

# Mark Epstein

St. Petersburg

Russia

Interviewer: **Vera Postavinskaya**

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*Mark Evgenyevich Epstein is a very charming person. He is 83 years old, but he bears his age well: he is tucked up, gray-haired elegant sporting man.*

*Mark is very active, vigorous and full of plans. He tells the smallest details of his eventful biography and shows documents from his family archive with pleasure.*

*Mark is very emotional; he seems to go through the events of his life anew. It is necessary to note that Mark always liked to sing and took voice-training.*

*At the end of the interview we managed to record Mark's singsong. On his repertoire there are romances, songs of known Soviet composers Dunaevsky, Bogoslovsky, Mokroussov and others.*

*Less than 2 years have passed away since Mark Evgenyevich left his pedagogical activities. At present he is a pensioner, but devotes all his energies to public work.*

*In the room there are bookcases with books, most of them are devoted to physics and history of the Great Patriotic War [1](#).*

*Mark's memory keeps a lot of information not only about distant pre-war years and wartime, but also about contemporary events.*



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## • Family history

I was born in Leningrad on March 26, 1924 in the family of Eugeny Markovich and Evgenia Yakovlevna Epstein. I know nothing about my paternal great-grandparents. I also do not remember my paternal grandparents. I only know that my grandfather's name was Meyer, I do not remember my grandmother's name. Their surname was Epstein. When I was born, my grandfather had already died, and we were not in touch with my grandmother.

I also know nothing about my maternal great-grandparents. My maternal grandfather's name was Smeer (people called him Yakov [2](#)) Shemshelevich and my grandmother's name was Gitel Yakovlevna.

They lived in Leningrad. I do not know the place where they were born. I know that they lived in Revel (now Tallinn, the capital of Estonia). My maternal grandparents had got 2 daughters (my Mom Eugenia Yakovlevna born in 1895 and my mother's sister Dina Yakovlevna) and a son David Yakovlevich born in 1906.

Grandmother was engaged in public work at the house-keeping department, and my grandfather was a shoemaker. We lived only a short walk from them (about 15 minutes) and frequently visited each other. Both my grandfather and my grandmother loved me very much. Grandfather was a person of cheerful nature, a real devotee. He observed Tradition. If I came from school with sandwiches in my schoolbag, grandfather used to comment on it that I should never eat sandwiches.

Grandfather attended a synagogue, prayed at home, celebrated every Jewish holiday including Shabbath. Grandmother helped him to observe traditions, but I consider her to be not religious. I don't think grandmother attended the synagogue.

My grandfather used to wear secular clothes. He was a good shoemaker, his work was highly commended, and people said he had clever fingers. One day I visited grandparents carrying sandwiches with bacon in my schoolbag (Mom had given them to me: she did not observe kashrut). Grandfather noticed them and created a scandal.

Grandfather knew that I liked jam very much. Grandmother kept jars of home-made jam in the small cupboard. Grandfather used to give me a table-spoon and a jar of jam and say 'Start eating quickly, before Granny comes in!' It did not mean that grandmother was greedy, but she could not understand how it was possible to eat jam with a tablespoon. And I liked it very much. Grandfather was very benevolent. Grandmother was a great contrast to him: she was strict and not always understood jokes.

People who worked together with her, used to say 'Your grandmother is able to be in command of big military units.' She always behaved in the spirit of Soviet authorities, but at the same time she successfully helped grandfather in observing Tradition (she carried much on her shoulders). Grandparents were a united family.

Grandfather had a beard, and he put on his kippah only when he prayed. Grandmother did not wear a wig.

Grandfather and grandmother lived in a one-room apartment. The room was large, but there was too much furniture: a big bookcase, a cupboard, a smaller cupboard with jam, a large screen, a sofa, a bed, a table, and several chairs. In the hall there was a hallstand. Their apartment was separate, not communal [3](#). Grandparents lived the two together. Mother's brother and sister lived separately.

Grandmother was very active at her house-keeping department. My grandparents loved me. Each my visit was a holiday for them. Grandfather and grandmother celebrated all Jewish holidays and invited only relatives.

My father's family came from the town of Velizh in Belarus. My paternal grandparents were born in Velizh. My father was born there too. It happened in 1885. Unfortunately certificate of his birth was lost. His name was Epstein Eugeny Markovich or Genuch Meyerovich (his Jewish name). He was a tailor. In St. Petersburg father worked at Bronstein's Berlin shop from 1912 till 1917. From 1918 till 1922 he worked as a tailor at the Theatre of Musical Comedy. Later he worked at the Smolninsky garment factory.

Father had got 4 sisters: aunt Tsilye, aunt Zhenya, aunt Rose, and aunt Sonya. They all lived in Leningrad. Aunt Tsilye was an outstanding therapist, her husband Samuil Karpovich was a lecturer at the Medical College, and their son Victor (he is 71 years old at present) works as a plasma metal cutting engineer.

Aunt Zhenya was a singer and worked at a musical school, her husband's name was Victor Markovich. They had got a son Boris. All of them are not alive by now. All her life long aunt Rose worked with children at a kindergarten, she was not married. The 4th sister was aunt Sonya, her husband Ilya and their son Izya have already died (Izya was knocked down by a tram when he was 4 years old).

Their daughter Galina is now 86 years old and her health is very poor.

They all were educated well. I guess my father was the eldest child in the family. I do not remember where my paternal grandmother lived. I saw her only several times in my life. Father was an excellent tailor. He had got a lot of customers and not only in the city: some of them came from other cities. My father was religious: he observed the lent, prayed, attended the synagogue, but he was not fanatic.

During all his life father was engaged in individual work (he worked every evening at home), and worked honestly. Soviet authorities confiscated everything we had, and father was deported to Luga of Leningrad region, where we lived several years. It happened in 1933 or 1934, and we moved to Luga all 4 together: Mom, father, my brother Alexander (born in 1921) and I.

In Luga father found a job as a manager of tailor's workshop. He worked there very well. Later things changed and... we returned to Leningrad. Our apartment was already occupied, and we had got great difficulties changing our house in Luga for an apartment in Leningrad. At that time grandmother and grandfather lived in Leningrad in the 8th Sovetskaya Street. Both grandfather and father had no concern with military service.

My mother Epstein Evgenia Yakovlevna (nee Shemshelevich) was born in 1895 in Revel (now Tallinn, the capital of Estonia). I do not know when mother's family moved from Revel to St. Petersburg: parents never spoke about it. When they arrived in Leningrad, mother could not speak a word of Russian. At first father was distressed for her, because she spoke only Estonian language. Later Mom managed to learn Russian, and at home parents spoke only Russian.

Before the Revolution of 1917 Mom worked as a milliner. But after her marriage she became a housewife. I guess she finished only 10 classes. My parents were able to write and speak grammatically correct. They read much, especially my father. Mom took care of my brother and me. She kept a strict hand over us. Mom was authoritarian.

In the family of mother's parents there were 3 children: mother's brother David, mother's sister Dina and my Mom Eugenia. A lot of people (relatives and friends) used to visit us during holidays. Mom was a fine hand at cooking.

In 1930s when authorities banished my father to Luga, parents bought a small house there. They grew vegetables and berries. In Luga father did not observe Tradition (no ceremonies), because he was oppressed by the fact of deportation. I remember that in Luga father went on sewing and carried finished clothes to customers in Leningrad. His clients did not leave him. It was very difficult for him both morally and financially, but it was necessary to work: father had to support his family.

In 1936-1937 we returned to Leningrad and settled in Nevsky prospect, 158. Before our departure to Luga we lived in Pushkinskaya Street. I remember it very well, because more than 55 years I worked as a teacher and have exact memory.

### • Growing up

In Leningrad our life was very interesting: we went to the cinema, to the theatre, took part in dancing sessions, had a good time on the Kirov islands, swam in the Gulf of Finland, and went boating. I liked to dance very much. I still like it: if they tell me about dancing and good music somewhere, I'll give up everything and quickly run there. Probably I got it from Mom: she liked dancing very much.

She always said 'Dear me, I see that you will take after me!' Every year the Leningrad Palace of Pioneers celebrates its anniversary, therefore on February 12 I come to the Palace, watch the official ceremony and take part in dancing. After that I feel 20 years younger, I really come to life! Together with my wife we won a lot of prizes for dancing tango, waltz Boston, Cracovienne, etc. at different recreation houses.

My parents read much, first of all classics, but they also kept their eye on periodic literature: literary magazines, newspapers. They subscribed for the Leningradskaya Pravda newspaper. I used a library, and my parents exchanged books and magazines with their relatives and friends. At home there were many books.

Most parents' friends were from among the father's customers. Mom was interested in political events, but she was a member of no political party. Her friends shared her interests. Most friends of my parents were Jewish, but there were a few Gentiles. All of them were intellectuals.

I never attended a kindergarten, Mom stayed at home with me. In summer we all went to dacha (to Kurort or Sestroretsk) in the Leningrad suburbs. When my brother and I were little, parents did not go far away from Leningrad, but later we spent summer in Sochi and other places by the Black Sea. Before the beginning of the war Mom went to Tallin, where she had a lot of friends. Daddy never left Leningrad before the war.

I was born in Leningrad on March 26, 1924. My elder brother Alexander was born in 1921.

I studied at the school #162. It was situated near the PRIZYV cinema. I studied with pleasure and was very assiduous in my studies. I was able to sit at the table doing my homework for 5 or 6 hours, especially if I had problems with my sums. I was an excellent pupil. Here you can see my

school-leaving certificate, which permitted me to enter the Leningrad College of Cinema Engineers without entrance exams after the end of the war.

My favorite subjects were mathematics and physics. That was why I became a physics teacher.

I remember my teachers. Nikolay Nikolaevich Platonenko taught us mathematics, Kotsubinsky taught us geography (he traveled much, and his stories were extremely interesting). Ketler taught chemistry. Aglaida Petrovna, our German language teacher liked me very much. Later at the front-line I was able to talk to the captured Germans (thanks to my teacher of German language). Later another teacher came to teach us geography. I was allergic to her and she was down on me. Now I understand that my nationality was the reason of it.

I do not remember any manifestations of anti-Semitism at school. Frequently my elder brother was not able to do difficult exercises in physics and asked me to do it for him. I did it, and his teacher of physics said 'I guess it was the younger Epstein who managed.'

At the same time I studied at the musical school. I started there studying piano, but later changed for voice-training. I liked to go to the nearest house of culture for dancing, but it was a problem to leave home, because Mom usually threw cold water on it.

At school I had got a friend Naum Katsunsky. He was the only and the best friend of mine. Here you can see his photo taken in 1945. Together with him we went for dancing, did our homework, and visited each other. My Mom liked him very much, and his mother liked me too. Naum's mother was very kind to me and tried to do her best to set a good table for me. Our days off we devoted to film-going. We also often went out on dates with girls. By now Naum has already died.

One summer I spent in the pioneer camp in Taytsy in the suburb of Leningrad. I keep a photo of me, where it is written on the reverse side 'During my stay in the pioneer camp I gained weight (300 gr), but at home I immediately gained more (2 kg).'

When a schoolboy, I was fond of reading fiction and liked to retell what I had read. That was the way I developed my abilities of narrator and later it became very useful for me (when I started working as a teacher). For many years I have been engaged in military and patriotic education of schoolchildren and students of technical schools.

[Technical School in the USSR and a number of other countries was a special educational institution preparing specialists of middle level for various industrial and agricultural institutions, transport, communication, etc.] Boys and girls usually listen to me with great interest, especially when I tell them about the blockade of Leningrad.

My brother Epstein Alexander was 3 years older than me. He was talented for music, played piano very well. At school he was very good studying humanitarian subjects, but other subjects were very difficult for him. I helped him in his studies. Alexander was a very sociable person, smiling, cheerful, had good chances with girls.

My brother liked to improvise on the piano. He read much. Our relations were ideal. Unfortunately he died when he was a pupil of the 10th form: he was going home from school and boys played throwing pieces of ice at each other. By chance one of those pieces hit him on his head. 3 days later Alexander died. He was hardly 19. Those 3 days turned my Mom from a brunette into a gray-

haired woman. Mom begged the surgeon to save my brother and promised to give him as much money as he wanted, but nothing could be done. My brother did not finish school. It happened right before the war burst out.

- **During the war**

On June 22, 1941 we learned about the beginning of war by radio. In Leningrad the weather was fine. Molotov's speech [4](#) troubled everybody. Stalin addressed people on July 3. Situation reports were alarming. In Leningrad authorities issued ration cards, but gradually number of products we could buy using cards became less and less. Hard time came in November 1941 - February 1942, when it became possible to get only 125 gr of bread per day.

As a matter of fact it was not bread: sawdust and something else. In June 1941 I finished 9 classes. We started preparation for defense: stuck paper on windows cross-wise. Balloons appeared in the sky. Roofs of military establishments, schools, factories, and medical institutions were coated with special camouflage paint.

Autumn came, it became dark, and there appeared special phosphoric badges. As the city illumination was cut off, people had to wear those phosphoric badges to be seen in the street. In October municipal transport stopped functioning (electricity supply was cut off). Water supply and heating were stopped, too. 30 degrees of frost were terrible, because people lacked fire wood. They burnt their furniture and books, tried to close windows with pillows to get warm. We cooked meals on special small stoves.

Mom casually found some raisin and walnuts in the cupboard, and it helped us to hold out for some time. My friend Naum sometimes brought us a sausage (his father worked at the meat-packing plant). We used to cut those sausages into 50 parts before eating. People reported about cannibalism cases. All cats and dogs had been eaten and some persons started eating people. They caught children, killed them, and sold their flesh and ground bones. No official reports. Only many years later I found some articles about it in newspapers.

Our teachers often sent us to find out why this or that pupil had not come to school. Usually we went together with my schoolmates, but sometimes I went there alone. I was afraid to go crazy. All doors in all apartments were open. I used to come in, say hello, ask whether there was anybody in the apartment. If nobody answered, I started moving from one room to another. People usually lay in beds. Very often all of them were dead. I saw terrible scenes: dead people lying or sitting in beds with their eyes open. Now it is impossible to imagine horror we had to go through.

Germans began dropping fire-bombs. Adults taught us how to behave. At first it was frightening, but later we understood that we had to seize a fire-bomb and quickly put it into the container with water to neutralize. Streets were almost empty. If somebody went along the street carrying something, he would have been robbed for sure. And if somebody walked carrying nothing, he could have been pushed behind a street-door, killed and eaten up. Life sparkled only in the market.

There were people who had everything (for example, directors of shops) in the midst of starving citizens. There it was possible to change valuables for bread. Famine, cold, and poverty reigned everywhere.

In our district there operated 3 schools. One day together with other excellent pupils I was invited to the Palace of Pioneers. There they set a good table for us: big dishes with sandwiches! They did not have time to give a command: children immediately fell upon those sandwiches!

Sewerage system did not function, therefore people carried sewage out to their back yards in buckets, and some people emptied those buckets out of the windows into the streets. Later authorities warned citizens by radio that the incoming of spring could cause epidemic. You see, we went through hard times; nobody has ever experienced or will experience anything of that kind.

Things looked black: we had nothing to eat. I was advised to find work, because workers received working ration cards (250 gr of bread vs. 125 gr). I managed to find a job of metalworker apprentice in Khersonskaya Street (near Naum's home). I immediately received a working ration card and an all-night pass.

Parents burst into tears when they got to know about my working card. Things became a little bit better. I used to bring water from the Neva River. It was an arduous trial. It was very difficult to approach the hole in ice: steps were ice-covered; therefore I slid down on my buttocks. Near the hole people stood in long line carrying hollow-ware. The hole in ice was very narrow, because it was about 30 degrees of frost. People became frozen standing in line, often fainted and sometimes died. It was impossible to help them.

So I brought water from the Neva River for 2 families: for my parents and for my grandparents.

There are a lot of stories written about blockade of Leningrad by authors who never outlived it. Therefore it is possible to find the truth only from a few witnesses who are still alive.

In August 1942 I received a notification from the local military registration and enlistment office. By that time I had finished school with excellent results and received my school-leaving certificate with distinction.

At present in my school which I finished during blockade, there is a local museum. A copy of my certificate is one of its exhibits. Now at that school I give pupils lessons of courage.

All the siege long our family was in Leningrad. Father went on working, but later he swelled up because of starvation and stayed in bed. Mother turned into a real mummy: before the war she was full-bodied (85 kg), and in blockade her weight was 36 kg... She took care of father and managed to help him be well again. My parents survived.

One day we were near to eat a human being. A dog casually ran into our apartment and started barking at the piece of meat Mom had brought from the market. We understood everything. And my uncle (chief engineer of the military factory) was eaten. One evening our neighbors came to us and sent us to the nearest doorway. The body of our relative was found there; flesh had been cut off. It was a nightmare.

I am sure that without me my parents would have not survived. One day at school I got a kettle of shchi. Fantastic shchi! Grandfather of one of my schoolmates went to the suburb and brought some hearts of cabbage heads. At school they cooked shchi from water and that mere apology for cabbage for us, pupils. I brought that kettle to my parents, shaking with fear that someone could strip me of my shchi. Mom was a wonderful woman. In spite of the fact that water, electricity

supply, central heating, and sewerage system were cut off, she tried to keep the apartment tidy.

Mom put my shchi on a small stove to reheat it. Together with my father we sat at the table covered with a snow-white cloth, and banged the table with our spoons. Mom used to cut our bread (125 gr per person per day) into thin pieces and put them on a big plate to create an abundance of bread. So we were sitting at the table and waiting for my shchi. Mom took the kettle from the stove and stepped towards the table, but caught her foot and fell down. Shchi spilled on the floor. I seized a chair and would have killed mother, but Daddy shouted 'Sonny! Mom!' It stopped me. We all bent down and picked slices of cabbage from the floor. We ate it with bread. I'll never forget it.

Listen what happened later. Mom bought a cat and I ate it. For some reason I also ate the cat's eyes though Mom urged me not to do it. The cat's pigment started glittering in my eyes. One dark evening I came into the room, and Mom cried 'A devil is here!' Daddy said 'What kind of devil?' Mom cried 'Look!' Father looked at me and said 'Yes, it is something terrible and looks like a devil!'

It was me who was the devil. I was surprised to watch them quickly barricading my door (they used a wardrobe and a table). I understood that my glittering eyes terrified parents to death. Parents kept me in my room during 2 days. I knocked at the door, asked them to believe me, and begged them to recognize their son. They did not trust me and said 'Stay there in your room: you are a devil!' Several days later I was back to normal. You see, it was another nightmare caused by the siege circumstances.

During the siege Mom carried all our valuables to the market. For example, she changed my father's expensive suit for 200 gr of bread and a piece of sugar.

During the blockade schools went on functioning and I studied at my school #11 [5](#). Later its number was changed for 162.

My parents and I survived, but my grandfather and grandmother died from starvation. They were buried at the Jewish (Preobrazhenskoe) cemetery.

Grandfather of my classmate brought us to the Preobrazhenskoe cemetery by a horsed cart. We paid him a bottle of vodka. It was very cold and difficult to find workers for digging a grave in the frozen ground. Later inscriptions we made on the gravestones disappeared, and we could not find the graves. After the end of the war I visited the cemetery many times, but found neither graves of my grandparents, nor tablets with their names. Everything disappeared. Grandfather had died earlier than grandmother. It was terrible.

In August 1942 I received call-up papers. By that time I had finished my school and got a school-leaving certificate with excellent marks.

I was called up for military service and brought to the local military registration and enlistment office. I left my parents at home. We (recruits) were offered seats at the table and given a pot of millet porridge each and it was possible to eat as much as we wanted. A doctor came in and warned us not to eat much, because we were really famished. Not all of us took his advice. Four guys died right at the table. It was terrible to watch famished people eating.

Later they gave us military uniform. They were not interested in our size, therefore they simply made a laughing-stock of us.

We were sent to the Leningrad front. I got to the detached company of snipers in Levashovo (rifle battalion #78). There they taught us about 2 weeks. The situation there was similar to that at the front-line. We got up at 6 o'clock in the morning (we lived in large barracks and slept in plank beds). We used to run to the lake (it was very cold in the morning), and had to give a souse. Two weeks later we were sent to the front-line. And it was impossible to ask questions, otherwise you could fall into the hands of SMERSH [6](#) officers.

We used to sit in trenches. Sometimes they equipped special places for us: in the trees, on the roofs, etc. We were engaged in murder: we had to shoot at Germans. If we noticed a moving target, we fired a shot.

I did not count how many Germans I killed, but my commanders told that the number was about 25 (from October till December 1942). In December we started preparing for the breach of blockade of Leningrad [7](#). The routine was very strict. Sometimes we went on the scout.

On the opposite side of the Neva River (near Dubrovka) Germans dug earth-houses. They made real earthworks. And in their earth-houses they had everything they needed. Later when we took that fortification by storm, we were surprised to find pianos in the German earth-houses. Our commanders trained us intensively, because Germans poured water over the steep bank of the Neva River (it was 12-14 meters high). Water froze; therefore it was necessary to use long ladders to climb up the bank after crossing the river covered with ice.

On January 12, 1943 we were ordered to fall into line near the bank of the Neva River. The first sergeant arrived carrying a large container. They handed out mugs and said 'Men, come forward!' All of us made a step forward. The first sergeant came up and filled every mug with alcohol (from the container).

Commanders told us that we had a hard work before us: a capture of the opposite bank of the Neva River, where Germans had entrenched position. We were dressed warmly: short fur coats, quilted trousers, warm caps. But we were inexperienced. Our commanders warned us that in case of wound, it was better for us to fall down and try to survive.

If not, nobody could help us, therefore they considered it necessary to give us a drink. Brother-soldiers were shocked: was it possible to drink, get drunk and go into battle? One guy said 'I refuse to drink.' The first sergeant answered 'You declared yourself to be a man, but you are not a man yet, join the ranks!' The first sergeant watched us drinking.

I drank half a mug of alcohol. We had nothing to take after, therefore we started eating clean snow. The orchestra began to play; we heard the thunder of cannon. We rushed forward carrying ladders. It became hot. We were drunk, we ran shouting hurrah. I guess we would have never run forward if we were able to take a practical view of the situation. Around us machine-guns and artillery fired, mines exploded. Germans pushed our ladders back as soon as we pitched them against the bank. The ladders fell back together with people and people broke their backs and heads shouting with horror and pain. At the same time shells and mines dropped into the Neva River and all this went under. Blood and flesh were around us... It is impossible to describe.

I was not religious, but I believed that every person had his fate. So we rushed into the trenches, killed Germans and hid inside the shell-hole. When we ran out of the shell-hole, a strong blow

caught me on my head. I fell down and lost consciousness. Later they told me there was a big hole in my head, and it seemed that my brain was damaged.

The surgeon examined me and ordered to put me closer to the morgue. Nurses dressed my wound smartly. In the outskirts of consciousness I heard that they were going to send me to the hospital in Leningrad immediately.

I found myself in Leningrad in January 1943. When they brought me to the Neuro-Surgical Institute in Mayakovskogo Street, doctor Polenov, the founder of the Institute was on duty. He examined me and ordered to put me on the operating table at once. [Polenov Andrey Lvovich (1871-1947) was one of the founders of neurosurgery in the USSR.] I was under the knife for 6 hours. After that I was unconscious for a long time. Polenov often came to examine me, and shouted at nurses 'Give him all the best!' The tastiest meals were on my bedside-table. Later they moved me to the hospital named after Mechnikov. I spent half a year there at the neurological department. There I was surrounded by crazy people, many of them were bound to their beds. My parents knew nothing about me.

I was horrified to watch my neighbors. Later I was discharged from the hospital and sent to a military unit. My father visited me there, but I did not see Mom. Very soon I was at the Leningrad front again, and later at the Baltic one. There I was wounded again and was brought to a hospital in Estonia. One day a doctor came in our ward and ordered all of us to go out of the hospital and hide in the field: they expected bombardment of the hospital. We all secreted ourselves in haystacks. By the way, Estonians hated us and sometimes shot at our officers from behind.

We found a hay-loft and hid there. We agreed upon night duty. At night an officer on duty woke us up. Fortunately he knew Estonian language and heard local people taking counsel together: 'Some Russians came into this shed, let's burn it to ashes.' That officer fired a grenade at them and saved all of us.

In total I was wounded 5 times and was demobilized in 1945 in Kazan (after my 5th medical treatment). It happened shortly before the end of the war. By the way, in 1944 I took part in liberation of Siverskaya (a suburb of Leningrad), where we have our dacha [8](#) at present.

At the front I joined the USSR Communist Party and was its member till the day of its collapse during Perestroika [9](#).

After demobilization I went to Leningrad, to my parents. For my service in the army I got 14,000 rubles. At that time the sum was rather significant. We bought furniture. Parents were in fair condition.

After the end of the war Daddy went on sewing. He worked at a fashion atelier, and Mom was a housewife. My parents lived happily till 1955, when in Pyarnu (a seaside town in Estonia) father died. I'll tell you how it happened.

#### • After the war

Father went on working, but with the increase of years it became hard for him. One day he got ill with influenza. Mom asked him to stay at home, but he refused and stayed on his feet. In summer

he got a permit to Pyarnu sanatorium in Estonia, and they went there together with Mom. At that time I went to the seaside (to Sochi).

In Pyarnu it was very hot, and father decided to swim in the Gulf of Finland. Mom objected, because father was sick the other day, but he refused to take her advice. When he came out of the sea, he felt shivery and had running temperature. Mom was frightened. From her neighbors she got to know that Kremlin doctors from Moscow spent their vacation nearby. She paid much money to invite those physicians for council. They told her that father could die in 3 days. Mom sent me a telegram to Sochi 'Sonny, if you want to see your father, come in short order.'

I bought an airplane ticket to Leningrad with great difficulty, then went to Tallin by train, and then from Tallin to Pyarnu. By that time father's health went from bad to worse: he was inarticulate and soon died. We did not want to bury him in Pyarnu. Estonians refused to transport his body to Leningrad by car not at any price. At last we managed to arrange railway transportation (we paid a large sum of money for it). They agreed to put the coffin into the freight car. I am sure that my father was able to live a long life, but that flu had got him down.

Daddy died in 1955 at the age of 70. I remember that he was always in good health, never sick.

After father's death something happened to Mom. Her arm and leg did not function well and I guess she became demented. At that time it was impossible to find a nurse, therefore she lived together with my wife and me. We had to leave home for work and used to leave meal for her.

When we came back in the evening we usually found her all in muck. At night she shouted loudly and we could not sleep. Later they took her away to the hospital, and on March 19, 1968 Mom died.

After the end of the war I entered the Leningrad College for Cinema Engineers without entrance examinations, because I was a former front-line soldier and my school-leaving certificate was excellent. It was difficult for me to study, because I had forgotten almost everything. But I was assiduous in my studies again and 5 years later I got my honors degree of an engineer. Later I was invited to the local communist party committee. They wanted me to work as a director of the technical school for projectionists in Tula.

At that time I wanted to become a postgraduate student and handed in an application. But the head of the acoustics department turned me down. Later I understood that my item 5 [10](#) was the reason. It happened in 1950. So I agreed and left for Tula, where I rented a room. I delivered lectures on amplifiers and political subjects. Everything was fine, my school was considered to be good. At that time my parents informed me that if I wanted to keep my room in Leningrad for myself, I had to come immediately. It was not easy to leave Tula, but they agreed to let me go if I found somebody to step into my shoes. I persuaded a local resident (a projectionist) to fill the position and left.

I arrived in Leningrad in 1953. Stalin died, the age was gravid.

After my return to Leningrad, I started working at the Leningrad Palace of Pioneers as an assistant manager of the department of science and technology. My task was to teach gifted schoolchildren physics. Later the Heads of the Palace offered me to supervise the city contest in physics, chemistry and mathematics. My work took plenty of time: teaching of pupils and coordinating of

work in all districts of the city. Besides I arranged excursions around laboratories of our department for schoolchildren of different city schools.

I used to describe our laboratories and invite pupils to come and study. Every year we arranged an exhibition. Exhibits were created by our pupils. The Palace of Pioneers was often visited by interesting people, for example we welcomed Jawaharlal Nehru, Ives Montand and Simona Signore. At the same time I studied at the postgraduate courses for teachers of physics and radio electronics. At the same time I taught physics at several city schools. I worked at the Palace of Pioneers from 1953 till 1962.

Before the war I finished musical school (voice-training class). When I was a student of the Leningrad College of Cinema Engineers, I sang to the orchestral accompaniment at my College. I also sang at the opera studio at the Leningrad Conservatory. The studio was housed by the Teacher's Club in the former Yussupov Palace. Aron Solomonovich Bubelnikov, the Honored artist of Belarus (a father of the well-known conductor Pavel Bubelnikov) was our teacher. At that time we prepared for stage a musical comedy Okulina (based upon Pushkin's [11](#) Mistress into Maid). We acted to the pianist accompaniment.

We performed Okulina not only in Leningrad, but also in Leningrad region. The performance was a great success. I sang the main part of Alexey Berestov. I also took part in fashion displays as a model. That was the way I earned additional money during my studies at the College. I was very vigorous. Among my friends there were pianists, accordionists, and guitarists. When we gathered at home, we used to sing much. I liked to sing very much and I like to do it till now. If only I had an opportunity, I would go on singing. Unfortunately, most of my friends are already not alive.

Being a student of the last course I got qualification of a projectionist. We had practice at different cinemas of the city.

I got acquainted with my future wife when I worked at the Palace of Pioneers. My wife Rose Yakovlevna Ebert graduated from the Leningrad College of Foreign Languages (French faculty) and taught French at school. She took her pupils to the Palace of Pioneers for excursion and came to my department. We noticed each other and I started courting her. It resulted in our wedding. We celebrated our wedding in the large canteen of the Mariinsky theatre. We invited 102 guests. An orchestra played, several people shot films. We had a good time. I still keep invitation cards. The next day at home I gathered my colleagues from the Palace of Pioneers, and my wife invited her colleagues from her school.

My wife was born in 1928.

During my work at the Palace of Pioneers the Head of our department regarded me with disfavor. I guess she was an anti-Semite.

I was a member of the CPSU since 1943. I joined the party at the front.

It was very difficult to find job at that time, especially if your item 5 was a stumbling-block. The principal of the school where my wife worked was a very decent person. He advised my wife to improve her English urgently (her basic language was French). You see, at that time English became the basic foreign language at schools, therefore my wife could loose her work teaching only French.

She finished a postgraduate course for teachers of English language, and started teaching English at school. As her salary was rather small, the director permitted her to combine teaching with a post of a Pioneer Leader [12](#).

My wife's mother Maria Romanovna was a seamstress and worked very quickly. My wife's father was a tailor (like my father). He was a wonderful person. He loved me very much (considered me to be his son). He often asked me to tell about a book I had read or a film I had seen. He said I was the best narrator he knew. My wife had got an elder brother (he was 4 years older than me). Her brother was a medical officer (submariner). He graduated from the Army Medical College in Leningrad.

Later he left for Chelyabinsk and worked there at the faculty of microbiology. With assistance of my wife he became a PhD, and later defended his doctor's thesis. He became a professor and a Head of the microbiological faculty at the Chelyabinsk Medical College. He was also a pro-rector of the College. Later he became a corresponding member of the Academy of Sciences. My wife's brother was a very sociable person.

In September 1962 I changed my work for the Leningrad Technical School for Radio Engineers. Here you can see a lot of diplomas for my work there.

I worked there about 44 years (till September 1, 2006).

In 1968 my Mom died. It was rather difficult to change our apartment for another one. But we managed and many years lived together with my wife's parents. Later her parents died, and we remained together with my wife in that apartment.

During my work in the technical school I never came across manifestations of anti-Semitism. All my colleagues were nice to me.

In 1970s our relatives left for Canada. We discussed it with my wife and decided not to leave the country.

Among my relatives there were some religious people. My father was also religious, but he was not fanatic. He attended a synagogue, celebrated Jewish holidays (especially Pesach). Mom was not religious. And I grew up an atheist. In the family of my wife they did not celebrate Jewish holidays.

At present I often visit the Jewish Community Center (the Organization of Jews - War Veterans), when they arrange different cultural events. Jewish traditions were a part of my life only while my parents were alive.

In 1950s I got to know that Stalin prepared deportation of all Jews somewhere very far from the European part of the country. I guess a lot of them could die on their way there [13](#). But fortunately Stalin died in 1953.

I mentioned already that at the Palace of Pioneers my chief was in antagonism with me and evicted me out of my post without any reason. In difficult situations I always addressed the local Communist Party committee and they helped me immediately. I was an active member of the CPSU, accomplished their errands without mishap. For example, during many years I was a member of the regional election committee.

I worked in Tula, when I got to know about the Doctors' Plot and persecution of Jews - doctors. I addressed a meeting and spoke in defence of them. Communists wanted to take away my party-membership card and expel me from the party. I had a hairbreadth escape.

War in Israel in 1967-1973 did not concern me.

I've never been to Israel. Relatives of my wife, some of my friends live there, but no relatives of mine.

Most of our friends are Russian. They are good people.

After Perestroika my life did not change, because I went on working at the same place and did not change the type of my activity. I am often invited to different schools where I deliver lectures about the war and blockade of Leningrad. It is necessary to say that usually children listen to me very attentively.

Sometimes I take part in different events arranged by the Jewish community of St. Petersburg. Once I visited the new building of the Jewish Community Center in Raznichinnaya Street. Several years ago my wife and I received food packages for Jewish holidays. Firstly, it was a pleasure for us to receive them. Secondly, it was significant support for our family. This year I was invited to JCC before Pesach and received only matzot. Taking into account that I am not a young man and JCC is situated far away from my home (it takes one hour and a half to get there), this sort of attention (so to say!) causes a lot of raised eyebrows and disappointment. I can buy matzot in close propinquity to my house.

I often visit the Organization of Jews - War Veterans in Gatchinskaya Street. Sometimes I sing there.

- **Glossary:**

## **1 Great Patriotic War**

On 22nd June 1941 at 5 o'clock in the morning Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union without declaring war. This was the beginning of the so-called Great Patriotic War. The German blitzkrieg, known as Operation Barbarossa, nearly succeeded in breaking the Soviet Union in the months that followed. Caught unprepared, the Soviet forces lost whole armies and vast quantities of equipment to the German onslaught in the first weeks of the war. By November 1941 the German army had seized the Ukrainian Republic, besieged Leningrad, the Soviet Union's second largest city, and threatened Moscow itself. The war ended for the Soviet Union on 9th May 1945.

## **2 Common name**

Russified or Russian first names used by Jews in everyday life and adopted in official documents. The Russification of first names was one of the manifestations of the assimilation of Russian Jews at the turn of the 19th and 20th century. In some cases only the spelling and pronunciation of Jewish names was russified (e.g. Isaac instead of Yitskhak; Boris instead of Borukh), while in other cases traditional Jewish names were replaced by similarly sounding Russian names (e.g. Eugenia instead of Ghita; Yury instead of Yuda). When state anti-Semitism intensified in the USSR at the end of the

1940s, most Jewish parents stopped giving their children traditional Jewish names to avoid discrimination.

### **3 Communal apartment**

The Soviet power wanted to improve housing conditions by requisitioning 'excess' living space of wealthy families after the Revolution of 1917. Apartments were shared by several families with each family occupying one room and sharing the kitchen, toilet and bathroom with other tenants. Because of the chronic shortage of dwelling space in towns communal or shared apartments continued to exist for decades. Despite state programs for the construction of more houses and the liquidation of communal apartments, which began in the 1960s, shared apartments still exist today.

### **4 Molotov, V**

P. (1890-1986): Statesman and member of the Communist Party leadership. From 1939, Minister of Foreign Affairs. On June 22, 1941 he announced the German attack on the USSR on the radio. He and Eden also worked out the percentages agreement after the war, about Soviet and western spheres of influence in the new Europe.

### **5 School #**

Schools had numbers and not names. It was part of the policy of the state. They were all state schools and were all supposed to be identical.

### **6 SMERSH**

Russian abbreviation for 'Smert Shpionam' meaning Death to Spies. It was a counterintelligence department in the Soviet Union formed during World War II, to secure the rear of the active Red Army, on the front to arrest 'traitors, deserters, spies, and criminal elements'. The full name of the entity was USSR People's Commissariat of Defense Chief Counterintelligence Directorate 'SMERSH'. This name for the counterintelligence division of the Red Army was introduced on 19th April 1943, and worked as a separate entity until 1946. It was headed by Viktor Abakumov. At the same time a SMERSH directorate within the People's Commissariat of the Soviet Navy and a SMERSH department of the NKVD were created.

The main opponent of SMERSH in its counterintelligence activity was Abwehr, the German military foreign information and counterintelligence department. SMERSH activities also included 'filtering' the soldiers recovered from captivity and the population of the gained territories. It was also used to punish within the NKVD itself; allowed to investigate, arrest and torture, force to sign fake confessions, put on a show trial, and either send to the camps or shoot people. SMERSH would also often be sent out to find and kill defectors, double agents, etc.; also used to maintain military discipline in the Red Army by means of barrier forces, that were supposed to shoot down the Soviet troops in the cases of retreat. SMERSH was also used to hunt down 'enemies of the people' outside Soviet territory.

### **7 Blockade of Leningrad**

On September 8, 1941 the Germans fully encircled Leningrad and its siege began. It lasted until January 27, 1944. The blockade meant incredible hardships and privations for the population of the town. Hundreds of thousands died from hunger, cold and diseases during the almost 900 days of the blockade.

## **8 Dacha**

country house, consisting of small huts and little plots of lands. The Soviet authorities came to the decision to allow this activity to the Soviet people to support themselves. The majority of urban citizens grow vegetables and fruit in their small gardens to make preserves for winter

## **9 Perestroika (Russian for restructuring)**

Soviet economic and social policy of the late 1980s, associated with the name of Soviet politician Mikhail Gorbachev. The term designated the attempts to transform the stagnant, inefficient command economy of the Soviet Union into a decentralized, market-oriented economy. Industrial managers and local government and party officials were granted greater autonomy, and open elections were introduced in an attempt to democratize the Communist Party organization. By 1991, perestroika was declining and was soon eclipsed by the dissolution of the USSR.

## **10 Item 5**

This was the nationality factor, which was included on all job application forms, Jews, who were considered a separate nationality in the Soviet Union, were not favored in this respect from the end of World War II until the late 1980s.

## **11 Pushkin, Alexandr (1799-1837)**

Russian poet and prose writer, among the foremost figures in Russian literature. Pushkin established the modern poetic language of Russia, using Russian history for the basis of many of his works. His masterpiece is Eugene Onegin, a novel in verse about mutually rejected love. The work also contains witty and perceptive descriptions of Russian society of the period. Pushkin died in a duel

## **12 All-Union pioneer organization**

a communist organization for teenagers between 10 and 15 years old (cf: boy-/ girlscouts in the US). The organization aimed at educating the young generation in accordance with the communist ideals, preparing pioneers to become members of the Komsomol and later the Communist Party. In the Soviet Union, all teenagers were pioneers.

## **13 Forced deportation to Siberia**

Stalin introduced the deportation of certain people, like the Crimean Tatars and the Chechens, to Siberia. Without warning, people were thrown out of their houses and into vehicles at night. The majority of them died on the way of starvation, cold and illnesses.