

Meites family

Yuliy Vaysman

Translated from Russian by Ella Romm and
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Meites is a metronymic surname that comes from the Yiddish female name Meita meaning *a girl*. Therefore the meaning of the surname Meites is "son of Meita".

The earliest memories about my family are linked to the pre-war years, when my parents, Genya and Lev Vaysman, and I lived in Chisinau, in my grandmother Ceitil's house. It was several years after my grandfather Yoil's death.

The city of Chisinau was first mentioned in 1436. After the war with Napoleon, Chisinau (Bessarabia) became a part of the Russian Empire until 1918, and after the First World War, it became a part of Romania. In 1940, due to the rearrangement of European territories between Germany and the USSR, Moldavia became the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic, which converted to the independent country (Moldova) in 1991.

Grandfather Yoil Meites came from a family of rabbis, and grandmother Cyettil was from the descendants of the famous rabbi Ben Sarah, who was born in 1791 in Poland.

Yoil Meites was born in the town of Balta (near Odessa) which at the beginning was a small outpost on the northern border of the Ottoman Empire (in Turkish "Balta" means "axe"). From XVIII to XX century most of the townspeople there were Jews. The city survived 2 pogroms, plague and major flooding during this time. According to the Bessarabian archives, the Meites family moved from Balta to Chisinau in the late nineteenth century.

Grandfather Yoil had a family business which mainly consisted of collecting, utilizing and selling secondary materials to factories. After his death (around 1925) his wife Cyettil and children (mostly his son Colman) were conducting the business. I remember the piles of worn cloths in the backyard and the workers who, with primitive machines, loaded them into numerous bags. I also remember the animal bones, which were turned into bone coal and sold to the sugar factory as adsorbent.

Grandfather Yoil ran his business together with his half-brother Yos. While on a business trip in Warsaw, Yos was accidentally killed in crossfire of bandits. My grate grandmother Esther was married twice, once to a religious widower with children and Yos was most likely the son from a previous marriage. Esther herself ran a business, trading lubricants, and died at old age from pneumonia. Yos had four children. His wife died young from cancer. After his tragic and unexpected death, the care of Yos' family was placed on Yoil's shoulders, who by then already had 3 sons: Yankel, Eliyahu, Colman, and 2 daughters: Clara and Anna. Successful business allowed Yoil not only to provide the food for a large family, but also allowed him to educate all the children. Even one of his nieces, who had shown interest in knowledge, completed 4 grades of elementary school even though education for women was not popular in those days.

Meites' house was located on the outskirts of Chisinau, on Pavlovskaya Street, next to the railway station Visternicheny, on the small river Byk. There were large rooms filled with heavy wood furniture. Each summer Yoil send his family outside the city. In 1903 this custom saved Meites from the famous Kishinev pogrom, known as pogrom on Asian Street. The pogrom was triggered by the murder of a 14-year-old boy, in which the newspaper "Bessarabetz" blamed the Jews. As a result of the pogrom, 49 people were killed, 586 were wounded or injured and over

1500 houses that make up one third of households in Chisinau were destroyed. The Kishinev pogrom received great public outcry in Europe and Russia in the beginning of the XX century. Writer Tolstoy, and professors at Moscow University Vernadsky and Troubetzkoy, accused the Russia rulers of acquiescence of the murderers.

When in the United States, my daughter met Mabel Meites, widow of Professor Joseph Meites my second cousin (*read Mabel Meites' memoirs "The early years of Joseph Meites" at Bessarabia SIG website, translator*). Thanks to her memoirs I learned that my grandfather Yoil has 3 brothers: Solomon, Jacob and Joseph. In 1920, Borukh Meites, the son of Solomon, immigrated to the United States along with his family. One of his sons Joseph Meites (Mabel's husband), later became a major American neurophysiologist who studied the processes of ageing. His studies served as the basis for his disciples (Guillemin, Schally, and Yalow) who won the Nobel Prize in Physiology in 1977. Another one of Borukh's sons, Samuel Meites, became an American biochemists, a historian of medicine and a specialist in laboratory Diagnostics.

But let's go back to Yoil Meites. His middle son Colman, who was also involved in the family business, was a solid man who always smiled. I remember his petit wife Pesya wearing her colorful robe.

On the 28 of July in 1940, after Soviet troops entered Chisinau, Colman Meites and his wife were arrested and sent into exile, where Colman died of typhus in the town of Samarkand (Uzbekistan). Grandmother Ceitil escaped such a fate, because luckily she was not home at the time the NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs during the era of Joseph Stalin) arrested her son.

The eldest son of Yoil Meites, Ilyusha (Eliyahu Meitus - famous Hebrew poet in the future) displayed an ability in literature and was sent to study at the Sorbonne University, which he left without finishing due to the outbreak of the First World War. Continuing his education in Petrograd University, Ilyusha joined Jewish poets of South Russia, headed by Khaim Bialik; Jewish poet who wrote in Hebrew and Yiddish. During the revolution Ilyusha was on the interim Government's site, but grandfather Yoil saved his son from the revolutionary fire by moving him to the Odessa University. After the Brest "peace" Bessarabia (Moldova) was ceded to Romania and Ilyusha was told to return to Chisinau immediately and stay with his family. By that time he had been married, but his wife Betty had not wanted to follow her husband and stayed on the other side of the border. Eliyahu Meites became a Director of the Jewish gymnasium in Soroki in 1921, and went to Palestine with his second wife Lisa in 1935. There he worked as a teacher, as well as published his poems and translations. The first poem in Hebrew ("Lilith") was published in 1910, in the magazine "haShiloah" with the support of Khaim Bialik. In Palestine and then in Israel, he published several poetry books, as well as a large anthology of contemporary poetry, and the memories of his childhood and youth in Chisinau. He also gained wide popularity as a translator, mainly from Yiddish. Among his translations into Hebrew are Baudelaire's "Fleurs du Mal (Flowers of evil) and two volumes of military memoirs of Charles de Gaulle. I remember my mother repeating lines from his lyric: "You're so tender, you're so gentle, and as you were woven from the moon's rays ..." We have a book of Eliyahu's sonnets "On the edge of the second bridge" written in Hebrew. Here is a translation of the sonnet "I am like an alive stem ..." written by my daughter poet Ella Titova-Romm.

*I am like a living germ in a fog of the Universe
Stuck in the darkness of the Ecumenical Tower,
I am rising forward behind God,
I will not fall: my palm is in His hand.*

*Look, I did not escape the wanderer's fate,
The road got entangled in the net of the foreign Moon.
But give me time and we will stay in the doorsteps
Of the sacred Palace- the point of beginning.
There has been blazing eye fire,
There is a warm ray of light in the depths of amber,
There is the silence of forests and seeds of meadows;
Always will come the right day among the stream of days,
In spite the fog on the mirror of the Universe,
The grieving soul shall arise, of course.*

Once uncle Ilyusha arrived in Chisinau, he brought a colorful oriental dress for my mother and a stamp book with postage stamps for me. That was when I started my first stamp collection which unfortunately completely disappeared during the Second World War. In 1946, I started collecting again. Now my collection includes thousand of stamps and is waiting for my disciples.

During the war and especially during the post-war disaster, we repeatedly received parcels from the Red Cross with clothing and food, and it seemed to me that they were coming from my uncle in Palestine. But that was not the case. My father's uncle Ilyusha explained that, while working as a teacher and financing and publishing his own books, he would not have been able to do so. I remember how my father sent to Palestine a few packages with paper for publishing purposes.

Eliyahu Meites died in 1978, one year before my father. It is interesting to note that his son Darrel died on the same day as my brother did in 1992. The grandchildren and great-grandchildren of Eliyahu Meites still live in Tel Aviv.

The youngest son of Yoil (Yankel) died at the age of 20 from complications following his bike accident.

Yoil's daughter Clara died in childbirth, leaving a baby girl Ester in the care of her father. In 1939, Ester was visiting us in Chisinau and I had my first romantic feelings. By that time my father had rented a 4-bedroom apartment on Prunkulovskaya Street (which continued as General Inzov Street). General Inzov was Governor of Bessarabia during Pushkin's exile in Chisinau. Ester had visited us at the time when my father bought a wagon of apples in Romania for resale, and the entire apartment was soaked in a fragrant odor and packed with numerous boxes. Later, our family had learned the tragic story of Ester's death. At age 16, she had married a Romanian engineer. In 1940 the fascist regime of General Antonescu came to power in Romania. In 1941 Ester and her husband tried to escape from the regime on a ship that sank in the Black Sea with them aboard. Perhaps it was the Bulgarian ship "Struma", which was used to evacuate Jewish refugees to Palestine and was hit by a Soviet submarine on February 24, 1942.

The story of the Meites family ends with my mother Genya, who was called Anna most of the time. My father affectionately called her Kutzala, from the Romanian name Anikutza. The exact date of birth of Anna Meites is not known. Although her passport had her date of birth in the year of 1906, I think that she was born in the beginning of the century because she remembers episodes related to the 1903 pogrom.

The Meites and Vaysman families lived side by side, and after my parents got married they stayed in grandmother Ceitil's house, where I was born in 1928. I was named Yuliy after my grandfather Yoil. When I was 3, we moved from the Meites' house to the 2 bedroom apartment on Prunkulovskaya Street in the yard of Mr. Katz. In this apartment my brother Yefim (Khaim) was born in 1934. Soon after his birthday we moved to the 4 bedroom apartment on the 2nd floor

in the same building. At the age of 4 Yefim fell from the second-floor window. It seems that he lost his balance while I had turned away. I managed to grab his leg, but he fell directly into the flower pot, which obviously softened his fall, leaving only his shoe in my hand. I run outside and brought him home. Luckily uncle Kopel had just walked past and he called Urbanovich, the family doctor. Except for the scar, the fall has not led to any other consequences, which significantly diminished the sense of guilt that I experienced during this accident.

I remember that as a child I had a nanny Nastya. Nastya often took me to the Pushkin Park, where she would meet with a young priest. According to my mother I had curly hair and wore fashionable sailor suits during those times.

Having the opportunity to move to a more prestigious area, my father chose the central part of Gogol Street, opposite of the famous Cathedral and the Triumphal Ark, established in honor of the Russian victory over Napoleon in 1812. It was a type of middleclass apartment with four bedrooms, one of which contained my mother's piano. Renting this apartment meant that my father had reached a certain level in his commercial activities. My mother always had a maid and we lived happily until 1940, when the Soviets arrived in Bessarabia.

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