

THE JEWS OF MOLDOVA

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HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Jews have been living in Moldova since the end of the fourteenth century.

Jewish names appear in ancient documents of the first princes of the Moldavian principality in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. During the nineteenth century, the Jewish population of the territory between the rivers Prut and Dniester (then Bessarabia) increased greatly; by the end of that century, it reached 230,000 people, representing 12 percent of the population of Bessarabia. In many of the towns, Jews made up 50 percent of the population. As merchants, craftsmen, traders, workers, and farmers, the Jews contributed substantially to the economic development of the area. Mutual influence and cooperation with other peoples characterized the spiritual life of the Bessarabian Jews.

The 1930s marked the peak of development of Jewish national life in Moldova. A well-developed cultural infrastructure of the Jewish communities appeared, i.e., the system of religious and political organizations, philanthropic and cultural-educational societies and other institutions. In 1935, 40 towns and shtetls of the area united as the Union of Jewish Communities of Bessarabia.

Among the sad milestones in the history of the Jewish community of Moldova are the Kishinev Pogrom of 1903 and numerous pogroms in 1905. During the years of German occupation, the Jewish population was completely banished from the territory of Bessarabia. More than 100,000 Jews from Bessarabia perished during World War II and the Holocaust.

POPULATION GROWTH

The dynamics of the Jewish population of Bessarabia (contemporary Moldova) can be analyzed with census statistics:

- 1930: 205,000 Jews (7 percent of the population of Bessarabia).
- 1959: 95,200 Jews, primarily families returned from evacuation (3.3 percent of the population).
- 1970: 98,100 Jews (2.7 percent of the population).
- 1979: 80,100 Jews (2 percent of the population).
- 1989: 65,800 Jews (1.5 percent of the population).



Beltsy Synagogue interior, 1997

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The steady decline in the Jewish population of Moldova has resulted from assimilation, natural decrease and emigration (mostly to Israel). The Jewish population has always been larger than has been reported officially, however, as not all Jews have stated their nationality. Thus, today the Jewish population in Moldova is estimated at between 35,000 and 40,000 people, despite the fact that from 1989 to 1998, more than 44,000 Jews repatriated to Israel.

THE REVIVAL OF JEWISH LIFE

Although the national life of the Jews in Moldova was virtually destroyed during the 1940s, it began to revive in the late 1980s and early 1990s, due to the emerging democratic society. It became possible due to the activities of the local Jewish intelligentsia, support from thousands of Moldovan Jews, assistance from Jews all over the world, the understanding of the government of the Republic of Moldova and help from Israel and international Jewish organizations. Charity services became active in various towns and villages. The following organizations were established: the Society of Jewish Culture, the Association of Former Prisoners of Concentration Camps and Ghettos, the Federation of Jewish Religious Communities, the Organization of Former Refugees, the Organization of Jewish Veterans of World War II, the women's organization

Hava, and the students' organization Hillel. The following Jewish newspapers are published in Moldova: *Nash Golos* ("Our Voice") and *Istoki* ("Roots"). Educational opportunities include courses offered in Hebrew and Yiddish, and activities at the Yiddish Center, the Sunday schools, the Educational University of Jewish Culture in Moldova and the Kishinev Institute of Social and Community Workers. A yeshiva and a women's pedagogical college were also opened.

The following state institutions functioning in educational and cultural fields are making an important impact upon the spiritual revival of the Jewish community:

- The Kishinev Jewish Library (named after I. Manger, which became a major center of Jewish culture).
- Jewish middle schools and kindergartens.
- The Department of Romanian Language and Literature, Yiddish and Hebrew at the Philological Faculty of the State University of Moldova.
- The Department of History and Culture of Jews of Moldova at the Institute of Inter-Ethnic Research at the Academy of Sciences of Moldova.
- The TV program *Af der Yiddisher gas* ("On the Jewish Street").
- The radio program *Yiddish lebn* ("Jewish Life").



In 1903, an infamous pogrom took place in Kishinev. The woman in this photo looks in horror at all that remains of her furnishings.



■ In the Beltsy Synagogue, 1997

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An important factor in the reawakening of Jewish life and Jewish identity is the moral and financial support from the people and the State of Israel.

ASSOCIATION OF JEWISH ORGANIZATIONS AND COMMUNITIES OF MOLDOVA (AJOCM)

Today, the revived Jewish community life in 12 towns and many other areas of the republic, including the region on the left bank of the Dniester River, is united by the Association of Jewish Organizations and Communities of Moldova (AJOCM). Its board of directors includes representatives from all Moldovan regions and organizations. The AJOCM is legally accepted as a successor of the Union of Jewish Communities of Bessarabia. The AJOCM is busy with many projects, including efforts to increase the number of people actively involved in Jewish national life, a search for local financial sources, the restoration of Jewish properties and other matters. The Association also publicly protests against certain manifestations of anti-Semitism.

The major focuses of the activities of the Association (including its member organizations and communities) are spiritual revival and the development of Jewish societies and social services for those who need it.

The Association of Jewish Organizations and Communities is a member of the Jewish Congress of Europe and the Jewish Board of Europe. The AJOCM collaborates with many organizations and institutions, including:

- The Israel Cultural Center in Kishinev.
- The Jewish Agency (Sokhnut).
- The Conference on Material Claims Against Germany.
- The religious movement Habad-Lubavich.
- The religious–educational organization Agudat Israel of America.
- The World Board of Yiddish Culture.

The development of a national self-consciousness and a return to their roots by the Jews of Moldova are strengthened through education in Hebrew and Yiddish and by the study of Jewish history, religion, traditions and literature. The creativity of Jewish writers and poets, journalists, composers and professional performers, musicians, producers and artists continues to advance. Jewish clubs (by interests), theaters and children's drama schools also exist. Books are being published in history, linguistics and literature. Prestigious international academic forums on Jewish topics also take place in Moldova. In addition, thousands of people fill the largest auditoriums during national holidays and memorial dates in the history of the Jewish people.

SOCIAL-SERVICE NEEDS OF THE JEWS OF MOLDOVA

Social services are especially needed due to the steady decrease in the economic quality of life of the population of Moldova. In December 1998, the average monthly pension

of elderly people was \$13 or less. Social services for the needy, elderly and handicapped are provided primarily through the system of Hased organizations created by the initiative and broad financial support of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (the “Joint”), which provides services to approximately 5,000 Jews in Moldova. It is difficult to overestimate the effect of the cultural Hased programs, which have improved both the spiritual rehabilitation and the communication among elderly Jews. Indeed, the cultural, educational and social programs of the “Joint” have had an especially important role in the revival of Jewish national life in Moldova.

Under the existing circumstances, emigration and aliya (emigration to Israel) are motivated both by national feelings and the desire for a better future for the next generation.

Despite the continuous emigration of the Jews from Moldova and the inevitable decrease of the Jewish population, Moldova’s Jewish community will survive. Taking this fact into consideration, the AJOCM will begin strategic planning for its further development. However, development depends not only on internal resources but also on the support of world Jewry.

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Semion Shoikhet is the chairman of the Association of Jewish Organizations and Communities of the Republic of Moldova and emeritus architect of Moldova. Mr. Shoikhet has designed general construction plans for the cities of Kishinev, Beltsy, Bendery, Dubossary, Kahul, Rybnitsa, Tiraspol and others; many buildings; and various monuments devoted to historical events and famous people, including the memorial plaque dedicated to the victims of the Kishinev Pogrom of 1903 and the memorial complex devoted to those who died in the Kishinev Ghetto.



■ Tombstone of Shaya Roif (1928–1990), son of Gersh, Vertuzhany Jewish cemetery, 1998



Memorial in Vertuzhany, Moldova, in memory of the 20,000 Jews from the region who were murdered during the Holocaust, 1997

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Late 19th-century Jewish cemetery in Orgeyev, 1966

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▀ Rabbi Zalman Abelsky, in his office at the Kishinev Synagogue, 1998

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