

## Meites Family

Yuliy Vaysman

Translated by Ella Romm and Viktoriya Titova

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



Tseytl Averbuch (Meites)

Yoil Meites

The city of Kishinev was first mentioned in 1436. After the war with Napoleon in 1812, Kishinev and all of Bessarabia became a part of the Russian Empire until 1918. After the First World War, it was taken by Romania. In 1940, due to the rearrangement of the European territories between Germany and the USSR, Bessarabia (now called Moldavia) became the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (one of 15 republics of the USSR). Then, it gained independence as the state of Moldova in 1991.

Grandfather Yoil Meites came from a family of rabbis, and grandmother Tseytl was (by a family legend) a descendant of the famous rabbi Ben Sarah who was born in 1791 in Poland.

Yoil Meites was born in the town of Balta, Bessarabia (near Odessa, Ukraine) which was a small outpost on the northern border of the Ottoman Empire (in Turkish *Balta* means an axe). From the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, most of the townspeople were Jews. The city survived two pogroms, a plague and a major flooding during this time. According to the Bessarabian archives, Meites family moved from Balta to Kishinev in the late 19th century.

Grandfather Yoil had a family business that mainly consisted of collecting, utilizing and selling secondary materials (mostly clothes) to factories. After his death (around 1925), his wife Tseytl and the children

(mostly his son Kolman) were running the business. I remember the piles of worn cloths in the backyard and the workers who, with primitive machines, were packing it into countless bags. I also recall the animal bones that were processed into bone coal and sold to a sugar factory as an adsorbent. Grandfather Yoil ran his business together with his half-brother Yosef. While on a business trip in Warsaw, Yosef was accidentally killed by police in a crossfire with bandits. My great-grandmother Esther was married twice, once to a religious widower with children, and Yosef was a son from a previous marriage. Esther herself ran the business trading lubricants. She died at old age of pneumonia. Yosef had four children. His wife Aidl died young of cancer. After her tragic and unexpected death, the care of Yosef's family was placed on Yoil's shoulders, who by then already had 3 sons, Yankel, Eliyahu, Kolman, and two daughters, Clara and Genya. Successful business allowed Yoil not only to provide the food for a large family but also to educate all the boys. Even one of his nieces, who had shown interest in knowledge, completed 4 grades of the elementary school even though education for girls was not popular in those days.

Meites' house was located on the outskirts of Kishinev, on Pavlovskaya Street, next to the railway station Visternicheny, on a small river Byik. There were large rooms filled with heavy wooden furniture. Each summer Yoil sent his family out of 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-years-old boy for 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 made up one third of all households in Kishinev were destroyed. The Kishinev pogrom received a great public outcry in Europe and Russia in the beginning of the 20th century. A famous Russian writer Lev Tolstoy and professors of the Moscow University Vladimir Vernadskiy and Sergey Trubetzkoy accused the Russian state of acquiescence of the murderers.

In the United States, my daughter met Mabel Meites, a widow of Professor Joseph Meites, my second cousin. In 1920, his father immigrated to the United States along with his family. Prof. Joseph Meites became a major American neurophysiologist who studied the processes of aging. His studies served as the basis for his students Guillemin, Schally, and Yalow, the winners of the Nobel Prize in Physiology in 1977. Prof Meites' brother Samuel became an American biochemist, historian of medicine and specialist in lab diagnostics.

Now let's go back to my grandfather Yoil Meites. His second son Kolman, who was also involved in the family business, was a solid man with a smile. I remember his petite wife Pesya wearing her colorful robe. On the July 28, 1940, after the Soviets occupied Bessarabia and entered Kishinev, Kolman Meites and his wife were arrested and sent into exile where Kolman died of typhus in the town of Samarkand (Uzbekistan). Grandmother Tseytl escaped such a fate because, luckily, she was not at home when the NKVD\*arrested her son.

The eldest son of Yoil Meites, Ilyusha (Eliyahu Meitus, a famous Hebrew poet in the future), displayed great interest in literature and was sent to study at the Sorbonne University in Paris which he later left unfinished due to the outbreak of the First World War.



*Eliyahu Meites*

Continuing his education in Petrograd University, Ilyusha joined the other Jewish poets of Russia led by Khaim Bialik, a poet who wrote in Hebrew and Yiddish. During the revolution, Ilyusha was on the Interim Government's side but grandfather Yoil saved his son from the upcoming upheaval in Petrograd by transferring him to the Odessa University closer to home. After the so called *Brest Peace Accord\**, Bessarabia (Moldova) was ceded to Romania, and Ilyusha was told to return to Kishinev immediately to 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 Russian border. Eliyahu Meites became a Director of the Jewish gymnasium\*\* in Soroki in 1921, and then went to Palestine with his second wife Lisa in 1935.

There, he worked as a teacher, and also published his poems and translations. The first poem in Hebrew ("Lilith") was published in 1910 in the magazine "haShiloah" with support from Khaim Bialik. In Palestine and later, when it became the state of Israel, he published several poetry books, a large anthology of contemporary poetry, and memories of his childhood and youth years in Kishinev. He also gained 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 lyrics: "You're so tender, you're so gentle, as if you were woven from the rays of the moon..." We possess 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 a living gem..." by Sheli Fain from Canada:

I am like a living gem 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 Kishinev, he brought a colorful oriental dress for my mother and a book of postage stamps for me. This caused me to begin collecting stamps, although the first collection unfortunately completely disappeared during the World War II. In 1946, I started collecting again. Now, my collection has thousands of stamps and is waiting for my disciples.

During the war and especially the harsh post-war years, we repeatedly received parcels from the Red Cross with clothing and food, and, it seemed to me, all that was coming from my uncle in Palestine. However, that was not the case. My uncle Ilyusha explained that, while working as a teacher and financing his own books, he was not able to help us. I remember how my father sent a few packages with paper to Palestine for the publishing purposes.

Eliyahu Meites died in 1978, one year earlier than my father. Strangely, his son Darrel died on the same day as my brother in 1992. The grandchildren and great-grandchildren of Eliyahu Meites are still living in Tel Aviv where one of the streets was named after him.



Eliyahu Meitus Street in Tel Aviv

The youngest Yoil's son Yankel died at the age of 20 of complications following his bike accident.

Yoil's daughter Klara died of childbirth, leaving a baby girl Esther in the care of her father. In 1939, Esther was visiting us in Kishinev, and I felt in love for the first time in my life. By then, my father had rented a 4-bedroom apartment on Prunkulovskaya Street (which continued as General Inzov Street). General Inzov was a Governor of Bessarabia during the famous Russian poet A. Pushkin's exile in Kishinev. Esther 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 Esther's death. At the age of 16, she had married a Romanian engineer. In 1940, the fascist regime of General Antonescu came to power in Romania. In 1941 or 1942, Esther and her husband tried to escape from the regime on a ship that sank in the Black Sea. Perhaps, it was the Bulgarian ship "Struma", that was evacuating the Jewish refugees to Palestine but 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 at the beginning of the century because she remembers episodes related to the 1903 pogrom.

\*NKVD - People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs during the era of Joseph Stalin

\*\* A gymnasium is a type of school with a strong emphasis on academic learning, and providing advanced secondary education in some parts of Europe (Wikipedia)