kherson, Tavria, Ekaterinoslav, etc.

1848-49 The Census and 1853 Jewish Census were conducted, and after that Jews in Bessarabia started to be recruited into Tsar Army (Law of 1825).

1856 abolished the cantonist system, when children from 10-12 years were taken to military schools, and after they turned 18, they served in the army for 25 years. Only from 1854-56 Jews of Bessarabia were subjected to the cantonists recruitment.

An increasing number of Jews entered agriculture, and between 1836 and 1853, 17 Jewish agricultural settlements were established in Bessarabia, mostly in the northern districts, on lands purchased or leased from Christian or Jewish landowners. There were 10,859 persons living on these settlements in 1858; 12.5% of Bessarabian Jewry were farmers, and the region became among the largest and most important centers of Jewish agriculture in Russia.

1855-1881 – Alexander II, major reformer, liberal press

In 1855 there were six Jewish Government schools, in Beltsy, Khotin, Brichany, and Izmail, and two in Kishinev, with 188 pupils. Private secular Jewish schools also began to appear, and from the 1860s Jews in Bessarabia, especially wealthier ones, began to send their children to the general schools.

During the reign of Alexander II Jews got the privilege of purchasing landed property within the Pale of Settlement. . This is how the seventeen Jewish colonies were established between the years 1836 and 1854. They covered an area of 9,305 deciatine.

1856. 78,751 Jews lived in Bessarabia

1858 the Law of 50 verst from the border was softened, almost cancelled.

1864 – 97,700 Jews lived in Bessarabia

1867 - 94,045 Jews lived in Bessarabia, excluding New Bessarabia.

1881-1894 – Alexander III – counter-reform

1881-82 – Pogroms in Bessarabia and NovoRossia

1882, May 3 – Temporary regulations concerning the Jews of Russia, proposed by Count Ignatiev, and sanctioned by the czar May 3 (15), 1882.

Jews were banned from living in rural areas and towns of fewer than ten thousand people (for 35 years). Strict quotas were placed on the number of Jews admitted to universities, high schools, and many professions were off-limit to Jews:

(1) As a temporary measure, and until a general revision is made of their legal status, it is decreed that the Jews be forbidden to settle anew outside, of towns and boroughs, exceptions being admitted only in the case of existing Jewish agricultural colonies.

(2) Temporarily forbidden are the issuing of mortgages and other deeds to Jews, as well as the registration of Jews as lessees of real property situated outside of towns and boroughs; and also the issuing to Jews of powers of attorney to manage and dispose of such real property.  
(3) Jews are forbidden to transact business on Sundays and on the principal Christian holy days; the existing regulations concerning the closing of places of business belonging to Christians on such days to apply to Jews also.

These regulations – May Laws - were intended only as temporary measures; and the government itself when it issued them was aware of the fact that such legislation would not be good for the permanent law of the legal status of the Russian Jews. The regulations were to remain in force until the final revision of the laws concerning the Jews.

This revision was assigned to a special commission, under the chairmanship of Count Pahlen, which soon afterward completed its task. In 1888, the special commission came to conclusion that from the government's point of view Jews should be equal with others! In this memorandum, it was said that the Jews are not foreigners, but part of Russia for 100 years! They recommended reforming the laws and giving Jews equal rights, but the Alexander III and his surroundings did not want to do anything, they had different agenda for Jews.

The temporary regulations from the beginning gave rise to different interpretations, misunderstandings and complaints. For instance, the phrase "to settle anew outside of towns and boroughs" was a source of official abuse. Some governments informed their officials that by this phrase referred not only to the change of residence by a Jew from one settlement to another, but also from one house to another in the same settlement. The Senate decided against this interpretation; but in the meantime it had become a source of many problems to the Jews.

Here are several other examples of interpreting the Laws: If one who had the right to reside in a village left it temporarily, he encountered trouble on returning. Jews who had served in the army encountered difficulties, at the end of their terms of service, in resettling in the villages in which they had dwelt.

There are also numerous cases on record where local officials refused permission to Jews to visit villages temporarily for business purposes, although the law expressly states that Jews are only forbidden to "settle anew".

Another limitation created by the May Laws is that Jews possessing the right of residence in villages have not the right to execute leases or contracts to purchase. Jews were not able to rent rooms or build a house on land leased. This clause was finally removed by the Senate, which decided that Jews having such right of residence might rent rooms or might build houses of their own on land leased for the purpose.

Law about regulating Jews to study at Universities and other institutions: 10% in pale, 5% outside and 3% in Moscow and Petersburg.

1889. According to Jewish Encyclopedia, total population in Bessarabia was 1,628,876 and the population of the Jews was 180,918.

1894-1917 – Nicholas II

1897 – Universal Census. 5 million Jews lived in whole Russia and 1.5 million outside Pale. In Bessarabia from total population of 1,936,392, Jews population was from 225-228 thousand, depending on the sources. (Jewish Enciclopedia, Evreiskaya encyclopedia, Moscow, 1900) <sup>3</sup>, Meriam Weiner, “Jewish Roots in Ukraine and Moldova”. 1999) <sup>9</sup>. Jews constituted about 11% of total population. In towns there were 109655 Jews, which is 37.4% from total population. Kishinev - 50237 Jews, which is about 46.5%, Beltsy – 10348, 55.9%, Bendery 10644, 38%, Orgeev - 7144, 59.5% and Soroki 8783, 57.4%.

Jews by Professions: Tayliors and shoemakers - 13%, Grain trade – 9%, Forest – 8%, Trade of other – 11%, Sales – 43%, Transport – 3.65%, Agriculture – 7%.

Total of 377 plants, factories in Bessarabia and 106 were owned by Jews, and they were getting 30% of all products made.

In 1897, 7.1% of Jews lived from agriculture, when in all Russia only 3.55%

### **Cities, Towns**

In this section you find information about Kishinev – main city in Bessarabia, two large towns - Bendery and Soroki and one shteitl – Kaushany of Bendery Uezd.

**Kishinev** (from Kishla-Nou, new spring, source of water) was established as a town in the 14th century. At the end of the 17th century Kishinev was destroyed by Tartars. In the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Jews lived on both sides of the River Byk. The early history of Kishinev can be found recorded in a 1774 official statute of a burial society. Written in Yiddish the statute was signed by 144 members of the Jewish community and was approved by a rabbi in Jassy. At the end of 18th century, Hayyim ben Solomon Tyrer was the rabbi of Kishinev. At the beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> century, Zalman the son of Mordechai Shargorodsky, a pupil of the Baal Shem Tov, the spiritual founder of the Hasidic movement, became rabbi in Kishinev and in 1816 established a synagogue. By the beginning of 19th century Kishinev had become the main town of the province of Bessarabia under Russian rule.

**Soroki** was another old Moldavian town. The first mention of Jewish settlement in Soroki was in 1657. A synagogue was established in 1775. The Jewish burial society came into existence in 1777. In 1817 there were 157 Jewish families living in Soroki. David Solomon Eibenschutz served as rabbi and encouraged the study of Torah.

**Bendery** was a castle town and the regional center of Bessarabia. In 1770 a synagogue was built inside the castle. After the town was moved to a new location outside the castle, the synagogue was visited only on Yom Kippur. In the 1840s, the city was home to RebWertheim, a rebbi and tzadik, the grandson of Rabbi Shimon Wertheim from Vienna.

**Kaushany** (Caușeni), Bendery uezd. Some tombstones in the Jewish cemetery in Kaushany are believed to date from the 16th century. It is certain that there was a Jewish community in Kaushany in the 18th century, when Kaushany was the center of Tatar rule in southern Bessarabia. By 1817, 53 Jewish families lived in Kaushany. The community increased with a large Jewish immigration into Bessarabia in the 19th century. In 1853 80 families of Jewish farmers were granted landholdings by the state, and were reclassified as "state farmers." In the 1854 Revision lists from Kaushany, we find 80 Jewish families: 251 men and 272 women. Due to the difficult economic conditions, in 1864 they were permitted to get reclassified as townsmen (middle class, 'meschane'). That is also reported in the Revision lists. However, a number of Jews in Kaushany continued to work in agriculture, including sheep and large cattle farmers. In 1849, two Jewish farmers owned a total of approximately one thousand heads of cattle and three thousand sheep and goats. In 1897, 1,675 Jews lived in Kaushany, of total population of 3,729 (45%).

**Who were the Jews in Bessarabia?**

To partially answer this question presented in a table below statistics of Jews lived in three places in Bessarabia. The years in the left column represent the Birth records for the towns. For example in Kishinev in 1867 there were 679 registered births in the Jewish community.

Kishinev as of 1897 lived 50,237 Jews from total of 108,483 (46%);  
 Bendery, uezd town as of 1897 – 10,654 Jews from total of 31,797 (34%);  
 Kaushany, shteitl in Bendery uezd as of 1897 – 1,675 Jews from total of 3,729 (45%).

	Total	Gender		Estate/Status			Mili- tary	Foreign citizens
		Girls	Boys	Merc hants	Towns men	From Agric. Colonies		
Kaushany 1866, 1876, 1888	249	112	137	5	209	1	4	24 (13 Moldavia 10 Turkey, 1 Holland)
Bendery 1866, 1871, 1883	543	199	344	19	446	4	16	40 (18 Moldavia, 13 Turkey, 7 Austria, 2 Greece)
Kishinev 1867	679	260	419	61	550	2	16	39 (31 Moldavia, 4 Austria, 4 Turkey)

The number of boys born is substantially higher than girls; large numbers of Jews were citizens of other countries.

## Conclusion

During my personal genealogical research I was able to trace part of my family to the 1750s, though I do not know where they were living in 18 century. The earliest time I know they lived in a shteitl Kaushany in Bessarabia in 1835. In order to continue discovery of our roots and go back to 18, 17 centuries, a research of Migration of Jews into Bessarabia will be tremendously helpful. It is most probable that many Jewish families did not live in Bessarabia in 18 century, but arrived to that area from Galicia or Ukraine, or from other regions. There is also a possibility that some Jews arrived to Bessarabia from Germany with German colonists from the same German towns, and established many agricultural towns in Bessarabia in the 19 century. My maternal grandmother lived in a German colony Tarutino, Bessarabia and I found that many Jews lived in these towns at the end of 19 century and studied in German schools.

To find out more about Jewish life in Bessarabia, historical research should be done with archival information available at JewishGen and the Moldavian Archives in Kishinev and other towns. I have started in August of 2009 to coordinate a project of translating and transcribing Bessarabia Revision Lists from 1830-1860s for JewishGen, where the records are filmed and digitized by LDS, Salt Lake City. I believe that the first batch of such records will appear online at JewishGen in 2010.

There are also records only available at Moldavian Archives in Kishinev, for example Census records of 1924. By hiring a researcher in Kishinev I was able to get information of my relatives lived in a shteitl in Bessarabia. I hope that information from Moldavian Archives becomes more available for the researchers and genealogists soon.

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