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THE FATE OF BUKOVINIAN JEWS IN THE GHETTOS AND CAMPS OF TRANSNISTRIA, 1941–1944: A REVIEW OF THE SOURCE DOCUMENTS AT THE VINNYTSA OBLAST STATE ARCHIVE

The first Jewish deportees from Bukovina began arriving in the Vinnytsa region as early as the summer of 1941. The documents from collection R-1683 (Extraordinary State Commission on investigation of the crimes committed by the German-Fascist invaders) are essential for investigating the fate of this Jewish population under Nazi occupation. In one such document, an investigation commission claimed that these first deportees were killed in a mass execution on July 28, 1941, near the town Yaruga. As recorded by the Romanian occupation authorities, the deportees from Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina had been “transported” from Mogyliv-Podilsk to Yampil. In the evening, when most of the deportees had already arrived, a unit of SS-men on trucks entered Yaruga. They assembled over a thousand deportees in different places along the road leading out of town, shooting them on the spot and burying them in ditches along the road. Children were thrown to the ditches alive.¹ According to a September 2, 1941 Einsatzgruppe D report, the Romanians transported about 35,000 Jews from Bessarabia and Bukovina to the Vinnytsa area. On 29 July, 1941, the 11th Army ordered Sonderkommando 10b and Einsatzkommando 12,

¹ State Archives of Vinnytsa oblast’ (*hereafter* DAVO), f. R-1683, op. 1, spr. 10, ark. 319.

under the command of Einsatzgruppe D, to evacuate during the first half of August 27,000 Jews to Bessarabia over the crossings at Mogyliv-Podilsk and Yampil. Approximately 1,265 of the deportees were executed, mostly those who could not keep up on the trek from Mogyliv-Podilsk to Yampil. Because the Romanians sought by all means to prevent the Jews from crossing into their territory at the river at Mogyliv-Podilsk, the Germans had to force the Jews to the Yampil crossing.²

The first wave of deportations from Bukovina to Transnistria lasted until late autumn 1941. Oral history accounts (collections R-5333, R-6022) testify that on the way, the Jews were robbed and humiliated by the Romanians, and the sick and the weary were killed. Exhaustion, starvation, cold, and rain all aided the murderers in military uniforms. The deportees were forced to cover long distances on foot, often carrying children and the elderly. Psychological conditions were also dire. Chernivtsi resident Martin Feller was born into the family of a Chernivtsi University mathematics professor. When Bukovina was annexed by the USSR, his father, like many other members of intelligentsia, was fired as a class enemy. “You can imagine what we expected from that Obodivka,” said Martin Feller. His worst fears came true: his father died of typhus in Obodivka ghetto.³ An eight-year-old girl named Madeleine Cain, a French citizen caught by the events of 1940 with her grandmother’s family in Bukovina, was amongst the deportees. She was amazed by the seeming lack of feelings and emotion displayed by people on that horrible trek. When she grew older, she realized that this was the only way for the poor refugees to protect themselves from the continuous sufferings of their harsh fate. The only ones who maintained “humanity and love,” in Ms. Cain’s view, were the children.

The crossing at the Dniester was terrible. Many Jews were simply thrown into the water to drown. During the crossing all the documents of the deportees were destroyed: the disenfranchised humans were transformed into nearly anonymous, half-real beings against whom any crime could be perpetrated.

It was naturally beyond the ability of most to cope with such conditions. Herman Moldover, a former inmate of the Bershad camp, remembered how

² Ibid., f. R-2966, op. 2, spr. 31.

³ Ibid., f. R-5333, op. 5, spr. 59, ark. 1–27.

during a night stop on the trip from Floresta station to Bershad, a rabbi from Chernivtsi snuck into a cowshed to cut his veins open. This suicide attempt was not only an act of despair, but even more a protest against the humiliation, dehumanization, and violence suffered by his people.

The number of deportees to Vinnytsa oblast reached 97,000–98,000 people. Of these, 28,391 were deported from the Chernivtsi ghetto alone in October–November 1941. In total, 74,000 people were resettled from Bukovina to Transnistria (most of them became inmates of Vinnytsa oblast ghettos).

In all, there were 112 ghettos, colonies, and settlements for deported and local Jewish populations in Vinnytsa oblast. By district, these included sixty-seven in Mogyliv; twenty-one in Tulchyn; ten in Yampil; and twenty-four in Bershad volost in the Balta district. In June 1942, 4,094 Jews were deported from the Chernivtsi and Bukovina districts; in September, another thousand were deported. Some 500 of them were imprisoned as politically suspect in the Vapnyarka prison-camp, while the remainder, on Gendarmerie Chief General Pupor's orders, were sent across the Southern Bug into the German zone, where they were interned in a Jewish labor camp at a granite quarry in the proximity of the village Kolo-Mykhailivka, near Hitler's notorious "Wehrwolf" headquarters. In the Kolo-Mykhailivka camp, as in other camps along the IV Berlin highway, the inmates' living conditions were horrendous. Many were quartered for an extended period under the open air in a field or forest, on a plot surrounded with barbed wire. Groups of 200–300 were forced to live pigsties, cowsheds, and stalls without windows, doors, or floor. Starvation, cold, overcrowding, and a lack of even the most primitive sanitary conditions caused large-scale epidemics of spotted and typhoid fever and of dysentery, resulting in a soaring mortality rate: by November 1943 only 700 inmates were still alive out of the initial 5,000. Those who managed to evade disease were murdered by the Nazis. December 16, 1942 was the last day for young Chernivtsi poetess Selma Meerbaum-Eisinger, who died of typhus in Kolo-Mykhailivka camp.

Internment in the ghettos and camps of the Romanian zone was also intolerably harsh. Recently, it has become increasingly possible to find information on and reconstruct a general picture of the living

conditions for such ghettos as Bershadt, Bratslav, Zhmerinka, Mogyliv-Podilsk, Murafa, Obodivka, Pecherske, Rogyznianske, Tulchyn, Shargorod, and Shpykyv. For example, the Mogyliv Prefecture archival fund has a number of alphabetically-organized inventory lists that enumerate the money and valuables confiscated from the Jews—evidence of the robbery of the Jewish population. Correspondence among the authorities regarding food supplies for the Jewish camps reveals that nourishment was scarce and limited. The dreadful conditions of the Vapnyarka prison-camp are confirmed in correspondence between the camp's commandant with the Jugustru (Yampil) district prefect: the deportees arrived without even the most basic necessities, since they had been given no time to prepare for the trip and were forbidden to take any hand luggage. They were locked up in buildings without windows; many became ill and were dying. The guards' reports describe the Jews' starvation, and that some were seen eating grass.⁴

The files of regional administrations (Kryzhopil, Chernivtsi, Stanyslav, Yampil, Mogyliv-Podilsk, Bershadt, Krasnyansk, Shpykyv, etc.) contain documents revealing various economic, social, and psychological measures against Jews. Examples include: Jewish children were barred from attending schools; all Jews were forbidden to walk the central streets of cities and towns; a national tax was levied on the residents of ghettos, both the permanent residents and the temporary (i.e., deportees) alike; in ghetto shops it was forbidden to sell goods brought from Romania; non-Jews were not allowed to buy jewelry from Jews, use the services of Jewish money-lenders, or employ Jews as officials of any kind. The documents also mention Jewish forced labor, which was used for primarily for the toughest and dirtiest jobs: repairing roads, digging quarries, draining peat swamps, and so on. In the beginning, an absolute majority of the Bukovinian Jews got by through selling their last possessions to Ukrainian peasants.

Starvation and disease took the lives of hundreds of thousands of local and deported Jews. The latter were more prone to epidemics, especially in 1941–1942. In the Bershadt ghetto-camp over 13,000 died of starvation or typhus; in Obodivka, 11,000; in Pechera, 9,450; in Shargorod, 8,000; and in Mogyliv-Podilsk, 6,000.

⁴ *Ibid.*, f. R-2988, op. 3, spr. 28, ark. 153; spr. 31, ark. 132.

The Pechera ghetto-camp on the border of the two occupation zones gained the most notoriety. Imprisoned there were many Jews from Bukovina, as well as from Mogyliv-Podilsk, Rogizna, Tulchyn, Bratslav, Ladyzhyn, and Vapnyarka. Of the more than 10,000 people who passed through the camp—nicknamed “the death loop” by the inmates—only 400 survived to liberation.⁵

During 1945–1950, the funds of three district prefecture administrations, twenty-six city and regional prefecture administrations, and seventeen village primaria administrations were transferred from the State Archive of Odessa Oblast to the State Archive of Vinnytsa Oblast. They were declassified in 1993–1994. Taken together, these funds comprise the main source base for research into the fate of the Jews from Bukovina deported to the Vinnytsa environs in 1941–1942. Comparative analysis of the constituent items and content of the mentioned documental holdings suggests that the Romanian occupation authorities maintained considerable thematic groupings of documents concerning financial-economic and social issues. Namely, there are groupings regarding the use of Jewish forced labor, the organization of private businesses, manifestations of communal and traditional life, and the like. The presence of such sources reflects the Romanian occupational authorities’ desire to implement the “colonization” of the annexed territories. In reality, the Transnistria administration’s repressive policies toward Jews were not centered on mass executions, but rather envisioned the gradual dying out of the Jews by forcing them to live in nearly unlivable conditions. At the same time, it made some allowance for the fact that, as long as they were alive, the Jews would have to perform some functions to somehow make a living. For this reason, the documents mention workshops, work teams, and certain social structures still operating in the ghettos.

Relations between local Transnistrian Jews and the arriving Jewish deportees were not always amiable. They had different political and religious views, prewar social status and property holdings, and levels of education. The Romanian authorities gave “preferential” treatment to the deportees, since the latter knew Romanian and often German, and thus had better communication with the authorities; sometimes they even had some jewelry left for bribes. Bukovinian Jews preserved as best they could their

⁵ Ibid., f. P-136, op. 13, spr. 96, ark. 6–8; f. R-4422, op. 1, spr. 37, ark. 14.

communal life, which proved invaluable in helping to resist and increasing the chances for survival. The preserved tradition unveiled the hidden power of traditional Jewish life. As a rule, community leaders in the ghettos and “colonies” were appointed from the educated deportees; sometimes the local Jews and the deported Jews lived in two separate communities. For example, in Zhmerinka ghetto the appointed head of ghetto was a Bukovinian Jew, Jur. D. Adolf Gershan, and the community of local Jews was represented in the administration by Joseph Yukelis and a certain Trakhtenberg; in the Mogyliv-Podilsk ghetto the community of Jewish deportees was headed by two Bukovinians, the attorney Danylov and the engineer Siegfried Egendorf. A lawyer from Chernivtsi, Meer Teich, led the community of deportees in Shargorod. In the Jewish community administration of the Bershad ghetto, M. Farfel, M. Perelmutter, M. Shrenzel, Dr. [?] Fleishman represented 20,000 deported Jews. Despite tensions between local and deported Jews concerning social, economic, political, and religious issues, the Bukovinian Jews managed to teach the local Jews certain things: organization of everyday routine, observance and preservation of religious traditions, and even some craftsman’s skills.

Ultimately, the community was necessary for survival. A considerable part of the documents concern the community’s efforts at solving the most urgent problem in the ghettos: fighting the epidemics of typhus, tuberculosis, and dysentery. Thanks to the skills of medics—among them many from Bukovina, such as Isaac Blank, Vatelman, and Gleiser—and aid from “Joint” as well as the Romanian Jewish Center in Bucharest from May 1942 to December 1943, hospitals and pharmacies were opened in the Zhmerinka, Bershad, Shargorod, and Mogyliv-Podilsk ghettos, among others. A map of the Mogyliv district is remarkable for its level of detail: a Star of David is used to mark the location of each ghetto and labor camp, and other symbols indicate the condition of roads and whether a ghetto had medical facilities or a functioning water supply system.⁶

Thanks to community organizing, the ghettos of Zhmerinka and Bershad had a kindergarten and a school; the ghettos of Bershad, Dzhuryn, Mogyliv-Podilsk, Murafa, Sokolivka, Tyrov, and Shargorod had orphanages. In the winter of 1943–1944 Jewish orphan children (only the deportees,

⁶ *Ibid.*, f. R-2966, op. 2, spr. 691, ark. 1.

not locals) were granted the possibility to evacuate to Romania and from there to Palestine.⁷

The documents demonstrate that if the community leaders were decent and conscious of their duties, it was possible to help at least some of the Jews to survive the horrendous conditions. The Mogyliv Jewish Community Committee attempted to secure the survival of the 60,000 Jews who had been deported to the district. They created a nursing home with 250 beds, two general hospitals, an infectious diseases hospital with 300 beds, and a public canteen serving up to 500 people daily, along with functioning public works, general statistics bureaus, and a post office. A major role in securing the relatively hospitable living conditions in the Mogyliv-Podilsk ghetto was played by Siegfried Egendorf, the head of the foundry “Turnatoria”: he struggled to employ as many people as possible (mostly former residents of Bukovina) and organized correspondence with their families. Similar authority was exercised by Meer Teich in the Shargorod ghetto and Mihael Shrenzel in the Bershad ghetto.

Jewish communal life in the ghettos was deeply connected to traditional religious life. The archival sources document the existence of synagogues in Krasne in the Tyvrov district, Yampil, Dzygivka, Zhmerinka, and Chernivtsi.⁸ Religious life in the ghettos profoundly influenced those who survived the war as teenagers or children; they mention it as the foundation for understanding and preserving *Yiddishkeit* (Jewishness). It must be stated that the occupation authorities—especially the Germans—were extremely hostile towards any manifestation of Jewish religion, especially synagogues, holy books, and devotional objects. Thus, maintaining religious practices, holidays, and a Jewish national identity were forms of Jewish resistance to the Nazis.

A former inmate of Tomashpil ghetto, Y. Tsapovskiy, testifies: “Life in the ghetto caused many Jews to return to Judaism. Although not all Jews had been religious before the war, now every Jew prayed daily. By that time our rabbi had passed away, and there remained only a single shochet who knew

⁷ Ibid., f. R-6022, op. 1, spr. 4, ark. 17–19; spr. 27, ark. 28; Vidomchy arkhiv Vinnyts’koho oblasnoho upravlinnia osvity, opys dovidskovoho kharakteru, spr. 2712, ark. 31, 36, 47, 83, 85, 102, 117, 135.

⁸ DAVO, f. R-2700, op. 7, spr. 91, ark. 64–65; spr. 182, ark. 18, 40 zv., 66.

all the prayers. He gathered men for minyan at his place (the synagogue was destroyed by the Germans immediately after they arrived in the town). We kept Sabbath and all the holidays.”

Bukovinian Jews also are known to have participated in anti-Nazi activities. For example, the Vapnyarka political prison inmates staged a “starvation” strike, winning better food rations, especially for the sick and the children. Doctors Meer Teich (Shargorod) and Mihael Shrenzel (Bershad) were connected to the underground. Dr. Teich helped families whose members were on the front, in partisan units, or in the underground, and supplied members of the underground with identity cards permitting free movement around the district. Testimonies recall how Dr. Shrenzel, from Chernivtsi in Bukovina, cured a 13-year-old boy, Danylko, who had been brutally punished by the Romanian commandant for leaving the ghetto. The commandant had bound the boy’s hands with a chain, fastened the chain to the rear wheel of a motorcycle, and dragged the boy along the ground. For over two months Danya remained in critical condition, but he survived due to the efforts of Dr. Shrenzel. Shrenzel also arranged the escape of Yakiv Talis, a captured member of the underground. Shrenzel was arrested by the gendarmes and tortured for information about Yakiv; Shrenzel refused to give his comrade away, and was murdered.⁹ Additionally, the sources document the efforts of the Chechelnyk and Olgopil ghetto community leaders—both Jews from Bukovina—to organize financial assistance for the anti-Nazi Soviet underground and the partisans.

At the same time, some Jews did collaborate with the German and Romanian occupation authorities. The fact of this collaboration is corroborated by the documents of archive collection R-6023 “Filtration, archive-investigation and supervision cases, captured documents, transferred from the departmental archive of the oblast SBU department.” The files of the Soviet investigation of Nazi collaborators contain, on the one hand, information on Jewish resistance fighters and evidence of violence against Jews, and on the other hand, information on collaborators among Jews from Bukovina. In the Pechora camp, the starosta (elder) Motl Zimmerman was responsible for much violence perpetrated against Jews; in Bershad many

⁹ DAVO, f. R-6022, op. 1, spr. 27, ark. 37–51; *Liudi ostaiutsia liud’mi: Svidetel’stva uznikov fashistskikh lagerei-getto* (Chernivtsi: 1996), 33, 104.

local and Bukovinian Jews suffered at the hands of the volunteer policemen Mark Gershkovich, Bernard Landweg, and Joseph Frenkel.¹⁰

After the Soviets reoccupied the territory, NKVD units arrested Adolf Gershman and Meer Teich on accusations of collaboration with the Nazis. Gershman was executed while Teich was pardoned thanks to the protection of the Jewish community. The personality of Dr. Teich is unveiled in another unique document—his letter to Stalin, in which he pleads for the repatriation of his countrymen and compensation for their losses. Indeed, the homecoming of Bukovinian Jews caused a great deal of trouble. A decree by the Bureau of Vinnytsa Oblast Committee CP(b)U, “On living conditions for the Jewish population re-settled from Northern Bukovina to districts of Vinnytsa oblast which suffered from the German-Romanian invaders” (June 15, 1944) demonstrates the Soviet authorities’ ambivalent attitude toward the deportees who had survived the Holocaust in the ghettos and camps of Transnistria: although the authorities seemed interested in returning them to their “birthplaces,” the phrase “provide with means of transport” (which directed local authorities to actively return the deportees) was replaced with “help with means of transport” (placing no obligation on the local authorities). Furthermore, the same document recommends sending them “to Donbass and other industrial centers,” where they would totally forget *Yiddishkeit* and merge into the “unified Soviet people.”

Out of 74,000 Bukovinian Jews, 54,000 perished in Transnistria. According to the data of the Extraordinary Commission and the Steinberg Yiddish Cultural Society in Chernivtsi, only about 9,000 of the 1941–1942 deportees who survived returned to Northern Bukovina.

*Translated from Ukrainian
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¹⁰ DAVO, f. R-6023, op. 4, spr. 595; 4949; 2806.