

The change of Government in Bessarabia

by Yuliy Vaysman
(Translated by Ella Romm and Michael Romm) (c) 2012

In the summer of 1939 my father, Lev Vaysman, decided to take a vacation and for the first time brought me to the Romanian mountains of Carpathians. After an hour in a train we arrived at the Posharyto. I remembered an empty station early in the morning, the fresh scent of herbs and mountains, rare local residents dressed in white clothes offering housing and fresh milk.

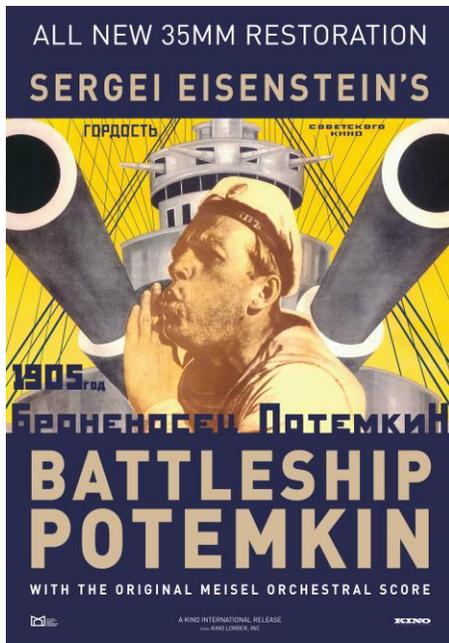
Our host was Austrian. She fed us enormous number of dishes for breakfast, lunch and dinner. I still see freshly baked sweets served with tea and diversity of other stuff. Hiking in the mountains we met my geography teacher, Mr. Chekira, who questioned me about my summer homework preparation.

Every day we went to the railway station to buy a newspaper. On one occasion I saw a train platform loaded with German tanks. I clearly remember black swastika painted on a green background. The military train headed south and my father decided to come back home immediately. To the surprise of my mother we were back the next day. She met us at the door holding my little brother Yefim.

I also remember another episode from 1940 when the Romanian newspaper was laying on my father's desk showing a huge printed portrait of a man with the inscription: «The famous Russian revolutionary leader Leon Trotsky was killed in Mexico». In addition I recall reading news about the war in Spain.

On July the 28th 1940 we witnessed the entry of the Soviet troops into Kishinev. Majority of the people came to this event as it was a celebration. We sat at the table on Alexander's (now Lenin's¹) street, and watched how the Soviet tanks came from the east as the Romanian cavalry and infantry were living to the west. Not a single shot was made. Later I learned that the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact had secret chapters where Bessarabia was given to the Soviet Union. At the same time the Soviet Union had annexed Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. Boys, including myself, climbed the tanks, lovely Soviet soldiers wearing black helmets gave us coins, someone from the crowd was throwing flowers but petty bourgeoisie like my father understood what this may lead for them to. In the evenings mobile cinema was showing the Soviet blockbuster "Chapaev". Boys sitting on the floor watched this amazing movie with amazement. Later I was fortunate to see the "Three tankers" («Три танкиста») and "Battleship Potemkin" («Броненосец Потёмкин»).

¹ It is now renamed Stefan cel Mare street (2012).



“Battleship Potemkin” movie poster

All of this took place in the summer of 1940 not hinting anything bad yet. However the Soviet power in Bessarabia was true to itself, arrests and repressions had begun.

Before the Soviets my father worked for a grain processing company. Soviets put him in a management position in the same type of business (“Zagotzerno”). He had been actively involved in the work but all this suddenly stopped due to a fowls envious accusation by his former school friend. My father learned about it in Moscow where he was taken after the arrest.

As a side note, I want to give a little more time to my dad’s life under the Romanian authority. While Lev Vaysman had been moving along hierarchical ladder in his business, he had also moved from the less to more prestigious areas of the town. In 1940 we lived in the central part of Kishinev. My father was an elected member of the stock exchange giving him certain privileges: using sleigh ride in wintertime, watching movies in the “Odeon” cinema from a personal balcony, etc.



Lev Vaysman (right) with his brother's (David) family

I recall how the same movie would be playing non-stop all day long, and the people were guided to their seats with a flashlight. Here is an interesting episode related to that cinema. I just finished the 4th grade of the primary school which (located on the street of Stephan the Great across from the Pushkin's park) and was enrolled in the first grade of the gymnasium (middle school) of Mihai Eminescu, the famous Moldavian poet. The high school boys were the petty bourgeoisie and their tuition fees were lower than those of the Lyceum (higher educational facility) students. The students of gymnasiums and lyceums were forbidden from attending the public places after 7 pm even if they were accompanied by their parents. One day my mom ignoring the rule took me to "Odeon" where the movie "Robinson Crusoe" was playing. We entered the hall accompanied by the controller's flashlight and after seeing one part of the film shockingly discovered that my school principal was sitting next to us. He looked at me and my mom so she understood that tomorrow she would have to visit the school for an apology.

Now let's go back to the fate of my father. In the early spring of 1941 we heard a knock on the door. The strict male voice said that it was our neighbor. The first person who entered the room was indeed one of our neighbors who, as it turned out later, worked for the NKVD (The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs). Then the people in uniform

followed. They showed the search and arrest warrants. You can imagine my parents anxiety at the moment but we, the children, were little aware of what was going on. Our apartment was searched and my father was taken away. The next morning my mother ran for help and advice to my uncle's wife Esther but it turned out that her husband David Vaysman was arrested the same night.

I recall how we were bringing parcels to the prison where Grigoriy Kotovskiy, a famous Soviet military leader and communist activist was once held under tsar. (Coincidentally we lived across from that prison after the war.) Having lost my father's income, my mother started to work from home making embroidery for customers. We were strongly supported by my grandfather Mendel and uncle Copel. Half a year has remained before the German invasion. All attempts to get any information about my father were failing. Only later from his own words we learned that after a few months in Kishinev prison he was transferred to Moscow where the trial was held. He was found guilty an "enemy of the people", the infamous section 58 of the Soviet criminal law charged with the economic counter-revolution.

The charges caused a natural question on how he might have participated in the counterrevolution activities while living in another country. The officials replied that he was robbing the peasants as a capitalist, and also he served as a Lieutenant of the Romanian army. My father refused to sign the indictment, but he was told about a possibility of torture (putting needles under his fingernails), and so he signed. This terrible truth I learned from my father but my mother never knew the details. At Butyrskaya prison in Moscow he accidentally saw his brother and realized that David was facing a similar fate.

Dad and uncle David were sentenced to 8 years in Siberian camps and sent to the town of Verkhoturie where temperature dropped to -60 degrees Celsius. At first my father carried out the most difficult work (logging) on equal terms with all the prisoners. After the war began the camp started to produce skis for the soldiers. Given to account his profession and leadership skills, camp authorities have transferred my father into the office position where he performed clerical work. Person in charge of the zone was very ferocious but a fair general. At the end of the fourth year he called my father and said that he intended to save his life because he will not survive any longer due to poor health and inability to do hard physical labor. He sent him to the doctor. My father visited the doctor who gave him a silk thread with an advice to smoke it on the eve of the Medical Commission from Moscow. The Commission came once a year and was the only hope for the early release. The doctor warned that my father will feel strong heartbeats after smoking but he had to bear. Dad followed the advice and stood in front of the Commission consisted of 5 professors-therapists. One of them listened to the father's heart, spoke with the other doctors, and then my father was informed that his health no longer allowed him to stay in the camp, and he would be released.

When I think about the miracles that accompanied our family during the 5 years of the war, it seems that a supernatural power had saved my father and uncle David. Who knows what could have happened to them if they were not sent to Siberia. Because of the

arrest and imprisonment they, being Jews, avoided the German occupation. On the other hand, those real criminals who were sentenced not for political reasons often were shot on the spot in the camps and prisons so they would not collaborate with the enemy. Ironically my father was spared because he was an “enemy of the people”.

In 1941 our family ran away from the coming Germans and in 1944 we were living in a remote village of Vozvyshenskiy, in Northern Kazakhstan. That year my father sent us a telegram saying that soon he will be released ahead of time and come back. My mother together with other women had worked in a farm taking care of cattle, milking cows, bringing water from the well and I was helping her shoveling grain, working as a motorist assistant, carrying combustible materials on the bulls, etc. One day after receiving the good news from my father, while working in the field with my mother, I saw a silhouette of a man descending to the village from the mountain and intuitively shouted: “Dad is coming!” A few minutes later my mom cried: “Lev!”, and I ran toward my father. Thus after a long wait and uncertainty we were together again.