

## **Paths to destiny: Nicolaie Toader's incredible story**

It was a quiet Sunday evening when I was sitting with my father in the living room, looking at old pictures from his childhood, letters from his time in the army, and many other relics of the past. However, what truly caught my attention and sparked my curiosity were three photographs with somewhat faded images and torn corners. I stared at them for a while and then urged him to tell me more about the people in the pictures. He told me that the three photos dated back to World War II and had belonged to his uncle, Toader Nicolaie. This statement made me want to find out more details about the experience and feelings of people from that time. I asked my father to tell me as much as he could, as he himself had learned these stories from my great-grandmother, his grandmother, who was also the mother of young Nicolaie.

In one of the pictures, his uncle was at the front with his entire company; in another, he was with his platoon comrades; and in the third, he was with his friend Tomoș Simion, a photograph that had been sent to Simion's sister. The third photo was taken in Turda in April 1942, right after they were urgently enlisted, at those born in 1921—the birth year of King Michael—had previously been exempt from military service. Shortly afterward, they were sent to the Eastern Front against Soviet Russia, where they were taken prisoner near the Don Bend and taken to a labour camp, where they were forced into various forms of labour. At one point, they were asked who had carpentry skills. Since Nicolaie came from a family that worked with wood and had knowledge of carpentry, he volunteered, hoping to make his life in the labour camp easier. This decision led to a separation from his fellow villagers. After that, no news of him surfaced for quite some time—until around 1947.

That year my great-grandmother heard that a soldier from Căpuș, a former comrade of Nicolaie had returned. She sought him out, hoping he knew something about her son. He confirmed that he had known Nicolaie and that he was still alive in a labour camp at the end of the war in 1945. According to his account, at one point, the soldiers were ordered to gather in a field with the promise of being released and sent home. However, instead of being freed, they were gunned down, and it was most likely then that Nicolaie lost his life. The soldier from Căpuș had managed to escape and made his way back to Romania on foot from Russia. He only travelled at night to

avoid being caught. When he reached the border and heard people speaking Romanian, he continued his journey home with relief.

My father also told me about a rather strange event linked to folk superstitions and the mindset of villagers from a deeply religious rural world. This happened shortly after his uncle's presumed death. My great-grandmother noticed a flock of crows circling the house. They seemed very agitated and noisy. At first, she dismissed it as insignificant, but eventually, the crows even started flying into the house if they found an open window. She didn't know what to do, so she went to the village priest and told him about this strange occurrence. The priest asked if there was a deceased family member who had not received a proper funeral. She told him that her son had gone to war and never returned, and from what she heard, he passed away. After listening to her story, the priest decided to hold a funeral for Nicolaie, even though the coffin was empty. According to my great-grandmother, the most remarkable thing was that after the funeral, the flock of crows disappeared. Today, no one considers this event credible, seeing it as a merely superstition. However, at that time, people's way of thinking was vastly different, and their faith had a profoundly existential dimension.

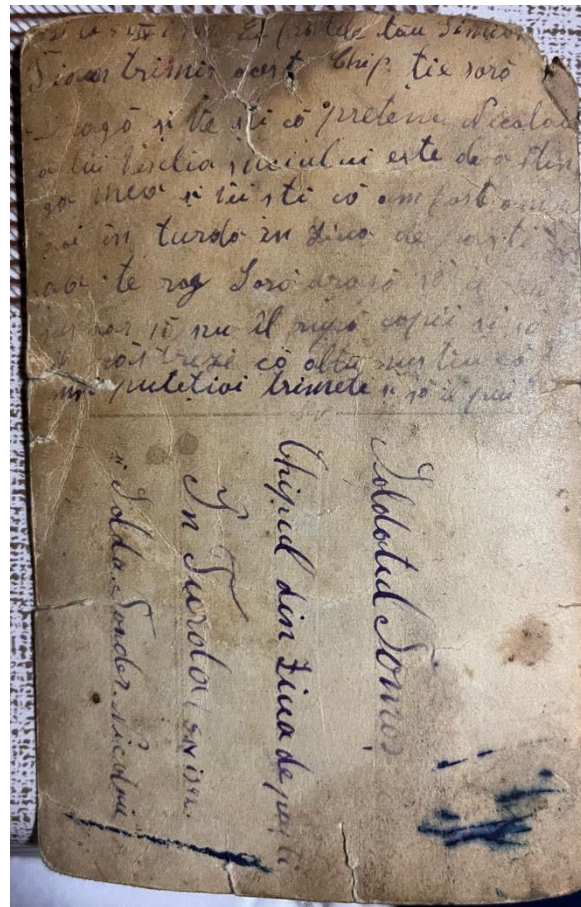
On February 5, 1971, my father, Toader Niculae, was born, who received this name at the insistence of his grandmother, in memory of the young Toader Nicolaie.

Toader Nicolaie and Tomoș Simion



(Turda, 1942)

The back of the photo



“Today, on 5.IV.1942. I, your brother Simion, am sending you this picture, dear sister, so that you will know that my friend Nicolaie, son of Veselica Suciului, is to my left. You will also know that we were [indecipherable] in Turda on Easter Day. Please, dear sister, [indecipherable], but do not let the children tear it, and keep it safe, as I do not know if I will be able to send you another one and [indecipherable] “

“Solider Tomoș Simion  
The picture from Easter Day  
In Turda/ April 5, 1942  
And solider Toader Nicolaie “

