

Fleeing Panemune¹

Wolf Bregstein

In 1915, at the beginning of the WWI, when the Germans attacked Kovno, my mother, along with my sister, Mary, and me, fled Russia. My brother, Moshe, was in the military in Vilna, my sister, Rachel, was already married and lived in St. Petersburg (later, in Moscow), and my brother, Ralph, had long set sail to America. We were alone, and fled with the Sonkins, our neighbors, in a horse and carriage.

The trip took two months, and, at each station, we had to wait, sometimes two to three days, while the army passed by. We had little to eat. Since, in the middle of the station was always hot water, we ate bread with tea.

We went first to Minsk, where we stayed for a few months, and then to Rostov, near Moscow. My sister, Mary, learned to type and worked in a local government office, which helped with our livelihood. Uncle Shepsel (Etienne Bregstein) then was able to send us 5,00 rubles, which was a lot of money, that helped us to survive the war, because my mother had nothing except our house and land in Panemune.

In Rostov, I attended a Russian gymnasium and had a Bar Mitzvah at a small synagogue run by a Jewish teacher. My mother and I often visited my sister, Mary, and her husband, Max, who was a forestry expert. The owner of the company for which he worked, had a dacha in a forest outside of Moscow. There, my mother and I often went for vacation.

We returned home with the Sonkins in 1918, a trip that, this time, took three months, arriving in October.

¹ Interview with Wolf Bregstein, Montevideo, 1996 by Philo Bregstein.