

Episode 35 -- Jewish Chişinău (Kishinev in Russian)

Hello, I am Adrian Iosifescu, your host of the History of Romanian Jews podcast, and this is episode 35, where we continue exploring the Jewish history of Romanian cities. This episode focuses on another major Jewish center, Chişinău, or Kishinev in Russian.

You just listened to the Klezmer song 'Bulgar from Kishinev'. A link to the full recording is provided in the episode notes.

Chişinău

Chişinău is the capital and largest city of the Republic of Moldova. It is situated in the middle of the country, on the River Bîc, a tributary of the Dniester. Chişinău is the most economically prosperous town in Moldova and the country's largest transport hub. Nearly a third of Moldova's population resides in the metropolitan area.

Though the city's buildings were significantly damaged during the Second World War and by earthquakes, a rich architectural heritage remains. The city's central railway station boasts Russian-Imperial architectural style and maintains direct railway links to Romania. The Swiss-Italian-Russian architect Alexander Bernardazzi designed many of the city's buildings, including the Chişinău City Hall, the Church of Saint Theodore, and the Church of Saint Panteleimon. The city hosts the National Museum of Fine Arts, Moldova State University, the Brâncuşi Gallery, and the National Museum of History of Moldova.

Historical documents mentioned Chişinău as a small village on the banks of the River Bîc, founded by Vlaicu, the uncle of Stephen the Great (Ştefan cel Mare). In a document of Duca Vodă from 1666, Chişinău is mentioned as a town. The development from village to town represents an important step in the history of Chişinău.

At the beginning of the 19th century, Chişinău was still a small town of 7,000 inhabitants. In 1812, in the aftermath of the Russo-Turkish War (1806–1812), the eastern half of Moldavia was ceded by the Ottomans to the Russian Empire. The newly acquired territories became known as Bessarabia. Under Russian government, Chişinău became the capital of the newly annexed province of Bessarabia. By 1834, an imperial townscape with broad and long roads had emerged as a result of a generous development plan, which divided Chişinău roughly into two areas: the old part of the town, with its irregular building structures, and a newer city center and station. Between May 26, 1830, and October 13, 1836, the architect Avraam Melnikov established the Catedrala Naşterea Domnului with a magnificent bell tower. In 1840, construction of the Triumphal Arch, planned by the architect Luca Zaushevich, was completed.

In 1871, Chişinău was linked by rail with Tiraspol, and in 1875 the Chişinău-Iaşi railway was opened in preparation for the Russo-Turkish War (1877–1878). The town played an important part in the war between Russia and the Ottoman Empire, serving as the main staging area for the Russian invasion. During the Belle Époque, the mayor of the city was Carol Schmidt, whose

contribution to the modernization of the city is still commemorated by Moldovans. The city's population had grown to 92,000 by 1862 and to 125,787 by 1900.

As part of the pogrom wave organized in the Russian Empire, a large anti-Semitic riot occurred in the town in April 1903, which would later be known as the Kishinev pogrom. The rioting continued for three days, resulting in 47 Jews dead, 92 severely wounded, and 500 suffering minor injuries. In addition, several hundred houses and many businesses were plundered and destroyed. The pogrom is largely believed to have been incited by anti-Jewish propaganda in the only official newspaper of the time, *Bessarabetz*, which, before Passover 1903, accused Kishinev's Jews of the ritual murder of a Christian child, though it was shown that the child had not been killed by Jews. Local authorities and Russian police were incapable of stopping the pogrom. Some of the perpetrators were tried by Russian courts but received only light sentences.

The pogrom had an immense influence on the ideological development of European Jewry and on the strengthening of its ties with Eretz Israel. In one of his speeches, Theodor Herzl declared that the events in Kishinev were a mirror of Jewish life all over the world. Kishinev was the symbol of Jewish development in tsarist times, but this event became an important catalyst for the Second Aliyah to Eretz Israel.

Following the Russian October Revolution, Bessarabia declared independence from the crumbling empire as the Moldavian Democratic Republic before joining the Kingdom of Romania. As of 1919, Chişinău, with an estimated population of 133,000, became the second-largest city in Romania. Between 1918 and 1940, the city center undertook large renovation work. Romania granted important subsidies to its provinces and initiated large-scale investment programs in the infrastructure of the main cities in Bessarabia, expanded the railroad infrastructure, and launched an extensive program to eradicate illiteracy.

On June 28, 1940, as a direct result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Bessarabia was annexed by the Soviet Union from Romania, and Chişinău became the capital of the newly created Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic. Following the Soviet occupation, mass deportations linked with atrocities were executed by the NKVD, the Soviet secret service, between June 1940 and June 1941. More than 400 people were summarily executed in Chişinău in July 1940.

In June 1941, in order to recover Bessarabia, Romania entered World War II under the command of the German Wehrmacht, declaring war on the Soviet Union. Chişinău was severely affected in the chaos of the Second World War. In June and July 1941, the city came under bombardment by Nazi air raids. During the German and Romanian military administration, the city suffered from the Nazi extermination policy targeting its Jewish inhabitants, who were transported on trucks to the outskirts of the city and then summarily shot in partially dug pits. The number of Jews murdered during the initial occupation of the city is estimated at 10,000 people. The deportation of the city's Jews to Transnistria reduced its Jewish population from 11,388 in the fall of 1941 to 177 in 1943; a large majority of the deportees died.

After the war, Bessarabia was fully reintegrated into the Soviet Union, with around 65% of its territory as the Moldavian SSR, while the remaining 35% was transferred to the Ukrainian SSR. Two other waves of deportations of Moldova's native population were carried out by the Soviets: the first immediately after the Soviet reoccupation of Bessarabia until the end of the 1940s, and the second in the mid-1950s.

In 1969–1970, young people, most of them returning from university studies in Leningrad, initiated Zionist activities in Kishinev. In 1970, and again in 1971, Kishinev was the site of two highly publicized trials of Zionist activists.

The period of the most significant redevelopment of the city began in 1971, when the Council of Ministers of the Soviet Union adopted a decision "On the measures for further development of the city of Kishinev," which secured more than one billion rubles in investment from the state budget. This development continued until the independence of Moldova in 1991.

Chişinău Jewish History

The Romanian historian I. Vianu found a legal ruling from the year 1742 in favor of the Jew David from Chişinău regarding goods that were stolen from him. The ruling required that the accused pay a penalty and return the goods to David. In his book "Old Documents of Romanian Law," the noted historian Nicolae Iorga mentions a document from 1743 indicating that the Chişinău Jews were required to pay an additional 5 lei annually in taxes compared with the rest of the citizens. The traveler von Rennes mentions in his book that in the year 1793, Chişinău was a small town with a mixed population of Moldovans, Greeks, and Jews.

According to the few documents that have survived, the Jewish community of Chişinău has existed for about 250 years.

By 1774, Chişinău was home to 540 Jews, representing 7% of the town's population.

A burial society was founded in 1774 with 144 members. Zalman ben Mordekhai Sharogrodski was Chişinău's first rabbi, and in 1812, Haim ben Shelomoh Tyrer laid the foundation for the Great Synagogue. During the same period, a Jewish hospital opened, and in 1838, a Jewish school with a secular curriculum was started on the initiative of local maskilim. In 1858, the Jewish educational system included two state secular schools, a private school for girls, and 46 heders. A Hasidic yeshiva, one of the first in the south of the Russian Empire, functioned from 1860.

Chişinău was a multiethnic city where Jews lived alongside Russians, Ukrainians, Romanians, Poles, Germans, Armenians, Greeks, and Roma. During the nineteenth century, the Jewish population rose from a small percentage to almost half of the city's inhabitants: in 1847, there were 10,509 Jews (12.2%); in 1867, the number had increased to 18,323 (21.8%); and in 1897, to 50,237 (46.3%). In 1897, 22 percent of all Bessarabian Jews were living in Chişinău, where Jews had come mainly from Ukraine and Belorussia, attracted by economic opportunities.

Data from the Jewish Colonization Society (ICA) show that in 1898, Jews owned 29 of Chişinău's 38 factories, 6 of the 7 steam flourmills, 5 of the 7 plants for curing tobacco, and 4 of the 5 printing presses. Most of the employees in these enterprises were also Jewish. The same source indicates that 2,470 Jews traded in agricultural produce, more than 1,000 worked in the garment and textile industries, 850 were teamsters and coachmen, and more than 500 were seasonal grape pressers and harvesters.

Many Jews lived in poverty. In 1898, two separate welfare organizations joined to form the Society in Aid of the Poor of Chişinău. From 1886, a group of Hovevei Tsiyon members, led by Meir Dizengoff, functioned in Kishinev, and from 1897, a group of Zionists was headed by Yakov Bernstein-Kogan.

Jewish communal and cultural life was thriving, with the presence of a Hebrew kindergarten, several Hebrew and Yiddish schools, a yeshiva, a teachers' seminary, a network of political, cultural, and youth organizations, and the central office of the Zionist Organization of Bessarabia. By the end of the nineteenth century, the city had become a major center for Yiddish and Hebrew printing and journalism. Among Yiddish newspapers and periodicals were *Dos besaraber lebn*, *Erd un arbet*, *Undzere tsayt*, and *Der yid*. In 1912, the Russian Zionist weekly *Evreiskaia khronika* was published there.

At the start of the 20th century, Chişinău had more than 70 synagogues and about 20 yeshivot.

While the working-class suburbs of the lower town concentrated the bulk of the Jewish population, some Jews had also taken up residence in the upper, more bourgeois part, where the majority of the embassies are today. The Moldovan capital therefore does not have a Jewish quarter to speak of.

In 1940–1941, during the short period after the Soviet takeover, Zionist organizations were disbanded and thousands of Jewish national activists and wealthy Jews were exiled to Siberia, though Yiddish culture was supported in the forms of schools, theater, and publications.

In the table shown below, it is possible to see the increases and declines in the numbers of the Jewish population in Chişinău from the first appearance of this settlement.

Year	Jews	% Total Population
1773	540	7.0
1847	10,509	12.2
1867	18,327	21.8
1897	50,537	46.0
1910	52,000	42.0
1930	42,000	38.0
1940	75,000	50.0

Year Jews % Total Population

1947 15,500 6.5

Chişinău Jewish Cultural Personalities

Let's mention a few of the many well-known Jews connected with the city of Chişinău:

- Yakov Bernstein-Kogan, a Russian physician, Zionist, and Jewish community activist. His father was an important figure in the Chişinău Jewish community. Bernstein-Kogan led the Chişinău bureau of the Zionist movement.
- Yitshak Korn, who, while in Chişinău, contributed to the daily Yiddish newspaper *Unzer tsayt* (Our Times), edited the student publication *Unzer veg* (Our Way), and with M. Kotik edited the weekly newspaper *Erd un arbet* (Land and Work). In Israel, he assumed important positions in the Mapai party and in the world Zionist movement.
- Alexander Goldenweiser, a renowned Russian pianist, teacher, and composer.
- David Kessler, a prominent actor in the first great era of Yiddish theater.
- Mendel Portugali, one of the leading figures in the Second Aliyah and founder of the Hashomer movement.
- Avigdor Lieberman, current Israeli politician.
- Meir Dizengoff, who, although born in Odessa, was a very active Zionist in Kishinev and eventually became the founder and first mayor of Tel Aviv.
- Yehudah Leib Tsirelson, chief rabbi of Chişinău and Bessarabia from 1909 to 1941, who founded a yeshiva there and also founded Agudas Yisroel. He served for a short time as mayor of Chişinău and in 1922 was elected deputy to the Romanian parliament, and then senator in 1926.
- Olga Bancic, a well-known communist activist, known for her role in the French Resistance.

Chişinău Jewish Cemeteries

An important element of Jewish presence in Chişinău is the existence of Jewish cemeteries.

During the long history of Jewish Chişinău, there were several Jewish cemeteries in town, of which only part of one remains. The cemetery was called the Jewish cemetery on Skulyanka or the "New" cemetery. The Chişinău cemetery was established in the 18th century and is the largest Jewish cemetery in Europe. Located on flat land with a continuous masonry wall and a gate that locks, the 1,000,000 square meter cemetery has over 25,000 graves. The oldest tombstone dates from the 19th century. In the cemetery, one can find:

- Mass graves of victims of the plague, in which Christians and Jews were buried.
- The tomb of Yehuda-Leib Tsirilson, rabbi of Bessarabia.
- A monument to the victims of the Chişinău pogrom.
- A monument to the victims of the Holocaust.

- Beit Kaddishim, the historic funeral hall. Constructed in the latter half of the 19th century, this structure has survived through significant historical events, including damage from shelling during World War II. Although the hall has experienced extensive neglect over the decades, resulting in the loss of part of its roof, its original interior decorations and dome have survived. It was recently restored with the support of the US Embassy in Moldova.

Chişinău Synagogues

One of the most significant remains of the Jewish history of Chişinău is an impressive yeshiva built in 1860 by the city's Hasidic community. Bessarabia was indeed a major center of influence for the thought of the Baal Shem Tov school, seeking to counter the growing influence of the Haskalah on the community. Chişinău's yeshiva was considered one of the most important in the southern part of the Russian Empire and attracted students from Bessarabia as well as Podolia and other areas now in Ukraine. After the war, the massive and relatively well-preserved yeshiva was converted to a warehouse for local scrap dealers. Now classified as a historical monument, it is awaiting rehabilitation.

Let us now review that symbol of Jewish life: the Chişinău Synagogues.

The Choral Synagogue is a former Jewish congregation and synagogue located at 75 Vlaicu Pârcălab Street. Construction of the synagogue was completed in 1913 with funds from the local Jewish community to commemorate the 300th anniversary of the Russian Romanov dynasty. Originally built for yeshiva students, it later became the main synagogue of Chişinău.

The synagogue was affiliated with the liberal or progressive tradition in Judaism, as reflected by the synagogue's use of the term "Temple." Under the leadership of Rabbi Yehuda Leib Tsirelson, the synagogue and its yeshiva were among the most well-known in Chişinău and earned renown for their cantors.

After World War II, the building was rebuilt and repurposed into a theater. In 2023, the city of Chişinău placed a plaque at the theater commemorating its former status as a synagogue, in remembrance of the 120th anniversary of the Kishinev pogrom.

The Glassmakers Synagogue, or Central Synagogue, was built in 1896–1898 by the architect Tsalel Gershevich Ginger. In 1964, local Soviet authorities ordered the closure of all synagogues except this one, which remained the only active place of worship for the Jewish community for more than 40 years. The synagogue complex includes the building and the mikveh, and it is now run by the Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidic movement.

The Lumberjack Synagogue, or the Lemnaria Synagogue, was built in 1835 and then nationalized by the Soviets in 1940. In 2005, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee opened the JCC in the building that once housed the synagogue. In 2019, the synagogue was reopened.

Chişinău's Jewish importance stems from its history as a major center of Jewish life in Eastern Europe, marked by both significant cultural development and tragic persecution, including the infamous 1903 pogrom.

This concludes this episode on Jewish Chişinău.

Until next episode, be well.