Bessarabia was a sweet and beautiful land...

'Hi, Romania, Romania, once upon a time was A Sweet and Beautiful Land'.. Thus begins a popular Yiddish song, often sung until...

ILLUSTRATIVE PHOTO

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'Hello, Romania, Romania, once was A Sweet and Beautiful Land'... Thus begins a popular Yiddish song, often sung to this day, Composed In The United States Diaspora By Aaron Lebedeff. Strictly speaking, he only had a nostalgic reverie when referring to ancient times, because, over the centuries, the Jews of Bessarabia suffered countless bitterness, persecution and slaughter.

Bessarabia, today the Republic of Moldova, had the misfortune of having its territory of 34 thousand square kilometers (slightly less than the state of Alagoas), flanked by the Dniester and Prut rivers, that is, located between Romania and Ukraine, two assumed bastions of anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe and which even sided with the Nazis during the Second World War. The Jewish presence in those parts, then called Moldova, dates back to the 2th century. The Jews were engaged in small trade, but as soon as they achieved some progress in their activities, they were expelled to Galicia, Poland, and to Podolia, in southeastern Ukraine. In the middle of the 16th century, Jews tried again to settle in Moldova, their main occupation being the crossing of people and cargo across the Dniester River. Once again they were expelled. They only returned in the following century, after the conflict between Russia and Turkey. As the winner, the Russian empire annexed the territory called Bessarabia. In 18, a decree was issued according to which Jews were prohibited from owning any type of land for agricultural purposes, but they could trade various goods and operate wheat mills. A census from the previous year indicated the existence of around 1818 thousand Jews in Bessarabia, corresponding to 19% of its total inhabitants.

Since then, the Jewish population has grown significantly in the region due to a decision by Tsar Nicholas I, who encouraged the settlement of Jews in small towns and villages, giving them two years of tax exemption. For Jews who wanted to leave Podolia and cross the Dniester River towards Bessarabia, the exemption was for five years, in addition to the granting of the right to own land. It was a skillful way of jettisoning Jews from their country. These, however, preferred to dedicate themselves to trading cattle, leather, wool and tobacco. As for the cultivable land that was granted to them, they found it more profita to lease it to Christian peasants. The 1856 census recorded the presence of 78 Jews, eight percent of the total population of Bessarabia, which had around 700 inhabitants. The

number of Jews grew at an accelerated pace, notably in the city of Kishinev where, at the beginning of the 900th century, 20 Jews lived, corresponding to 50 percent of the total.

The first and greatest tragedy of the Bessarabian Jews occurred on February 16, 1903, in Kishinev, where there was a flourishing community, with 110 thousand souls. Its social and cultural activities were intense and there were 16 Jewish schools and a good hospital, in addition to the publication of periodicals in the Yiddish language. That day, a Christian boy was found murdered 12 kilometers north of the city, on the banks of the Dniester River. Local authorities stated that the boy had been the victim of a Jewish ritual designed to extract his blood to make matzot (unleavened bread consumed on the feast of Pesach, the celebration of the Exodus). The rulers knew that the boy had been killed by a relative, as he soon confessed. However, they clung to the lie of the Jewish ritual, inciting and driving the city's non-Jewish population to hysteria, especially because of the virulent texts contained in a local newspaper with a known anti-Semitic stance, published in Russian. A pogrom (murder of Jews) then began, which lasted three days, because the Minister of the Interior, Viacheslav Plehve, did nothing to stop the killing. The news regarding the pogrom triggered protests from Western governments, but the tragedy was already complete: 49 dead, 500 injured and 700 houses destroyed or burned.

Vladimir Korolenko (1853-1921), a non-Jewish Russian writer and journalist, was in Kishinev two months after the massacre, when, as he wrote, "its echoes still reverberated." His report is impressive. He narrates that he walked the streets of the city and spoke to dozens of Jews and non-Jews "at least to understand what had happened." He stressed that he found no reason for that outburst of bestiality and wondered how it was possible that people who were, in principle, decent could suddenly transform into real wild animals. He then wrote: "I hope that readers can reflect on the feeling of horror that gripped me during my stay in Kishinev. I hope that justice will find an answer, but this is unlikely to happen."

In 1905, when the first Russian revolution occurred, pogroms were repeated throughout Bessarabia and, once again, one of the most targeted locations was Kishinev. This time, however, although the Jews had organized a defense system, 19 died and 56 were injured. This second massacre gave rise to the famous poem, *Be-ir Ha-Harega (The City of Slaughter)*, written in Hebrew by the great poet Chaim Nachman Bialik, which ends lik this: Because of the succession of tragic deaths and violence, thousands of Jews from Bessarabia emigrated to ancient Palestine, the United States, Western Europe and different ıtries in South America. After After the victorious Russian revolution of 1917,

Bessarabia was incorporated into Soviet rule. The new rulers abolished many of the restrictions applied to the Jews, but their tranquility was short-lived. The following year, the Bolsheviks lost Bessarabia to Romania, which owned it from 1918 to 1940. Despite some isolated anti-Semitic outbreaks, these were the best years for Bessarabia Jews, who automatically became citizens Romanians, having received permission from the Bucharest government to open primary and secondary schools in which Yiddish and Hebrew were taught. The situation was so favorable that, in 1922, 270 Jews lived throughout Bessarabia and established 140 schools, 13 hospitals and dozens of homes for the elderly there. This population was spread across dozens of small towns.

I quote some of the best known, spelling them according to the pronunciation I heard from my parents: Britshon, Sicuron, Iedenitz, Britsheve, Lipkon, Beltz and Chotin, in which Jews were the majority, in addition to the martyred Kishinev. In Britshon, for example, there were 7 thousand inhabitants, of which 5 thousand were Jews. These villages were relatively close to each other and followed the same pattern: wooden houses and sidewalks lined up on the edges of dirt streets that, during the rainy season, turned into an immense mud that took months to clear. The mecca for young people was studying, or at least getting to know Tchernovitz, a city with a vocation for modernity, located in the region known as Bucovina. I know of a curious episode, told by my father, who lived in Britshon, involving the places I mentioned. The Romanian government drew up a plan for a new railway that would pass by those cities, which would mean an obstacle to people's transport, which until then had been limited to horse-drawn carriages. On one occasion, a commission of Romanian engineers in charge of building the railway line appeared in Britshon. His proposal was simple and direct: if the Jews contributed and gave them a considerable amount of money, they could redesign the road and take it to where the compulsory donors intended. So it was done. But the road was built and never touched the agreed places. It was then that the Jews learned that the local coachmen had also got together and given more money to the engineers to move the railway away. This is because, if trains passed through there, they would lose their main source of income. If in the last years of the 20s conditions in Bessarabia were satisfactory for Jews, why did thousands of them decide to emigrate, and in significant numbers, to Brazil? Because Bessarabia did not show them prospects for the future due to the minimum quotas for Jews in force at the time in higher education. Furthermore, young people ran the risk of being drafted into the Romanian army, a sure way to go, but more than uncertain to return. Why Brazil? Becau the United States had exhausted its quotas for immigrants from Eastern Europe. Thus, e Jews, including my maternal grandfather, undertook trips to Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo to investigate the means of living and see on the spot whether the legend circulating

in Bessarabia that money was lying on the streets of Brazil was true. All you had to do was bend down and collect it. He stayed in Rio for four years, prevented from returning to Europe because of the First World War. He ended up returning home with little desire to emigrate, despite having enjoyed life in Rio de Janeiro.

In Britshon, a city that became closer to me because of my parents' stories, there was intense Zionist activity and youth movements were spreading throughout Bessarabia. Moshe, my paternal grandfather, was one of the community leaders and an activist in the center party, General Zionists. There he performed the functions of kazioner ruf, a type of civil authority, which had the power to validate documents that did not have a religious origin. My father, who came to Brazil in 1929, at the age of 24, was a teacher at a primary school in Britshon, went to high school in Tchernovitz, but didn't have the opportunity to continue, so he packed his bags and headed to Brazil , where a large group of friends awaited him. My paternal grandparents, together with a daughter and son-in-law, emigrated to Palestine in 1933, and the family plan was for my father to go to meet them a few years after having made some money in Brazil. However, my grandfather died at a young age, in Tel Aviv, in an accident, and the Second World War prevented my parents from going to the Middle East and even because there was no money available on the streets of Rio de Janeiro, quite the opposite.

From the 30s onwards, the fragile democracy that existed in Romania deteriorated into a fascist dictatorship. There was a succession of fragile governments and, as always happens in periods of political instability, the Jews became the scapegoat. The nationalist demonstrations exploited the fear of communism and, in an anti-Semitic vein, repeated that the Jews were plotting to dominate the economy. As a consequence of the beginning of World War II in 2, Nazi troops began to enter Romania in October 1939. On June 1940, 22, despite the German-Soviet non-aggression pact, Nazi troops invaded the Union Soviet Union and then occupied Bessarabia and Bukovina. At this point, Romania was ruled by dictator Ion Atonescu, who encouraged the killing of Jews in the capital, Bucharest, and placed his troops alongside Nazi forces, heading towards Odessa and Stalingrad. There is a record of the following statement made by Antonescu to his Council of Ministers on July 1941, 8: "Even at the risk of not being understood by some traditionalists, I am in favor of the total forced migration of Jewish elements from Bessarabia and Bukovina . I don't care if we are considered barbarians, before history. The Roman Empire also committed acts barbarism, but it was the greatest power of its time. This is the moment and, if necessary, we will know how to use our machine guns."

The Romanians excelled as Hitler's allies, to the point that the German 6th Army was commanded by General Petre Dumitrescu. It was Antonescu's responsibility to order the murder of thousands of Jews in Bessarabia. Kishinev's Jews were annihilated in phases. When Nazi and Romanian troops occupied the city, 10 Jews were murdered in their homes and in the streets. After being confined in a ghetto, the Germans set about killing Jews who could exercise some leadership over others: doctors, lawyers, engineers and intellectuals. Some 11 were confined to the ghetto and gradually became extinct due to hunger, disease, torture and forced labor. In Tchernovitz, where 50 Jews lived, a ghetto was not demarcated, but they were restricted to circulating in a few streets in the city. However, what the Romanian-Nazis really wanted, they got: representatives of the National Bank of Romania confiscated all their properties and current accounts. As German troops approached, the Jews could only flee across the Dniester River to reach Ukraine. They abandoned everything they had. I learned that my maternal grandmother, Esther, who came to Brazil after the war, even took care to sweep the house before fleeing with her daughter Hannah, my aunt. My grandfather, Itzik, decided to stay another day to see if he could sell some more belongings. He would cross the river the next day. He didn't have time. The Nazis entered his village, called Rujnitsa, and immediately executed him by shooting him in the back of the head.

The same happened nearby with another 10 Jews. My grandmother and my aunt continued to flee through the blood-soaked paths of the Soviet Union, until they ended up in the city of Alma-Ata, in Kazakhstan, where they survived the war on a diet of bread, radishes, cucumbers and potato peeling soup. In total, it is estimated that around 250 Bessarabia Jews died in concentration and extermination camps, with the Transnistrian camp being the most populous and under Romanian control. Unlike the Nazis, who kept detailed records of their extermination actions, the Romanians kept almost no documents relating to the ghettos and camps under their custody. Although the Romanians took advantage of the opportunity to unleash their ancestral wrath on the Jews, there were exceptions. The mayor of Bucovina, Traian Popovici, saved five thousand Jews, but was unable to prevent another twenty thousand from being taken to the Transnistrian camp. There, of the 150 thousand inmates, 120 thousand died. In Kishinev, of its 65 thousand Jews, only 12 thousand survived.

In August 1944, the Russians occupied Bessarabia and incorporated it into the Soviet Union, named the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic, with Kishinev (today, Chisnau) as its capital. The communist regime was not particularly friendly to the Jews who had returned e after the conflict. Jewish festivals were banned from being celebrated, including bar

mitzvah. Of the dozens of synagogues that existed before the war, only one, in Kishinev, was left standing. In 1989, after the collapse of communism, the country took on new directions. After a civil war that lasted three years, Moldova became a parliamentary democracy, with a president as head of state and a prime minister as head of government. The country was welcomed in 1992 by the United Nations and today participates in the most diverse international organizations.

In the general elections held in July 2009, the communist party won 48 seats in parliament, out of a total of 101, but the market economy that had been implemented at independence prevailed. Moldova is currently a country sunk in extreme poverty, devoid of natural resources, with the economy centered on agriculture, export of fruits and vegetables, wine and tobacco production. Gone are the days when Bessarabia was a sweet and beautiful land.

Finally, it is worth telling the story of two young brothers, Bessarabian Jews, second cousins of my mother. Before the Germans arrived, both fled towards the Soviet Union, where they were enlisted in the Red Army. They fought in Stalingrad and behind or in front of tanks and armored vehicles they reached Berlin, witnessing the final collapse of Nazism. In June 1945, shortly after the victory, cousin Berl advised his brother: "Listen carefully, we are Jews and when we return to the Soviet Union something bad will happen to us. We'd better defect." No sooner said than done. They took off their uniforms and headed towards Eastern Europe on foot, towards their old home in Bessarabia. One of them, injured in the leg, could barely walk. Finally, he delivered the points: "It doesn't make sense for us to both be shot as deserters; at least one has to survive. Go ahead, I'll sit back here in this tree and be whatever G-d wants." Unwillingly, Berl took his course. He walked a few kilometers and, as he told me, he thought: "But if I survive and find my family, what will I tell my mother? That I left my brother injured, under a tree?" He came back and carried him on his back for twenty miles. After a series of adventures, they managed to board a train that took them to Romania. Because of the effort expended, he was left with both legs bowed forever. In the city of Iassi, in Romania, they found my grandmother and my aunt who had returned from Kazakhstan. Berl married Hannah and, in 1962, they obtained visas to emigrate to Israel with their two children, a boy and a girl. The absorption ministry gave them housing in Cholon. Perhaps some reader, years ago, bought a soft drink at the popular kiosk that Berl maintained in Jaffa until he died.

Janeiro or Santos. Some landed in Recife and Salvador, where the ticket was a little cheaper. Those who arrived in Santos tried to settle in the capital, São Paulo, or in the interior, in Campinas, Franca, Piracicaba, Sorocaba or even in Santos. Despite having no possessions, the Bessarabers (originally from Bessarabia) helped their co-religionists in adapting to their new life in São Paulo. Still in the 1910s, they founded community associations, synagogues and schools mirroring those that existed in their cities in Europe. The Vila Mariana Israeli Cemetery, whose records show around 450 graves belonging to people born in small towns and villages in northern Bessarabia, was founded and run by the Bessarabers of Securon (Tabacow family) and Iedenitz (Teperman family), helped by the already well positioned Lithuanians from the Lafer-Klabin family. With them followed Blacher, Kaufman, Balaban, Koifman, Chapaval, Gandelman, Guelman, Chansky, Cambur, Krasilchik, Palatnik, Schneider, Rosenblit, Kuperman, Naslausky, Polacow, Schwartzman, Waidergorn, Zaguer and many others.

Source: Extracted from the book "The First Jews of São Paulo: a brief history told through the Cemitério Israelita de Vila Mariana", by Paulo Valadares, Guilherme Fainguenboim and Niels Andréas.

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