

# The Change of Government in Bessarabia

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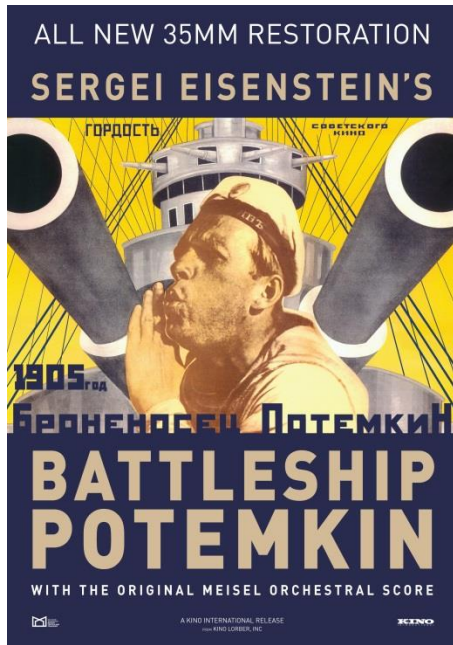
In the summer of 1939, my father, Lev Vaysman, decided to take a vacation and for the first time brought me to the Romanian mountains of Carpaty. After an hour, in a train we arrived at the station Pozharito. I remember an empty platform early in the morning, the fresh scent of herbs and mountains, rare 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. Chekir who asked me about my summer homework.

Every day we were going 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 Fima.

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

On July 28<sup>th</sup>, 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 (later, Lenin) 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 heard. 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 were giving us coins, someone from the crowd was throwing flowers, but petty bourgeoisie, like my father, understood what this may lead to. In the evenings, a mobile cinema played the Soviet blockbuster "Chapaev". Boys, sitting on the floor, watched this amazing movie with amusement. Later, I was fortunate to see the "Three tankmen" and "Battleship Potemkin".



*"Battleship Potemkin" movie poster*

All of these 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. The Soviets put him in a management position in the same type of business named "Zagotzerno". He had been actively involved in the work, but all this suddenly stopped due to a false envious accusation by his former school friend. My father learned about it in Moscow where he was brought after the arrest.

As a side note, I would like to give a little more time to my dad's life under the Romanian authority. As Lev Vaysman had been climbing the hierarchical ladder in his business, he was also moving to more prestigious neighborhoods 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's) family*

\* Sleigh was one of the winter types of transportation

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 in the cinema. I just finished the 4<sup>th</sup> grade of the primary school located on the street of Stephan the Great across from the Pushkin's park, and was enrolled in the first grade of the gymnasium of Mihai Eminescu, the famous Moldavian poet. The students of gymnasiums 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 controller's flashlight and, after watching 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 my father's fate. In the early spring of 1941, we heard a knock on the door. A strict male voice pronounced that they were our neighbor. When we opened the door, 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, 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 the 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 Kopel. There was only half a year left 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 as an "enemy of the people", the infamous section 58 of the Soviet criminal law, and charged with the economic counterrevolutionary activities.

The charges caused a natural question on how he might have participated in the counterrevolution activities while living in another country (before the Soviet occupation). The officials replied that he was robbing the peasants as a capitalist, and also 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. I learned this terrible truth 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. Dad was sent to the town of Verkhoturie where the temperatures dropped to minus 60 degrees Celsius (-76 F). At first, my father was a logger, the most difficult work in the camps, on equal terms with most of the prisoners. After the war began, the camp started to produce skis for the army. Considering his profession and leadership skills, the camp authorities put my father into an office position where he started to perform the clerical work. A person in charge of the camp 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 day when the Medical Commission was coming from Moscow. This annual commission was the only hope for an 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 of 5 medical doctors. 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 five 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, evaded the Holocaust. On the other hand, many camp prisoners were shot to death during the war as potential traitors. This was especially applied to the real criminals while my father was ironically spared even though 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 Vozvysheński, in Northern Kazakhstan. That year, my father sent us a telegram saying that soon he will be released. My mother, together with other women, had worked in a farm taking care of the cattle,

milking cows, bringing water from the well, while I was helping her shoveling grain, working as a motorist assistant, transporting gasoline 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.