

When Life Turns into a Movie Script...

At the start of the Second World War, Romania hadn't picked a side yet. Even though the Romanians were not participating in any battles, they were still losing territory due to unfavorable international circumstances. When King Carol II abdicated, Ion Antonescu took control of the state and placed Romania in Germany's orbit. And that's where Botoaca Gheorghe's story as an active soldier begins. He had to leave his home and his wife without knowing if he would ever return.

Gheorghe was sent to the northern front to take part in the invasion of the USSR. A group of young men, barely more than boys, were forced to march through the gates of hell to satisfy Hitler's thirst for power. Operation Barbarossa, the invasion that would ultimately decide the outcome of the war, relied just as much on 20-year-olds as it did on battle-hardened soldiers.

At first, things looked promising for the Germans and their allies. They advanced quickly, conquering vast stretches of land, almost reaching Moscow. Gheorghe fought in this campaign until around 1943, when the Soviets began reclaiming their lost territory. The tide of war had turned. The Red Army launched powerful counterattacks, forcing the Germans and their allies to retreat. Gheorghe was caught in one of these attacks and captured alongside two other Romanians. It was a miracle they were taken prisoner and not executed on the spot. The Soviets must have seen through their uniforms and realized they were just young men forced into war. They were taken to a village where they were temporarily held captive before being sent elsewhere. Realizing they would soon be transferred—likely to a labor camp—they began planning their escape. The Soviet troops guarding them celebrated their victories every night, drinking and partying. Noticing this pattern, Gheorghe and his two comrades saw an opportunity. The night before they were scheduled to be moved, they escaped their cell and ran for their lives into the nearby woods. Desperate to get away, they didn't stop running until they reached a village. But they had run in the wrong direction—they were even deeper into Soviet territory. Going back was impossible, so they relied on the kindness of the locals. Most villagers refused to shelter them, fearing the consequences, until they came across an old woman. A devout Christian and a respected figure in the village, she surprised them by offering them refuge in her basement. They spent the night there, undisturbed.

In the morning, the world felt eerily peaceful. Gheorghe went outside to wash his face at a well in the backyard. But as the cold water touched his skin, he felt something even colder press against the back of his head—a gun barrel. The Soviets had found them. The soldiers lined them up in front of the house, ready to execute them on the spot. But then, something incredible happened. The old woman pleaded for their lives. To this day, no one knows exactly what she said—whether she bribed the soldiers or convinced them the prisoners wouldn't survive anyway. But somehow, she saved them.

With a second chance at life, Gheorghe and his friend figured out the safest route home. Miraculously, they encountered few obstacles, avoiding battles and Soviet patrols. Eventually, they reached the Prut River, the natural border between Soviet-occupied territory and Romania. By now, it must have been 1944—Romania had lost its eastern territories to the advancing Soviets.

At the riverbank, they faced their second real challenge. Someone had spotted them and alerted Soviet troops. Only Gheorghe knew how to swim, so he had to ferry his comrades across one by one. He successfully carried the first man to the other side and swam back for the second. But he wasn't fast enough. Before he could reach him, a Soviet soldier shot his friend from a distance. When Gheorghe and the other survivor reached the far bank, they looked back and saw his lifeless body lying on the shore.

At last, the two survivors reached Romanian soil. They parted ways, each heading home. Gheorghe walked for two or three days before finally arriving at his house. When he knocked on his door, his wife didn't recognize him. He had a long, unkempt beard, wild hair, tattered clothes, and was covered in filth. But he was home. He could finally rest in his own bed.

But war does not let its soldiers rest. The very next day, the mayor knocked on his door with terrible news. Gheorghe was ordered back to the frontlines. If he refused, he would be tried for desertion and executed. This time, he fought alongside the Soviets, as Romania had severed ties with Nazi Germany. He took part in the battle to reclaim Transylvania. But war left its mark on him—permanently. A bombshell exploded near him, sending shrapnel into his abdomen. Field doctors treated his wounds, but they couldn't remove the metal fragment. He would carry it inside him for the rest of his life.

Gheorghe's story is a testament to the brutality of war—but also to the kindness that can be found even in the darkest times. The old woman's altruism saved their lives. But her actions would have meant nothing if the Soviet soldiers hadn't first shown mercy. It's a miracle that someone with no battle experience could survive something like this. And yet, Gheorghe's story is just one among countless others.