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A Moldavian Massacre: Exploring The Ruins of The Chisinau Ghetto

◆ Cemetery, Concentration Camp, Dark Tourism, Moldova, Religion

On the outskirts of Chisinau, the capital of Moldova, there stands an abandoned synagogue. Thick, luxurious ivy forms a bed over the space where once an altar stood; a Star of David, formed from twisted red metal, provides a grip for the weeds and creepers which are slowly, year by year, reclaiming the ore, pulling this temple back down into a sea of featureless foliage. For now the stone walls stand tall, an empty shell, but in time these too will succumb.

As a ruin, it is magnificent; a near-perfect microcosm of urban devolution, a poetic illustration of the earth's relentless hunger. It is a reminder, too, of our own fragility. It shows that even our temples, stout buildings of iron and stone, can, in the space of just a few short decades of disuse, soon be dismantled, dismembered, and re-digested by the flora we so readily take for granted.

This abandoned synagogue represents more than just a study in urban decay, however... as I would discover when I visited the streets of the former ghetto, and explored the labyrinthine paths of Chisinau's sprawling Jewish necropolis.



ARRIVAL IN CHISINAU

Before my visit to Moldova, I hadn't even heard of the Chisinau Ghetto. While the Jewish ghettos of Western and Central Europe – those in France and Poland, Italy and the Czech Republic, for example – are well represented in the conventional Western narrative of history, the treatment of Jewish communities in Eastern Europe seems to feature significantly less.

first visit, I had felt – in all honesty – quite indifferent about meeting. I simply knew nothing about the place... other than the fact that in travelling from Bucharest to Kiev, I was going to need to pass through it.

I had already taken the train through Chisinau on two separate occasions (peering out the window at rows of drab concrete buildings – what the Germans might call *Plattenbauten*) before I ever stopped to explore the city. By the time I finally did though, I would find it a thoroughly rewarding experience.



My third visit to Moldova – my first extended stay in the country – came at the end of August. It was a road trip, a small group of friends on our way to see the Independence Day parades in the neighbouring [breakaway state of Transnistria](#). We stopped for the night in the Moldovan capital en route, and this time I was keen to do it justice. I ended up spending a full day with my pal Nate (author of travel blog [Yomadic](#)) wandering the streets of Chisinau; we crashed a festival, watched two young boys wrestle for a chicken, we explored an [abandoned Soviet-era circus](#) and ate some of the best sushi I've ever had in Europe.

Modern-day Chisinau is a fun city, full of life and colour... but my taste in tourism runs toward the darker end of the spectrum, and I wanted to know more about the city's less celebrated stories. In particular, I was fascinated by the history of Chisinau's Jewish population; the early communities, their subsequent ghettoisation, and the telltale scars which still remain, memories cast in solemn stone, the uncomfortable heritage which lurks beneath the surface of an otherwise upbeat, progressive capital.

And so, as the day drew on, I would inevitably find myself walking towards the Old Market area of Chisinau – and the site of the city's former Jewish ghettos.

THE JEWS OF BESSARABIA

The city of Chisinau was mentioned in history books as early as the 15th century, and featured a significant Jewish population from the 16th century onwards. It was then the capital of Bessarabia – a province of some 45,000 square kilometres, stretching from the Danube Delta and the Black Sea in the south, as far north as the River Dnieper that flows through Kiev. After its 1812 liberation from Ottoman rule, Bessarabia was absorbed by the Russian Empire and would remain under its control for more than a century.



The Jewish community grew rapidly in the 19th century, and by the time of a census in 1897 there were over 50,000 Jews living in Chisinau – representing 46% of the city's total population. In 1903 however, these Bessarabian Jews suffered a vicious and bloody pogrom during which 49 people were killed in anti-semitic riots.

Abraham Polnovick, a survivor of the 1903 pogrom, reported:

...cased with the clothes torn off. There were ears, fingers, noses lying on the pavements. Babies were tossed in the air to be caught on the points of spears and swords. Young girls were horribly mistreated before death came to end their torture. I saw these things with my own eyes, no pen or tongue can add anything to the fiendishness of the mobs who swarmed through the streets, crying: 'Kill the Jews! Burn their houses! Spare not at all!'

The Russian-appointed governor of Chisinau lost his job for failing to prevent the pogrom; but in the years that followed, Tsar Nicholas II would have bigger things to worry about than insurgency in the Bessarabian province. When Russia was subsequently torn apart by the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, Romania claimed the lands of Bessarabia... it would keep them until 1940, when they were peacefully returned to the Soviet Union to form the new 'Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic'.

The local Jewish population, meanwhile, was still increasing. As fascist sentiments began to dominate the political narrative of neighbouring Romania, Chisinau would receive a massive influx of Jewish immigrants, bringing their total number up to 60,000 people.



The tides of war were turning, though... and when Hitler set his sights on the USSR, Chisinau was soon caught in the crossfire. Just a year after its formation, the Moldavian SSR came under assault from the combined Nazi forces of Germany and Romania. Thousands were killed in raids by the German Air Force, who used incendiary bombs to set huge swathes of the city alight. By 16th July 1941, a Romanian flag was once again being raised above Chisinau's *Nasterea Domnului* cathedral.

The Jewish population of Chisinau would be reduced from 60,000 to just 86 people in the space of roughly a year.

It is estimated that another 10,000 Jews were murdered during the first two weeks of the German-Romanian occupation of Chisinau. Witnesses report that the invaders moved from building to building, breaking into homes as they shot whole families and stole their possessions.

Other Jews were transported elsewhere to be murdered. Some disappeared into the hands of the Gestapo, while many were taken from their homes in military trucks, to the outskirts of the city – where they were shot in the back before being thrown into hastily dug pits.

The ghettoisation of the Chisinau Jews began on 24th July, as an effort to bring some kind of order to this chaos of looting and death. Romanian soldiers called the surviving Jews out from their homes – by now numbering 11,000 people – and marched them to the Old Market area of the lower city. Here, amongst the bombed-out ruins left in the wake of German Air Force raids, they were fenced in and the Chisinau Ghetto was born.



The ghetto in Chisinau was one of ten such sites established in the wake of the invasion, to accommodate those Jews left behind after the initial slaughter. There are believed to have been 75-80,000 Jews interned in these camps, out of which the Chisinau Ghetto housed a population of 11,526 people.

Some accounts suggest that these remaining Jews would have been summarily executed en masse, had it not been for orders received from Bucharest. While the German *Einsatzcommand* favoured extermination, the Romanians had considered Bessarabia as their protectorate, and had insisted on dealing with its citizens – Jewish or otherwise – in their own way. These preferred methods, as it turned out, would come to

include beatings, robberies and rape; according to the [Encyclopaedia of Jewish Communities in Romania](#),

“ Every Romanian division that passed through Chisinau on the way to the front wanted to ‘have a good time’ in the ghetto.

These *good times* would be relatively short-lived, however. From October 1941 onwards, the ghettos of Bessarabia went into liquidation and their Jewish inhabitants were sent on a ‘death march’ to the camps in Transnistria. Documents reveal that the authorities governing Chisinau had never intended all of the Jews to survive this forced exodus, as instructions issued by Romanian General Topor advised for the preparation of, “each 10 kilometres a grave for about 100 persons where those lagging the convoys will be gathered, shot and buried.”



Of the 75-80,000 Jews initially counted between the ghettos of former Bessarabia, only 55,867 arrived in Transnistria. Many of those that did, were inevitably murdered there instead. By the time the Soviet Red Army returned, taking Chisinau in August 1944 and installing a communist government, it is believed the Nazis had committed the systematic murder of as many as 300,000 Jews across the areas of Bucovina, Bessarabia and Transnistria.

VISITING THE CHISINAU GHETTO

Little to nothing remains of the Chisinau Ghetto today. Large areas of the city were levelled over the course of the war – from German bombing raids, to the eventual Soviet 'liberation' in 1944. As if it weren't enough to be caught on the front lines of a conflict between two warring empires however, further damage was caused when a freak earthquake struck Chisinau in November 1940, measuring 7.3 on the Richter scale and in many places finishing the job that German bombs had started.



Walking through clean, quiet streets of 1960s Soviet architecture, we found the site of the former ghettos easily enough. Aside from a modern memorial commemorating the victims though, the connection to the site's history was no more than intellectual. A wedding party passed us by, led by a white limousine that cruised down the boulevard with a bride and groom sat up top, singing loudly and waving a bottle of champagne from the open sunroof.

Strange to think that seven decades ago, these same streets were a prison. A death camp. But the bold, brutalist architecture of Chisinau, its socialist-realist monuments, look forward towards a utopian future as prophesied by the former Marxist regime. They do not look back.





the road across an empty yard of dust. Trees had burst through the foundations, to sprout inside and around the old walls. It had been a Jewish synagogue and *yeshiva*, I would later learn – a casualty of the 1941 air raids.

The resilience of the human spirit apparently knows no bounds, however; and even here, where twice in a century Jewish communities have been subjected to the very worst kinds of soulless brutality, there is yet fresh growth. Turning a corner onto a narrow backstreet as we cut our way through the blocks, heading for the city centre, we stumbled across the heart of the contemporary Jewish community in Chisinau.

I almost walked straight past the Chabad Lubavitch Synagogue... a humble, nondescript building that, save for a small plaque written in Hebrew script, did very little to advertise its presence. It was a reassuring sight – the temple's very presence here, on the site of the former ghetto, a powerful statement of defiance; an admirable stubbornness in the face of humankind's worst tendencies.

The Old Market area of Chisinau had disguised its past well: no one would have guessed that these pleasant, tree-lined streets had once known such pain and suffering. There was one place though, that might yet tell a different story – a more authentic, unedited account of the city's Jewish heritage. As [Harold Wilson](#) once said,

“the only human institution which rejects progress is the cemetery.”

CHISINAU JEWISH CEMETERY

The Jewish cemetery lay a little way out of town, to the north of Chisinau's centre. At the open gates, an elderly woman tried to sell me flowers. She was persistent but I felt uncomfortable, as though acting out the ritual of mourning would be to play the role of tourist in someone else's tragedy. I gave her the money without taking a bouquet.



between stones and shrines and mausoleums that grew increasingly more green, more dilapidated, as my gaze followed them into the distance.

I walked with my friends for a while, but the aura of the burial ground soon cast its spell over us all – and as we drifted about the graves, peeling back the ivy to read chiselled inscriptions, or to peer into the eyes of fading photographs, we became separated from one another and lost within the tranquil necropolis.



boundaries are ritualistic and time can take on new dimensions. He also described the quality of combining varied – and sometimes contradictory – narratives; something that I was struggling with myself, as I tried to place this cemetery against what I knew of the city's history.

There are somewhere in the region of 23,500 interments at the Chisinau Jewish Cemetery, dating from as early as the 17th century. Here though, near the entrance, the graves were much more recent. Many featured dates in the 1960s and 70s; the freshest I could find read 1997.

I had assumed, after reading about the Chisinau Ghetto, that the Jewish community had all but vanished in the wake of the Holocaust. It was written that only 86 Jews remained in Chisinau after the war... but rather than fading out, the graves here told a different story. There were consistent burials throughout the following decades, seemingly growing in number over the years. On some graves I saw freshly laid flowers – though I didn't once see another visitor, save for those I had arrived with.

Straying away from the central track I followed one narrow path after another, each one fainter than the last, while the undergrowth grew up on all sides of me. Some of the newer graves had been carved in Latin letters, alongside others marked in Hebrew and Cyrillic script. Further from the entrance though, the stones got older – until I was surrounded by graves written solely in Hebrew, not even their dates discernible to a goy such as myself.

The cemetery had been badly damaged by the bombs in 1941 – that's what my research had told me, and now I could see it for myself. As I moved deeper into the wooded areas in the furthest corners of the necropolis, pushing branches and creepers aside to pass down long-disused paths, the landscape itself was changing, undulating in great waves of green. I brushed aside the ferns and ivy on one of the mounds; it wasn't earth, but rather piles of broken rubble that lay hidden beneath the vegetation.



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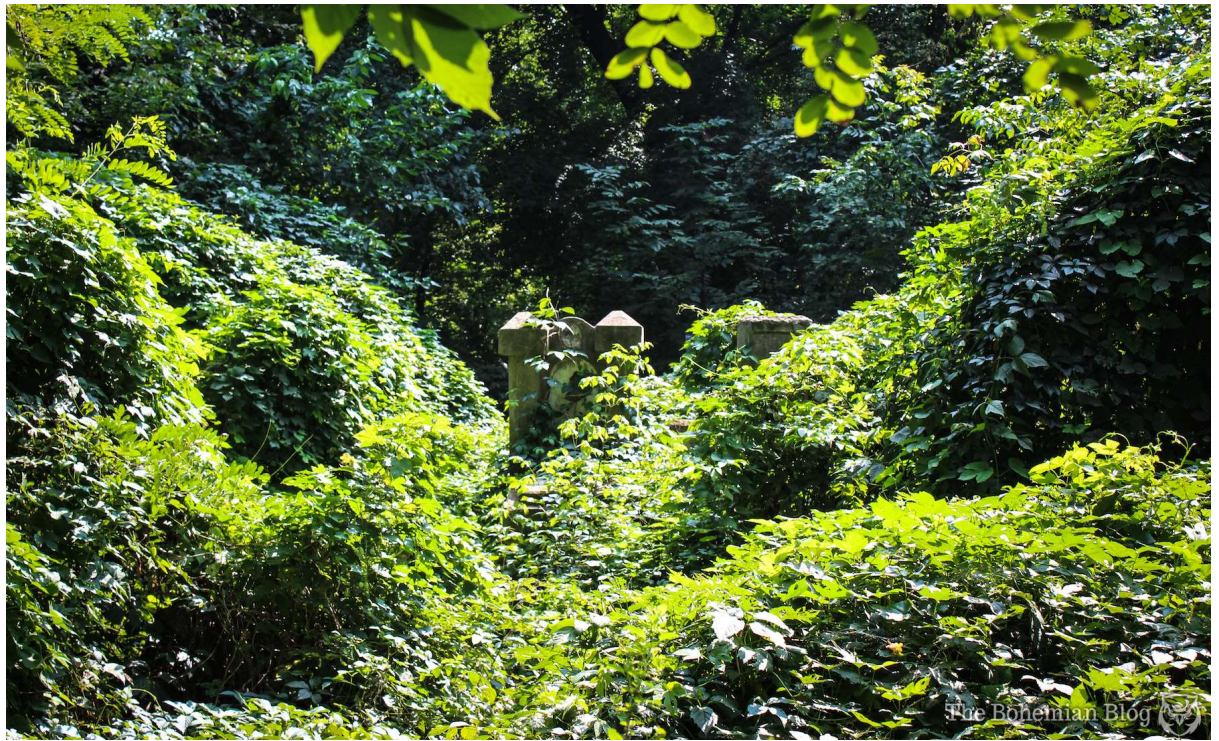
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That's when I found the clearing. By now the stones had given way altogether, I'd left the cemetery behind and I was stood in a sea of golden green: nothing but leaves and sky. It was a surreal feeling – until I was brought sharply back by the sound of a dog growling. And then barking.

I saw the first one peering at me from beneath a veil of brambles... and then another behind that, and I think, perhaps, a third. They were probably harmless. Homeless, hungry strays, threatened by the intrusion in this otherwise private place. As the pack leader started squaring off against me though, baring its teeth in a deep, throaty growl, I lost my nerve. Logic was telling me to stand firm, stare it out – but instead I found myself running.

Sprinting back the way I'd come, hopping over logs and stones and trailing vines, I could hear the dogs giving chase behind me. They ought to have been able to run me down, overtake me if they wanted; but they didn't, which might suggest they were simply defending their territory. Either way, by now the adrenaline was pumping and I didn't slow down to test the theory.



Hitting a wall, I guessed I'd reached the outer boundary of the necropolis. It was too high to climb, so I followed it... keeping close to the barrier as I looked for some way to scramble up and over, out of reach. Instead, I found a building – it seemed to come from nowhere, a large brick structure looming at me suddenly from the undergrowth. For a moment it gave the impression of having floated up out of a sea of vegetation, torrents of greenery clinging to its sides like water streaming down the flanks of some beached leviathan.

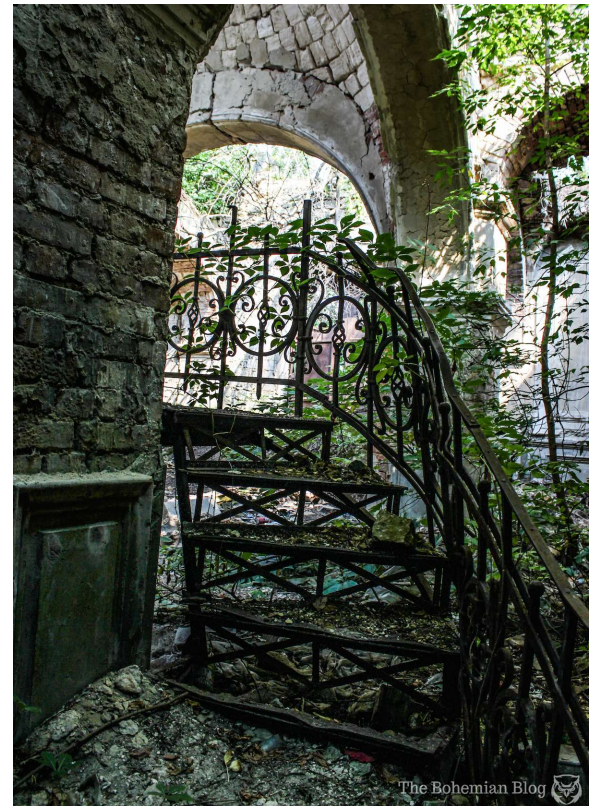
Around the corner I found a metal door set into a stone frame, partially obscured behind a mound of rubble. It was jammed in place, stuck partially open, with just enough space for me to squeeze through the gap and into the building beyond.

Leaning against the inside of the door I caught my breath; and as I did so, I looked up to find myself inside the ruins of an abandoned temple.



I've learned more about the building since my visit. It was built several hundred years after the first graves were dug, opening in the late 19th century. Some sources call it a synagogue; others say it served only for the preparation of bodies for burial. The wrought iron pulpit inside, black metal clinging to the side of a crumbling pillar, seemed to suggest, at least, that the building had once been used for religious services.

It's impossible to say how long I spent inside that place. Long after the dogs had stopped barking, for certain; and longer still, as I breathed in the old air, absorbed every detail of the weathered carvings, the rusted stars on the metalwork.



In the first lines of this article, I called the building 'magnificent': but in light of its history, such superficial evaluations feel insufficient. In a world where visual stimuli are so readily available, where social media feeds are clogged and cluttered with sensory delights in photographic form, it's sometimes easy for us to separate structures from their stories... but the story of *this* structure should not be forgotten. It is a story of horror, and of resilience.

This sacred ruin, this beautiful corpse, stands for more than just a portrait of natural decay. It is a testament to *three-hundred-thousand* systematic murders; while plans for renovation might yet preserve the site as a tribute to those whose faith lived on regardless.



REFERENCES

This was a tough article to write, and it wouldn't have been possible without some very thorough resources. Rather than cite my references throughout the post, I've decided to list them here instead. The vast majority of dates, facts and figures in this article come from the following three sources:

"Memories of the Holocaust: Kishinev" via [Jewish Virtual Library](#)

"Encyclopaedia of Jewish Communities in Romania" via [Yad Vashem](#)

"Jewish Heritage Sites and Monuments in Moldova" via [Syracuse University](#)



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