
CREATION AND FUNCTIONING OF CHERNIVTSI GHETTO IN
OCTOBER–NOVEMBER 1941

Over the past few years Holocaust Studies in Ukraine have gained the features of significant academic issue. However, certain regional peculiarities still remain out of historical scope. Among these are the reasons and circumstances of creation and functioning of Chernivtsi ghetto in October–November 1941.

The Romanian WWII leadership headed by I. Antonescu was directly involved in the Holocaust. Romania was the only ally of Germany, which had its own plan of the extermination of Jews. In the research by Romanian scholars one can come across claims that every two minutes of 1213 days of Romanian occupation in Bessarabia, Northern Bukovina and Transnistria one Jew was killed and that every square meter of these territories has bones of ten murdered Jews.¹ The act of genocide against Jewish population was I. Antonescu's order of 8 June 1941 on deportation of the Bessarabian and Bukovinian Jews to Transnistria, where 240 ghettos and camps were founded.

Since 1 September 1941 Transnistria (“territory beyond the Dniester” as translated from Romanian), which embraced the territory between the Dniester and the Southern Bug, came under the Romanian rule, which allowed the new authorities to implement the plan which failed in the summer, namely deportation beyond the Dniester of all Bukovinian Jews.

¹ *Shafran A.* Soprotivleniye natsistskomu uraganu 1940–1944: memuary / Ed., comment by J. Ancel; short., transl. from English, foreword, afterword by D. Rosenfeld. – Odessa, 2003. – P. 14.

Following this aim, on 11 October 1941 the largest temporary ghetto in Northern Bukovina and Khotyn region was created in Chernivtsi.

The primar (mayor) of Chernivtsi in 1941–1942, who in 1967 was posthumously honoured in Israel by the title of the Righteous among the Nations, recalled, “Shortly after being appointed the primar I had an audience with Governor Riosanu and could discuss with him the Jewish problem. The late governor (died of unsuccessful surgery on 30 August 1941) asked me to allocate a part of the city for a ghetto. I explained and tried to point out for the governor that such actions, taking into account the cultural level of Chernivtsi Jews and the technical side of implementation, are impossible, i.e. surrounding a part of the city with barbed wire and barricades.” Riosanu replied, “I admit you are right, but what can I do if the prime-minister is pushing me, he calls every day and demands the ghetto”.²

Primar T. Popovici created a commission which had to travel to Poland and Germany (Lublin, Krakow, Frankfurt-am-Main) to learn the experience of these cities concerning ghettoisation (an article on this was published in the *Bukovina* newspaper on 27 August 1941.).³ But this project was not implemented. “It was only due to this, not taking into account the period 11 October – 15 November when the ghetto was a tool of deportation, that no ghetto was created in Chernivtsi”.⁴

But in late September 1941 the new governor of Bukovina C. Calotescu held a meeting with the representatives of military and civil authorities, where the projects of ghetto organization were discussed and where primar T. Popovici spoke up in defence of the Chernivtsi Jews.⁵

On 4 October 1941 the headquarters of Romanian army passed on to the Chernivtsi commandant I. Antonescu’s order to deport within 10 days all Bukovinian Jews to the “region east of the Dniester”.⁶ The short period allowed

² Documente / Comisia Internationala pentru Studiarea Holocaustului in Romania; ed. ingrij. de Lya Benjamin. – Iasi, 2005 (*hereafter* – Documente). – P. 576.

³ *Bukovina*. – 1941. – 27.08 (Derzhavnyi Archiv Chernivetskoï Oblasti (*hereafter* – DACHO).

⁴ Documente. – P. 577.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Sbornik dokumentov i matyerialov ob unichtozhenii natsistami evreev Ukrainy v 1941–1944 godah / Ed. A. Kruglov. – K., 2002. – P. 451.

for the deportations was stipulated in the plan under which 2 trains of 50 cattle carriages each holding 50–70 people⁷ had to be sent from Chernivtsi to Transnistria daily. On October 9, 1941 the governor of Bukovina General C. Calotescu received an order from Bucharest and the same day notified the primar of Chernivtsi and on October 10 the military command of Chernivtsi that “on October 11, 1941 all Jewish population of the Chernivtsi municipality is to be moved to the special sector of the city, which is being turned into a ghetto”⁸.

Based on this order was a decree by C. Calotescu dated October 10, 1941 on the creation of a temporary ghetto in Chernivtsi and the deportation of Chernivtsi Jews, which started the next day. The creation of the ghetto and the ensuing deportation of the Jewish population from Chernivtsi was headed by General I. Topor. At the same time the “Commission on evacuation of Jews” was founded.⁹

In T. Popovici’s words, the military (Military department at the Governor’s office) did not consult him on any issues concerning the fate of Jews and only on October 10, 1941 he was called to the governor, where he could familiarize himself with the details of ghetto creation and where he received an order urgently to find resources for baking bread to supply the Jewish population in the ghetto. Later, during deportations from Chernivtsi in October–November 1941, before boarding railway carriages every person received 4 loaves of bread. In the governor’s office the city primar once again tried to persuade C. Calotescu to make the conditions for Jews better. He said, “Mr. Governor, the French revolution which gave the humankind the right of freedom cost 11 800 human lives, whereas you are sending to death in the early winter 50 thousand people. What a trace you want to leave in history?” On returning to his office T. Popovici met representatives of Chernivtsi Jews. At this crucial moment, T. Popovici even intended to resign.¹⁰

On October 10, 1941 the Bureau in Jewish Affairs was ordered to tell the Jews of Chernivtsi that they should move to the ghetto that was created

⁷ *Carp M. Carte neagra. Suferintele evreilor din Romania. 1940–1944. – Bucuresti, 1946–1948. – P. 190.*

⁸ DACHO, f. 307, op. 2, spr. 10, ark. 224.

⁹ *Ibid.*, ark. 225.

¹⁰ *Documente. – P. 578.*

within the limits of the Jewish quarter which had been the home for the poorest strata of Jewish population. The quarter included Yevreyska str. (current Sahaidachnoho Str.), the Jewish market and all the side streets and lanes from the current Holovna Str. to the current Ruska Str..¹¹

Saturday morning (the day was purposefully chosen for humiliation) October 11, 1941 large crowds of people started moving around the city. The people carried sacks with clothing, linens, valuables. Some pulled their property in carts or prams. To intimidate the people a few tanks appeared on the streets. In the evening of the same day the ghetto was hidden behind the high wooden fence and the whole territory, guarded by the military and gendarmes, was surrounded with barbed wire.¹² On 9 October 1941, the heads of battalion No 430 received an order to reinforce the cordons along the city limits to prevent the flight of Jews while the ghetto was being formed. The direct guard and safety of Chernivtsi ghetto was ensured by battalion No 780 and the 1st gendarme battalion. The latter also took the responsibility for the deportation of the Jewish population from the Chernivtsi railway terminal.¹³ T. Popovici recalled, “Under the threat of death penalty the Jews had to move to the ghetto before 6 p.m. The ghetto was created with unbelievable speed, shut in by the wooden fence with barbed wire and military guard on entrances and exits”.¹⁴

The authorities allocated for the ghetto the territory which normally housed 5 000 people. But General I. Topor mentioned in a report that it “was possible to house no more than 15 000 people”.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the number of people was to rise to 47 000–50 000 people. Any shed became a shelter. Some 5–8 Jewish families (30–40 people) were put into each looted and ruined flat. Many rooms did not have even flooring, not to mention

¹¹ Chernovitskoie obshchestvo evreiskoi kultury im. E. Steinbarga. Vestnik. Liudi ostaiutsa liudmi. Svidetelstva ochevidtsev / Ed. G.L. Shabashkevich. – Chernovtsy, 1992. – Vol. 2. – P. 6.

¹² Chernovitskoie obshchestvo evreiskoi kultury im. E. Steinbarga. Vestnik. Liudi ostaiutsa liudmi. Svidetelstva ochevidtsev / Edt. G.L. Shabashkevich. – Chernovtsy, 1992. – Vol. 4 (hereafter – Vestnik CHOIEK. Vol. 4). – P. 30.

¹³ DACHO, f. 307, op. 2, spr. 10, ark. 224.

¹⁴ Documente. – P. 580.

¹⁵ DACHO, f. 307, op. 2, spr. 10, ark. 225.

windows or doors. Witnesses recall that people in the ghetto laid on the ground, at entrance doors and corridors, without food or water or minimal living conditions.¹⁶ Exit of the Jews from the temporary ghetto was forbidden. Entrance or exit of other people who had to pass through the ghetto was allowed only on producing special paper or personal identification.¹⁷ The city primar said, “The ghetto constantly lacked drinking water, two of three water supply networks were ruined. It was stinking and the threat of epidemics was looming”.¹⁸

The Jews had a miserable look: overgrown beards, torn and patched clothing, ripped boots or just rags on the feet or sometimes nothing at all. After the resettlement, big cooking pots were brought into the ghetto. People cooked borsch, hominy, porridges. There was no bread at all; many could not remember when they ate it for the last time. They cooked hominy, poured it on the big wooden doors and pressed it with another doors to make the meal even. Then the above doors were taken away and the hominy was shared into pieces.¹⁹

From the first days of creation it became increasingly harder to control the life of the large Chernivtsi ghetto, since its territory embraced various municipal institutions, schools, workshops and companies that continued to work. Non-Jews had to pass though the ghetto every day on their way to work and back home. But the urgent problem was that the main city transport arteria, from the railway station to the center, passed through the ghetto, namely the streets Reg. Ferdinanda – Bratianu. The city authorities reacted immediately, deporting the residents of these streets on 13 October, 1941, clearing the passage to the railway station.²⁰

The actual situation concerning the Chernivtsi ghetto is described by T. Popovici, “Despite the fact that points 3 and 4 of order No 38 on creation of the ghetto in Chernivtsi prohibited entrance from and exit to the ghetto without a special permission issued by the governor, on the second day the

¹⁶ Vestnik CHOIEK. Vol. 4. – P. 116.

¹⁷ DACHO, f. 307, op. 2, spr. 10, ark. 72.

¹⁸ Documente. – P. 581.

¹⁹ *Snigur. I. Ievreiske ghetto in Chernivtsi 1942–1943 rr. // Chas. – 1997. – 31 October.*

²⁰ DACHO, f. 307, op. 2, spr. 10, ark. 225.

massive movement to the ghetto began. In fact that meant massive robbery of the Jews or exchanging any valuables for food: jewelry, gold or silver, carpets, fur, cloth, food items (tea, coffee, chocolate) etc.²¹

On the meeting of October 12, 1941 C. Calotescu told 18 senior officials from his office that the ghetto in Chernivtsi was created exclusively for the deportation of Jews to Transnistria. The only person to protest was Traian Popovici; as a result, at the end of the meeting he was openly called “a Jew” and later the local newspaper *Bukovina* labelled the Jews of Chernivtsi “the Traian people”. At first the governor agreed to leave in the city about 2 000 Jews, but owing to the efforts of T. Popovici and negotiations with I. Antonescu, on October 15, Wednesday afternoon, the primar of Chernivtsi got a eprmission during a telephone talk with the head of state to leave in the city about 20 000 Jews, mainly professionals for the army and national economy.

In the evening of October 15, 1941 the primar of Chernivtsi Traian Popovici arrived to the premises of the Jewish Committee and said that Bucharest granted a permission to leave a part of the Jews in Chernivtsi. This decision was motivated first and foremost by the need to restore municipal trades and industry. For this pupose a decree was issued, releaving all ethnic Romanians in charge of industrial and trading enterprises from military service. In a short time many shops and businesses opened all over Chernivtsi; most of them were previously owned by Jews and now were pronounced the property of the Romanian state and rented to the Romanians at minimal prices. But the new owners shortly felt the lack of specialists and qualified workers who could be found mostly among the Jewish population. Primar T. Popovici requested that lists of Chernivtsi Jews be created by profession and age. This resulted in the final number of over 16 569 people remaining in the city. The number included representatives of various professions, elderly people (aged 60), pregnant women (over 6 months into pregnancy), mothers with newborns, state pensionnaires and reserve army officers.²²

In fact, permissions to stay in Chernivtsi, the so-called “authorizations”, in many cases were sold for considerable amounts of money. The people

²¹ Documente. – P. 582

²² DACHO, f. 307, op. 2, spr. 10, ark. 219.

who did not have enough money could not get a permission even if they qualified by profession or any other criteria. The people who got permissions had to part with their families, children, parents since the permission included only one person. Most of the family members were gradually deported by mid-November 1941, but then the deportations were postponed because of transport issues. Over 5 000 Chernivtsi Jews who did not have permissions were hiding in the city, at attics, in basements or pits. Those having the authorization could leave the ghetto and return to their own, completely looted and ruined flats.

At the same time a control commission was created in order to check the permissions issued. The commission that met in the largest room of the town hall was headed by Governor C. Calotescu. It included representatives of civil and military authorities and Siguranta (Romanian secret police). The commission annulled many permissions, deporting their owners to Transnistria.

Later new registration was announced for all the Jews who remained in the city without an official permission. They were issued a different type of papers that allowed staying in the city but were signed not by the governor but by the primar T. Popovici and were therefore called “Popovici papers”.

During the second half of October – first half of November 1941 crowds of physically and morally exhausted people were moving along the streets to a cargo railway station. In the ghetto a special directive was issued. According to it, residents of a certain street were to be deported on a certain day.²³ It was allowed to take only the most necessary possessions: personal belongings, jewelry. It was autumn, so it was cold and raining. The victims describe the events, “When we were deported from the Chernivtsi ghetto to Transnistria there were many crying children at the railway station, tears in the eyes of the adults, but the worst were soldiers with bayonets. The wives of Romanian offices, who were not city residents, walked around the station and laughed at us. They suddenly started treating us not like humans, but like animals. We turned into cattle which were sent to Transnistria.”²⁴

²³ Kolys Chernivtsi buly gerbreiskym mistom...Svidchennya ochevydtsiv / Tr. by Petro Rykhlo. – Chernivtsi, 1998. – P. 36.

²⁴ Ibid. – P. 96–100.

As the ghetto was created, on October 11–13, 1941, the first transport left Chernivtsi with 7 053 Jews in three trains 50 carriages each²⁵. The deportations of Jews from Chernivtsi and the existence of the ghetto continued until November 15, 1941. The 1st gendarme batallion managed to deport to Transnistria 33 891 people in 14 trains.²⁶ The Romanian and German newspapers mentioned these events as “a wise solution to the Jewish question in Bukovina.”²⁷

Therefore, the local authorities, gendarmerie and the military failed to deport all Jews of Chernivtsi to Transnistria in 10 days in October as demanded by the order by I. Antonescu, even despite the creation of the ghetto. Such failure could be explained by the following reasons: first of all, the order on creation of the ghetto was inspired by anti-Semitic ideology, Romania’s desire to present oneself as a reliable ally of Germany, rather than by the real situation in Northern Bukovina; secondly, a need to keep a stable economic situation in the governorship, the Romanian leadership allowed for leaving about 20 000 Jews in Chernivtsi.

*Translated from Ukrainian
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²⁵ DACHO, f. 307, op. 2, spr. 10, ark. 226.

²⁶ Ibid., ark. 230.

²⁷ Vestnik CHOIEK. Vol. 4. – P. 94.