

Encyclopedia of the Jewish Communities
From their Foundation until after the WWII Holocaust

ROMANIA

Volume I – Moldavia
(Pages 120 - 123)

Vaslui

Map Coordinates: 46° 38' North – 27° 44' East

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Transnistria, Hargat

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N.B. Kehillah will be used where reference is to the organized Jewish community. Kehillah is the name given to Jewish communal organizations in Eastern Europe. The role and authority of the Kehillah varied greatly, depending on location and historical period. At times a Kehillah would have quasi-governmental authority over both the Jewish community and its relationship with the Gentile community.

Vaslui is a district town in the Moldavia region, on the estuary of the rivers Vasluietz and Balard. According to one tradition, it was founded by the Byzantines.

Jewish Population

Year	No.	Percentage of Jews in the general population
1803	64	
1820	180	
1838	892	
1859	1,202	25.3
1889	2,823	41.0
1899	3,747	31.0
1910	3,296	
1930	3,729	26.7
1941	2,904	25.2
1942	3,824	

Until the end of WWI

The Beginning of the Jewish Settlement.

Several of the tombstones in the Jewish cemetery date from the first half of the 18th century. According to a certificate from 1769, there were many Jews in Vaslui who traded with petrol and alcoholic beverages. Count Haurtiv wrote in a journal he kept of his Voyage from 1788 that he found several Jews in that area. In 1851 two Jews were appointed to the rank of Boyars as a reward for their service to the town.

Most of Vaslui's Jews were initially from Galicia and Bukovina. In the second half of the 19th century, many of the "kidnapped" (cantonists) escaping from Russia settled in Vaslui.

In 1867 many Jews were expelled from the villages and the farms around Vaslui. During that year many were arrested on the pretext that they were vagabonds. In 1886 a plague broke out infecting the Jewish population and as a result, a parcel of land was allocated for a new cemetery. In 1889 the Jews were expelled again from the villages and the farms of the district and the same thing happened again and again in 1901 and 1908.

During the farmer's rebellion, in 1907, 87 Jewish families were robbed and many of their houses were destroyed.

Jews from Vaslui dealt with grain trading. They built a mill and a soap factory. In 1910 there were among them 345 traders, 228 tailors, 26 shoemakers, 14 tinsmiths, 37 carpenters and 287 of other professions.

The Organization of the Congregation

For a long time Vaslui was left without an organized congregation because of the constant disagreement among the different classes. Each class and each association had its own organization. In 1881, the traders and some of the craftsmen had a hospital and a modern school, also a Rabbi, and their own "shochet" (ritual slaughterer). The organized craftsmen in the "Osey Tov" (doing good deeds), who were ultra-conservative, had their "Talmud Torah" (school), "Hekdesh" (poor people shelter) and a "Mikveh" (ritual bath house). They also had at their service four ritual slaughterers. The members had to pay a separate meat tax that covered all the expenses. Also, the "Hevra Kadisha" (the ritual burial association) was a separate institute. All those associations and institutes operated independently under each committee leader and without an ordered budget. In the beginning of the 20th century, an attempt was made to establish a congregation to supervise all those institutes. However, it lasted only two years (1904-1906) and upon its dissolution things went back to the way they had been.

A similar condition can be found in the education area. The congregation's school was established in 1877. In 1897, a building was purchased for it and in 1914 it was built anew. However, the conservative "Osey Tov" organization opposed the school and founded a "Talmud Torah" of its own. It seemed that the poor people preferred to send their children to a "Heder," while children of the rich people studied in governmental schools. In 1911 the number of children attending governmental schools was 65, while in the congregation's school there were 62.

The Zionist Movement

The Zionist movement was already rooted in Vaslui from the times of the "Eretz Israel Settlement" movement (1880-1884). In 1883 a group of pre-Zionist youth movement, "Olifant," was also active in Vaslui. In 1894, a branch of "Hovvei Zion" (Lovers of Zion) was founded there. In 1908 a group of Zionist girls, "Dvorah," was organized. The school children had a group of their own called "B'nei Zion" (sons of Zion).

Rabbis

In 1870 the rabbinical chair in Vaslui was given to Alexander Taubes, who was born in 1841 in Iasi. He was the son of Rabbi Yaacov Taubes. He wrote the books: "Otzar Hahaim" ("Life's Treasure") and "Darach Kochav mi Yaacov" ("There Shall Step Forth a Star Out of Jacob"). He passed away in Vaslui in 1913. Rabbi Binyamin Rabinovitch (1863-1913), the author of the book "Imrei Binyamin" ("Sayings of Binyamin"), served in Vaslui from 1885 until his death. His son, Rabbi Dov Ber Rabinovitch who was born in 1895, served next from 1915 to 1936. In 1959 he immigrated to Israel and served as a Rabbi in Tel Aviv.

In 1909 Rabbi Shalom Halpern arrived in Vaslui, a descendant of the Admor (a title of a Hasidic Rabbi) of Rogin dynasty and the son-in-law of Rabbi Yitzhak Friedman from Buhush (born in 1848 in Berdichev, Russia and died in 1939). He founded in Vaslui the Admorim court of the "Vasluier Rebe." After him, the chair was passed to his son Haim, who was born in Buhush in 1876. Rabbi Haim Halpern was a pupil of the grandfather, Rabbi Friedman, and served in Vaslui until 1950. He passed away in 1957 in Haifa.

In the years 1938-1949, the Rabbi, Dr. Arie Dov Halpert, served in Vaslui. He was born in 1907 in Borsha, Transylvania, and was the leader of "Agudat Israel" in Romania. He immigrated to Israel in 1960.

For some time the writer and educator, Menachem Braunstein-Mabshan, was active in Vaslui. He published schoolbooks, poetry and translations.

Between the Two World Wars

The Organization of the Congregation

In 1919 a congregation's committee was organized in Vaslui but was not elected by its members. In protest meetings, the participants demanded new elections in order to choose a committee representing all the classes in the community. Those were years

of crisis and in 1922 the school of the congregation closed due to lack of any order. However, that same year things got better and the congregation of Vaslui reorganized. In 1923 it became a “public and moral entity” authorized by the religious ministry. In 1923 the congregation published a periodical named “Vaslui Guard”.

In 1932 this committee was given formal status as a judicial essence and as a result, the Jewish public became interested in the congregation’s activities. In the 1935 elections, 797 Jews participated.

On the eve of WWII the congregation maintained the following institutes: the hospital “Bikur Holim” (visiting the sick) with a clinic and a pharmacy; an old people’s home; a new cemetery (in addition to the previous one); a ritual bath house; an elementary school, “Osey Tov;” a kindergarten; and also supported the “Talmud Torah.” The school was supported by the municipality. There were eight synagogues in Vaslui at that time. Apart from the meat tax, the congregation had income from houses that it owned. The budget included donations to Zionist funds and to welfare. With welfare matters others were also involved – “The Society of Jewish Women,” “The Montifiori Association of the Craftsmen,” and “Ezra,” the society of mutual help that was founded in 1920. Also, the community operated a credit bank.

During the years 1920-1921, the Zionist Federation published a weekly bulletin and a farm for preparation of pioneers was also established.

Political and Public Life

The “Emancipation” of 1919 granted citizenship to 1,283 Jews living in Vaslui. In 1921, the interior ministry appointed a temporary council to the city that included two Jewish members. Following the elections, Jews from the Romanian political parties were also added. In 1932 there were 5 Jews in the council: 4 from the farmer’s party and one from the liberal party. In 1933 there were 6 Jews among the 36 members, only one from the Jewish party.

The Holocaust

Once the Legionnaires seized the governmental reign in September 1940, the congregation’s leaders were arrested and tortured. Hundreds were taken from their homes in the middle of the night and sent to hard labor on the estates confiscated from two of the Jews. Members of the “Green Shirts” conducted searches for Jews at the train station and robbed from the traders their money. One of them, who resisted, was arrested with the pretext that he had communist pamphlets in his pockets. By tormenting him, they succeeded to extort information from eight of his former friends from school and from some of his friends from Balard. All of them were arrested at the end of October 1940, with a communist libel; they were transferred from jail to jail, from Vaslui to Iasi, and then to Bacau and to Galatz, where they were tortured severely. On December 19, 1940, the Galatz congregation redeemed them by paying enormous amounts of money to the presiding judge and the defense attorney.

On November 10, 1949, the Legionnaires took over the Jewish school. That same month the Jews were forced to dig out the bones of the deceased from the old cemetery and transfer them to the new one. 23 wealthy traders were arrested by the

Legionnaire police and forced to sign a statement to hand over all of their assets and shops. On the 1st of June several Jews were sent to Taragu-Jiu camp, including some wealthy traders with a communist libel. On the night of June 29, 1941, all the distinguished members of the community were taken as hostages and were told they will be shot or hurt if one Romanian soldier is injured. On July 1, 1941 all the Jewish men, up to 60, were imprisoned in the synagogue. Some were sent to hard labor and some were coerced to work in the town. The rest were expelled to three farms in the district. The congregation was forced to provide them with food. In September 1941 the Mayor published a decree prohibiting the Jews to be present in the market for more than one hour per day in order to buy food. After that, they were not allowed to come to the market at all, in order to separate them from the Christian population; the congregation had to provide the food. They were also forced to wear the mark of disgrace.

Jews that were originally from Bessarabia were sent to a concentration camp in Caracal and some were killed on the way. Others were expelled to Transnistria. Jews from villages and farms such as Cauest, Pungest (Pungesti), Tibana, Negrest (Negresti), and more were transferred to Vaslui; altogether 600, and the congregation had to take care of their employment. The congregation was also forced to supply food, clothing and medicines to the Jews employed in the work companies.

The economic situation of the Jews at that time is evident from the following numbers from 1942: out of 286 craftsmen and workers only 160 were employed; out of 159 clerks (commerce and industry) only 49 were working; out of 470 grocers and industrialists only 160 were active; out of 22 of liberal professions only 13 continued working; and out of 24 other professions – only 5. Only 8-10% of all the professional groups were active. In all the Vaslui district 462 buildings, 8 mills, one factory, 983 hectares of land watered by rain, 3,121 hectares of forests, 21 hectares of vineyards and 3 hectares of lakes were confiscated from the Jews.

When the orphans returned from Transnistria in February 1944, 300 arrived in Vaslui and were housed in the synagogue. When the [war] front got closer to the town the children were transferred to Buzau.

After the War, life in Vaslui went back to normal.

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The General Archive of The History of The Jewish People, RM 154; RM 160.

The Central Zionist Archive, A 133 (99).

Yad Vashem Archive

IM 1220; 0—11/18—1 (333—36); 0—11/17—1 (4, 36, 53, 67, 71, 80); 0—11/18; 03/1462; PKR/I—23 (87-89); PKR/I—112 (1252—55); PKR/I—113 (1256—60); PKR/I—114 (1261).

W. Filderman Archive

M. Karp Archive