

Memoirs of Great-Grandparents Varvara and Emilian

Before the ceding of Northern Bukovina and Bessarabia on June 28, 1940, great-grandmother Varvara Popescu lived in Cernăuți, Northern Bukovina. She was the director of the girls' high school and a respected figure in the community. Varvara lived with her husband, Popescu Emilian, a devoted lawyer and a doctor in law and philosophy, who studied at the universities of Vienna and Iași. Emilian was also a hero of the First World War, having fought against the Bolsheviks. He was decorated with the "Bărbăție și Credință" (translated as "Manhood and Faith") medal, complete with swords and the Siberia cap, a symbol of his direct contribution in the battle for Siberia.

Life in Cernăuți was typical of a cosmopolitan and modern city. The great-grandparents lived on Iancu de Flondor Boulevard, right in the center of the city. Every morning, the street was sprinkled with water that carried the scent of roses. Although it may seem like a time long past, the world there was more modern than one might think. They had a telephone, and an electric trolleybus passed in front of their house. People went to theaters, movies, and football matches. On birthdays, they ordered cakes and pastries from Vienna, which arrived the same day by airplane from Cernăuți Airport—a service that seems like a precursor to modern delivery apps.

On that fateful day, a heavy and terrible news reached them: Romania had decided to cede Northern Bukovina and Bessarabia to the Soviet Union. They learned that the city of Cernăuți was to be handed over to Soviet troops by the end of the evening. Overcome with deep panic, Varvara and Emilian made a desperate decision. They quickly gathered a few precious items from their home, only what they could carry, and loaded them into a truck. Their few belongings were taken to the train station to be loaded onto a freight train, marking a sudden and painful departure from a place full of lifelong memories.

In the chaos of that day, their home was left behind, with nearly all its treasures, memories, and the fruits of a lifetime of work. Losing their house meant more than just losing material things; it erased years of love, hard work, and shared moments. Many of their close friends and neighbors did not escape such a cruel fate. Some were deported to Siberia, and others were executed with a single shot to the neck.

After fleeing, Varvara and Emilian found refuge in Romania. They lived with relatives and friends, holding on to hope until 1941. That year, Romanian troops liberated Cernăuți from Soviet control. With a timid hope, they returned home only to find that their house had been devastated. All their belongings had been stolen by the communists, leaving behind empty walls and shattered memories.

They worked hard and spent large sums of money to repair the damage. Slowly, they tried to rebuild their life, but happiness did not last long. On March 30, 1944, just two years and a few months later, the city was occupied again by the Bolsheviks, who came with force and fought fiercely for control. This time, the struggle was not for memories or belongings—it was a desperate fight for survival. Bombs fell from Soviet airplanes, and in the midst of that terror, Varvara and Emilian managed to board the last train leaving Cernăuți station headed south.

That day was filled with deep sorrow. Many brothers, sisters, friends, and other loved ones lost their lives. Some died in fierce battles, while others were summarily executed by the Bolsheviks. The cruelty of that day touched even the most innocent. Women and children suffered terribly; houses were completely looted by Bolshevik gangs, and women were brutally violated. The horror of that day left wounds that never healed.

When they arrived in Romania after their second escape, freedom was still not complete. The country was under the control of Soviet troops who imposed the communist regime for many years. In Romania, they searched for a stable place to settle. Forced out of Bucharest by Allied bombings, they decided to move to a small town in Transylvania called Brad, known for its history of gold mines. Even as they worked hard to rebuild their life and welcomed a newborn daughter, political persecution continued to follow them. For a long time, great-grandfather Emilian had no income, since he was unable to practice law, while great-grandmother Varvara struggled to secure a teaching position at a small school. They lived in constant fear of arrest and being sent to a labor camp by the new communist power. Despite all their efforts, they could not escape another abuse by the communists, who forced them to pay for the few belongings they had brought from Cernăuți, under the absurd claim that these items belonged to the Soviet people.

For 45 years, Romania lived a nightmare under communist rule. Emilian died in 1977, never seeing the end of that regime and never reuniting with their home

and the remaining relatives in Cernăuți. Varvara, however, lived until 1996. In the last years of her life, she witnessed the fulfillment of her greatest dream: a free and democratic Romania. In the years after the fall of communism, only partial answers were found about what happened to many of the friends and family members left behind. She learned that some had left for other countries, such as Israel, America, or Argentina. Others managed to survive deportation to Siberia and returned home. Sadly, for some, it was known only that they were killed, and despite sustained efforts, their graves could not be identified.

This memoir tells the painful story of my great-grandparent's loss, struggle, and survival. It reminds us of a time when a family, living their life happily, was suddenly forced to leave their home in haste, when friends and relatives faced a cruel fate, and when hope was pushed to its limits. Yet, beyond all the pain and destruction, Varvara's and Emilian's lives remain a testament to the fragility of our current way of life. Their journey, from being a respected family in Cernăuți, through the chaos of forced departure and loss, to finally witnessing a free Romania, remains a powerful memory of the price of freedom and the strength of the human spirit for all who have known them and for all who have gotten to learn their story.