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EXTRACT

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A Town in Eastern Europe :  
Leova (Bessarabia)

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A TOWN  
IN EASTERN EUROPE :  
LEOVA (Bessarabia)

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After the Great War, Romania found itself with a considerable increase in territory, doubling its size and population. Bessarabia, formerly a Russian province, is one of its annexations.

Leova, a town of 4,000 inhabitants, is a sub-prefecture of the department of Cahul in Bessarabia, situated on the banks of the Prut, which formerly separated Romania and Russia.

**The Prut**

The Prut River has its source in the Carpathians in the region of Galicia. In Leova, it is a beautiful river with calm waters, which has already traveled two thirds of its 800-kilometer course. Its basin is not very broad, constricted between that of the Seret, which receives its water from the Carpathians, and that of the Dniester, into which flow most Bessarabian streams. At Easter, when the snow melts, the Prut swells excessively and spreads over its surrounding prairies; it becomes a vast river, several hundred meters wide. It recedes slowly back into its bed, with a few remaining swamps the only witnesses to its flooding. Never dry, even in the heart of summer, the Prut is essentially navigable almost throughout its course. From Czernowitz, a few kilometers from its source, it is buoyant and used for conveying the famous lumber of the Carpathians, to less-forested areas.

It supplies the market of Galati, situated on the Danube a few kilometers from its confluence with the Prut, with corn and wheat. The waters of the Prut are silty because they carry the "Yellow Earth" found throughout the country. Its course is a series of meanders, some of which, abandoned, are now swamps or wetlands used for agriculture. In Leova, the convex side of the Prut, where the wetlands are, is Moldavia; it possesses a forest, the only one in the region, and beautiful gardens cleverly irrigated by huge horse-driven water wheels that channel the silty water of the Prut. On the concave side, the Bessarabian side, the river wears away at a little cliff of yellow earth, half crumbled, for a hundred meters or so. In the shelter of a hill where stand the mossy headstones of the old Jewish cemetery, is the port: wooden docks and warehouses of earth and crumbled bricks. Further on, the river runs among the meadows and provides a kind of beach where in the summer young and old come to bathe; the horses too, although downstream waters are officially reserved for them. On New Year's Day, pious Jews turn their pockets inside out to shake out the dust that symbolizes the sins of the past year.

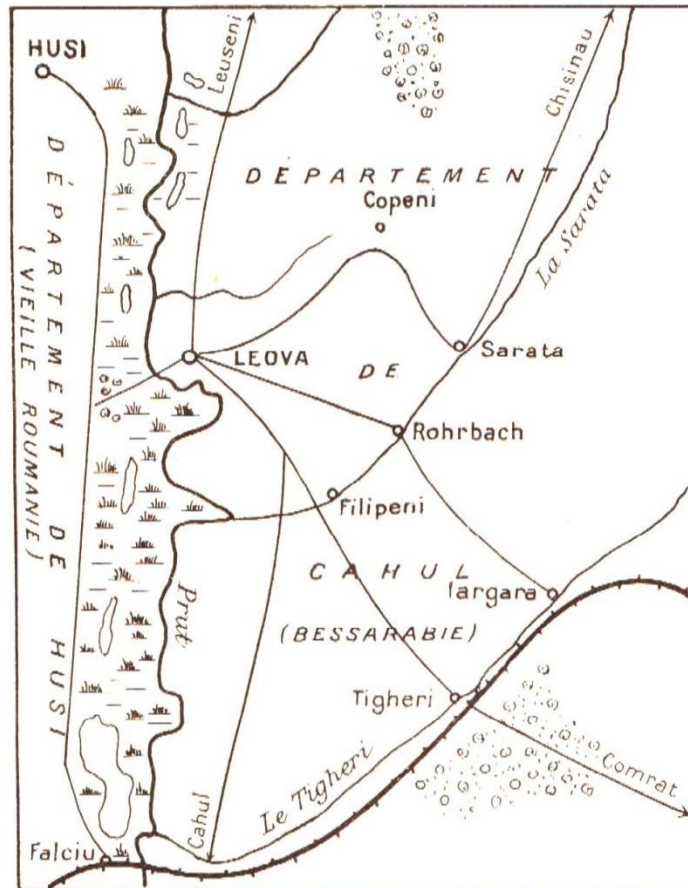
### **The Steppe**

The landscape does not have the typical monotony attributed to an Eastern European country or to a corner of the Russian steppe. The great Ukrainian plain, that of the Black Earth, only begins on the other side of the Dniester, in Podolia. Here, there are soft hills separated by dry ravines. The soil is composed of a thick layer of alluvium, yellow earth that is very fertile, but also very brittle, dissolved by the slightest rain when there is a slope only protected by the grassy vegetation typical of the steppe. The steppe, like Champagne and other parts of the French countryside, designates a landscape without forest, one of large plains where grasses and thistles grow, but also fields of wheat, barley and corn. In Leova, the steppe has been completely cultivated. Any undulations in the land wear quickly; crumbling cliffs, ever-moving ravines, and grassy slopes are dotted, after rainstorms, with barren patches produced by landslides and erosion.

The climate is Continental, with a harsh winter that includes snow, and a spring thaw that results in swelling streams.

Summer is dry, but punctuated by violent storms. In autumn, rains extinguish the dust and heat.

Across the land are seen fields of corn, millet, barley, and oats; wheat is rarer. Slopes that receive a lot of sun are planted with grapevines; beautiful prairies blanket dewy valleys, while the area immediately



1- The Surroundings of Leova

surrounding the Prut is left fallow with wild shrubbery often used by nesting storks. Corn accounts for a large portion of the diet of people as well as livestock, with the leaves and stems replacing foraged-for grasses since the cultivation of clover and alfalfa is uncommon in Bessarabia. The grapes (Chasselas, Muscat) are of good quality, locally consumed, and result in mediocre wine; there are, in Leova, around ten vineyards. Sunflowers decorate the fields of corn and barley; their roasted seeds delight the Bessarabians.

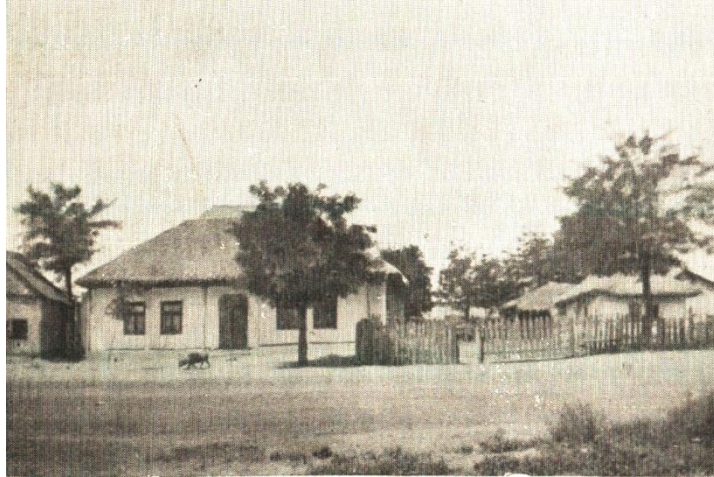
This region also produces vegetables, with less variety than in France. The homemaker has at her disposal potatoes, eggplants, tomatoes, peppers, melons, and watermelons. However, green beans, peas, lettuce, endive, chicory, and other plants that we eat in salads are not commonly cultivated. Fruit is also abundant: pears, apples, cherries, black cherries, plums, and small peaches. There are multiple and delicious ways to make jam. It is customary to offer a visitor a glass of water and some jam, presented in a tiny pedestal glass saucer.

### **Commercial and Agricultural Life**

Amidst this rich agricultural region, the Prut is an important trade route. In Leova, wheat and corn are shipped to Galati where the international brokers are located. Trade along the river is now suffering from the competition of the railway, which is faster and allows for the shipping of merchandise in smaller quantities, while chartering a boat on the Prut is usually prohibitively expensive. Originally, the train station was to be built in Leova, but fortunately, it was constructed 15 kilometers to the east, near the village of Iargara. Despite this distance, the station is used to transport a portion of Leovan goods, as the railroad can take them directly to international ports, bypassing the hefty duties imposed by the International Commission of the Danube en route to Constanta, a Romanian port on the Black Sea. In the port of Leova, there is heavy trafficking of timber, coming in on rafts from the Carpathians of Bukovina.

The river and the rail are the only two modes of safe travel and conveyance in this part of Romania. In fact the road... does not exist! There is but a simple dirt track through the vast steppe of corn and wheat, which is difficult to discern when no other travelers are upon it. The trace of a previous vehicle is recognizable as deep ruts left in the mud as there is no paving. Trajan, alas! and not Julius Caesar, conquered Dacia.

These dirt tracks crossing marshes and meadows are washed away with the slightest rain.



THE TYPICAL BESSARABIAN HOUSE.

The roads must constantly be repaired. Wide and shallow ditches are dug on either side of the dirt tracks to provide more dirt to repair the roads.



BESSMEDRESH. THE SYNAGOGUE OF THE MERCHANTS.

However, the rain can turn these ditches into lakes, worsening the ability to travel by road. When it's dry one travels amidst a cloud of dust, when it rains the car gets stuck in the mud up to the bumper.

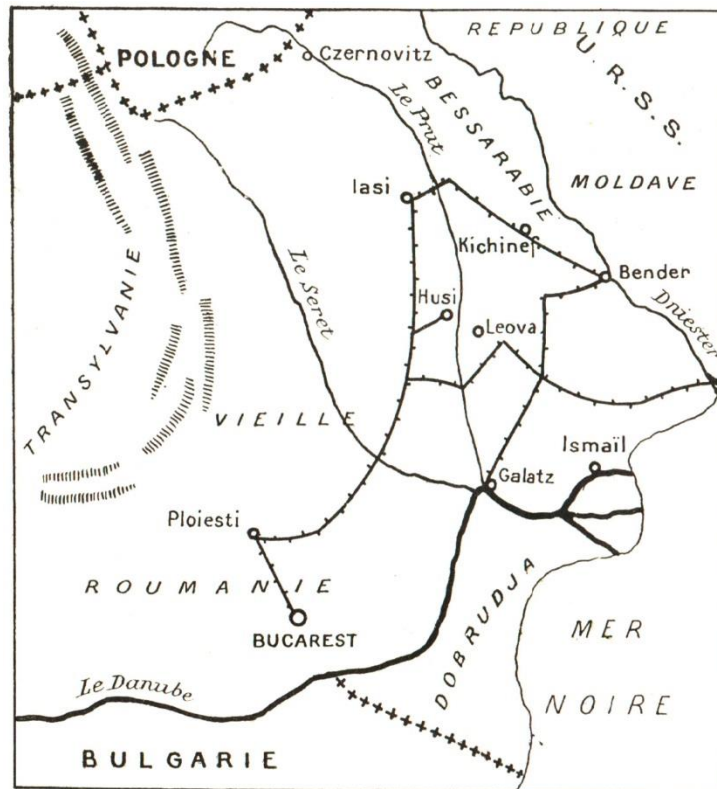
Like a caravan trail in the middle of the Sahara, the Bessarabian road is dotted with dead horses and sheep, which decay in the hot July sun. To travel by car is folly ten months out of the year.

Leaving Leova by car, the day after a heavy rain, to go to Kishinev a hundred miles away; a trip that was to take four hours took me, painfully, after seven hours, into a muddy ditch 30 kilometers from where we left. A sturdy pair of Bessarabian oxen drew us out with some difficulty. We then had to take shelter at the inn and leave at dawn the next day to find, after repeatedly nearly flipping over, a real road, the one from Husi to Kishinev, where we finally arrived after a journey of twenty hours!

The bridges with which one negotiates ravines and streams are made of badly-jointed planks with no room for two cars to pass. The bridge over the Prut has been washed away by recent flooding and has not yet been replaced. One must content oneself with a raft. On similar roads it is pointless to look for signposts. Farmers and tradesmen do not need them as they already know their way. As for tourists, other common facilities are either absent or so unaccommodating that there is perhaps no point. Such is the state of the roads within 50 kilometers of Leova in any direction. An over-ambitious sign that reads, "Ghidul Turistului, si Automobili stului," and indicates a state road to Moldavia, from Husi to Falciu, and passes within 5 kilometers of Leova, is in reality but a path made of pot holes. The Company of Romanian Railways has achieved a monopoly on public buses, establishing regular services that link the main towns and nearby railway stations. A highway improvement project is under consideration, which will perhaps make road travel a less dramatic experience.

Horse-drawn carriages are the vehicle of choice in Leova, which boasts only four cars! Even the bicycle is rarely seen. The typical peasant conveyance is a rectangular box of sorts, mounted on four wheels and drawn by two or three horses. The "phaetons" are luxury vehicles, used exclusively by tourists and wealthy locals. Typical speeds vary, depending on the weather, between 5 and 10 kilometers per hour.

Certainly the region, and in general Bessarabia and Romania, more populous than many of our [French] provinces, will not improve their economic development without improving their highways. It is not paving stones that are lacking; Regina Maria, a big German village located 20 kilometers from Leova has all its houses built with a sort of millstone; thus a simple tarmac could be created without great expense.



2- Leova and Romania

The origin of Leova is uncertain; the name appears to be of Russian origin. Perhaps there was a large estate belonging to a Pomiechtchik by the name of Leova (Leon?). The age of one of the cemeteries however, indicates a human presence long before the Russian occupation. In any case, Leova, at first Turkish-Moldavian, then ceded by Turkey to the Czar in 1812, became again Turkish-Moldavian in 1855, and finally stayed under Russian rule from 1877 to 1918, when Bessarabia then became Romanian.



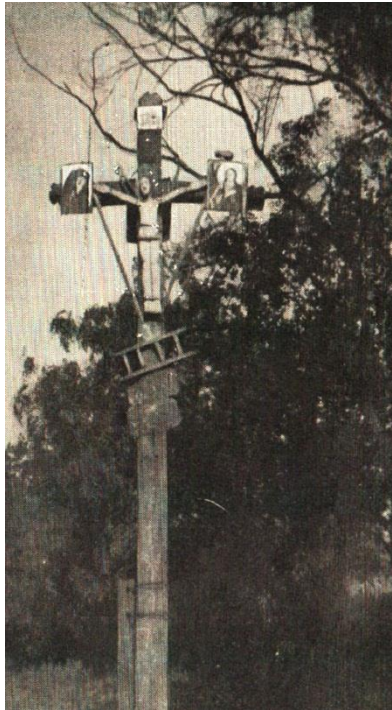
Like all little centers of these agricultural Eastern Europe countries, Leova relies on commerce with its neighbors. Being the main town of a district, it performs some of the administrative tasks of the Department of Cahul.

At the top of the social hierarchy is found the wealthy grain trader, who ships boats laden with corn and wheat to Galati, not only from Leova where he has his home and offices, but from other villages on the banks of the Prut. To his profits he will not hesitate to add loan services, such as advances on the potential sale price of crops. The sale price of goods can fluctuate a lot and someone must step in to stabilize the financial situation. The merchant protects himself against bad luck by demanding huge interest rates from farmers, based on an annual percentage instead of monthly, which the farmer must pay even if he borrows for only a few weeks. The fortunes of these potential potentates depend on demands from customers and other dealers who may become desperate after a bad harvest. Prices fall, the farmer in his misery can no longer pay his debts in money or in goods; creditors can be ruined more radically than the farmers as at least the farmers keep their homes and fields. The State, which is based on peasant labor, will cancel a farmer's debt. However, this results in some small banks being unable to survive. Small grain dealers who trade at the largara station seriously threaten the big grain merchants and diminish the importance of Leova. In addition to this faltering aristocracy, there are also a few millers, the only manufacturers in the area.

The petty bourgeoisie, starved by years of economic instability, includes doctors, pharmacists, haberdashers, tailors, hat-makers, cloth merchants, carpenters, vintners, and the many officials of the police, the administration of the sub-prefecture, and the tax and justice offices.

Bessarabia is not industrialized enough to have factories other than outside a few in big cities like Kishinev and Izmail. There is therefore no real proletariat in Leova. Some low-paid employees who work for grain dealers or tailors are able to approach this social class. Most of these poor artisans have a standard of living lower than that of the laborers in Western Europe.

Fifteen hundred farmers, who number less than the townspeople, occupy the large suburb of Frumosica as well as some cottages near the fields.



THE CEMETERY CRUCIFIX WITH THE  
ICONS AND THE ATTRIBUTES OF CHRIST.

Cities in Bessarabia always contain a large proportion of peasants which, together with the absence of roads and sophistication in construction, makes them look very rustic.

The large properties of Czarism have partly disappeared. Romania, to avoid the Agrarian Revolution and Bolshevism, divided among the poor peasants the properties of the Pomiechtchiks, setting individual property size to a maximum number of hectares, often exceeded in reality. At the time of partition, some managed to skillfully work around the law by granting to each of their children hectares, which added together, allowed the family to reconstruct its previous holdings in their entirety.

The typically small property holdings as well as the old-fashioned farming techniques further stall the development of modern agricultural methods possible only with large estates, individual or collective.

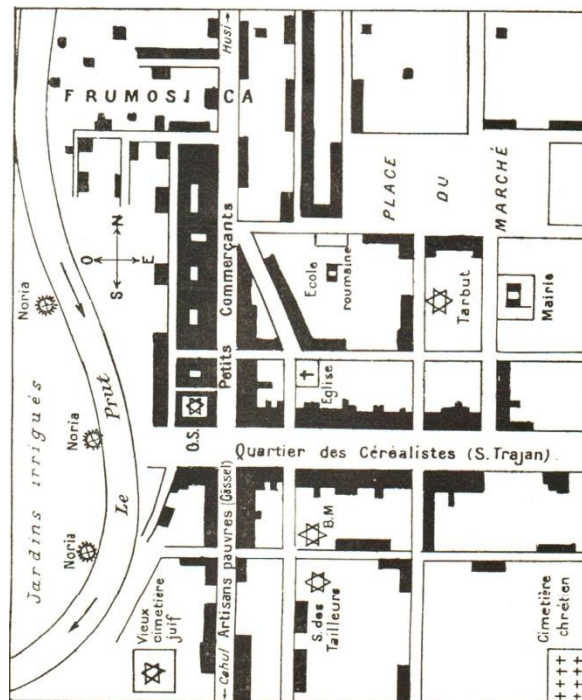
### **The Town: Its Houses and its Streets**

The marshes and swamp-related illnesses of the Prut did not invite human habitation along the banks of the river. Thus, the houses are grouped a few hundred meters to the east, parallel to the Prut, in a wide street lined with small shops, home for centuries to Jewish merchants. This street extends north becoming an ill-defined path, lined with the thatched cottages of Romanian peasants, which form the suburb of Frumosica. To the south lies the neighborhood of the poor Jewish artisans, called in Judeo-German, "Gassel" (the little street). In the west, towards the steppe, the rich Jewish grain dealers have populated Trajan Street.

The streets are like the roads, mere paths, badly defined, either flooded or full of dust. The ground, fortunately, has a slope and is quite permeable. Water is quickly absorbed and the fetid puddles that form when it rains do not remain for long. A task of modernization has been undertaken in recent years. Sidewalks were constructed on the main street and acacia trees were planted. Unfortunately, this concern did not extend to the street surface itself, which has not improved. The street is a common grazing area for geese and pigs that wallow at ease and for large bands of crows from the steppe that fill the air with their mournful cries. No sewers, no gutters. On a rainy day, a large stream zigzags down the middle of the street and one must protect one's feet with rubber galoshes, that is if one dares to leave the house at all.

The houses are scattered along the roads, surrounded by a green canopy of acacia trees, vacant lots, yards, and sheds. The limited density per square kilometer of the village is the biggest obstacle to an urban plan. The houses consist only of a ground floor. There is only one two-story house in the whole city, and it is considered a curiosity. The rich and poor, whether artisans, merchants, or farmers, live in buildings of this very simple, but often very comfortable, architecture.

The Bessarabian peasant's house was born from the ground. It is built entirely of earth, a sandy loam which comes directly from the steppe. Mixed with chopped-up straw and water, this clay is molded in wooden frames and then hardened under the summer sun. The foundations of the houses are not deep and the homes do not have basements. The walls of clay are not reinforced with stone or wood and the mortar is also made of silty earth.



3-Leova

With variations in weather, walls of this mixture acquire a certain hardness over time. Thus, homes are built, but not covered by a roof, suffering for several months the combined action of sun and rain in order to “cure” the structure. The roof is made of reed, which is the thickness of straw, producing the picturesque rusticity typical of Bessarabian villages. Today, the reeds are being replaced by thin strips of wood. To avoid overloading the fragile walls, the roof is supported by wooden pillars flanking the front of the house. A ledge of earth goes around the house and serves as a bench of sorts, a “prispa.” The walls are then coated with a layer of smooth mud, which is then painted white or blue.

This method of construction is widespread in Leova and not only found among the peasants. It is very economical, but its fragility precludes any possibility of building structures consisting of more than one story. Leovan brick is not fully-fired and is more brittle than most, as such, it is not much stronger than the mixture used to build homes. As houses cannot extend in height, they extend in length and width. One goes from a shed, to the peasant cottage, to the home of the rich merchant with its multiple blocks of buildings. Only now, a zinc roof has replaced the reed, the windows are wide and numerous, and floorboards replace the clay. Whether it is a peasant or bourgeois home, from the outside it is unassuming. However, inside there is often a comfort we rarely find in the homes of the richest and most sophisticated of our own countries [those of Western Europe].

Cold winters explain the care that goes into building effective stoves. Each room contains a high brick fireplace where wood or corn husks are burned. The bricks of the fireplace effectively radiate heat. The double windows prevent the cold winter wind from entering the house and are often stuffed with cotton-wool or rags. Wallpaper is unknown; the walls are whitewashed or more often covered with decorative patterns using a mechanical process. Large colorful rugs are spread over the poor-quality wooden floorboards and beautiful fabrics are hung on the walls. Among the rich peasants, "Casa Mare" is a luxurious reception parlor.

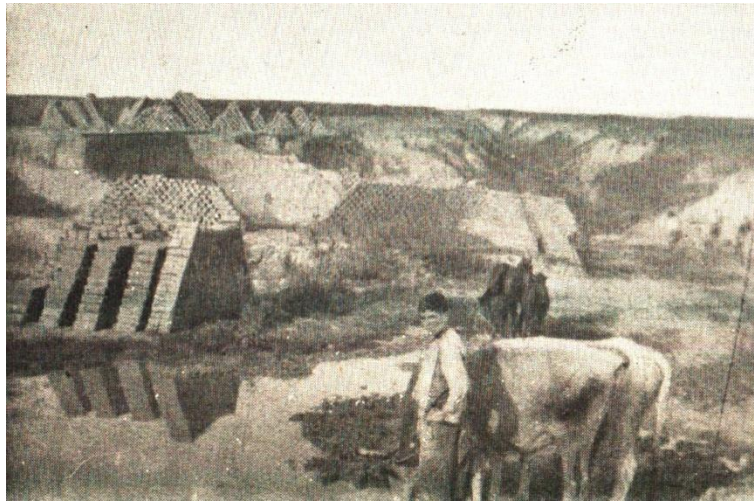
In the middle of the yard, or under the house but not accessible through it, is the cellar, a narrow gallery of masonry several feet underground.

The isolation of the town is due to the ample countryside surrounding it. Kishinev is one day away, Cahul and Husi a half day trip. Residents are forced to live closed-in on themselves, which contributes to their sense of individuality.

## The People

### 1. *The Jews*

In Leova, the majority of the population is Jewish; about 2,500 Jews in a population of 4,000 inhabitants. This is not just a religious sect, citizens of the Mosaic tradition, as in France. Nor is it a race that has preserved over thousands of years the physical characteristics of a people from Syria, if we suppose that these people ever had any racial unity. The Jews here are a relatively recent ethnic formation, a people.



THE PROCESS OF BRICK-MAKING.

The religion of this neo-Jewish people is the Israelite religion, but its language is a German dialect. All the races of Central and Eastern Europe are united in him, augmented by common characteristics, due to the social habits that have resulted in a single anthropological type.

*The Yiddish.* — This group was formed in the thirteenth century in the vast plains that stretch from the Oder to the Don. Around a core of several thousand Germans of Jewish religion, driven from the banks of the Rhine, gravitated several millions of men from the lands of Poland and Tartary. Not only were the indigenous Jews, speaking Polish, Russian, or Tartar quickly assimilated, but so were some foreigners, who, detached from the Christian and Islamic masses which were still profoundly pagan, were attracted by Israelite proselytism.

Ethnic pride and a claim of racial purity are recent phenomena among the Jews; they are the result of persecution. Even today, the most traditional Jews marry Christian women, provided that they embrace Judaism. In Leova last year, a blonde Walloon from Liege, a farmer's daughter, married a Jewish merchant and was then given the Hebrew name Sarah! The community presents phenotypes both Germanic and Slav, "Nordic and Eastern European" anthropologists would say, next to brown individuals appearing to be of a Mediterranean descent. It is very easy to recognize a Jew, just as one can distinguish a peasant from a merchant or a manual laborer from an intellectual. However, this is a physical characteristic common among men: exaggerated ears. The only real way of distinguishing is through the language, Yiddish or Judeo-German. Hebrew was a dead language at the time of Jesus, who spoke Aramaic. Later, Jews spoke the language of the countries where they lived, Latin and Greek, and later Germanic and Romance languages.

Jews in the Rhineland, driven there by the Crusaders, who settled in the twelfth century on the banks of the Vistula, spoke the German dialect of their Christian compatriots, the Franconian medieval variety of Middle High German. It was for centuries the language of this ethnic unity, which migrated towards the vast Polish-Lithuanian state, the vanguard of the "Drang nach Osten" ["yearning for the East"]. Polish, Lithuanian, and Ukrainian regions are still, in the twentieth century, the heart of the Judeo-German group that has spilled over into neighboring countries such as Hungary, Romania, and Greater Russia. Under the influence of Slavic culture, accent, and intonation, the Franconian dialect altered and terms from Talmudic instruction infused the vocabulary with many Hebrew words and phrases. By the early eighteenth century, the language was sufficiently transformed to be designated by the term "Yiddish," which means "Jewish" in this new Germanic dialect. This distinguishes it from literary German, like Alsatian, and from all other German dialects, as it is written with special characters, those of Hebrew, a Semitic alphabet not easily transcribed into an Indo-European language.

Much literature is written in Yiddish, the only German dialect to fully escape the linguistic unification begun by Luther.

*The Yiddish of Leova.* — Yiddish has an infinite number of varieties. The Yiddish of Bessarabia is very different from that of Vilna in which is printed books and newspapers, and which has remained very German. In Leova, Germanic vocabulary is drowned amidst a crowd of Russian, Romanian, and Hebrew terms, as the Jews there commonly speak Russian, Romanian, and sometimes Hebrew, in addition to Yiddish.



THE CLIFF AND THE PRUT.

Here is a sentence in Yiddish, transcribed in Latin characters with German spelling, you be the judge:

“Es is du assach Iden in Leova: Soschrem, Schenkers, Schnaders oder Schisters. Die Gojem arben inseire Felder von Papschois, Weitz en Kirn.”

[Translation] There are many Jews in Leova: merchants, vintners, tailors, or shoemakers. The Gentiles work in their fields of corn, wheat, and rye.

This example shows us that the Jews retained the biblical term of “Goy” to designate the people among whom they live. This translates into French as “Gentil,” from the Latin “Gentes” or “Nations;” it is the exact meaning of the word, which is not pejorative. However, the ethnic name “Id” is but a deformation of the German “Jude.” “Assach” (many) and “Soschrem” (merchants) are distorted Hebrew words; “Schenkers” (vintners) and “Papschois” (corn) are borrowed from Russian and Romanian. There would be some interesting studies for philologists and geographers here.



It is difficult to predict the future of Yiddish, particularly in Leova. The people have a mentality similar to that of the French before [Jean de] Joinville [1224-1317, historian of medieval France, author of widely-read *Vie de St. Louis*]. This language of potential literary talent is still considered a dialect; only Hebrew gets all the honors. This is due to the influence of the religious environment, Zionist circles especially. The situation is paradoxical: one studies at school a dead and unhelpful language, while one knows nothing of the everyday language; the mother tongue is condemned to the status of a mere jargon.

*Education.* — The Jewish School, sponsored by an association of worship and culture called “Tarbut” (in Hebrew, Culture), includes primary classes. The secondary classes, up to [roughly] the ninth grade, having eliminated some years ago. Basic education is given in Hebrew, but one also learns Romanian and notions of Latin, French, and German. This school, founded in the early years following the birth of Zionism, is of no use to those who are not going to Palestine, which is why the Romanian School is increasingly frequented by Jewish students, who, not knowing the Hebrew alphabet, will not read or write Yiddish. It was to reconcile the attendance of the State School and the knowledge of the mother tongue that Judeo-German began to be written with the Latin alphabet, more rational and economical. This movement is gradually spreading in Jewish centers in Romania, Poland, and the Soviet Union. Language education in Yiddish is frowned upon by the Romanian authorities, as it could strengthen the power of the Jewish minority. It is also not favored by Jewish Zionists or traditionalists. Besides, in Leova, the days of any Jewish school are numbered as only the State School is free.

*Social Composition of the Community.* — The bulk of trade and craft is in the hands of the Jews. Some are engaged in agriculture or cultivation of the vine. Land owners are rich, while the poor remain exclusively urban. The predominance of the Jews is marked in the electoral college, despite the surrounding Moldavian hamlets. The current mayor, a National Liberal, is Romanian, but his two predecessors, a National Agrarianist and a Iorguist [moderate conservative], were Jews.

The community is of ancient origin, and it is perhaps to this that Leova owes its foundation and surely its development and commercial importance. The old Jewish cemetery, abandoned for half a century, contains gravestones from the eighteenth century, the oldest monuments of this earthen town.

Some families are practically indigenous, having no memory of their origins, while others came from Iasi, Balti, Podolia, and the Crimea, all having left Poland long ago. Family names are German or Judeo-German and indicate commercial or craft occupations, such as Eisenhandler, ironmonger; Schafer, shepherd; Kutscher, coachman; Fischmann, fish-seller; Fruchtmann, fruit-seller. Some are nicknames borrowed from flora and fauna: Naiberg, Grinberg, Apel, and Resonblatt. All these names also exist in German Christian communities, and are used by genuine "Aryans." This is why in Judeo-Slavic countries, where one's identity is both Jewish and German, there is confusion. Hitler and his minister Rosenberg are seen in many families as renegade Jews, their names seeming typically Semitic from Posen to Odessa. Exclusive to Jews are a dozen surnames formed with the romanized Slavic suffix of vici, son, and Judeo-German first names like Bar, bear; Hirsch, deer; Leib, lion; Selig, happy, such as Barcovici, Herschcovici, Leibovici, Seligcovici, etc.

*Religious Life.* — Anyone who has read the novels of [travel writer Jean] Tharaud [1877 – 1952] would expect to find Leova full of bearded Jews, their temples covered with curls, their heads shaved and covered with a velvet cap. If such customs ever existed here, they no longer do. Men and women follow the fashion of Bucharest and Paris. Religious life is not very intense; however, it is unusual to find among adults someone who has entirely abandoned the Law of Moses. This law, precise regarding daily life and culinary practices, is accommodated with a simple yearly visit to the synagogue. The synagogue is also a symbol of solidarity throughout the whole community, religious or not, against the potential Christian enemy. There are four synagogues: two for the rich, where one must pay for membership, Die Grosse Schil and Dus Bessmedresch; and two for the poor, Schnadersche Schil, the Synagogues of Tailors. Democracy reigns under the sign of David.

*Politics.* — Romanticism, antisemitism, the Great War, and national politics, as in Jewish communities in Western Europe, resulted in the birth of a nationwide secular Judaism.

It soon divided into various movements fighting for hegemony in the community. The Zionists here are numerous and active, among them the Betharists (Brith Trumpeldor) which consist of a youth organization with fascist tendencies, a subsidiary of the Jabotinsky Revisionist Party. The Betharists are opposed by the Gordonists, young Social Democratic Zionists. All Zionists are Jewish nationalists who want to make Hebrew, a dead language for twenty centuries, a modern language to replace Yiddish, Judeo-Spanish, and other dialects spoken by Jews, but of non-Semitic origin, in order to revive a sense of Jewish nationality, be recognized as a national minority in the Jewish communities around the world, and enjoy the broadest of rights in Palestine.

The Yiddishites, less numerous and unorganized politically, strive for, in Romania as in all of Eastern Europe, the strengthening of the national German-Jewish minority and the Yiddish language. They have no interest in Hebrew, which they consider a religious language, or in Palestine, which they consider a foreign country. The Yiddishites are regarded negatively by the Romanian government as centralizing and assimilationist, especially since their ideology finds a great deal of support with political officials of the U.S.S.R. In the absence of local Jewish deputies, Zionist or not, the Yiddishites of the community of Leova must vote for Romanian candidates of either the National Agricultural Party or the National Liberal Party. These parties are strongly supported by Jewish families in the process of Romanian assimilation. An active intellectual life is manifested by the youth. Artistic and theatrical evenings are frequently given by touring theatrical troops. Contemporary world literature is well known through countless translations into Yiddish or Hebrew, which compensate for the lack of literature initially written in these still emerging languages.

*Jewish Youth and Crisis.* — As in France, the lack of opportunities in commerce and industry requires the youth to pursue diplomas of ever higher and higher learning so as to find work. In most cases, Jews cannot be civil servants; jobs in the Post Office, Public Education, the Police, and the Justice system, as well as Public Education, are occupied only by Christians, mostly Romanian. This exclusion from public sector jobs deprives the Leovan petty bourgeoisie of opportunities that would naturally be available to it in the West.

Intellectuals must limit themselves to professionally-licensed careers such as those of physician, pharmacist, or engineer.

The antisemitism of Romanian students makes life difficult for Jews in Iasi and Bucharest. To fight against career congestion, the Romanian government has decreed a quota for most medical schools, that is to say, a maximum number of students that can enroll each year. This "numerus clausus" is especially bothersome for Jews who have greater difficulty being accepted to these schools than do Christians, even though there is no law encouraging any kind of discrimination. For these reasons, Jewish students of Leova prefer, if they can afford it, to enroll in the universities of France, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, and Italy. Some leave never to return, hoping in a future abroad that their ethnicity prevents them from claiming in their homeland. There is also the lure of Paris and France due to tales of prosperity and success created by expatriates, who even if their situation is miserable, will not admit they should not have left their home country.

Many young people educated in Jewish schools do not receive high school diplomas and are forced to restrict their educational choices to institutions that do not require a [roughly equivalent to a high-school] diploma, such as the Toulouse Institutes of Agriculture and Chemical and Electrical Engineering. There are in Leova, about ten people who have studied at the University of Toulouse, Toulouse being the best known French city after Paris. Naples and Milan in Italy, and Prague in Czechoslovakia are also well-known. Those who do not settle abroad, return in possession of a diploma that will enable them to... enter as associates into the family business. Rare indeed are those who manage to use their engineering qualifications or licenses; only doctors have not studied for diplomas in vain. The father's dream of having a son involved in industry or commerce has faded; the diploma, however, may allow its possessor to marry well. A son-in-law with a professional diploma is something so sought after that even before finishing his studies, a young man may become engaged with the understanding that his studies will now be paid for by his future father-in-law, who is only too happy to have found a suitor for his daughter. An unmarried status is considered shameful among the Jews. These early engagements are an old custom, medical students having replaced the students of the Talmud.

Palestine is, after the West, the favorite place of emigration. To obtain a passport for Palestine, one must have available capital, which is rare among migrants, or be Halutz, that is to say, a Pioneer.

The Halutz must first study on a "model farm" in Bessarabia, and then he can go to the land of Israel after pledging to farm there for several years. Their commitment having been fulfilled, many Halutzim prefer, admittedly, the more exciting life found in Jerusalem or Tel Aviv, to the solitude of working isolated farmland.

As for those who are too poor to go to France and who have not been called to a particular vocation, a hopeless life opens before them. They can go to find work in Ploiesti or in Bucharest, the only two industrial centers in this part of Romania, but again, there are few employment opportunities. Leova, which does not manufacture any particular goods, and whose commercial importance is decreasing, is having trouble feeding a growing population, with many families consisting of four or five children. Resigned to their destiny, young people find work in their father's shop without hope of improving their living conditions. The contrast between the culture, tastes, and aspirations of young people and the low standard of living in which they are obliged to remain, leaves an indelible impression on the French traveler throughout Bessarabia.

*Jews and Christians.* — Relations between Jews and Christians are good in spite of the restraint imposed on both sides by older generations. There was never a ghetto in Bessarabia, although the Jews, like all minorities, have a tendency to group themselves in order to better resist any potential aggression. The financial security that some have achieved living a rural life in the community of Leova has given the Jews an air of assurance and convivial countryside hospitality. This is very unlike the impression of mysterious fearfulness one has of Polish and Lithuanian Jews, who live under gray skies, crowded into the unhealthy Jewish communities of large cities. Commonly used terms still retain a trace of the semi-hostility in which the older generations lived. The young Christian peasant, often brutal and quarrelsome, is to the Leovan Jew, a "Schegitz," a Hebrew term that can be translated as boorish or uncouth, a term also often applied to the whole of Christian youth. In Romanian and in Russian, the word "Jew" has a derogatory connotation that it does not have in other languages like French and German, which is why the term "Hebrew" is preferred when speaking to a person one does not wish to offend. In other cases, the term "Jew" and its derivatives are followed by derogatory adjectives and suffixes. In spite of this, marriages between secular Jews and Christians are increasing.

The differences that still exist are due to social as well as ethnic or religious considerations. It was once said that the Jew of Romania was hated by the Romanian peasant because of his origins and his Germanic language, that origin being unknown to the Jew himself. His language, although Germanic, is known to the peasants of the Romanian-Russian steppe by the term "Hebrew." The few German peasants settled in southern Russia and Bessarabia know only that their Swabian dialect and the "Hebrew" of grain merchants in the nearby town are related. The German peasants, although Calvinist or Lutheran among the Orthodox, iconoclasts among the worshippers of images, are regarded by all Christian and Jewish neighbors as good people, though a little naive.

Relations between the Israelite and Christian officials and merchants are excellent, but this is much less the case with the rural masses who feel the same towards them that every peasant feels towards a city dweller, even when the city dweller is poorer than he is. In the primitive spirit of the peasant, the Christian merchant is a Christian merchant, while the Jewish merchant is simply a Jew. Thus laborers, craftsmen, and merchants have repeatedly blamed Jews for the atrocities committed on the farmers by merchants and speculators both Jewish and Christian, who, with the more or less overt complicity of the Russian authorities, are happy to find in Jews an outlet for anger and misery and a popular scapegoat for the sins of misadministration.

## *2. The Christians*

The non-Jewish population is composed of a thousand peasants and Romanian officials and a few hundred Greeks, Ukrainians, Roma, and Russians.

*The Romanians.* — Romanian officials are from the Old Kingdom (Moldavia and Wallachia), thus they are foreign to the local community. This is why they indiscriminately frequent the milieus of Romanians, Russians, and Jews, particularly the latter, whose social status is closer to their own.

The peasants are, as on the other side of the Prut, Moldovans or Moldavians. The terms "Romanian" and "Roumanian" are neologisms created by intellectuals of the nineteenth century to denote the ethnic group of neo-Latin peoples of Eastern Europe.

These are still not common terms in everyday language. The Moldavians of Leova speak Moldavian, one of three Romanian dialects. These dialects are not very different from each other, and the Romanian of Bucharest is understood without difficulty by Bessarabian peasants. The uniformity of the Romanian language is probably due, as in Spain, to a late differentiation of dialects owing to a relatively recent migration from the Carpathians, which has formed the nation and language of Romania. The vocabulary and syntax probably still reflect Latin, but the emphasis is very "Slavic-ized" and has nothing in common with the accents of the Romance languages of the West. There is no common physical characteristic among the Moldavians of Leova, their race is not homogeneous. Their costumes consist of the disheartening banality of modern costumes; the hand embroidery that adorns the peasant blouses in Wallachia and Transylvania is unknown. In the summer, the peasant wears a small felt hat, and in the winter an Astrakhan hat (cucima) that resembles the cap of an apothecary. The shoe (opinca) is very simple and handmade by the peasant, who most often will go barefoot in the summer. In the winter, he wears large leather boots.

The Moldavian peasant eats "mamaliga" everyday: this is a dish of corn, a porridge-like mixture hand-rolled into little balls, which are then dipped into melted butter and eaten with quark.

The Romanian State School includes primary and secondary classes, up to the [roughly equivalent] ninth grade. It is attended by Romanians, Greeks, and Russians, as well as a growing number of Israelites.

The church of Leova was built four years ago out of low-quality brick. It replaced a wooden chapel. Its style is commonplace, with some reminiscences of Byzantine and Wallachian architecture. The cemetery, poorly maintained, as is typical of a country churchyard, is indicated by a large wooden crucifix on which are hung icons and attributes of the carpenter of Nazareth, including a ladder, a hammer, and pliers!

*The Greeks.* — The edges of the Black Sea, the Crimea, and Sarmatia have always attracted the Greeks who were the first grain merchants. Today, in Southern Bessarabia, the astute Greeks have to reckon with competition from the Jews. They settle higher up the Prut in Galati and Braila and sometimes establish themselves permanently in Leova.

The senator of the Department of Cahul, who resides in Leova, is a Greek by the name of "Antipas," like the famous Greek figure of antiquity. Most of his compatriots are grain or wine merchants. The Greeks quickly assimilate with the Romanians, some of them are also Wallachs from Macedonia.

*The Slavs.* — Ukrainians and Russians are few in Leova, they came to settle there during the time of Russian rule. The original provenance of the people of Bessarabia is unknown. Pan-slavists contend that the Slavs are original to the area; Romanian academics, such as Mr. Iorga [1871 – 1940, academic, politician, and founder of the moderately conservative Democratic National Party], are of the opposite view and invoke Trajan and the Roman Emperors as the area's original population. It seems that among the current populations of Bessarabia, the Moldavians have been in the area the longest, but their arrival on the banks of the Prut only goes back to the twelfth century. Previously, the Russians of Kiev and Halych fought the Asian hordes, who in the fourth century repressed the Daco-Romanians in the Carpathian Mountains. This area has been perpetually populated by both nomadic and sedentary populations, and it is futile for each to claim they are indigenous, although these claims are supported by distinguished university professors.

*The Bohemians.* — Romania, Hungary, and Spain are the countries that contain the most numerous tribes of wandering people called "Gitanes" in Spain, "Egyptians" in England, and "Tziganes" in Central and Eastern Europe. In France, we call them "Bohemians" because the first tribes that we saw in the Middle Ages, came from Bohemia, but they gave themselves the name of "Romanichel." There are two kinds of Bohemians in Leova, the sedentary and the nomadic. The first are barely distinguishable from Moldavians, as they gradually adopted Moldavian customs and language. Roma musicians are the best interpreters of popular Romanian music, as there is no distinctly "Tzigane" music. They travel in small groups and organize simple concerts in the cafés of the village.

Nomads make periodic visits to Leova, to the dismay of residents who fear for their hen-houses and crops. They have retained very "Oriental" features, and they are it seems, of Indian origin. Their hair is blue-black and their complexions olive. The women are solemn-looking and often of a stunning beauty.



Their trailers are covered with a roof of woven straw. When the tribe sets up camp, they do so facing the public square, leading their horses to public pastures... and sometimes to private ones!

*The Russian Influence.* — The Russian imprint on Leova is still noticeable. Like in all of Bessarabia, the Russian language is still commonly spoken, not only among the Russians, who are few in number, but among the Jews and Romanians. Even without the benefit of government support, the Russian language, spoken by millions of men, can easily outweigh the Romanian language, spoken by some ten million citizens.

Russian newspapers published in Kishinev are read by as many citizens as are the newspapers published in Romanian or Yiddish.

The ideas of the new Russia enter this Russian-speaking environment with relative ease. The older generation is less influenced. There are also some merchants in Leova who fled Russia in the years following the Revolution. Among the youth, some are less hostile to revolutionary ideas; some have even crossed the Dniester illegally and are now established in the Soviet Union in the Jewish republic of Birobidzhan on the banks of the Amur in Eastern Siberia or in the Republic of Moldavia a few kilometers from Bessarabia. These are exceptions, and it is conceivable that Bolshevik propaganda has had little success with artisans and merchants, who make up the majority of the people of Leova.

*The Future.* — The center of growth for Leova and the rest of the region remains the ports on the lower Danube, those of Braila, Izmail, Reni, and most of all Galati, indispensable outlets for the fertile plains of southern Bessarabia. It is via these Romanian ports and cities that this heterogeneous population, midway between the Carpathians and the Ukraine, will be able to claim full integration into the ethnic and economic whole that is Greater Romania.

Michel ROBLIN