

Vaysman family from Kishinev

Yuliy Vaysman

Translated by Ella Romm and Michael Romm

My grandfather Mendel was a strong and respectful man. He led the entire family where everybody grouped around him. Each Saturday, all the relatives would seat together around the huge table and grandmother Heyved (Yekheved), who was taller than her husband, would stand near him with a bottle of wine that grandpa Mendel drank after praying on the bread. Then, he would wipe his moustache, and Shabbat began. I remember how the table was full of massive geese and turkeys, fish and pastrami, all cooked by my grandma and numerous relatives participating in the meal. Grandpa Mendel was a merchant. He was buying grain from Moldavian farmers and selling it to the mills. Grain was delivered on big wagons and stored in a huge barn in the backyard. This yard stood side by side with my mother family's yard. Grandpa Mendel had established very good relationships with the farmers. When they would bring grain, he fed and treated them with wine, and the peasants respected him. He was very religious and belonged to the synagogue that stood across the road.

My father graduated from a Jewish school that coincidentally was named after a Vaysman, unknown to us. He started to help grandpa Mendel in his business buying grain and selling it to the mills. At some point, grandpa, wishing to get his son more education, sent him to Vienna Polytechnic Institute that my dad had not finished for an unknown reason. He came back to Kishinev to continue working as a trader. When time came to serve in the Romanian army, grandpa Mendel took advantage of the law that allowed him to pay off his son's service. He gave the senior officer some money and a horse, and my dad became a second lieutenant and was released from the duty. However, this ridiculous episode played an ill joke with my father later, when the Soviet authorities charged him with espionage based on his service in the Romanian army that actually never happened.

The Meites and Vaysman families lived side by side, and after my parents got married, they stayed in grandmother Tseytl'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 two-bedroom apartment on Prunkulovskaya Street in the yard of Mr. Katz. In this apartment, my brother Fima was born in 1934. Soon after his birthday, we moved to the four-bedroom apartment on the 2nd floor in the same building. At the age of 4, Fima fell from the second floor window. It seemed that he lost his balance while I had turned away. I tried to grab his leg unsuccessfully, able to catch only a shoe that stayed in my hand. He fell directly into the flower pot, which obviously softened his fall. I ran outside and brought him home. Luckily, uncle Kopel had walked by, and so he called Dr. Urbanovich, our family doctor. There were no consequences to the fall, except for a scar. This outcome significantly diminished a sense of guilt that I experienced after this accident.

As a child, I had a nanny named 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's suits in 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 built in honor of the Russian victory over Napoleon in 1812. It was a type of middleclass apartment with four bedrooms and a piano in one of them. Renting this apartment meant that my father had reached a certain level in his commercial enterprise. My mother always had a maid and we lived happily until 1940 when the Soviets arrived in Bessarabia.

Uncle David, my father's brother also participated in the business of my grandfather Mendel, albeit, to a lesser extent. Being a handsome young man, he loved to be surrounded by beautiful women. His future wife Ester was one of them. My uncle's fate turned out to be similar to the fate of my father – they both were arrested by NKVD.

In the beginning of the war, uncle David was sent to Siberia for participating in the Zionist movement and for the so called economic counter-revolution. After his release way after the war, he settled in Lvov, Ukraine, where his family lived at that time.

Let me turn to the memories of uncle David's daughter Bima who writes: "Dad was arrested in 1941 by the NKVD for Zionist activities. According to him, he was an activist of Maccabi society. This Kishinev organization actively supported the repatriation of Jews to Israel, and dad was helping people moving to Palestine with fake documents. He served in Siberia (Republic of Komi, the city of Solikamsk) chopping woods for more than 6 years. In the harsh conditions of survival, he suffered from severe frost bites on the legs which affected his health through the rest of the life. He came back with no right to leave near the major cities, as people were saying, "no closer than the 101 kilometer" (from Moscow). At the end, he was officially rehabilitated from all prior charges but the certificate came years later. (An interesting coincidence: dad was released and died on the Victory Day**, although years apart.)

My father's younger brother, Kopel, was not repressed by the Soviets. However, his personal life has evolved very dramatically. He was married three times. His first wife Rosa came from a wealthy family. Rosa and Kopel lived nearby, on the Pavlovskaya Street. I remember a comfortable mansion with beautiful furniture. When the war began, Rosa was not able to flee Kishinev and ended up in the ghetto together with her little daughter Tanya, who was later brutally murdered by the Nazis. An elderly doctor working there helped Rosa to survive in the ghetto. After the war, Rosa became his wife out of a sense of duty, but they were soon repressed as unreliable survivors of the ghetto and exiled to Siberia. There, they had a boy, who died in early childhood. After the war, I saw Aunt Rosa just once, when she came to visit my mother.

As for uncle Kopel, he served in Iran in time of the war, where the Soviet troops occupied the northern part of the country. Together with the British troops, they carried out a corridor of assistance under the Lend-Lease**. I remember him in the American leather coat upon returning to Kishinev after the war. In 1944, Kopel managed to find us in Northern Kazakhstan through the Buguruslan Agency***.

Moreover, he miraculously found the addresses of two other brothers who were serving terms in Siberia and we, being in the Northern Kazakhstan, received a letter from my father. Obviously, the fate

provided so that one of the brothers stayed free to bring back together all the Vaysmans who were scattered all over the country in those terrible years.

In peacetime, uncle Kopel worked in "Zagotzerno" together with my father. There, he met his second wife, Maria, with whom he lived on the Pirogov Street. After Maria's death, uncle Kopel married for the third time. His third wife, Lea, had worked in the prestigious food shop on the Lenin Street and supplied all the relatives with scarce groceries. Uncle Kopel also worked in a grocery store on the Kostyuzheny Highway.

After the Aunt Lea's death, uncle Kopel stayed alone. My cousin Galya, who lived nearby, was helping him with the housework. One time, nobody opened the door. His Gipsy neighbors broke the door and found uncle Kopel seated in an armchair near a TV still turned on. He was dead. His difficult life and lonely death deserve regret and sympathy.

Not to finish on a sad note, let's remember that the Vaysman brothers loved football and, together with us, the kids, and even with their wives, had not missed a single match at the Kishinev Stadium. I and uncle David rooted for Dynamo of Tbilisi, a Georgian team. My brother Fima's favorite was Dynamo of Moscow, and uncle Kopel preferred Spartak of Moscow. Altogether, they rooted for Burevestnik of Kishinev.

* The Victory Day – the Victory in WW2 in USSR was celebrated on May 9.

** The Lend-Lease policy, formally titled An Act to Promote the Defense of the United States, was an American program to defeat Germany, Japan and Italy by distributing food, oil, and materiel between 1941 and August 1945 (Wikipedia).

***Buguruslan Agency was an agency in the town of Bururuslan, Orenburg region of Russia, that helped people to find each other during and after the WW2.