FROM THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH OF "SAINT HIERARCH NICHOLAS" IN COSTICENI, FORMER HOTIN COUNTY

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ABSTRACT

This article reconstructs the history of the church dedicated to "St. Hierarch Nicholas" in the locality of Costiceni, former Hotin County (now in the Cernăuți region, Ukraine), the native village of the Bessarabian poet Ion Vatamanu. The study begins with the earliest documentary attestations of the holy place of worship, dating from 1770, and continues to the present day. Based on parish registers, diocesan bulletins, archival documents, and oral testimonies of local residents, it presents the succession of priests who served in Costiceni beginning at the end of the 16th century, the process by which the church was endowed with land between 1840 and 1923, as well as the construction, between 1858 and 1879, of the present stone church in place of the wooden one, which had been affected by the passage of time and the floods of the Prut River. A separate chapter is devoted to the policy of Russification of the Bessarabian clergy after 1871, the 1911 visit of the Russian bishop Serafim Ciceagov, and the circumstances that led to the controversial removal of the parish priest. The consequences of the two world wars for the community, the effects of the Union of Bessarabia with Romania in 1918, and the purchase of new church bells from Bucharest in 1924 are also analyzed. The final part of the study describes the situation of the Costiceni parish in the postwar years, in the context of Sovietization, collectivization, and religious persecution. Through the information brought together, the article places the history of the religious community of Costiceni within the context of the transformations that took place in northern Bessarabia over the last two and a half centuries.

Keywords: church history, parish clergy, Costiceni, Hotin district, Bessarabia.

1. INTRODUCTION

The village of Costiceni, first documented on February 17, 1581, is situated on the bank of the Prut River, in the former Hotin district of Bessarabia, today included in the Cernăuți region of Ukraine. The Church dedicated to "Saint Hierarch Nicholas" represents the principal center of the community's religious and spiritual life. This article aims to reconstruct the history of this holy place of worship on the basis of parish and diocesan registers, documents from the State Archives in Cernăuți, Bessarabian and Bukovinian diocesan bulletins, as well as testimonies

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collected from local residents, tracing both the succession of the priests who served here and the evolution of the parish property and the church building. At the same time, the work captures the way in which the religious life of the community was influenced by the political and administrative changes through which the region passed, from the Moldavian period and the domination of the Tsarist Empire to the Romanian administration and the Soviet regime.

2. THE MOLDAVIAN WOODEN CHURCH AND THE FIRST DOCUMENTARY ATTESTATIONS (1770–1817)

The first documents referring to the Church in Costiceni date from 1770. At that time, not far from the Prut River, there was a wooden church in the village. According to the parish register, the holy place of worship dates from 1770, is dedicated to "St. Hierarch Nicholas", is built of wood, and is sufficiently provided with holy vessels and the other church objects[192].

According to the 1817 cartography of Bessarabia, the village of Costiceni had 3 priests, 2 church teachers, 1 sexton, and 1 minor nobleman. The lower class comprised 181 households, including 20 widows, 37 bachelors, and 8 tax-exempt dependants. Part of the estate was held by the tax official Tudorache Ciure from Moldavia beyond the Prut and by the Holban boyar family; another part, including the hamlet of Pol-Vancicăuții, belonged to the freeholding peasants. Half of the estate of the hamlet of Dumeni was held by the same Tudorache Ciure, and the other half by the official Nicolae Balș. The village of Costiceni had 9 mills on the Prut River[193].

The archive of the old wooden church was rich: in 1809 income and expenditure registers were introduced there, in 1808 registers for births and baptisms, from 1813 records of confession and communion were kept, and from 1835 marriage registers were introduced[194]. This archive has been preserved in its entirety to the present day and is the only one of its kind in the former Noua Suliță district; it requires adequate protection so that it does not lose its integrity.

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[192] Ведомость о Свято-Николаевской церкви 2-го округа Хотинского уезда села Костычаны за 1897 г.: „датируется 1770 годом, во имя Св. Николая Чудотворца, деревянная, утварью достаточна" [Record of St. Nicholas Church in the 2nd District of the Khotyn County, in the village of Kostychany, for the year 1897: "Dated 1770, dedicated to St. Nicholas the Wonderworker, wooden, with sufficient church furnishings"].

[193] Роспись землевладения и сословного строя населения Бессарабии по данным переписи 1817 года/I.N. Halippa, (ed.), in Труды Бессарабской Губернской Учёной Архивной Комиссии, t. 3, Chișinău, 1907, p. 38 [I.N. Halippa (ed.), "A Survey of Land Ownership and the Social Structure of the Population of Bessarabia Based on the 1817 Census", in *Proceedings of the Bessarabian Provincial Scientific Archival Commission*, Vol. 3, Chișinău, 1907, p. 38].

[194] Sergiu Barbuța, *Istoria bisericii Costiceni [The History of the Costiceni Church]*, Drobeta-Turnu Severin, Dandes Editory, 2019, p. 10.

3. THE FIRST PRIESTS (END OF THE 16th CENTURY – 18th CENTURY)

It is not known exactly who the first priest of the village of Costiceni was. We can only suppose that, at the end of the 16th century – beginning of the 17th century, Father Iremia served at the church altar, the father of the landowner Marica and of her brothers Tanas, Vasile, Gavriil and sister Irina (Catrina)[195]. When they sold their shares of land in Costiceni, priest Iremia may have transferred to the village of Bilăuți, in the same district. The priest may have been replaced by priest Miron, who purchased from Toderașcu Jora part of the village of Costiceni in 1673[196].

It is known with certainty that the first documented priest in the village of Costiceni was priest Ion. He appears in the 1774 Fiscal Census of Moldavia, organized by the commander of the Russian occupation troops, Piotr A. Rumeanțev[197].

Subsequently, parish documents attest Constantin Valcănescu, born in 1749 and married to Ioana Valcănescu (b. 1764). He was followed by priest Gheorghe Marcincu, son of Ion, born in 1769, who had two children, Ion (b. 1803) and Vasile (b. 1805). The children of these two priests, Petrea Volcănescu and Ion Marcincu, also served for many years as deacons at the church in Costiceni.

4. THE PRIESTS OF THE EARLY AND MID-19TH CENTURY

The next priest was Gheorghe Hasanescu, son of Ion, born in 1779. Ordained by Bishop Parfenie on May 22, 1804, and sent to Costiceni, he was married to Catrina, daughter of Constantin (b. 1775), and had three children: Ștefan (b. 1819), Nicolae (b. 1821), and Elisei (b. 1827). He served in Costiceni until 1840[198].

For 20 years the parish was shepherded by priest Elisei Ignatovici, son of Alexandru, born in 1810 and transferred to Costiceni on March 15, 1841. He was married to Maria Ignatovici (b. 1817) and had seven children. During his ministry in Costiceni, the site was blessed and construction of the present stone church began.

Beginning on June , 1862, the parish priest was Filip Ghinsca, son of Vasile (a Russified form of the Romanian name Gânsca), the son of a priest, without

[195] Gheorghe Ghibănescu, *Surete și izvoade (Documente slavo-române între 1412–1722) [Surete and Sources (Slavic-Romanian Documents from 1412–1722)]*, Vol. 22, Iași, Viața Românească, 1929, pp. 18-19.

[196] Sergiu Bacalov, *Hotinul – veche stăpânire românească/Boierimea Țării Moldovei la mijlocul secolului al XVII-lea – începutul secolului al XVIII-lea [Hotin – an ancient Romanian domain/The Nobility of Moldavia in the Mid-17th Century – Early 18th Century]*, Chișinău, 2012, p. 170.

[197] ***, *Moldova în epoca feudalismului [Moldova in the Feudal Era]*, Vol. 7, Part 1: Recensămintele populației Moldovei din anii 1772, 1773, 1774 [The Population Censuses of Moldova in 1772, 1773, and 1774], edited by P.V. Sovetov, Chișinău, Știința Publishing House, 1975, p. 143.

[198] Sergiu Barbuța, *op. cit.*, 2019, p. 7.

seminary studies, born in 1826. He served in Costiceni until 1867. On November 30, 1867, Ștefan Pascalov, son of Gheorghe (b. 1843), was appointed priest[199]. He served until October 21, 1871, when he was transferred to Stălinești, Hotin district, being replaced on February 27, 1872, by priest Ștefan Caisân from Pănășești, Chișinău district[200].

Because the contraction process of the new place of worship was in full swing, a more experienced priest was needed than the newly ordained Caisân. On June 10, 1872, the diocesan authorities decided to reinstate Ștefan Pascalov as parish priest in Costiceni, sending Caisân to Stălinești[201].

5. THE PARISH TRUSTEESHIP AND THE POLICY OF RUSSIFICATION

In the middle of the 19th century, church-parish trusteeships began to be established in the Russian Empire. On August 2, 1864, Emperor Alexander II approved the "Regulations concerning the Parish Council of Trustees of Orthodox Churches". These non-governmental organizations were established to care for the arrangement and welfare of the parish church and parish in economic terms, as well as to establish primary education for children and charity within the parish.

Priest Ștefan Pascalov decided to take advantage of the opportunities that opened up for accelerating the construction of the church if a board of trustees were established.

At a village meeting in December 1872, the decision was made to establish a church-parish trusteeship, and the chairman and members of the council were elected. The council included priest Ștefan Pascalov, churchwarden Petru Nicorici, volost mayor Todor Flofaș, and parishioners Grigore Sucevan, Constantin Rața, Ion Afanas, Ion Haisan, Gheorghe Dogolici, Gheorghe Pascari, Nicolae Pascari, and Toadere Rotari. Ion Precup, mayor of the village of Dumeni, was elected chairman[202].

Ștefan Pascalov sent the decision of the meeting to the diocesan authorities for approval. On December 24, 1872, the bishop issued the following resolution: "The chairman and members of the trusteeship are approved".

[199] Кишиневские епархиальные новости, № 12, 15 decembrie 1867, p. 137 [Church News of the Diocese of Chișinău, No. 12, December 15, 1867, p. 137].

[200] Кишиневские епархиальные новости, № 22, 15/30 noiembrie 1871, p. 525; № 5, 1/15 martie 1872, p. 109 [Chișinău Diocesan News, No. 22, November 15/30, 1871, p. 525; No. 5, March 1/15, 1872, p. 109].

[201] Кишиневские епархиальные новости, № 16, 15/31 august 1872, p. 363 [Church News of the Diocese of Chișinău, No. 16, August 15/31, 1872, p. 363].

[202] Кишиневские епархиальные новости, № 1, 1/15 ianuarie 1873, pp. 3–4: „Председатель и члены попечительства утверждаются" ["Chișinău Diocesan News, No. 1, January 1, 1873, pp. 3–4: "The chairman and members of the board of trustees are confirmed"].

On February 9, 1873, the supreme church authorities of the Russian Empire decided to introduce new positions for parishes. This decision was approved by the emperor on April 9, 1873. According to the list of urban and rural parishes, churches, and parishes of the Diocese of Chișinău, the Church of St. Hierarch Nicholas in Costiceni is defined as the principal church to which the Church of St. Demetrius in the village of Vancicăuți is assigned. The new staffing provided for: rector priest – one, assistant rector – one, cantors – two. The main requirements for the rector priest were reduced to seminary education, knowledge of the Russian language, and an age below retirement[203].

After the death of Metropolitan Bănulescu-Bodoni (d. 1821), the Diocese of Chișinău and Hotin was led only by Russian hierarchs. On June 23, 1871, Pavel Lebedev was elected Bishop of Chișinău and Hotin (raised to the rank of archbishop in 1879). During his archpastoral ministry, all clergy of the Diocese of Chișinău and Hotin, including those in the villages, were required to serve only in the Russian language. Liturgical books written in Romanian in Cyrillic script were removed from circulation. Bessarabian priests began to wear vestments cut in the specifically Russian style and pectoral crosses. In the second half of the 19th century, more and more Bessarabian priests Slavicized their names and, as a rule, married Russian and Ukrainian women.

From September 5, 1874, the parish priest in Costiceni was Nicolae Litinschi, son of Avram (b. 1826), the son of a priest and a graduate of the Theological Seminary in Chișinău. From 1875 he also taught religion at the school in Costiceni, and from November 9, 1887, at the school in Vancicăuți as well. Litinschi was tasked with completing the construction and putting the new church into use.

6. THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE NEW STONE CHURCH (1958–1879)

Because it was located near Prut, the old wooden church was frequently flooded and severely damaged. Rain came into the church through the perforated roof, and the water was carried out in buckets. It could no longer be renovated. In 1858, it was decided to build a stone church. Initially, the site chosen for this purpose was the land on which the local secondary school was built during the Soviet period. A few years later this option was abandoned because the land was frequently flooded after rain, turning into a pool of water.

In 1875 it was exchanged for higher ground belonging to the peasant Petrea Nicorici (a total of 0.41 hectares). He was compensated for this loss with an equivalent amount of land from the church's holdings.

[203] Кишиневские епархиальные ведомости, № 14, 15/31 iulie 1873, p. 285 [Chișinău Diocesan Gazette, No. 14, July 15/31, 1873, p. 285].

The new place of worship was located approximately 300 meters from the old wooden structure. The entire village took part in the construction work. The building stones were brought by ox carts from the quarry of the village of Belăuți (a village now located in the former Hotin district). The road was long. It was necessary to pass through the fields of the Costiceni, Șerbiniți, Forosna, and Sânger estates. Thus, the villagers set out at dawn and returned home late in the evening. The work was completed in 1879. The consecration of the place of worship took place on May 22, on the feast of the Translation of the Relics of St. Hierarch Nicholas from the city of Myra in Lycia to the city of Bari (Old Style). It was a great celebration in the village: the roads were full of people coming from all the surrounding villages to share with the people of Costiceni the joy of this great spiritual event.

The construction of the new church would not have been possible without the involvement of the faithful and philanthropists who, under the guidance of the priests, contributed voluntarily, with complete dedication and out of love for God, to the construction work. For their active work in the construction of the church, in July 1880 the Holy Synod awarded certificates of honor and diplomas of merit to the founders, helpers, and benefactors of the parish: priest Nicolae Litinschi, parishioners Ion Precup, Constantin Rață, Ion Rață, Vasile Captari, Gheorghe Nicorici, Gavril Vasilaș, and landowners Victor Sonsedschi and Anna Jihovski[204].

A church document from 1890 confirms that the church in Costiceni was built in 1879. The building is made of stone and covered with sheet metal. The bell tower rises above the narthex. In the church there is an altar dedicated to Saint Hierarch Nicholas[205].

In 1887, according to data from the agricultural records of Hotin district, the inhabitants of the three villages – Costiceni, Pol-Vancicăuți, and Dumnei – contributed to the repair of the church, each community using different methods to raise the necessary funds. The villagers of Pol-Vancicăuți raised the sum of 183 rubles. The communities of Costiceni and Dumeni chose a different method of financing. The document specifies that they sold corn from the communal fund, namely from the reserve grain store. In total, the contribution amounted to 250 rubles[206].

[204] Кишиневские епархиальные ведомости, № 20, 15/31 octombrie 1880, p. 402 [Chișinău Diocesan Gazette, No. 20, October 15/31, 1880, p. 402].

[205] Ведомость о Свято-Николаевской церкви (...) за 1897 г.: „построена в 1879 году. Здание каменное, крыта железом. Колокольня возвышается над притвором. В церкви один престол во имя Св.Николая Чудотворца" [Record of St. Nicholas Church (...) for 1897: "Built in 1879. The building is made of stone and has an iron roof. The bell tower rises above the narthex. The church has a single altar dedicated to St. Nicholas the Wonderworker"].

[206] К.Н. Ермолинский, Обзор Хотинского уезда в сельскохозяйственном отношении за 1887 год, Moscova, 1888, p. 188: „Продавали кукурузу изъ общественной копилцы (т. е., изъ запаснаго хлѣбн. магазина)" [K.N. Yermolinsky, *An Overview of the Khotyn District in Terms of Agriculture for the Year 1887*, Moscow, 1888, p. 188: "Corn was sold from the public granary (i.e., from the grain reserve store)"].

7. THE PRIESTS OF THE LATE 19th CENTURY AND THE REPAIRS TO THE CHURCH

Unlike the old wooden church, built in the traditional Moldavian style, the new stone church was built according to the model of Russian churches, like all the other places of worship erected after the occupation of Bessarabia by the Tsarist Empire - and there were many of them: from 42 churches[207] in 1812, the number reached 818 in 1903, the vast majority in rural areas, in the Russian Neoclassical style, according to standard designs with minor modifications from one monument to another, the domes taking the form of onion bulbs. The church in Costiceni was also built according to such a model. The architecture is eclectic, with the Classical style combined with Russian elements: the plan consists of the square altar apse and the rectangular nave, dominated by a pyramidal roof crowned with an onion-shaped dome. A two-level bell tower was attached to the church, with a prismatic bell chamber and large arched openings.

In the activity report of the Costiceni Parish for the year 1882, the locality had 217 households, with 868 men and 857 women.

On January 23, 1890, after 10 years of priesthood, Nicolae Litinschi was transferred to the village of Hâjdieni[208], Bălți district (now Glodeni district, Republic of Moldova), and priest Spiridon Teleiman was appointed in his place, followed, from April 14, 1890, by priest Vasile Pranițchi, son of Domentie. Vasile Pranițchi was born on March 22, 1839, in Orhei district and graduated from the Theological Seminary in Chișinău[209]. From 1900 he began teaching religion at the school in Costiceni. In 1895, Gavril Roșa was church trustee of the Costiceni parish.

Although almost 30 years had passed since the consecration of the church, the place of worship had still not been completely finished and supplied with everything necessary. The rehabilitation and furnishing of the church began in 1906. It is assumed that, following disagreements between priest Vasile Pranițchi and the villagers, the fitting-out work was taken over by a doctor from the zemstvo hospital in Costiceni. Subsequently, this disagreement provoked the anger of the hierarch Serafim Ciceagov, Bishop of Chișinău and Hotin.

Among the founders of the church in Costiceni was the householder Constantin Rață, son of Nicolae (1837–1915). A forester by profession, Constantin Rață donated 200 rubles toward the completion of the fitting-out and repair work on the place of worship. The first donation was made in 1906, and the second in 1912. According to the

[207] И.Н. Халиппа, Сведения о состоянии церквей Бессарабии в 1812-13 гг., in Труды Бессарабской губернской ученой архивной комиссии, t. 3, Chișinău, 1907, p. 268 [I.N. Khalippa, "Information on the Condition of Churches in Bessarabia in 1812-13", in *Proceedings of the Bessarabian Provincial Scientific Archival Commission*, Vol. 3, Chișinău, 1907, p. 268].

[208] Кишиневские епархиальные ведомости, № 3, 1 februarie 1890, p. 101 [Chișinău Diocesan Gazette, No. 3, February 1, 1890, p. 101].

[209] Кишиневские епархиальные ведомости, № 10, 15 mai 1890, p. 433 [Chișinău Diocesan Gazette, No. 10, May 15, 1890, p. 433].

diocesan bulletin, priest Vasile Pranițchi contributed 384 rubles for the repair of the church, Ion Precup 100 rubles, and the other parishioners 224 rubles[210]. For his merits, Constantin Rață was deemed worthy to be buried in the churchyard, a fact confirmed by Order No. 4046 of September 19, 1912, of the Ecclesiastical Consistory of Chișinău[211]. On June 3, 2016, on the occasion of the 101st anniversary of his passing into eternity, a service for the consecration of the new funerary monument was officiated, the monument having been erected at the initiative of villagers Nicolae Caba and Andrei Colac. It should be noted that also buried on the church grounds are priest Nicolae, son of Vasile Pisica, the director of the zemstvo school Aleksandr Nikolaevici Koroliov, and the yesaul of the Don Cossack infantry battery, Aleksandr Dmitrievici Gherman, probably deceased on the front of the First World War.

8. THE VISIT OF BISHOP SERAFIM CICEAGOV AND THE REMOVAL OF PRIEST PRANIȚCHI

On the eve of the centenary of the annexation of Bessarabia to the Tsarist Empire, Serafim Ciceagov, one of the last Russian hierarchs of Bessarabia, undertook a pastoral visit to Hotin district, including the Costiceni parish. According to his spokesman, Archpriest Vasilie Guma, the hierarch was astonished by the condition of the parish and expressed his dissatisfaction with the behavior of the parishioners:

> "For 30 years no hierarch has visited the village of Costiceni. Therefore, the church is very neglected: the plaster has come off and fallen from the building, the crosses have bent; inside, the condition is no better, everything has blackened, even the chalice. The parish consists of 300 families. Priest Vasile Pranițchi reported to the Bishop that the parishioners had recently repaired the church, but the work had not been coordinated by him, but by a doctor who had removed him. Under these circumstances, the Bishop warned the inhabitants not to forget their own duties toward the church and the priest"[212].

At the same time, Bishop Ciceagov visited the zemstvo school, as well as the village cemetery.

> "At the zemstvo school, the Bishop found 40 boys, barefoot, dressed only in a white shirt and a red sash; the pupils do not sufficiently know the Law of God. Seeing that the cemetery in the center of the village was completely unfenced, the Bishop asked

[210] Кишиневские епархиальные ведомости, № 10, 11 martie 1907, pp. 61–62 [Chișinău Diocesan Gazette, No. 10, March 11, 1907, pp. 61–62].

[211] Кишиневские епархиальные ведомости, № 34–35, 26 august/2 septembrie 1912, p. 953 [Chișinău Diocesan Gazette, No. 34–35, August 26/September 2, 1912, p. 953].

[212] „De 30 de ani niciun ierarh nu a vizitat satul Costiceni. Prin urmare biserica este foarte neglijată: tencuiala de pe clădire s-a desprins și a căzut, crucile s-au încovoiat; nici în interior starea nu este mai bună, totul s-a înnegrit, chiar și potirul. Parohia este compusă din 300 de familii. Preotul Vasile Pranițchi a raportat vlădicii că enoriașii au reparat recent biserica, însă lucrările nu au fost coordonate de el, ci de un medic care l-a înlăturat. În aceste condiții vlădica i-a avertizat pe locuitori să nu uite de propriile datorii față de biserică și preot", in Кишиневские епархиальные ведомости, № 17–18, 29 aprilie/6 mai 1912, p. 458 [Chișinău Diocesan Gazette, No. 17-18, April 29/May 6, 1912, p. 458].

> the head of the zemstvo and the head of the volost, A. Moșan, to influence the local residents so that they would urgently fence the cemetery, or at least dig a ditch all around it, so that the dead would be buried in a certain order (...)"[213].

At the end of the visit, the hierarch decided, without much hesitation, to remove the priest and the church cantor from service at the holy altar. According to the Official Bulletin of the Diocese of Chișinău, priest Vasile Pranițchi, aged 72, was placed outside the staff establishment on August 20, 1911.

In 1912, the Russian historian, publicist, and ethnographer Nikolai Durnovo published a series of articles in which he criticized the Tsarist regime in Bessarabia and the activity of Metropolitan Serafim Ciceagov, accusing him of opportunism, greed for money, and the intention to Russify the Bessarabian Romanians through the institution of the church, showing that the metropolitan behaved brutally toward the native clergy because

> "the most distinguished spiritual and cultural forces are driven out of Bessarabia by him"[214],

citing as an example the case of priest Vasile Pranițchi of the Costiceni parish, who, according to testimonies, had been exiled after 50 years of faithful service to the Russian Orthodox Church. Subsequently, an article appeared in the official diocesan bulletin in which Serafim Ciceagov rejected all the accusations, stating that Vasile Pranițchi had retired from the priesthood because of his age and health problems[215].

9. THE INTERVENTION OF GENERAL MIHAIL SCHINA AND THE NEW BELLS PURCHASED IN BUCHAREST

On September 11, 1911, after completing his theological studies, Eusebie Popovici was ordained priest of the parish. In 1915 he was promoted, and on March 16, 1915, he was replaced by priest Mihail Poleanschi, son of Andrei (b. 1881), from the church in Cugurlui, Bender (Tighina) district[216]. On October 28, 1915, church cantor Nicolae Dimitriu was placed outside the staff establishment. One year later,

[213] „La școala de zemstvă Vlădica a găsit 40 băieți, desculți, îmbrăcați doar într-o cămașă albă și cingătoare de culoare roșie; elevii nu stăpânesc suficient legea Domnului. Văzând că cimitirul din centrul satului este complet neîngrădit, Vlădica l-a rugat pe mai marele zemstvei și pe șeful de voloste, A. Moșan, să-i influențeze pe localnici ca aceștia de urgență să îngrădească cimitirul, sau cel puțin să se sape un șanț de jur împrejur, ca cei morți să fie înmormântați într-o anumită ordine (...)", in Кишиневские епархиальные ведомости, № 17–18, 29 aprilie/6 mai 1912, p. 458 [Chișinău Diocesan Gazette, No. 17–18, April 29/May 6, 1912, p. 458].

[214] „cele mai alese forțe spirituale și culturale sunt izgonite de el din Basarabia", in Кишиневские епархиальные ведомости, № 24–25, 17–24 iunie 1912, p. 8 [Chișinău Diocesan Gazette, No. 24–25, June 17–24, 1912, p. 8].

[215] Кишиневские епархиальные ведомости, № 24–25, 17-24 iunie 1912, p. 8 [Chișinău Diocesan Gazette, No. 24–25, June 17–24, 1912, p. 8].

[216] Кишиневские епархиальные ведомости, № 13–14, 29 martie/5 aprilie 1915, p. 209 [Chișinău Diocesan Gazette, No. 13–14, March 29/April 5, 1915, p. 209].

on August 4, 1916, the position was taken over by Iacob Gherbanovschi (b. 1892), a native of the village of Vasieni, Orhei district, who would later become a priest.

In the cemetery of Costiceni is the grave of Porfirea Gherbanovschi (b. 1865), the mother of Iacob Gherbanovschi. The woman passed into eternity on October 11, 1929, at the age of 64. The Romanian-language inscription engraved on the tombstone was covered with lime during the Soviet period, as was the inscription on the monument to the Bessarabian soldiers, erected in 1928 in the churchyard in Vancicăuți[217].

With the outbreak of the First World War, hundreds of men from the former Hotin County, including from Costiceni, were mobilized into the Tsarist army. The Russian 8th Army was concentrated on the territory of the district, and its maintenance fell largely on the shoulders of the surrounding peasants and priests. During the war years, the church's brass bells were requisitioned and melted down for ammunition.

After the world conflagration, with the collapse of the three great empires – Austro-Hungarian, Russian, and Ottoman –, Bessarabia, including Hotin district, united with Romania on March 27, 1918. A Romanian armed force of 4 divisions crossed the Prut. The 1st Cavalry Division, led by General Mihail Schina, intervened in northern Bessarabia. According to the general's notes, for the purpose of protecting and researching objects of historical value, the division's officers collected 73 documents and objects from Hotin district, which were later sent to the Romanian Academy in Bucharest. Among them were three documents from the church in Costiceni: a "Strastnic" printed in 1773, a register of church ornaments from 1809, and a "Vedemus" mentioning the laying of the church foundation in 1858[218].

On November 30, 1917, Nicolae Pisica, son of Vasile, was appointed priest. From December 3, 1917 he taught religion at the school in Costiceni, and from 1918 also at the schools in Pol-Vancicăuți and Dumeni. Born on October 8, 1865, into the family of church teacher Vasile Pisica from the village of Bardar (today Ialoveni district, Republic of Moldova), he had spent several years at Hârbovăț Monastery before coming to Costiceni. According to the 1922 Diocesan Yearbook, the church teacher was the same Iacob Gherbanovschi, aged 30, and the parish consisted of 560 families.

In a 1924 letter preserved in the church archive, priest Nicolae Pisica mentions the purchase from the "Nicolae Spireanu" Factory in Bucharest of five new bells, valued at 68,600 lei. On April 8, 1924, the objects arrived at Mămăliga Railway Station, from where they were transported to Costiceni by the ox cart of peasant Ion Caba. The large bell weighed 420 kilograms, the second 166, the third 65, the fourth 35, and the fifth 28 kilograms. Around the 1940s, the large bell cracked while sounding the alarm for a fire in the locality.

[217] Sergiu Barbuța, „Memoria cvasiumană (Amintiri din monumente)" ["Quasi-Human Memory (Memories from Monuments)"], in *Literatura și Arta [Literature and Art]*, Chișinău, 2023, No. 22–23 (June 8), p. 6.

[218] Mihail C. Schina, *Pe marginea Unirei – Basarabia (ianuarie 1918 – iunie 1919) [On the Union – Bessarabia (January 1918-June 1919)]*, 1938, p. 68.

In the summer of 1924, priest Nicolae Pisica was the victim of an armed robbery committed by a band of thieves roaming Hotin district. According to the newspaper "Universul", five-armed bandits entered the parish priest's house, taking 5,100 lei and household items worth 35,000 lei[219].

Respected and loved by the villagers, priest Nicolae Pisica was, at the community's request, buried in the churchyard after he passed into eternity on July 14, 1929[220]. After 90 years, on July 14, 2019, his grave was restored through the care of the "Valea Prutului" Cultural Society and the "Ștefan cel Mare și Sfânt" Association of Costiceni, and a funerary plaque financed by donations from villagers and descendants was installed. Faithful from the priest's native village, Bardar, including distant relatives, attended the consecration service.

On September 1, 1929, Petrea Zama was appointed priest, transferred from the Berestea parish, where he had been ordained on May 1, 1927[221]. The two priests were relatives: only 9 days after the death of Father Nicolae Pisica, during the visit to Berestea of Bishop Visarion Puiu of Hotin, on July 24, 1929, it is recorded that

> "parish priest Petre Zama is away from the parish in Costiceni on the occasion of a memorial service for a relative"[222],

exactly 9 days after the death of priest Nicolae Pisica. A document from 1931 shows that, through the efforts of priest Petre Zama, church trustee Ion Savca, and the parish committee, the church was provided with two large icons – of the Mother of God and St. Mary Magdalene – and with vestments for the priest, worth 8,000 lei[223].

10. THE MISSIONARY CONFERENCE OF 1937. THE REFUGE OF PRIEST ZAMA

In November 1937, the faithful of the district attended a series of Orthodox missionary conferences organized by the Deanery of Hotin County. On November 8, 1937, priest Vasile Mihnevici, missionary of Circle II of Hotin County, held a conference at the Costiceni Parish, in the primary school (today the town hall building), with both rooms filled to capacity. The diocesan bulletin reports that, after the prayer "O Heavenly King", Mihnevici spoke about the correction of the church calendar, while Archpriest Dimitrie Crocos presented the film "The King of Kings". The parish choir, conducted by Iacob Gherbanovschi, sang religious hymns, and after the screening the missionary priest spoke about the Passion of the Savior and the danger of sects; sheets of religious literature were distributed to the people[224].

[219] *Universul*, No. 200, September 4, 1924, p. 2.
[220] Diocese of Hotin, Official Diocesan Bulletin, No. 15–16, 1929.
[221] Diocese of Hotin, Official Diocesan Bulletin, No. 17–18, 1929.
[222] „preotul paroh Petre Zama este plecat din parohie la Costiceni cu ocazia unui parastas pentru o rudă a sa", in *Ibidem.*
[223] Diocese of Hotin, Official Diocesan Bulletin, No. 8, 1931.
[224] Diocese of Hotin, Official Diocesan Bulletin, No. 23, 1937.

Professor Deomid Savca, son of churchwarden Ion Savca, left the following testimony about priest Zama:

> "Priest Petre Zama did not wear a beard, wore glasses, and spoke in the Moldavian dialect. He had two children: Eugen and Tamara. He taught us religion class. After the prayer we turned toward the icon and made the sign of the cross. I spent my entire childhood at the church altar. At Christmas, my father accompanied him by cart, and my mother, Fevronia, baked prosphora and brought them to the church. This priest had many livestock and hectares of land, and his apiary numbered about 20 beehives. Before taking refuge in Romania, the priest left the bees to my father – if anyone had found out, all our property would have been confiscated"[225].

With the entry of Soviet forces into Bessarabia, priest Petre Zama took refuge with his family in Romania. According to some sources, he served between 1952 and 1967 at the church in the commune of Cocora, Ialomița County, later settling in Bucharest, from where he corresponded with residents of the village of Costiceni, mentioning frequent meetings with other Bessarabian refugees from Vancicăuți, Cerlena, Berestea, and Șendreni.

In May 1944, churchwarden Ion Savca was mobilized for work in the city of Krivoi Rog, and his duties fell upon his 11-year-old son Deomid.

11. THE CHURCH SITUATION AFTER 1944. SOVIET PERSECUTION

By the end of March 1944, more than 470 churches were functioning in the Soviet-controlled territory that was to become the Cernăuți region, in addition to synagogues and houses of prayer. After 1944, only the Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches remained in operation, while the others were banned. According to the Cernăuți Regional State Archives, of the more than 470 churches only 384 remained – 366 Orthodox and 18 Roman Catholic –, but services were not held in all of them because of an acute shortage of priests[226].

On October 8, 1944, there were only 39 priests, 2 deacons, and 162 cantors in the entire region – the entire Orthodox clergy consisting of 192 persons. Where churches were open, services were often officiated by church teachers. To replenish

[225] „Preotul Petre Zama nu purta barbă, umbla cu ochelari și vorbea în graiul moldovenesc. Avea doi copii: Eugen și Tamara. Dumnealui ne preda ora de religie. După rugăciune ne întorceam cu fața spre icoană și făceam semnul crucii. Am petrecut întreaga copilărie la altarul bisericii. De Crăciun, taică-meu îl însoțea cu căruța, iar mama, Fevronia, cocea prescuri și le aducea la biserică. Acest preot avea multe dobitoace și hectare de pământ, iar prisaca lui număra circa 20 de stupi. Înainte de a se refugia în România, preotul i-a lăsat albinele tatălui meu - dacă ar fi aflat cineva, toată averea ne-ar fi fost confiscată.", Testimony of Professor Deomid Savca, son of churchwarden Ion Savca, quoted by Sergiu Barbuța, *op. cit.*, 2023, p. 50.

[226] Dumitru Covalciuc, „Situația bisericii și a clerului din actuala regiune Cernăuți în perioada anilor 1944–1952" ["The Situation of the Church and the Clergy in the Present-Day Cernăuți Region from 1944 to 1952"], in *Țara Fagilor* XXV, Cernăuți-Târgu-Mureș, 2016, p. 40.

the clergy, Teodosie Kaverninski, Bishop of Cernăuți and Bukovina, began inviting priests from the Volîn and Podolia regions[227].

Until the end of 1944, the church in Costiceni had no priest. Beginning in 1945, the new church authorities, led by Bishop Teodosie, entrusted the Costiceni parish to church teacher Ioan Chiriac of the Vancicăuți parish, who also served at the small church in the hamlet of Făgădău.

> "We took him to Costiceni by cart. We opened the church and rang the bells. Priest Chiriac walked home. This priest stood by the parishioners of Costiceni during the famine of 1946–1947"[228],

Deomid Savca recounts, testifying that the lifeless bodies of villagers who had died from famine, including those found by the roadside or in ditches, were brought and piled up in the churchyard, then transported and buried in dozens of mass graves in the village cemetery.

In the spring of 1947, the locality had a new priest, a Romanian about whom not much was known. He did not serve for long in Costiceni, disappearing toward the end of the year. People believed that he had crossed the Prut into Romania, because he had repeatedly been seen swimming in the river. Before his probable refuge, two students from Cernăuți had come to his home, wearing the caps of Romanian high-school pupils[229].

During the period 1948–1959, priest Pavel Saveliev, son of Constantin, called Savelea by the villagers, served at the church altar; he was married to Elena Saveliev and had three children. The faithful built the family a house on forked posts, roofed with reeds and consisting of three rooms – a dwelling preserved to this day, although in an advanced state of deterioration.

In the first postwar years, local activists of the Soviet authorities tried, with particular hatred, to destroy the Christian customs and traditions inherited from their forebears. Christians were hardly allowed to celebrate Christmas, the Baptism of the Lord, and the Resurrection of the Lord. With the establishment of the Costiceni Collective Agricultural Farm (September 1947), the persecution intensified. According to an archival document, the chairman of the collective farm announced to the General Assembly of collective farmers that the patronal feast would no longer take place on May 22, as the church had established, but on May 1, and later on May 9.

In July 1950, priest Pavel Saveliev informed Mihail Ivanovici Kasatkin, the commissioner for matters of the Russian Orthodox Church attached to the executive committee of the Cernăuți Regional Council, that the chairman of the collective farm in Costiceni was sending the peasants out to agricultural work even on Sundays. When the faithful reminded him that Sunday had been given by God as a day of rest,

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[227] *Ibidem.*

[228] „Îl aduceam la Costiceni cu căruța. Deschideam biserica și trăgeam clopotele. Preotul Chiriac pleca pe jos acasă. Acest preot a fost alături de enoriașii din Costiceni în perioada foametei din 1946-1947", in Sergiu Barbuța, *op. cit.*, 2023, p. 50.

[229] *Ibidem.*

the chairman replied: "There is no God, for He has gone away to advanced training courses!"[230].

The management of the collective farm later decided to turn the old village cemetery into the collective farm's apiary. The rotten wooden crosses were removed, and beehives were placed on the old graves. Because of his worsening health, priest Pavel Saveliev was forced to retire from his position. He died and was buried in the city of Luțk in the Volîn region.

12. THE PARISH FROM 1959 TO THE PRESENT

From 1959 to 1992, the mission of preaching the word of God to the parishioners of Costiceni was entrusted to priest Dimitrie Mândrescu, born on October 23, 1925, on the boundary between the villages of Mahala and Cotul Ostriței, localities situated approximately seven-eight kilometers from the city of Cernăuți.

After the fall of the communist regime, Father Dimitrie was among the pillars of national revival in the Cernăuți region: a founding member of the "Mihai Eminescu" Society for Romanian Culture, co-organizer of the first Celebration of the Romanian Language in Cernăuți, and participant in the First Congress of Romanians on June 7, 1992, during which the "National Development Program of the Moldavian Romanians of the Cernăuți Region" was unanimously approved.

From 1992 until August 2024, the church in Costiceni was shepherded by priest Aurel Pițu, son of Ioan, a native of the locality of Oprișeni, Hliboca district. In January 2019, Father Marcel Bivolaru was installed as concelebrating priest. From September 2024 to the present, the parish priest of the church has been priest Mihai Moisei, a native of Tărăsăuți, transferred from the Forosna parish[231]. Throughout all these years, the church underwent a series of major repairs and maintenance works. The fence and roof were rebuilt, the façade of the place of worship was renovated, and the inner courtyard was paved. The church floor was tiled, and a heating system was installed. Thanks to the faithful several roadside crosses and three chapels were erected and consecrated in the village. The inhabitants of the village have played and continue to play an important role in the financial support of the place of worship.

[230] Державний архів Чернівецької області. Ф. 995, оп. 1, спр. 4, арк. 121 [State Archives of the Chișinău Region. F. 995, op. 1, file 4, p. 121].

[231] Valea Prutului Editorial Team, „Slujba de pomenire a preoților și ctitorilor de la Biserica Sfântul Nicolae din Costiceni: 250 de ani de continuitate spiritual" ["Memorial service for the priests and founders of St Nicholas' Church in Costiceni: 250 years of spiritual continuity"], in *Valea Prutului*, October 9, 2024, Available at: https://costiceni.blogspot.com/2024/10/slujba-de-pomenire-preotilor-si.html, Accessed on August 13, 2026.

13. CONCLUSIONS

The history of the Church of "Saint Hierarch Nicholas" in Costiceni recounts, on a local scale, the same transformations experienced by all of Bessarabia over the last two and a half centuries. From a modest wooden church of the Moldavian period, through the period of Tsarist occupation and the construction of the present stone church, to the Union of 1918 with Romania. Then, the two world wars, the difficult years of persecution, and the hardships imposed by the Soviet regime. The parish archive, preserved to this day, continues the documentary succession of the priests, while the collective memory preserved by the parishioners constitutes a valuable testimony to the spiritual and community life of the village situated in the Prut valley.

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