

Grandparents. Grand stories. The closest stories from World War II
By Agachi Ana

My grandparents found themselves at the heart of turbulent events, where history left its deepest scars. They endured famine, war, and repression—not for glory, but for survival. Their fates were shattered and rebuilt countless times, and the sacrifices they made give me the strength today to tell their story.

War tore families apart, pushed brothers and fathers into opposing trenches, and reduced people to mere numbers in a bloody conflict. Simion Bantaș (my maternal grandmother's father) and Tănase Băbălău (my paternal grandmother's father) fought under the Soviet banner, while Vladimir Cernăuțan (my maternal grandfather's father) stood with the Romanians as early as 1939. When he returned home, he knew that speaking the truth about which side he had fought on was a luxury he could not afford—he hid his past, living in constant fear of being discovered and punished by the Soviets.

In the USSR, military service was mandatory for all fit 18-year-old boys—two years in the land forces and three years in the naval fleet. After my great-grandfathers endured the horrors of World War II, the following generations continued to serve in the military, though not on the front lines. My uncle Vasile Agachi was assigned to the border guard naval troops on the Kamchatka Peninsula, my grandfather Gheorghe completed his military service in the Sevastopol naval troops until 1953, and my grandfather Alexandru Cernăuțan served in the artillery troops from 1968 to 1970.

For the Agachi family (my paternal grandfather's side), war brought not only hardship but also death. In 1941, a German bomb fell on their home in the village of Pelinia, Drochia district—not as part of any strategic attack, but purely to spread suffering. My great-grandmother, Anica Agachi, was killed instantly, while my grandfather Gheorghe, then a child, was gravely wounded. A German soldier found him in the ruins and, in an unexpected act of humanity amidst an inhumane war, took him to the hospital in Bălți, where he ordered the doctors to treat his broken leg instead of amputating it. Because of that, my grandfather was able to walk on both feet for the rest of his life.

The 1946–1947 famine in Bessarabia was not just a humanitarian catastrophe but also a tool of political oppression, used to weaken and control the population. Hundreds of thousands perished, and the survivors resorted to desperate measures to stave off hunger. Food was a distant memory. Instead, people boiled goosefoot, pigweed, and green barley, ate sow thistle and whatever animals they had left. Cases of cannibalism even emerged. My families bartered carpets, clothes, and whatever possessions they had left for mere crumbs. The Cernăuțan family traded a carpet for a bowl of wheat, while the Băbălău family exchanged a bundle of clothes for dried sugar beet scraps. My great-grandfather Tănase Băbălău, in a desperate attempt to keep some food for his family, hid wheat in a wine barrel, which he hoisted into the attic and removed the ladder—knowing full well that if discovered, he, his wife, and their five children could have been deported to Siberia. During the famine, my grandfather Alexandru Cernăuțan's family lost two children—a two-year-old girl and a newborn boy—to starvation.

Collectivization was yet another blow. People lost their right to their own land, their own harvest, and their own labor. My paternal grandparents were stripped of everything they owned—18 hectares of land, entire dreams turned into state property. My grandfather Gheorghe

Agachi, forced to work as a tractor driver in the kolkhoz, toiled to exhaustion. One night, fatigue overcame him, and he collapsed onto the railroad tracks, face to face with death. The train stopped at the last moment, but to the Soviets, the fault was his alone, and he was sentenced to six months in prison.

Forced industrialization in the Moldavian SSR turned sugar factories into pillars of the local economy. My maternal grandparents, Alexandru Cernăuțan and Eugenia Bantaș, spent their lives working in this industry. They met at the Bălți sugar factory, married after two months, and in 1972 were relocated to the factory in Alexăndreni. My grandfather, studying remotely at the Technical University of Vinnytsia, became the head of the thermal power plant that supplied both the factory and the town of Biruința, which was built around it. My grandmother worked for 15 years in the water testing laboratory, but exposure to chemicals worsened her genetic predisposition to asthma, forcing her to quit. My grandfather continued working even after the factory was shut down in 1994, when it was taken over by the German company Südzucker Moldova, later becoming a logistics and packaging center.

From the earliest school years, as my parents told me, children in the USSR were taught that they lived in the most just and prosperous country, unlike the “unfortunate” ones in capitalist states. In first grade, they received a badge with Lenin’s face and became Little Octobrists; three years later, they were inducted as Pioneers. At the Pioneer slogan “Be ready!” each child responded, “Always ready!” At 14, they were “voluntarily” required to join the Komsomol after an oral exam about the Party and the Union. The most active members could, at 21, apply to join the Communist Party—again, through an exam. Komsomol groups held regular meetings where they discussed the “successes” of the state, capitalism’s failures, and the faults of those who did not conform. Without Komsomol membership, access to higher education was impossible, making loyalty to the regime a prerequisite for a young person’s future. Freedom was an empty word, and their future was a path already written for them.

Starting in 1940, my family endured immense hardships, losing brothers, sisters, and parents along the way. The communist totalitarian system controlled people’s minds until they came to love the regime and desire nothing else. Thus, all the principles of totalitarianism were fulfilled: the Soviet man was created—one who thought and acted as dictated to him, a result of mass conformity and manipulation in all aspects of life. Because of this, many people still support certain socialist ideas, deeply implanted in them and passed down to their children.

Today, I sit here writing these lines because my family endured. Because of their sacrifices, I exist. I carry their memory in every word, in every thought. They suffered hunger, fear, and injustice so that I could live without the chains that bound them. And by writing this, I do not only honor them—I ensure that their story will not be forgotten.