Hamster Invasion in the Budschak

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Note: Information within [brackets] are comments by the translator.

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[Translation Begins]

The Hamster and Hamster Invasion in the Budschak

by Erwin Heer


Hamster

When we consult our village chronicles, we repeatedly find some agricultural pests mentioned that seemed noteworthy for the village history, such as the wolf and the grasshoppers (*Heuschrecken*) (these two were particularly plagues in the 19th century), as well as the "earth hare" (*Perlziesel*)[1], hamsters, and also the field mouse; from insects, the grain beetle (*anisoplia*), the grain weevil (*Getreidelaufkäfer*), and in the 20th century the Hessian fly. No pests are recorded in the chronicles among the birds; once—in the Teplitz Chronicle of Homo—a bird is even mentioned as a helper of agriculture: the rose starling (*Kupferstaren*—copper starling) as a destroyer of the many grasshoppers. Our colonists had to endure great hardships from these pests and their plagues since the settlement in 1814 and until the Resettlement in 1940. Today we want to take a closer look at the hamster, which deserves special attention due to its invasions there.

The hamster (*Cricetus cricetus*) is called "*Obyknowennyj chomjak*" in Russian, "*Hyrciog*" in Romanian, commonly known as "steppe dog" (*Stepphund*), and also "*Sobatschka*" (little dog, which is Russian). Along with the striped ground squirrel (*Ziesel*), it was the most popular and

[1] [speckled ground squirrel (*Spermophilus suslicus*), a member of the squirrel family, *Sciuridae*, within the order *Rodentia*. A short, stout body covered with fur that is speckled with small, light-colored spots, giving it its name (from German *Perl*, meaning *pearl*). Its tail is relatively short and bushy]

well-known creature from the rodent kingdom (excluding field hares [jack rabbits], of course). While the striped ground squirrel always remained in the steppe, the hamster penetrated into settlements and sometimes sought out barns and cellars, where it was caught with traps. I clearly remember how my father caught the hamsters that had invaded the second old cellar of our yard in Sarata (around 1922 or 1925) one by one with a rat trap; it was a box trap with a wire enclosure. And at my second-door neighbor's, we as boys around the same time caught a mighty specimen of a hamster in his barn by pouring bucket after bucket of water into the burrow until the water finally forced the hamster to the surface. Johannes Schmauder from Mannsburg reports that around 1923, during the time of corn and melon ripening, a hamster entered his basement and was killed. Woldemar Fieß from Sarata writes literally: "I also still remember the hamster plague very well. A hamster even made its way into our house through the floor and completely chewed up one of my mother's shoes." Guido Schilling, who consciously experienced the first hamster invasion in 1924, writes about it in detail: "Now about the hamster. Compared to the ground squirrel, the hamster was much rarer to find around us. It did not only live in the fields, but was also found in basements and barns. I particularly remember the year 1924 when we had a poor harvest, and suddenly the hamsters appeared, in large numbers, in the fields; then they came into the villages and invaded cellars, barns, stalls, and even homes. It was a real hamster invasion. I was living at that time (a year after my escape from Russia) in Neu-Mathildendorf with my brother-in-law. It was an old house with a clay floor. The hamsters not only invaded the cellar, barn, and kitchen, but also the living room. They dug their tunnels under the foundation right into the living room. We caught them with traps (cooking pots balanced on a thin stick to which the bait was attached), or at night we would light a match or use a flashlight (battery), and then simply hit them with a stick. I had never seen anything like it in my life. I do not know if hamsters appeared in such numbers everywhere in Bessarabia; I can only write about what I experienced in Mathildendorf. After some time, the hamsters disappeared from the villages. But even the next year, many hamsters were caught in the fields." — In the *Chronicle of the Parish of Lichtental* (*Deutscher Volkskalender für Bessarabien*, 1935, Tarutino, p. 64), it states regarding this: "In the post-war period, an unprecedented hamster plague troubled the farmers greatly." Professor Dr. Heptner and co-author mention the intrusion of hamsters into vegetable gardens, in gardens, yards, and occasionally even into barns and directly into houses (Lit. 2). — One can therefore speak of hamster plagues in certain years. I have a vivid memory of such a hamster plague from my childhood. Back then, I noticed a hamster in our "little garden" by the Sarata River (south of the railway line) that was eating a pumpkin on a bright afternoon. Wolde Fieß (see above) also remembers this plague well, and Mr. Schmauder from Mannsburg knows that the year for this hamster plague was 1923. (It was actually 1924, as Mr. Schilling correctly states and as we will see further below with Professor Dr. Calinescu.) It had been during the middle of threshing time, and the first hamsters were found among the "*Kopitzen*" (grain piles) in the field. The hamsters appeared in such numbers that they came into the village (as the above cases also show). It was indeed a proper hamster invasion back then.

Hamster Invasions: The leading Romanian mammal researcher Professor Dr. R. Calinescu vividly describes two hamster invasions from 1924 and 1930, during which the species crossed the Dniester River and its wide estuary (*Liman*). I find this work very noteworthy, and because it is difficult to access for us, I would like to present the most important (and the most) parts of it word for word. Calinescu states, "In 1924, there was a real invasion of hamsters in Bessarabia, which was repeated in 1930. In both cases, the animals came from Ukraine (Russia) by

swimming across the Dniester. Two specimens of this last incursion were kindly sent to me by Engineer S. Paskowsky for identification. I have established: a) that it is *Cricetus cricetus nehrigi,* b) that this subspecies also occurs in the south of Ukraine, from where it has invaded Bessarabia, c) that, considering the other aspects of its distribution, it is found throughout the plains of the lower Danube, extending east to the Dniester and beyond the Dniester.

The details of the invasion are very instructive for both the biology and zoogeography of these animals. In the summer of 1924, according to the statements of the agricultural departments, the fields of southern Bessarabia (the districts of Cetatea-Albă and Ismail, as well as the southern half of the district of Tighina) were literally flooded by this subspecies. The animals caused great damage to the crops (15 to 20 percent of the harvest), which is why drastic measures had to be taken to eliminate them. Every resident was required to kill 50 of them. They even destroyed the vineyards by climbing onto the vines to consume the grapes.

The animals appeared in groups towards the end of June. Between 15 and 30 August, they were seen in very large numbers around the Dniester Liman, particularly near Gura-Roschie, and on the shores of the sea, opposite the mouth of the Dniester Liman. At Gura-Roschie, it was observed how they swarmed across the Dniester Liman from Ukraine in the thousands. Upon reaching Romanian territory, they immediately hid in groups of 40 to 50 under the overturned fishing boats lying on the beach, where they spent the whole day. They only came out in the evening and ventured into the villages. Here, they chose human dwellings, yards, basements, and sheds as their residence, where they started to lead a semi-tame life. For food, they made use of onions.

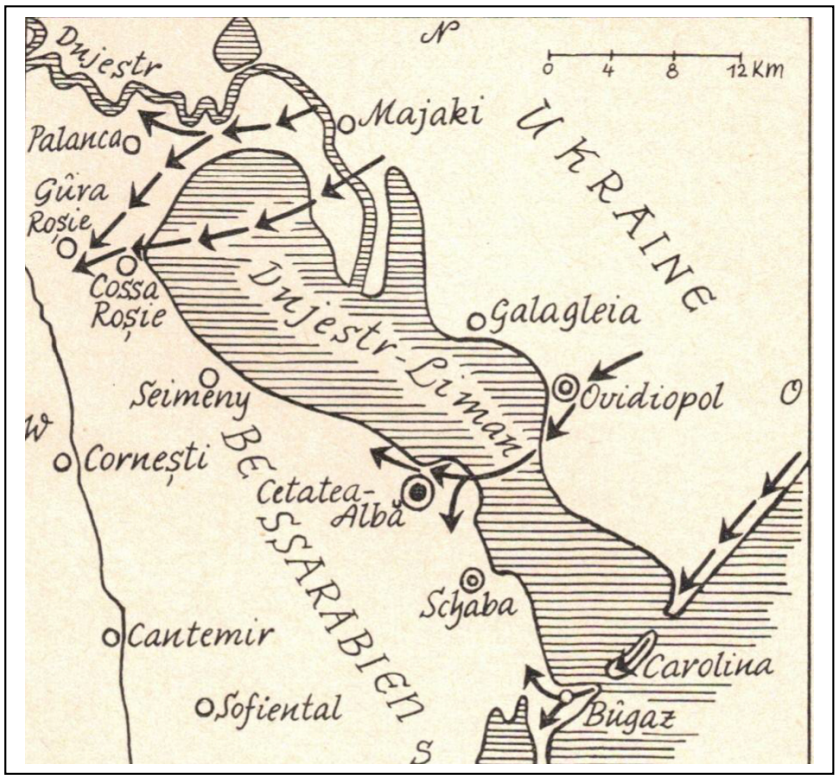
During this time, the hamsters did not hibernate as usual, probably due to the warm and long autumn; the following cold winter nearly wiped them out, so that in the spring of 1925 only very few remained. It is interesting to note that the large increase in hamsters led to an excessive increase in the "light" (*Putorius eversmanni Less.*) and "dark" (*Putorius putorius L.*) ferrets (*Iltisse*).[2] In addition to the ferrets, domestic cats and dogs also pursued the hamsters, but were unable to overwhelm them.

However, swimming across the Dniester-Liman at its mouth was very risky, even though the distance is much smaller. On the Russian side, the current is weaker and allowed them a safe crossing, but the strong current on the Romanian side swept them far out to sea, especially the weak and young animals, which drowned there. The waves of the sea then washed hundreds of dead animals ashore. The stronger animals, however, were able to overcome the current. They hid during the day and at night they moved back and forth in the fields and on the beach, where their tracks could be observed on the wet sand the next morning.

In the year 1930, the influx of hamsters occurred in the early days of September. During this time, a large number flooded the district and the city of Cetatea-Albă. The animals, which were more hidden during the day, could be seen swarming in gardens, vineyards, thickets, under existing fences, and on paths starting from 10 PM, both in the countryside and up to the center of the city. Real battles took place between hamsters and house cats. However, the cats did not eat the killed hamsters, but rather left them lying there. This time, more hamsters were observed in

[2] [a domesticated, albinistic, red-eyed form of the polecat]

the city of Cetatea-Albă than in the year 1924—and especially ‘at the dam’, although house cats significantly reduced their numbers. At the end of December, the frost and snow destroyed the remaining animals in the city; in the countryside, the farmers killed several with the help of an electric lamp, whose light attracted the animals.” So far Clainescu; he also indicates the possible cause of the hamster invasions: “The cause of the hamster invasions is probably the same as that of the invasion of the steppe sandgrouse (*Steppenhühner*)—(*Syrrhaptes paradoxus Pall.*): Due to an abundant year, they were able to multiply significantly; this was followed by a dry year, and now the food shortage forced the animals to migrate to better areas (Lit. 1).”



The known immigration lines of the hamster in 1930 (according to Calinescu). Here (lower Dniester) also breeding areas of the gray goose.

Hamster Catching: The scale of hamster numbers in 1924 is shown by another example: Mr. Schmauder from Mannsburg mentions a hamster catcher from Marianowka, who trapped so many hamsters with 20 traps that he was able to buy a couple of medium-quality horses with the proceeds from the pelts. During the day, the hamster catcher set the traps, at night the hamsters went into the traps, and in the morning the inspection and harvest took place. And one more example—Emil Jakowenko from Seimeny writes: “In Neu-Seimeny there was a large family named Eisenbarth; the head of the family provided for them solely through the profits from the pelts of the dug-up steppe dogs.” That hamsters in the Budschak were caught in the wild (that is, in the fields) with traps was personally new to me. As is well known, hamsters were generally flushed out of their burrows and killed together with ground squirrels by using water; I witnessed this myself. Furthermore, hamster diggers dug the hamsters out of their burrows. Wolde Fieß mentions that the farmers from the neighboring community of Plachteewka were specialized in catching hamsters, making nice money from their pelts. (Hamster pelts always sell well, in contrast to the ground squirrel pelts, which are of inferior quality.) And retired high school senior teacher Immanuel Schöch adds: “The hamster was a real agricultural pest in some years.

Alongside the ground squirrel and field mouse, it often caused significant damage to the grain fields." Since his black-white-brown fur was also bought at times and his often quite significant grain supplies for the winter also attracted the little man, the hamster burrow was mainly sought out, dug up, and then a quick end was made with the intolerable old miser, who had "hamster-hoarded" so much—he was killed without mercy and deprived of his supplies. Once, I met such a hamster hunter, who had at least 10 to 12 stuffed skins hanging from his belt. On his right shoulder hung a sack containing 40 to 50 pounds of barley; on his left shoulder, he carried a spade on a string. He told me that he received 6 to 8 kopecks for each pelt from the trader. That was about 75 kopecks, plus the barley! He said with satisfaction that as a day laborer he would hardly earn that much. Of course, there would also be days when the plunder was smaller.

But there were not only hamsters among the local population; apart from the colonist Eisenbarth (Neu-Seimeny), I am aware of two other men from the ranks of the colonists, one—Jakob Nitschkek—lived (until 1940) in Beresina, the other—Ludwig Bader—(until 1940) in Neu-Posttal or in Owidowka. However, both colonists caught the hamsters with traps (not digging out their burrows). Ludwig Bader states that during a check of the traps he caught 15 to 20 hamsters; and Jakob Nitschke caught between 30 and 60 hamsters every morning in 75 traps that he received from German fur traders stationed in Tarutino, coming from the city of Leipzig (Germany) at that time. Emil Götz (Tarutino) is well-informed about these fur dealers; he kindly shares: "As you may be aware, Bessarabia has been afflicted by a hamster plague. It became known even beyond our borders, resulting in fur dealers from Germany coming to us and buying up hamster furs. At my parents-in-law in Tarutino, three Germans also set up a buying station for hamsters; their names were Holz, Roter, and Topf. The hamsters were brought by the hamster catchers already fully skinned. The dealers sorted the furs, which were paid for at a rate of 1 to 2 lei per piece, depending on quality and demand." Then the pelts were immediately stretched on steel springs and dried under a roof in the light breeze. The cinema roofed area (*Kinodachboden*) was particularly suitable for this, as it was large and covered with metal. Consequently, the drying progressed quickly. After drying, the pelts were bundled into groups of 25 and then again into 100; then pressed into bales and sacks sewn over them. This is how the hamster pelts were exported.

I myself took hamster furs as luggage to Germany around 1928 and sold them at a hamster auction in Leipzig. At that time, I received 25 pfennigs for Grade-A furs; that was about 10 lei per fur at the then-exchange rate. Jakob Nitschke writes about catching hamsters: "From 1928 onwards, I caught hamsters for their furs, using a wooden box trap that caught the hamster from both above and below. Most of the time, I did not place the traps at the holes (burrows), but rather in field furrows, as it was quicker than the painstaking search for burrows. A few corn kernels were scattered around and inside the trap. Every morning, I caught between 30 and 60 hamsters in 75 traps. The hamsters were skinned with pliers, the hides were hung on steel wire frames to dry, threaded onto binding wire, and thus made ready for sale. I sold the hides to a German company based in Tarutino near Lukas, which also provided me with the traps free of charge. The hamsters were caught in early spring, in April/May, and in autumn from mid-August to mid-October, depending on the weather, even until the end of October."

Hibernation and Winter Burrows: According to Heptner and co-authors, the hamster goes into hibernation, which, however, is not very deep. It wakes up in the middle of winter and then

feeds on its reserves, as it also does in spring. In the south, it comes to the surface during mild winters. In very warm winters in the south, it does not hibernate at all. Jakob Nitschke writes: "In spring, the hamster emerged from its winter burrow when the hawthorn [*Carpimus oxyacantha*] (*Schlehdorn*—blackthorn [*Prunus spinosa*]) was about to bloom: a very sure sign! The male hamsters then built their summer burrows, mostly just slanted burrows that were not very deep, at most only 50 centimeters [19.7 inches]; the females remained in the winter burrows, which were 1.20 meters [3.9 feet] to 1.50 meters [4.9 feet] deep, where they gave birth to their first litter of young. The second litter, which occurred from mid to late June, was born in newly constructed burrows.

Hamsters have probably overwintered mostly in corn fields; only then did barley and wheat fields follow. At the beginning of the sowing season in spring, while sowing barley, I unearthed a hamster from its winter burrow: the hamster was very much alive and had in its burrow three chambers: one with a warm nest, a storage chamber with corn, and a chamber where it had only deposited its droppings. I also took a whole bucket full of corn from the storage chamber, which was just as nice as our corn at home on the ground—not rotten or dirty at all. The hole was about 1.30 to 1.40 meters [4.3 to 4.6 feet] deep. When one has dug up the hamster, it does not run away like the 'jackrabbit', but instead always attacks the person. On the other hand, the hamster **diggings** (less so the hamster **catchers**!) inflicted sometimes considerable damage on farmland and also on birdlife by, among other things, not covering up the excavated hamster burrows—which posed a danger to horses and agricultural machines (mowers!)—and taking the eggs of the increasingly rare Great Bustard (*Großtrappe—Otis tarda*), as well as bothering these sensitive breeding birds."

Albinos (white types): Mr. Nitschke writes about this: "There were often albinos (white types) among the hamsters; I caught almost 2 to 3 of them every year, but I never caught any black ones."

Young Numbers: Mr. Bader from Neu-Posttal or from Owidowka reports that a female hamster sometimes has eighteen young in her womb. J. Nitschke writes about this: "The hamster has multiplied very strongly; usually, the litters were between 5 and 12 little ones; but there were also exceptions. I once dug out 18 young from a burrow—along with the adult animal." And Guido Schilling writes: "In my vineyard, a hamster had made a nest under a vine. When I discovered it, I took a spade the next day and dug out the hamster. It was a female and had 14 young in the nest. I was astonished at such a large number of offspring; but when I told acquaintances about it, I was informed that the number 14 is not the absolute limit for hamster offspring, and that 16 had also been encountered—could that be possible?" That is indeed true! Professor Dr. Heptner and co-author state that the maximum number is 15 young, and according to some reports, it could even be more. And according to Professor Dr. Petzsch, the headcount rarely exceeds 12; higher headcounts are said to be exceptions (Lit. 4). According to Miss Dr. Mohr, the litter size varies between 4 and 18 (Lit. 3).

Food: Onions (and grapes) have already been mentioned. Mr. Schilling also writes about this: "A special treat for hamsters is onions. In 1925—when there were still many hamsters—I planted a free spot in my vineyard with onions. I did not harvest a single onion—all were taken by the hamsters!" — And J. Nitschke reports: "The diet of the hamster during summer mainly

consisted of leafy food such as bindweed (*Winde*), vetch (*Wicke*), wild peach (*wilder Pfirsich*), thorn leaves, and others, but no stems like couch grass (*Quecke*) and other grasses." And in winter—when it occasionally wakes from hibernation—it feeds on the stored grains: wheat, barley, corn, etc. — But it also eats meat—favoring field mice, which makes it useful! Furthermore, it takes young birds, earthworms, and other animals. The hamster is therefore a true omnivore.

Enemies: Weasel, fox, white stork, dogs, and cats catch the hamster. Karl Bierer (Arzis) mentions that his house cat brought home hamsters in addition to rats and ground squirrels. I was informed from Alt-Posttal that the fur remains of mice and hamsters are often found in front of fox dens—especially during the young-rearing season. The wolf also devours hamsters: Johannes Manske from Kisil (Akkerman District) participated as a hunter in a hunt, where one animal of 2 wolves was shot. Upon examination, it turned out to be a male; he was actually as popular as a pregnant she-wolf. His stomach was opened: It contained nothing but hamsters! Mr. Manske also said that he could not give an exact number of hamsters; but it was half a wheelbarrow full; there were over 25 little ones! According to Miss Dr. Mohr, the average weight of a hamster is 150 to 250 grams [2.3 to 8.8 oz]. This amounts to about 5.0 kilograms for 25 hamsters. Therefore, the killed wolf had approximately 4.5 to 5.5 kilograms [9.9 to 12.1 pounds] of hamster meat in its stomach, which is a considerable amount!

In the farmer's magazine *Farmer and Farmer Activities* (*Bauer und Bauernschaffen*), its distinguished editor, retired teacher Ferdinand Wagner, has published an essay about the hamster. How unfortunate that I could not access this work!

I would like to sincerely thank all fellow countrymen for their reports, which shed light on the hamster from various perspectives. However, my special thanks go to Director Professor Dr. Schüz, State Museum of Natural History, Stuttgart, Castle Rosenstein, who kindly made Volume 6 of the *Journal of Mammalogy* (*Zeitschrift für Säugertierkunde*) with the above Calinescu work available to me from his private library.

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