

Interview with Emanuel Ornstein in his home in Brooklyn, New York, November 17th, 2013.

(Leo Ornstein, grandson of Emanuel Ornstein took part in the interview, sometime as an interpreter. Before the interviewed was taped, EO already told a bit of his childhood, his parents etc. I did not take sufficient notes of this.)

BL: In April, 1926, you were born? In Chişinău?

EO: Yes, in Chişinău. (Showing photos in a book, that they had made themselves) And this is my mother, my sister and brother. He perished. He was in the Army, only 18 years, when he perished. In 1942, in Caucasus, in a famous battle in the Caucasus. That is about my brother. Then I was in the army. I was only 17. The first time I was wounded, near Kharkov, and this is after the second wound, I was 18, in Spremberg, in Germany. Around 50 km from Berlin. In the famous battle on Berlin, in April, 1945.

BL: Yes, I have been there, in this battlefield outside Berlin. It is in a big wood.

EO (showing more pictures): Here I was a student. I was a surgery. Here I am with my colleagues during an operation. This is my operating room. Here is my family. This is my father, and my mother, and my uncle. I was decorated. Semiology, semiotic, it is in the book. Ah, this is different, from the military, the commander of my regiment. In Kurskaya, from the famous battle of Kursk, we remained from our regiment only two. Only two alive, and our commander, Kaspersky. This was after 25 years.

LO: So, this was the commander of the regiment, and they were the only two soldiers that survived out of the whole regiment.

EO: This is my colleague Budakin.

LO: This photo was taken 25 years after the battle.

EO: This is my picture. And this is also my commander of the regiment. And here is my wife. And this is my friend.

LO: He was Hero of the Soviet Union, a very high medal.

EO: The highest. (We are looking at more photos, of the family, friends etc.) This is my grand... And this is for you. (He gives me some copies of photos of old buildings in Chişinău.)

BL: This is very interesting. And I have brought with me some maps of Chişinău, some old maps, and I would like you to tell me, where you have lived, before the war, and when you came back. Then I have a lot of photos from old Chişinău. Maybe we could discuss them.

EO: No problem!

LO: And I was only 4 years when we came here, so I remember a bit, but not so much.

BL: Here is a map from 1940. That is in Romanian, with Romanian street names, but the Russian street names are also written, in Romanian transcription. This is the main boulevard.

EO: Yes, Alexandru cel Bun, in the Soviet Union, Lenin. (Shows at the map.) This is Regina Maria, Mihailovscaia, Armeanscaia, here (points at a corner to Sadovaia)

BL: So, you lived at this corner, Sadovaia?

EO: Sadovaia and Armeane. A little house, *malenky*.

BL: Maybe on this side, the southern side?

LO: Yes, that is the side¹. He says, it was a dead end street, and that is where they lived.

EO: I lived here before the war, and after the war, I came back, returned also to this house.

LO: So, after the war, he returned to the same house, and years later, in 1970, they got an apartment on a different street, where they lived from 1970 until they left.

EO: In Botanica. At Prospect Mira.

BL: Now there are new names.

EO: In Romanian, it is Prospect Dacia. (Correct: Bulevard Dacia.) And here is Alexandru cel Bun, Alexandrovsciaia, now Ștefan cel Mare. Here was the monument of Ștefan cel Mare, a big monument. Alexandru cel Bun, Bulgara, oh, near Pushkin, Kafedralny Sobor, the Cathedral. And here is the street Bernardazzi, from the famous architect Bernardazzi. He had the honour, they gave him a street, Bernardazzi. The Primăria, the mayor's residence, the Municipality.

BL: The City Hall. He designed many churches also.

¹ It is a bit unclear in the interview, if they lived at the southeastern or the northwestern side of the street. Also, at the map EO pointed at the corner between Sadovaia (present A. Mateevici) street and G. Brosteanu (present Vasile Alecsandri street). Maybe he pointed wrongly. None of the streets was a "dead end", but maybe he refers to the Armeanscaia (present Armeneasca) street, which continues with a kind of cul-de-sac into the cemetery on the other side of Mateevici street. At the corner Strada Mateevici / Armeneasca is on the south side preserved an old two-storey building with shops in the basement. On the north side, the buildings are probably from after World War II. Maybe the second floor was added in 1947. At the corner Mateevici / Vasile Alecsandri, there is no building at the north side, but a one-storey corner building at the south side. Later I understood from EO, that his childhood home did not exist anymore after the war, and that he then lived at the neighbour ground. This could be on the north side of either present Vasile Alecsandri or Armeneasca street. This should be found out.

LO: Right.

EO: And (pointing at another map of Chişinău) this is only the centre, not all Chişinău, it is only the centre. There was also Botanica, Rîscanovca, Sculianca. (Today: Rîşcani and Sculeni.)

LO: So, the house where they lived afterwards was further outside.

EO: Here is Bulevard Negruzzi and *gara*, railway station. And from railway station, up, begins Botanica, rayon, microrayon.

And in the war: You left Chişinău, before the Romanians came back with the Germans in 1941?

EO: My brother and I escaped from Chişinău on 6th July 1941. Because the fascist military was near Chişinău.

BL: Did you come to the Soviet Union?

EO: To the Soviet Union! After the pact Ribbentrop – Molotov, Bessarabia was occupied, was invaded with the Soviet Army. It was *Sowjetisch*. (Discussions in Russian.) Moldova was a part of the Soviet Union. I was too young for the army. I was in the army from 1943, in Kurskaya battle. In 1941 I was only 15.

BL: Did many of the Jewish people escape in 1941, before the fascists came? The Germans came to the Ukraine, but did you managed to get further east, and not to be caught by the Germans?

EO: In Ukraine was killed all my family², 22 people, my grandparents, my uncle, my aunt, my cousins... In Transnistria, all perished. I, with my brother only, escaped, with a train, in a waggon. (Continuing in Russian.)

LO: So, they swam across the Dniester river, and they kept walking until they came to a train station. And on the train station they managed to catch a train and to go further.

BL: And they were not caught up by the Germans?

LO: Right, and his family was, and they were caught and they were killed, but he and his brother managed to get on the train.

² Before the recorder was put on, EO talked about his parents. If I remember it right, his father was an engineer, and taken to the Soviet Army in 1940 or the beginning of 1941. He took part in the Soviet defense of Chişinău in 1941, but he was killed by a bomb. Then EO's mother, who was a doctor (or nurse?) was evacuated eastwards with the Soviet troops, because they needed her for medical service. It is not clear to me, if EO and his brother escaped eastwards before or after their mother was evacuated, or at the same time. Probably it was shortly before. EO did not tell anything more about the faith of his mother, if she survived the war and if they met again.

BL: And how far did they come with the train?

LO: On the train, to a place near Rostov.

BL: And the Germans did not come there until later?

EO: Near Rostov, a village, Pishanakovskaya. Rostov-na-Donu is on the big river Don. In Ukraina is Dnieper the biggest river, and the second big river is Don. And the biggest river in Russia is Volga. So, we came to Rostov, near the Caucasus. And my brother went to the army. And he fought against the Germans from March to November, 20th November he was killed. (Continuing in Russian.)

LO: Right. So, he says, from March to November he served in the army, once they had escaped. He was providing cover fire for the battalion, because they were surrounded by German troops. So, he stayed behind to provide cover fire while, but he was not able to make it out, so that was when he was killed.

BL: So, you were then quite alone?

EO: I was alone, I came to Bukhara, near Tashkent, to Uzbekistan. I was young, born in 1926, but I was together with those born in 1925. I was 16 years old.

LO: So, after his brother was killed, he was going further alone, and in the town that he told you, he tried to join the army, a year younger than was allowed. So he said that he was one year older than he was. So, after his brother was killed, and he volunteered to go join the army.

BL: I just wonder how you could find out to make your living? You were very young and had no money.

EO: I was in a school internat around one month.

LO: And he says that along the way there were people who were kind, to give them some food, and they could sleep a night here and a night there, and they kept moving, kept moving. There wasn't much to do.

EO: In Bukhara, there was a school internat.

LO: So, right before the army, he visited a school. He was living there, just to have some place to live, and after one month, he went to volunteer to join the army.

BL: So, it was good that also in those hard times, there were helpful people.

LO: Right, people helped them along the way.

BL: Since I am mostly working with the city, Chişinău, I would like to ask you more about your childhood. So, you lived here (pointing at the map)?

LO: That was right here.

EO: At this corner. Drumul Viilor, exact, exact. Sadovaia is our street.

BL: And then I heard that you went to this big school, which is today a museum.

EO: Yes, the Hasdeu School, Liceu Hasdeu³. *Liceu* is high school. High school Hasdeu. Named after a famous Moldovan writer, a poet. And when the Soviet Union occupied Moldova in 1940, the name was changed to Serghei Lazo school, after a Bolshevik. And we remained in the same building, it was the same school.

BL: Was it your first school?

EO: No, it was my second school. The first school was at Sadovaia, at the corner to Gogol Street. And where is Pushkin street? Oh, here is Pushkin street, and the next is Gogol street. This was an elementary school only, first and second class. And then I was transferred to Liceu Hasdeu. It was a small school, only one floor. But Haşdeu was a big building. I went there together with Aroni and Marius. In elementary, it was different.

BL: I know that you were only a child, but do you remember any shops, cafés etc?

LO: He says that there was a few cafés in the city in general. The street Alexandru cel Bun, that street had cafés and restaurants, anything else – very few streets.

BL: Do you remember any names?

EO: Not much – now my wife is waiting with some lunch – we will take a brake.

BL: Here is an old map with the Russian city and the Old Town.

EO: Yes, the city was Russian from 1812 to 1918, then Romanian. During the war it was Soviet, then Romanian, then Soviet and from 1991 Moldova was independent.

BL: Here is Stary Bazar, Piața Veche, the old market place. Do you remember it?

EO: (We talked a bit general about the war.) Maybe Marius and Sam Aroni know better. They were in the ghetto. Ask Aroni. He has a big book on Holocaust in Chişinău.

³ The *Liceul B. P. Hasdeu* was erected in 1888, then as the Boys' Gymnasium nr. 1. The architect was H. Lenskoy. The school director until 1938 was Liviu Marian. The *Chişinău Enciclopedie* (1997) mentions several prominent teachers at the school in interwar years. After the war, the building was used for the Museum of Military Glory. In 1977, the building was severely damaged by the earthquake, and it was impossible to restore it. Instead, it was pulled down and replaced by a copy – the same façades, but different interior – which from 1987 was used for the Museum of Archaeology and History of Moldova.

(BL shows maps of Chişinău Old Town indicating buildings that remain since before World War II, buildings that have vanished since 1940 and buildings that have been erected after 1945. BL shows buildings that will be demolished if a planned new street is implemented, and tells that there is now a growing movement against the street and for preserving the old buildings.)

EO: It is very good to preserve the old city for the future, for future generations, our grandchildren. What is the root from Chişinău. Also, my grandparents were born in Chişinău.

BL: Here is a photo of former Hôtel de Suisse, then at Strada Alexandru cel Bun. It still remains.

EO: Alexandru cel Bun, yes, later Lenin street.

BL: And here is the childrens' hospital, where Marius Cherovici's father worked.

EO: Yes, a small hospital it was. Then they erected a big hospital for children, in the Soviet period.

(We looked at several pictures from central Chişinău, recognized by EO. He did not comment the Lutheran church, demolished in Soviet time. We talked about the City Architect Bernardazzi.)

EO: Bernardazzi, oh yes. He was Italian, originally. He came to Russia. There were architects in St. Petersburg and Moscow. They came from France, from Europe.

BL: And that building, that is a museum today, was it your school? It was demolished and moved and reconstructed.

EO: It was the Princess Dadiani School, and the building was committee central of the *kommunistische* party.⁴

BL: (showing several pictures.) And here is an old photo from present Bulevard Ştefan cel Mare, before the Second World War.

EO: The centre of Chişinău, Ştefan cel Mare, from 1455 to 1504.

BL: At first he was there (referring to the statue), then Ferdinand I was put there (referring to a later statue).

EO: Ferdinand was the father of Carol II, and before Ferdinand was Carol I, of Hohenzollern, he was from Germany, the dynasty from Germany.

⁴ EO refers at another monumental building, located close to his old school. The former Princess Natalia Dadiani Girls' school was erected in 1901, designed by Bernardazzi. It housed in 1944 – 64 the central committee of the communist party of Moldova, and was in 1964 – 74 Pioneer Palace, From 1976 to 1991 it was the museum of the communist party of Moldova. Now it is used by the National Museum of Art.

BL: And in Soviet time, the Bell Tower at the Cathedral was pulled down, but it is now reconstructed. And here (showing a map) is the Old Town with all synagogues and pray houses before the Second World War. There were many small synagogues. Here is Hotel St. Petersburg. Do you remember this house? It was near the Old Bazaar.

EO: I remember, I remember, it was an old building. (He did not continue this)

BL: And this is the old main synagogue. It is changed to the Chekhov theatre today. But the walls of the old synagogue remain inside the new building.

EO: (He commented a text that Spaniol was also a language of Jews in Chişinău.) But, I think this is not correct. Spaniol was not a language in Chişinău. Yiddish, Russian, Moldavian or Romanian, and a little Greek and Armenian. They learnt, the intelligence, the celebrity, French. French language. We learnt French in high school. My French is much better than my English.

BL: That was a Jewish school, cheder school, and this was a Torah school, and this was a synagogue and small Jewish shops. And here is that ruin that you have on a picture. (The street name Strada Rabbi Țirilson is shown at the photo. Maybe the name could also be spelt Cyrilson or Cyrilsohn.)

EO: Țirilson, that was our rabbi, the famous rabbi before the Second World War.

BL: And that is a home for older people, as you showed me, and that is a Jewish school and that is a Jewish hospital. And that is the child home of Samuel Aroni, and a list of people along his street. We have found documents telling who lived along different streets in the 1930s. So we can find out the names and the property owners in 1930. (Showing several maps.)

EO: It is a big investigation. Aroni and Marius can tell more about the ghetto area.

(BL shows pictures of buildings in the Old Town, also some remaining buildings from ghetto photos. He also shows pictures of Soviet plans, plans for demolitions in the Old Town, and the "Black book", written by persons who want to preserve what is left of the Old Town.)

EO: Yes, *Cartea neagră* means "Black book".

BL: And that I a map of Jewish heritage.

EO: Yes, and there was a German cemetery in Chişinău, and a Armenian cemetery, and of course, a Jewish cemetery.

BL: And here is a picture of the old Jewish hospital.

EO: Germany had many colonies, not in Chişinău, but in suburbs, in Bessarabia, near Akkerman. Between Bender and Akkerman. In Chişinău there was a German cemetery.

BL: And there were also French colonies and a Swiss colony, near Akkerman.

EO: I don't remember. Ah! Şaba, Şabola, near Akkerman! And an Armenian colony was there also, Grigoriopol. Only Armenian people. In Chişinău there was an Armenian cemetery. It was a different population.

(BL shows more pictures from the Old Town, and the few photos from the ghetto town. He also refers to testimonies by Aroni. These are the pictures that I wanted to show you.)

EO: That was very nice.

(Short pause; than we talked about EO's memories from school.)

EO: There was a German student, one Armenian, many Russians and Ukrainians, and Jewish students.

LO: So, 8th grade was his last class before the war and he stopped going to school.

BL: And how were the relations between the different nationalities at school?

EO: It was normal. We were friends.

LO: We got along, it was fine.

EO: We were friends, the Armenians, the Jewish, the Greeks, the Romanians, Russians, no problem. Then, beginning with the war, then fascism, with Antonescu. With the parents it was different, of course.

LO: Right, so when the war started, the divisions came, because the parents believed different things and they pushed them away. He says, right before the war started, when people knew that the fascists were coming, then they started taking side, and then problems started. Right before the war. Otherwise it was friendly.

EO: Befoe the war it was normal, no problem. Anti-Semitism began after Hitler came to power. Before the war, 1937-39 with Cuza-Goga and the Antonescu regim. Our director of the school, of *liceu*, was an Iron Guard professor Hare.

LO: He says that the director of his school was an active member of the fascist party, so he was very strict and believed in it. But, at the same time, he was OK to the kids, they found out later that he was a member of the fascist party. He dropped out, to Bucharest, and later to Germany.

BL: Maybe he had to be a member of the party in order to keep his job?

LO: No, he says, he did not need it for his job. It was what he believed in. At other schools, the directors were not fascists, it was only this one.

BL: The Romanian Holocaust was mostly directed against the Jews of Bessarabia and Bucovina, because they did not speak Romanian. In the old kingdom of Romania, it was not that harsh. Most of them survived.

EO: (About the regime as such.) They were nationalists. Only Romanian language, only Romanian symbols. No Russian. No Jewish.

BL: We have had a long talk. Maybe you are tired now?

EO: No, it is our pleasure. If you have any more questions about Chişinău, I am ready to answer them.

BL: Maybe one question: When you came back to Chişinău after the war, did you feel that the city was very much changed, or did you feel that it was the same city?

LO: He says that before the war, only city people lived in Chişinău, afterwards it got mixed up. And a lot of people from the villages moved into Chişinău. So, you know, people moved around a lot. It was not the same group that lived there before.

BL: In Černivci, Cernăuți, when Jews came back after the war, they felt quite los, no people spoke German anymore. Only foreign languages, foreign people.

BL: So, after the war, after 1945, it was only Russian language. There was a strong russification. Russian, Russian everywhere.

BL: But the Romanian population that remained? How did they feel? Were they suppressed?

EO: I understand, in villages, the population was only Moldavian, they liked the Romanian language, not Russian. But in cities, in Chişinău, almost all people after the war used the Russian language.

LO: So, in all aspects of life inside the city, it was mainly Russian. At work, in schools and all over. And outside the city, they mainly liked Romanian.

EO: I was studying at the Medical Institute. There was only one group in Moldavian.

LO: So, he says that when he came back from the war and he went to the medical school, the total class was 260 people, in the first course, and out of the 260 about 12 or 14 were Moldavian, and the rest spoke Russian. Everybody else spoke Russian.

EO: Then I ended after 5 years, coming in a group of Moldavian...

LO: So, at the end of his study, after 5 years, that he was studying at the school, there were already four groups of Moldavians. The majority was still Russians, but they were coming from the villages and they were getting into that school and they were taking up more space in the university.

EO: After 15 - 20 years, the majority was Moldavian groups. The director spoke perfectly both Russian and Romanians. He taught both groups. It was around 1962.

BL: Today, when still around 30 % of the population speak Russian (or Ukrainian), Romanian is almost the only official language. There are very few signs in Russian. At the airport there are signs in Romanian and English, but not in Russian. Russian is regarded as a foreign language. They learn it as a foreign language. So, it is not as bad as in the Romanian times. You are allowed to speak Russian, but it is regarded as a foreign language. They want to make Romanian the main and the only language. And this is a policy, because they want to come to the European Union, and they can do it either through uniting with Romania or independent. Maybe it is easier through Romania.

LO: Yes.

EO: Since Moldova became independent, Romanian is the only official language.

BL: And they have almost the same flag as Romanian.

EO: Only the older people have conversation in Russian.

LO: The older Russian-speaking people still speak Russian.

BL: And there is this small land strip, called Transnistria, on the other side of Dniestr. I think it should not belong to Moldova. It should belong to Ukraine, because the river was the historic frontier of Moldova.

EO: The population is Ukrainian and Russian, not Moldavian, in Tiraspol, but after the Second World War, it was a component of Moldova. And also, in the south of Moldova there is the Gagauz population, in Comrat, Ceadâr Lunga, Baimaclea, live Gagauz population, similar to the Turkish people as in Azerbaidjan. The Gagauz people think about themselves as an own nationality.

BL: They have a kind of autonomy.

EO: They have their language, but official it is Moldavia. It is not possible for them to separate as an own country. This is similar to the Kurds in Iraq. There was never at Kurdish country, but still they exist.

After this, Emanuel Ornstein told me about his career as a doctor. He was a prominent orthopaedic. In Chişinău, he married Raya. In perestroika time, their children could emigrate to the USA. Emanuel and Raya came to the USA after the independence in 1991 (if I remember right).

