

## The memory of heroism and the official recognition of sacrifice: from the front of the Second World War to the socialist era

By Andreea-Denisa Borș

The history of a family is like an unwritten book, but full of stories, emotions and life lessons, and the last visit to my grandmother, the being who looks after the history of our family, helped me to explore the memories and stories related to my family and homeland. Here, in my grandmother's house, where time seems to stand still, I learned with amazement about my great-grandfather, a man who lived through difficult times, but and through a significant period of Romania's history. His memory brought me in front of some precious symbols: his military decorations, which were kept with reverence in the box of our family's memories, waiting to be revealed to the story of the descendants. These are not just simple objects of material value, but true testimonies of the tumultuous period, but also of the life lived in the service of the country. Each of these tells a story about sacrifice, about the desire to defend your country and about the official recognition of heroism.

In the history of any nation, the objects that bear the imprint of a significant past are not just simple remains, but true testimonies of the events that marked the destiny of a people. The decorations and medals, as symbols of merits and sacrifices, constitute a true heritage. My grandmother handed me the box of our family's memories, and I discovered five military decorations that belonged to my great-grandfather, marking the evolution of the way society Romanian recognized and honored the sacrifices made by those who lived and fought in the troubled historical periods of the 20th century. I looked at them, touching them lightly, feeling the inscriptions and the cold metal, as if I had touched the past.

These military decorations, which were awarded both for acts of bravery during the Second World War, as well as for contributions under the socialist regime, are a bridge between two worlds: one marked by war and another by political and economic transition. These provided me with a thorough understanding of the process of building collective memory and of the way in which the Romanian state understood both heroism in the face of external invasion and loyalty to the regime established after 1945. Through these lines, I emphasize the importance of these objects in the context of family and personal history, in order to understand the deep connection between daily life and national history.

The decorations that belonged to my great-grandfather reflect not only his personal experiences, but also the historical developments of Romania from the conflict periods and after the war.

When he found out that he was drafted into the army of the Second World War, my great-grandfather was a young man who did not fully understand the meaning of war. When he received the news, he was in his native village, Tărlungeni, belonging to Galati county. He was afraid for the future, but also for his family. He left with a heavy heart, but with the duty to defend his country. He was sent to the Eastern Front, in Russia. He remembered from the first day of the battle, how a shell fell near them, then he truly understood that the war was not the same as in the stories told by the old men. They were all trembling, but they had no time to be afraid. He said that he grabbed his rifle and fired. He didn't even know if he achieved anything, but he knew that from then on he stopped being a child. He fought for weeks in Odessa, for every square meter of land, where he was fired from everywhere. The Russians had well-dug trenches, and the Romanians ran among the bullets like shadows. Everywhere was a picture full of smoke and blood, which the great-grandfather could never forget. Every time he remembered that the war changed him profoundly. That he no longer saw the world the same way after going through this period. He returned home with a different outlook on life. He learned to value every moment of life, he learned that life is fragile. Each decoration is proof that he did everything he could to contribute to a better future for us. When he looked at them, the great-grandfather didn't think only of him, but of all those who were by his side in those times, especially those who never got to receive such recognition. The military decorations made him feel proud and grateful that he had the opportunity to be part of a great history and the importance for our country. In the following lines, I will present the military decorations belonging to my great-grandfather, following his contribution in the Second World War.

### 1. Commemorative Cross of the Second World War

Among the first objects of historical value that my great-grandfather received in the Second World War type was the Commemorative Cross, one of the most important distinctions he had received. My grandmother carefully took it out of the box, gently caressing the shiny and cold metal, testifying to the fact that my great-grandfather did not talk much about what he lived in the war, but he knew that every night was a struggle for him. I also wore the cross in the palm, imagining my great-grandfather's hands proudly holding it once. What was he thinking when he held it? While we are talking, I imagine a young man dressed in a military uniform, leaving

home with the hope that he will return. During the discussion, we learned that this Commemorative Cross is a symbol of heroism and sacrifice, but also of the extremely troubled period for Romania. Instituted during the Antonescu regime, this decoration reflects Romania's active involvement in the Second World War.

This distinction was awarded to those who fought in the Romanian army during the Second World War. The Commemorative Cross was instituted in 1941 to honor the sacrifices made by Romanian soldiers on the western and eastern fronts. This decoration reflects, on the one hand, the heroism and dedication of those who fought for the defense of the glia, and on the other hand, the realities of a world conflict that deeply affected not only the country, but the whole world. My great-grandfather, receiving this distinction, was not only a direct participant on the front, but also a witness to the political and social transformations of that period. This reflects an official recognition of his sacrifice and that of many other Romanian soldiers who, although they were not always considered heroes, contributed significantly to the defense of the nation in the face of a devastating conflict.

If it could speak, this medal would tell the story of long marches, battles in extreme conditions and the loss of comrades in battle. Although after the war my great-grandfather's life continued in a totally different regime, this Commemorative Cross remains a symbol of full duty.

## 2. „War veteran” badge

Another object of great significance is a symbol of my great-grandfather's past, more precisely the „War Veteran” Badge. This is a symbol of respect for those who participated in armed conflicts and especially in the Second World War. The appreciation of war veterans was during the communist period a way to maintain the link between the heroic past of the nation and the ideals of the new socialist man. These veterans were seen as a bridge between the historical traditions of the country and the modern ideals of the socialist state.

In the case of my great-grandfather, the badge is proof of the recognition of his value in the context of the war, but also of an official recognition by the socialist regime of those who participated in the conflicts of the past. At the same time, this badge is also a sign of the link between the historical past and the communist regime, a form of symbolic understanding between the heroism of the war and the achievements of the post-war period. Although he did not talk much about the past, the great-grandfather he said that war changes people. Aveeta wore the badge proudly at commemorative events. My grandmother remembered how, on

Heroes' Day, great-grandfather would put on his best suit, arrange the decorations on his chest and go to the ceremonies.

Now, I look with honor and pride at the decorations spread on the table and understand that they are not just objects, but living stories, testimonies of a man who lived his life with dignity and courage. They reflect the transformations that Romania went through and show that the state rewarded heroism.

Following the discussions with my grandmother about the values of our nation's history, I realized that it is much more profound to taste the „fruit” of history by hearing the living speech, about what happened and what our ancestors lived through, through their sacrifice for the country, which cannot be compared by observing the objects behind a simple showcase of a museum, devoid of breath, not knowing the story behind the sacrifice the soldier. But, in the cold silence of the historical pieces, the whispers of the unknown heroes of the nation can be heard from the museum windows, wanting someone to discover their living memory.

I left my grandmother's house with a treasure much more valuable than a medal: a life lesson, the fact that history is not only what we learn from books, but also what we live through the stories of our ancestors. For me, as a descendant of my great-grandfather, these decorations represent a valuable lesson about sacrifice, loyalty and adaptation. I understood that heroism does not only mean great deeds on the battlefield, but also the courage to move forward, regardless of obstacles.

## World War II Commemorative Cross and "War Veteran" Badge

