

Childhood during the Second World War

by Victor Hendres

Peace and war are not selfish, they live together all the time. We love peace, but we don't want to give up war. My mother used to say that she is the first generation of many who have not experienced war directly and that she would like it to stay that way. War keeps haunting us... A family of Ukrainian refugees moved near our house, an opportunity to remember family stories again.

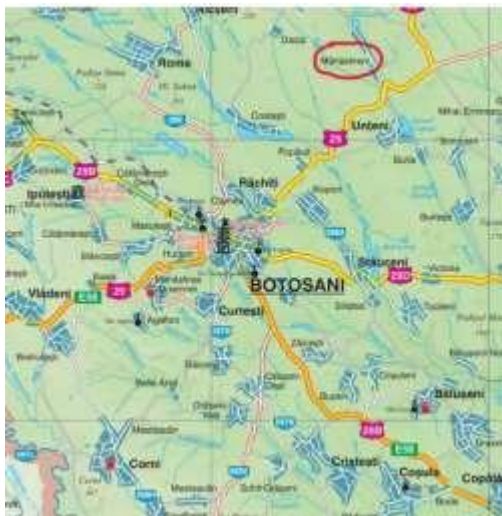
My paternal grandparents were born shortly before the outbreak of World War II. My grandmother is no longer alive and did not tell me about the war. My maternal grandparents were born during the war, and my grandfather, who is no longer alive, was a refugee. I heard stories about this war, and my mother told me many things from what her grandmother, with whom she lived, told her. Many names have been forgotten, many stories may have gotten mixed up. I was born in a city that was on the front line, a military operation bears its name, but it seems to me that we do not do everything we should to honor the memory of our ancestors.

What was life like for people during the war? We know more about strategy and weapons, but little about the daily lives of ordinary people. That's why I talked to my grandparents about the war. My grandmother, Eugenia Puiu, was too young to remember the war, having been born in December 1943, but she told me the stories she heard, too. My paternal grandfather, Vasile Hendreș, born in January 1937, told me about his childhood during the war, in a village in northern Moldova, near the city of Botoșani, in Romania.



Me, my grandfather Vasile Hendreș, and my grandmother, Eugenia Puiu, on January 24th 2025, when my grandpa turned 88

Who is my grandfather? His parents were Vasile Hendreș, born in 1906, and Anica Hendreș, born in 1901. His grandfather was of German origin, his parents being from Germany (father) and Austria (mother). His family name was Wilhelm, but during World War I, when the Romanians and their Russian allies fought against the Germans, he changed it to his wife's family name, Hendreș, which sounded less German. They were afraid because the Russians (the Romanians' allies) were looking for Germans and killing them, so they changed their names. His grandfather Wilhelm came with a group of craftsmen to teach the Romanians a trade. The boyars in the area had written a memorandum to King Carol I and requested this. Carol brought about 22 craftsmen, three in the Galați area, to Tecuci. He married Ana, who was a seamstress, in Romania and his father was born in Tecuci. Then they came to Mănăstireni. There was also a family of German origin in Mănăstireni, who had a mill, with whom they were friends.



Mănăstireni is a little village near Botoșani, in the North Eastern part of today's Romania. During the Second World War, an important military operation took place here, operation Uman-Botoșani (spring of 1944). Unfortunately, Romanian and German armies lost

Vasile Hendreș sr. was at the front for only three months, in 1943, being left at home because he had four children. The grandfather remembers how much he missed his father (he was about six years old) and how he looked into the distance, maybe he saw his father coming. Many men from the village were at the front. An uncle went as far as Cotu Donului (where many Romanian soldiers lost their lives in a catastrophic battle), but he was lucky, they left him at home because he had many children. A man from the village, Fetcu, was taken prisoner by the Russians, they took him to Siberia. He was about 35-40 years old and he stayed in Siberia for



seven years. When he returned, he sang for about 3-4 days on the porch of the house, out of joy, because he liked to play the violin. He was happy to be back with his wife and daughter.

Grandpa remembers the German soldiers who used to pass through the village (they didn't station troops there), retreating from the front. They would stay for a few hours, in cars, with tents on their carts, they wouldn't enter people's houses. They had small balls, with which they played a kind of tennis. The soldiers would call the children, caress them, they were friendly, they would give them candy and chocolate. They didn't eat from people, they cooked for themselves. People would give them products, they never took from people by force. German soldiers would cook their chickens, lambs, rams, they had small round cylinders with burners. When grandpa went to Botoșani one time, on foot, he saw German soldiers stationed in the field at Răchiți, at the beginning of 1944. They were there with cars and carts. He does not remember German soldiers in the city.

One of the most impressive memory from childhood was from the spring of 1944, when a German plane flew very low over the village, close to the roofs of the houses, hovering over a house, as if it was looking for something (probably during the Uman-Botoșani operation). Grandpa (and probably other children) were afraid but also very curious.

In the spring of 1944, the Soviet armies arrived on Romanian territory. For the people, things got worse. Grandma Eugenia Puiu, born in a village on the banks of the Prut River, Zahoreni, was kidnapped by a Russian soldier (she was about one year old). Her mother ran after the soldier, who was on a motorcycle with a sidecar, and he left her on the side of the road, in the field. All the women in the village were terrified of the Russian soldiers, because rapes were a habit. Great-grandmother was about to suffocate in the corn stack where her mother-in-law hid her so that she would not be caught by the Russian soldier who wanted to rape her. He stuck his bayonet in the stack to see if she was hiding there.

When the Russians came, things were different for my grandfather and his family, too. The parents did not want to take refuge, father Vasile said that God would take care of them. There was a man from the village who took refuge. He was with some wealth, he had a mill. He lived on the same street, three houses further on, on the right, with his family. They were of German origin and left for fear of the Russians, in the Timișoara area, to a cousin. They returned



to the village in 1946. A family of refugees from Rădăuți, Suceava, who had two beautiful Tyrolean cows, white and yellow, settled in their house. The Russians took their cattle.

The Russians came in the spring of 1944. They didn't stay in the village, they were just passing through. He remembers how a large group of about a hundred soldiers passed by, coming from Unțeni, from the hill, heading towards Botoșani. From time to time, Russians would come to the village. They would check the houses, looking for Germans. One day they came to my grandpa's house, in the good rooms, and looked under the bed to see if there were any Germans hiding. They came in cars, but especially in carts. If they came across sheep, they would take a few. He remembers that around May 1944, maybe later, a little further from the village there was a place where they would put up a cauldron and boil whole sheep, along with their wool, to the disgust of the people in the village.

His father had tractors and plows, a mechanical tractor and one with animal traction, which he worked with. One of the tractors was in the yard and grandfather used to climb into it. One day four carts with Russians had arrived and two Russian soldiers entered the yard. One of the Russians motioned for him to get out and he climbed into the tractor. He had a gun, a kind of big pistol, he looked around the yard and shot two chickens. One of the soldiers was shouting in Romanian and grandfather's mother told him that she would prepare the chickens. She plucked and cleaned the chickens and the Russians took them. They cooked food in the fields, when leaving the village. They often took different things from people, especially corn for the horses, but also drink, they were especially looking for brandy. They didn't beat people, but sometimes they treated women badly (grandfather didn't want to say what they did, but he implied that they raped them). He says that there was a poor woman in the neighborhood, Russian soldiers often went to her (she was a prostitute).

An important part of life is school and it is important to know if children attended school during the war. Grandpa started primary school in 1944. Back in those days children did not go to kindergarden in the rural areas. The school was in the neighboring village, Poiana, which later merged with Mănăstireni. It wasn't very nice at school. In the first grade, he had a teacher who was about 50 years old, who would hit them with a ruler if they didn't know. After the war, two female teachers came, and it was good with them.

During the war, food was a problem as well as other things like coal for heating or clothes. He doesn't remember there being any major food shortages during the war. They had food from the household, they didn't lack. After the war, it was badly, there was famine in 1946 and 1947. They also had diesel for tractors, anyway, only one man in the village still had a threshing machine. People bought from the village store, in tin barrels, not in very large quantities, but it was enough. Anyway, they used carts more or walked. Grandpa remembers walking to town in Botoșani, 12 km away. He was happy when someone would take him in a cart. He would go to town with his mother.

The face of the war was ugly enough even through the eyes of an innocent child.



My grandfather's home in Mănăstireni in 2019 (with me, my mother, others relatives, my grandfather's sister, Olga). The house was restored but it is very similar to what it was during the war