IVAN BARBUL – A LIFE REBORN

Ivan Barbul was born as Isaak Rybakov in 1929 in Rezina, which was a mostly Jewish town in Bessarabia at that time. He grew up in a poor Jewish family, with his father working at the local Jewish school.

During World War II, his family was deported to Bogdanovka, an infamous labor camp in Transnistria. While his siblings and parents were killed, Isaak, now 14, managed to survive thanks to Ivan Ilich Barbul and his wife Agafia, who adopted Isaak and gave him a new name, and a new life.

STUDY GUIDE

Moldova between two world wars

In the interwar period (1918-1940), the territory of modern Moldova was divided between the USSR, which inherited from the Russian Empire the left bank of the Dniester (Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in the Ukrainian SSR), and the royal Romania, which got the interfluve of the Prut and the Dniester, or Bessarabia. In 1930, there were 765,930 Jews in Romania (4.2% of the total population). Within the borders of old Romania there were 263,192 Jews, in Bessarabia - 206,958 Jews, in Bukovina - 92,080 Jews, in Transylvania - 193 thousand Jews. By 1940, thanks to the influx of refugees from other parts of Romania, the number of Jews in Bessarabia reached, according to estimates, 300,000 people. The native language of Bessarabian Jews, especially in small towns and shtetls, was predominantly or even exclusively Yiddish.

The 1930s in Romania were marked by a sharp rise of state anti-Semitism, which received an additional impetus after the rapprochement with Nazi Germany. In pursuance of the secret additional protocol on the division of spheres of interest in Eastern Europe to the non-aggression pact between the USSR and Germany of August 23, 1939, known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, on June 28, 1940, the USSR seized the territory of Bessarabia, creating from the interfluve the Prut and the Dniester and the left bank The Dniester the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic.

Rezina, where Ivan Barbul was born as Isaac Rybakov, till 1940 was a small village with a mixed Jewish-Christian population.

Moldova in World War II

For the Soviet Union (part of which was the territory of modern Moldova since June 1940), World War II began on June 22, 1941 with the German invasion of the Soviet Union. Bessarabia and Bukovina once again became part of Romania, the land between the Dniester and the Bug rivers was turned into Transnistria governorate, ruled by the Romanian administration. More than half of the pre-war number of Bessarabian and Bukovinian Jews, about 160,000 people, were killed in the first few weeks of the war, 49 ghettos and concentration camps were created on the territory of Bessarabia and Transnistria, including the infamous Bogdanovka, where in a few days in December 1945 55 thousand Jews were killed).

Odessa, occupied by the Romanian troops in October 19th 1941, became a capital of Transnistria province, and already on October 22-24 the first mass killings of Jewish and non-Jewish Odessa dwellers took place.

The total number of Jews of Moldova (right-bank and left-bank) destroyed by German Nazis and Romanian fascists, is estimated as 250,000. About 300,000 people, including Jews, were evacuated or fled on their own from Moldova to the interior parts of the Soviet Union: Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Georgia. Many did not return from the evacuation, where severe conditions, hunger and illnesses sometimes killed no less effectively than bullets.

Righteous among the Nations

In 1953, the Knesset (Israeli Parliament) passed the law „On perpetuating the memory of martyrs and heroes", one of the articles of which established the title of Righteous Among the Nations (Hasidi Ummot a-olam). The Righteous are non-Jews who risked their lives during the Second World War to save the Jews who were doomed to physical destruction. For Eastern Europe and the occupied territories of the Soviet Union, this was also associated with a danger to the life not only of the savior himself, but of his entire family. Nevertheless, more than 25 thousand people are recognized as the Righteous Among the Nations of the World, including 2515 from Ukraine and 79 from Moldova (one should bear in mind that, for various reasons, not all the saviors of Jews have become known, especially in the former Soviet Union).

In Israel, the National Institute of Holocaust and Heroism Yad Vashem, the documentation center, a research institute and a museum, is engaged in studying and perpetuating the memory of the victims of the Holocaust and the Righteous Among the Nations.

Post-war and Post-Soviet Moldova

After the war, Jewish cultural and religious life in Soviet Moldova was not renewed officially. Many Moldovan Jews suffered during the anti-Semitic campaign in the Soviet Union, culminating in the doctors' case, many Jewish doctors were arrested in the MSSR. According to the 1959 census, there were 95 107 Jews living in Moldova (3.3% of the total population - the highest percentage of Jews in the population of all Soviet republics).

About 50% of Jews continued to call Yiddish their mother tongue. In the late 1950's, persecutions on religious Jews intensified. After 1960, there was only one synagogue in the entire MSSR - in Chisinau. In a number of cities, Jewish cemeteries were closed and often destroyed.

The Jews of Moldova are distinguished by a high percentage of people with higher education. For example, according to the 1961-62 academic year, in Moldova there were 1,225 Jewish students (6.4% of the total number of students, higher than the general index for the Soviet Union). In 1966, out of 500 scientists of the Moldavian Academy of Sciences, 49 (that is about 10%) were Jews. Jews made a significant contribution to the development of culture, science, industry. According to the 1970 census, 98,072 Jews (2.7% of the total population) lived in Moldova.

Moldavia was the only republic in the European part of the Soviet Union where the Jewish population has increased since 1959. The percentage of Jews who called Yiddish their native language (44.6%) declined, but remained one of the highest in the Soviet Union. Since the late 1960's Moldovan Jews played an active role in the struggle for repatriation to Israel, and due to aliyah to Israel and emigration to other countries, in 1970-1990s the Jewish population of Moldova significantly decreased. However, the Jewish community continues to exist, and Jewish cultural and religious life has become an important part of the existence of the Moldovan society.