

Rosa Freisond

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Mogilov-Podolski

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Interviewer: Ella Levitskaya

Rosa Freisond lives with her older sister Lubov in a two-bedroom apartment of a 4-storied building built after the war. They have no excessive furniture, just what they mostly need. This furniture was also bought after the war, but it hasn't worn out. They have bookshelves full of books in Russian and Ukrainian. Rosa reads pedagogical literature, Russian and Ukrainian classics and foreign writers. Rosa is a short slim lady, very sociable and vivid. She speaks very distinctly and pronouncing each word very clearly – one can tell she is a teacher. She has a great sense of humor. Rosa says she is an optimist and this helps her a lot in life. Her former students remember and keep in touch with her. During the interview we've been interrupted by phone calls. Her former students, younger and older, have dropped by. They remember their first teacher, and this speaks for itself.



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My family background

Few generations of my parental families lived in the Jewish town of Yaryshev, Vinnitsa region. My paternal grandfather Moishe-Eleh Freisond was born in the 1850s. I guess my father's mother Rivka was few years younger than her husband. I don't know my grandmother's maiden name. I know that my grandfather was some kind of a trade dealer, but I don't know any details about what he did for a living. My grandmother was a housewife like all married Jewish women in the town. My grandmother had many children, but only four survived. My father Abram Freisond, born in 1876, was the youngest. I don't know his older brothers' dates of birth. My father's older brother Aron Freisond lived in Yaryshev near where we lived and I remember his family well. His wife's name was Kreina. Aron had four children. They were older than me. One daughter died from tuberculosis in her childhood. I went to school with the other three girls. We were friends. My father's next brother Isif died very young in the early 1920s. I remember his widow Hana and their four children, who were older than me. My father's third brother moved to USA in the 1910s, and the family lost track of him. I don't remember his name.

My father's family was religious like all Jewish families in the town. Before the revolution of 1917 [1](#) there was a cheder in the town where my father and his brothers studied. My grandmother and grandfather spoke Yiddish at home and Ukrainian to their Ukrainian neighbors. I don't know whether my father studied at school, but he could read and write in Yiddish and Ukrainian. My father and his brothers had to go to work to help the family. My father worked as cattle dealer. He purchased cows and calves from villagers and supplied them to butchers.

My mother's father Eleh Ber Kaz and his wife Rivka Kaz were born in Yaryshev in the 1840s. My grandfather was a tailor and my grandmother was a housewife. My grandfather was short and thin. He worked at home and I remember him wearing his black vest with many needles and pins that he needed for his work – in it and a kippah. My grandfather had a meter tape line hanging round his neck. He was always busy doing his work and spent little time with his numerous grandchildren. My grandmother had to save every kopek to manage the household and give education to her four children. My mother was the youngest and the only daughter. I don't know how many children my grandmother had in total, but only four of them survived: my mother and her three brothers. The oldest brother's name was Azril. The next one was Aron and the third brother was Gershl. My mother Motl was born in 1866. Her brothers cared for her much. They studied in cheder and when they were doing their homework my mother sat closer to them and they showed her letters teaching her to read. My mother picked Hebrew and could write and read in it.

My mother's older brothers Azril and Aron began to help grandfather Eleh-Ber with his work after having bar mitzvah and studied the tailor's vocation. Aron stayed to work with him while Azril got married and started his own tailor's business. Grandfather also taught my mother and she learned tailoring. Gershl became an apprentice of a blacksmith and stayed to work with him after his apprenticeship was over. I don't happen to remember their wives' names or my cousin brothers or sisters' names. I remember that Azril had three sons. Aron and his wife had a daughter. Gershl, the third brother, had four children. My mother brothers' wives were from Yaryshev, of course.

My parents got married in the early 1900s. They had a traditional Jewish wedding, of course. People in Yaryshev were religious and observed all traditions. After the wedding my parents lived in their own house that as my mother's dowry. Her father and brothers gave it to the newly weds. Our family lived in this house before the Great Patriotic War [2](#). It was a wooden plastered house with a big fore room where my mother kept food stocks for winter, a big room where the children slept, my parents' bedroom and a kitchen with a big Russian stove [3](#). This stove heated our parents' bedroom and there was another stove to heat the children's room. The only thing my father didn't like about the house was that it adjusted to another house. The family living in this house had a yard and a separate entrance, but my father used to repeat that if one constructed a house he should make sure that one could ride a horse-driven cart around it. However, this was common in Yaryshev that houses adjusted to one another. We had a small yard and a shed in it. Some time after I was born my father built a little house with one room and a small kitchen in it in the yard. He said that older daughters would move to live with their husbands after getting married and the youngest one – and this was me – would stay with my parents and that then they would move to live in this smaller house and I would be in the bigger one with my family.

I have right memories of the town of my childhood and youth. I don't think it has changed much since that time. Jews resided in the central part of the town. Yaryshev was a lovely town. It remains to be a piece of paradise for me, the place where I had a happy childhood and youth. Its population

counted to over 400 people. We got along well with our neighbors attending weddings and funerals. Of course, routinely anti-Semitism has always been in life and it will always be, but in Yaryshev it only revealed itself in the form of short quarrels that people forgot soon, but state anti-Semitism either did not exist or we didn't face it in Yaryshev before the war.

There was a big choral wooden synagogue in the town. The synagogue was called Shil [in Yiddish]. Men sat downstairs and women – on the upper gallery listening to the prayer through little openings. It is not there any longer. The synagogue was beautiful, and it's a pity it's not there any more. It wasn't ruined in action during the Great Patriotic War, but the local Ukrainians took it apart using wood as construction material during the war. That was it. Men went to the synagogue regularly while women only attended it on Yom Kippur. They dressed up and wore white shawls on their heads. Men wore white clothes with contrasting black stripes of their tallits. I remember this well. There was also a prayer house built by one of two wealthy men in Yaryshev. There was a cheder in the town before the revolution of 1917. There was a primary Jewish school and two Ukrainian schools: 17-year lower and 10-year higher schools in the Ukrainian part of the town. After finishing the primary school all children went to Ukrainian schools. There was a drugstore and medical office in the town. The assistant doctor, a Jewish man, was very experienced and skilled. He went on calls and prescribed medical treatment to patients, and it was very simple at the time: aspirin, castor oil, herbal teas and clysters. Perhaps because people trusted their 'professor', as they called him, his prescriptions worked all right. There was also a hospital in Yaryshev, but people only came there in emergency. Women gave birth to babies at home, tended by the assistant doctor and a midwife. There was a public library with books in Yiddish and Ukrainian and a cultural center in the town, and people of different nationalities borrowed books from there.

Before the revolution and during the Civil War [4](#) there may have been pogroms [5](#) in Yaryshev. My mother told me about one. My parents had two children then: my older brother Lev and sister Liebe. When gangs [6](#) came into the town, Jews hid away wherever they could find a place. My mother and the children took shelter in the basement of the only two-storied building in our neighborhood across the street from our house. My father was away from home. My brother studied to play the violin. When my mother saw that bandits were taking away his violin she ran out of the basement and ran to ask them to leave the violin. They beat her mercilessly and hit the violin on the ground and left. There was another pogrom before this one. My father told me about it. The family took hiding in one place and my father went to a different place. This was safer. Bandits found my father and beat him. They hit him on his stomach and he had liver problems for the rest of his life. My father died young from liver cancer that must have resulted from this beating.

The Jews of Yaryshev accepted the Soviet power with enthusiasm. They were probably hoping that there would be no more pogroms, anti-Semitism or anything bad in their life. Most of Jewish residents were craftsmen: tailors, shoemakers, blacksmiths and tinsmiths. Some Jews owned shops selling convenience goods: salt, sugar, kerosene, matches and cereals. They were small stores and their owners often could hardly make ends meet, so poor they were. There was a fabric store owned by two wealthier Jews that were in relation to one another. After the revolution the Soviet authorities did not even dispossess Jews of their shops, probably because they were so small. After the revolution the Jewish population began to celebrate Soviet holidays: 7 November [7](#), 1 May. They got together at the cultural center, made speeches, concerts and parties.

The houses were lit with kerosene lamps in Yaryshev. Electrical lighting was only provided shortly before the war. I remember that we had a very nice bronze hanging lamp. My mother cleaned and polished it with woolen cloth every Friday. My parents had a table kerosene lamp in their bedroom.

Many Jewish families had lived in Yaryshev for generations. They must have been all in some kind of relation to one another. There was one restriction about marriages between cousin brothers and sisters, but marriages between distant relatives were allowed. I remember our neighbor marrying a guy from Ozarintsy in Vinnitsa region. Her husband moved to Yaryshev. People discussed this wedding for a long time blaming the bride's parents of having failed to find her a match in their own town. This guy was called 'foreigner' by others. Of course, everybody in Yaryshev knew everybody else, but there were still shadkhanim and they gave their advice about possible matches. There were traditional Jewish weddings in the towns with a chuppah in the yard and a rabbi. All residents of the town were invited to weddings. If a girl came from a poor Jewish family, the whole town contributed to make her a dowry. There were big parties and musicians playing at weddings. Musicians accompanied the most honored guests to their homes playing music. Before she had to step under the chuppah the bride had her hair cut and right after the chuppah she put on a wig. All women wore wigs and men – a yarmulke and caps or hats. People were very close. If somebody got in trouble they gave money or whatever help they could. They knew everything about each other, and I guess they even knew what their neighbors were having for dinner. Occasionally somebody from Yaryshev traveled to Mogilov-Podolski. This was a full range trip. They made prearrangements with a balagula cabman. Nowadays Mogilov-Podolsk seems to be about 30 km from Yaryshev, not too far, but a trip in a horse-driven carriage took a long time then. People went there for an X-ray, or if they needed something special to buy in a store. For example, those who had babies went to Mogilov-Podolski to buy white bread to soak it in milk, wrap in gauze and give babies as a dummy.

There were four of us, kids, in the family. My mother had 11 babies, but the others died in infancy. I don't remember, when my oldest brother Lev, Jewish Leiba, was born. My sister Lubov, Liebe, was born in 1907. Then my sister Lisa, Jewish Leya, was born in 1909. I was born in 1918 and named Rosa, Reizl in Jewish.

My father was a cattle dealer and my mother was a housewife. We were neither wealthier nor poorer than other Jewish families in Yaryshev. We didn't know any other way of life and were content with what we had. Children only got new clothes for Pesach. My mother and father's parents also gave us new clothes on Jewish holidays: a hat, stockings or a new shirt. All clothes were bigger size to fit them next autumn. I didn't get new clothes as often as the older ones: being the youngest, I got what they'd grown out of. It was all right with me since this practice was common in Yaryshev.

My parents followed kashrut strictly. My mother had separate dishes, utensils and tableware for meat and dairy products. She kept them in separate cupboards in the kitchen and a separate spot for all of them on the table. Even dish wash sponges were separate.

There was a market in Yaryshev twice a week. Farmers from Yaryshev and neighboring villages came there to sell their products: eggs, dairy products, fruit and vegetables, corn and wheat flour. There was a shochet near the synagogue. Housewives bought live chickens and took them to the shochet to have them slaughtered. The shochet also sold kosher veal and beef. Housewives also

bought turnip that they ground, added onions and goose fat serving this dish almost every day. Villagers even called turnip 'the Jewish pork fat' joking. Housewives bought plums, apricots in buckets to make jam for winter on a brick makeshift stove in the yard. They usually made lots of jam and neighbors came in to help with taking stones out of quinces or cut apples singing songs and talking while working. When it got too late, they baked potatoes in the fire to eat together. People supported and helped each other.

My parents were religious. My father went to the synagogue on Sabbath and Jewish holidays. My mother went to the synagogue on Yom Kippur. We celebrated Sabbath and Jewish holidays. On Friday morning my mother cleaned the house and baked brown bread for a week ahead and two white challah loaves for Sabbath. On Friday morning all housewives went to the market to buy food products. My mother made us chicken broth with homemade noodles or gefilte fish. In the evening the family got together. My mother dressed up and lit candles in beautiful bronze candle stands, her dowry. She covered her face and prayed over the candles. Then we took down to dinner. My father didn't go to work on Saturday. In the morning he went to the synagogue and when he returned, he read us stories from the Bible. We spoke Yiddish at home, and my father usually translated for us from Hebrew so that we could understand the stories.

Pesach was a special holiday. There was a general clean up before Pesach. Furniture was removed from the rooms to whitewash the walls and the ceilings. The house was also whitewashed outside whatever the weather. About two weeks before Pesach a community representative collected contributions for the needy families for them to be able to buy flour for matzah, chicken, fish and vegetables. I remember this man who collected the money. He always said that some people might think that he left some money for himself, so he did take 5 kopeck each time so that the person who thought so did not sin before the Lord. People laughed when he said this.

When the house was clean, neighbors got together to make matzah. Jewish families were big: women bore as many children as the Lord gave them and they needed a lot of matzah for the holiday. Matzah was kept in wooden boxes on the attic where they kept crockery for Pesach. One day before Pesach, when there was not a single bread crumb left in the house, they took the matzah and crockery off the attic. My mother cooked much for Pesach. We crashed matzah in a mortar and sieved it. My mother added bigger pieces to chicken broth. She made strudels with jam, nuts and raisins from the matzah flour and also - maina, strudel with meat, fried onions, spices and homemade noodles also made from matzah flour, gefilte fish, puddings, delicious potato pancakes baked in the oven in a big ceramic pot. We also liked egg puddings with matzah. Housewives shared their recipes. My father conducted seder in the evening. He put on a white kipp that men wore on Yom Kippur. He reclined on cushions. My mother also put a saucer with salty water, bitter greenery, hard-boiled egg and a piece of meat with a bone on the table, and a big wine glass for Elijah the Prophet in the center of the table. Father broke a piece of matzah into three and hid the middle part under the cushions. One of the children was to find it and hide away and later give it to our father for a ransom. I remember that the family allowed the youngest to do it and this was me. My father recited the Haggadah in Hebrew and my brother asked him four traditional questions in Hebrew. Lev just learned the words by heart. Then my mother or father recited a prayer and we all sang merry songs. The entrance door was left open for Elijah the Prophet to come in and bless us.

Yom Kippur was a sad day, when all went to the synagogue. Housewives made food for the children and spent the day at the synagogue. Adults fasted till the first evening star, almost 24 hours.

Parents took cookies and fruit with them for their children to come to the synagogue to see them and get treatments. My mother could read in Hebrew and read prayers to other women sitting upstairs. On Sukkoth a sukkah was installed in all Jewish yards and decorated with ribbons and greenery. There was a table inside for a family to have meals and pray inside. On Purim it was customary for relatives and neighbors exchanged sweet treatments: jam, cookies, and candy. On Chanukkah children got some change for a gift.

After the revolution there were 2 kolkhozes [8](#) in Yaryshev: one for Ukrainian villagers and one Jewish kolkhoz [9](#) named after Lenin [10](#) with its fields in Yaryshevskaya Sloboda 2 km from Yaryshev. Schoolchildren could work there on summer vacations.

In the middle 1920s grandfather Moishe-Eleh Freisond died. A couple years later my maternal grandfather Eleh-Ber Kaz died. They were buried in the Jewish cemetery in accordance with Jewish traditions. Every anniversary of their death we went to the cemetery and my father recited the Kaddish for them over the graves of his father, his father-in-law and his brother Isif who died some time before grandfather passed away. My maternal grandmother Riva died in the 1930s. She was buried near my grandfather's grave. Grandmother Tube went to live with my father older brother Aron's family, whose children had their own families by then and lived separately from their parents.

My older brother and sisters finished the Jewish primary school in Yaryshev and went to the 7-year Ukrainian school. After finishing school my brother entered the agriculture technical school in Vinnitsa. After finishing it he became a specialist in growing tobacco in the Jewish kolkhoz. My sister Lubov went to work as a secretary/typist at the equipment yard. Lisa fell ill with scarlet fever after the 7th form and grew deaf. She didn't work being an invalid. I went to the Jewish school after all others had finished it. We studied there in Yiddish and also had Ukrainian classes. I enjoyed studying at school. I learned to read before going to school and reading became my favorite pastime for life. I had all excellent marks at school. I became a pioneer and took part in all school activities. After finishing the 4th form I went to the 7-year Ukrainian school where my brother and sisters studied before. I joined the Komsomol [11](#) in this school. I attended a drama club where I played the main roles in performances. Sometimes an amateur theater from Mogilov-Podolski came to Yaryshev on tour. Their performances were free of charge. I attended all of their performances. During summer vacations I worked in the Jewish kolkhoz. Schoolchildren received a little money and food products for our work. I finished school with excellent marks.

In 1929 my father fell ill. He was taken to the hospital in Mogilov-Podolski where they identified his terrible diagnosis: liver cancer. He died shortly afterward. My father was just 53 years of age. He was buried in the Jewish cemetery in accordance with Jewish traditions. My older brother Lev was married and lived separately. His wife's name was Rosa. She was from Yaryshev. My brother supported us, but he could not support two families. My sister Lubov was working. My mother decided to lease the little house that my father built. Buchatskiy, manager of the equipment yard, lived there for quite a while. He was a nice and kind person. I became a teacher thanks to him, and I will always be grateful to him for this. My older sister Lisa learned to sew. My mother had a sewing machine and Lisa sewed plain clothes for women. Her clients sometimes paid her money and sometimes paid her with products.

Shortly after my father died my mother fell severely ill. The Jews of the town collected money for the road and my brother took her to the hospital. My mother happened to have a benign tumor of a kidney. She had a surgery: they removed one kidney, and my mother lived with one kidney for almost 39 years. Probably her optimism that all children inherited from her helped her to hold on.

1932-33 was a period of famine [12](#) in Ukraine. People in Yaryshev were forced to give away all of their grain stocks for winter. There were searches and inspectors took away even bags with 1-2 kg flour or cereals, whatever they found. Our people picked berries and mushrooms in the woods, made soup of herbs, made flat bread from roots and managed to survive.

Growing up

I finished school in 1934 at the age of almost 16. Once Buchatskiy, the tenant who rented a room from us, asked me whether I wanted to become a teacher. I laughed – teachers were like idols for me. He said there was a 2-week teachers' training course in the village and after finishing it I could go to work. It goes without saying that I rushed to this course. After finishing it I obtained a certificate of a primary school teacher. The course sent me to work at the likbez school [13](#). Of course, I felt awkward having to teach people of the same age as my parents, but they treated me with respect as they should treat their teacher, and they enjoyed studying. One of my adult students even became a teacher of mathematics later. I liked my job. I worked there for a year before I was offered a job of a primary school teacher at the 7-year Ukrainian school. I hadn't turned 17 yet and enjoyed playing with my pupils during intervals. They respected me and took off their hats to greet me: 'Good afternoon, Rosa Abramovna!'. When I greeted them first, they replied: 'Day Bozhe Zdorovya!' [Lord grant you health!], a common greeting in the village. Those were the 1930s and Lord should not be mentioned in those years, the period of struggle against religion [14](#). I asked director of the school what I was to do and he advised me to reply 'Good afternoon to you' to the relevant greeting. My sister made me a sateen dress, dark blue in white polka dots. I wore it all year round and when there were ceremonies or meetings at school, I sewed on a white collar to it and it became a fancy dress.

In the first year of my work at school I was elected deputy of the local town council. There was another council of the farmers' part of the town. I was responsible for making minutes of meetings. Not all deputies had education to do this.

In 1937 arrests [15](#), and trials against 'enemies of people' [16](#) began in the USSR and Yaryshev was not exception. I don't know whether there were any Jews arrested in the town. My Ukrainian colleague, a teacher of literature in our school, was arrested. There was a militia office across the street from our house. Its officers often came by our home, when they needed something. Our house faced the windows of the cell where this teacher was kept. His wife came to us and kept sitting for hours looking at her husband. The militia men discovered it and closed the shutters on the windows. Later this teacher was taken to Vinnitsa and this is all I know about him. He was a good man and it's hard for me to believe that he was an enemy of people. When our tenant Buchatskiy was arrested, I couldn't believe he was guilty either. However, this was how we trusted the Stalin's propaganda and believed that enemies wanted to destroy our state. I had some doubts, but on the whole, I believed that our state was revealing the enemies. None of our relatives or friends suffered from arrests.

During the war

There was an affiliate of Tulchin Teachers' Training School in Yaryshev. I attended classes in the evening there. A year later I finished it with all excellent marks and entered 3-year Teachers' Training College in Vinnitsa. I studied there by correspondence. I went to Vinnitsa to take exams once a year. I stayed with my brother wife's sister, who was a doctor. In June 1941 I was taking graduation exams in college. I was to take my last exam on 23 June. On Sunday of 22 June I was preparing for the exam. The radio was turned off to not distract me. The doctor came home from work and said that patients had been taken to her hospital and that the war began. I passed my last exam on the second day of the war. It is fearful to think about it now, but then my only concern was my exam and not the war. We were taught so that our army was invincible, and that if an enemy attacked us we would defeat them on their own territory. I had no doubts about it. As soon as I passed my exam and obtained the diploma, I made an effort to go back to Yaryshev. This was hard to do since there were hardly any trains going in this direction. Kofman, one of our distant relatives from Yaryshev, lived in Kopaygorod Vinnitsa region. He was chief of the town financial department. I called him and he promised to help me. I came to Kopaygorod where he helped me to get on a train to Yaryshev. He said that we had to leave Yaryshev. I was not so sure that we had to do this, but decided to do as he said. My mother and sisters packed some clothes. I asked my brother and his family and other relatives to come with us, but they refused. Older people, who remembered World War I, were telling the others that there was no need to panic, that Germans were cultured people and did no harm to Jews during World War I. Chairman of the Jewish kolkhoz gave me a horse-driven cart and my mother, my sisters and I moved on. Tsylia Dikstein, a teacher from my school also went with us. We took little luggage. I had a change of underwear and my 'teacher's' dress with me. We didn't take any warm clothes, being sure that the war was going to wend soon. We just locked the door and left. It never occurred to us that we were leaving Yaryshev for good. We road on the road, but then fascist planes began to bomb it. Before coming to Vinnitsa we left the house and the cart with some farmers and walked across the woods for safety. We got to the railway station in Vinnitsa and took a train. We didn't know where we were heading. We were the only ones who managed to leave Yaryshev. Few days after we left director of the Jewish school and his family wanted to leave. They only rode few kilometers, when somebody told them that Germans were in Vinnitsa already and they had to go back to Yaryshev.

Our trip was long. On the way our train was often bombed. The train stopped and people scattered around looking for shelter. At times not all of them returned. The train moved on and there was no opportunity to bury the deceased. Two weeks later we reached the Northern Caucasus. The train arrived at the Armavir railway station. People came to the station ringing food and offering accommodation. We stayed there for some time. Then the evacuation office offered us to go to Kalacha village between Armavir and Maykop [Azerbaijan, 1800 km from Kiev]. The locals were friendly. One of local women offered us accommodation. Her husband was at the front. She lived with her three children. There was a vacant little house in her yard and we accommodated there. At first my sisters and I went to work at the kolkhoz. Then I heard that there was a children's home evacuated to Kaladja from Ukraine. Tsylia and I went there hoping to get a whatever job, but director of the children's home said that their men went to the front and there was a number of vacancies. We became tutors at the children's home, and I also taught Russian in the local Uzbek school in the classes where our children studied. In 1942 Germans sent their land troops to Armavir near Kaladja. We had to evacuate the children's home immediately. The kolkhoz provided oxen and carts. We got to a railway station and from there evacuated to Tashkent [] where the children's home was dismissed and I lost my job. My sisters, Tsylia Dikstein and I went to work in the kolkhoz.

My mother could not work. There was an evacuation inquiry office in Buzuluk. We started looking for our relatives or acquaintances and got to know that Kofman from Kopaygorod lived in Pokrovka village of Orenburg region. We wrote him and he replied inviting us to join him there. We obtained a permit for moving there and got train tickets. We reached Orenburg and from there went to the village. We stayed with the Kofman family. Tsylia and I went to work in the local school. My sister Lubov worked as a secretary/typist in the district financial department and my sister Lisa went to work in a garment shop. Winters in Orenburg region were very cold, and we didn't have any warm clothes with us. The locals were very kind to us bringing us warm clothes, mittens and valenki [very warm high boots made from felt sheep wool]. The word 'valenki' derives from the Russian word 'valat' that means 'felt'] boots. We received food cards and at school we were provided soup and bread. The bread was falling apart and we had to put slices of it on a plate to keep it together. The market was very expensive. A bucket of potatoes cost a monthly salary. At times we were paid in food products at work instead of money. I remember once we were paid with over frozen potatoes and I didn't know what to do with it. Tsylia ground these potatoes and made soup from them. This soup looked and tasted terrible, but then we enjoyed eating it. Only my poor Mum could not eat one spoon of this soup and I left my ration of bread for her. But we survived anyway!

We followed the front line news in the evacuation. We were convinced that our army would win the war, though we already realized that this was going to take longer than we had been told before it started. We read every line of newspapers. There was one radio in the village in the village council office. At noon all those who could come there got together to listen to news and then retold what we heard to others. In late March 1944 we heard that Serebria village [] near Yaryshev was liberated. We started thinking about going back home. The Kofman family was the first to leave. They wrote us that they settled down in Mogilov-Podolski, but there were no details. Kofman wrote that I would receive a permit for going back from the Ministry of Education. I received it shortly afterward and we went on our way back to Yaryshev. We didn't know anything about our relatives, but we were hoping that they had evacuated and would return to Yaryshev. My mother and sisters stayed with the Kofman family in Mogilov-Podolski and I went to Yaryshev. The town was empty. The houses were taken apart and the others had no windows or doors in them. Our house was not destroyed, but there was nothing left in it. I went to the Ukrainian part of the town where Ukrainians told me about the terrible fate of the town residents. Germans made a ghetto in the town fenced with barbed wire. Ukrainian policemen were guarding the ghetto. There were Jews from many villages of Vinnitsa region in the ghetto. 5 Jewish families stayed in our house. On 21 August 1942 all inmates of the ghetto were lined in columns and taken outside the town. They were convoyed by policemen with machine guns. One of my colleagues from school was there with her 6-year old son. When they were passing a corn field, she pushed her son to run away, but a policeman noticed him, chased after the boy and took him back to the column. They were all taken to the outskirts of the town where there was a deep pit dug. They were made to stand on the edge of the pit and killed. They killed those who still stirred. Almost all our relatives lie in this pit. On 21 August 1942 my paternal grandmother Tube, my father's brother Aron, his wife Kreina and their three children, and my father brother Iosif's wife and her four children were killed. My mother's brothers Azril and his wife, Aron and his wife, daughter and the daughter's children, Gershl, his wife and their four children perished there. My brother Lev, his wife Rosa and their two sons also perished in this shooting. The older son was 14 and the younger one was just 4 years old. All inmates of the Yaryshev ghetto, including 400 Yaryshev residents lie in this ghetto. The Jewish town of Yaryshev vanished. Only those who were away from Yaryshev survived: my father brother

Aron's sons, who were in the army. Two of them perished at the front and one returned. There were about 40 of us, survivors. None of them stayed in Yaryshev, but we meet and correspond. Only my sister Lubov and I stayed to live in Mogilov-Podolski: the rest of us reside in other towns and countries. Few years ago we collected money and installed a memorial crypt on this shooting place. There is a plaque with the names of the deceased on it. Unfortunately, we could not identify the names of all inmates of the ghetto, who perished here, but we had the names of all Yaryshev residents inscribed on it. The crypt was installed beside the pit. We arrive there on 21 August to honor the memory of our dear ones.

After the war

Many Ukrainian residents hearing that I'd returned came out of their houses to say the words of sympathy to me. One woman, who learned to sew from my sister, returned the sewing machine that she took from our house after we left, but this was all I got back. I had a fur jacket before the war made from the fur lining of my father's coat. One of villagers told me that a woman from the village had it. I went to see her and asked her to give it back to me, but she set her dog on me. I went away. People are different, before or after the war.

I was offered a job at the School in Yaryshev, but I just could not stay there. Every stone or house reminded me of the deceased. I remembered each of them and I remember now. I remember my Yaryshev with pain and gratitude. Damned be the war that destroyed my town and thousands towns in Ukraine and all over the world. I remember the life in our town. One cannot retell this. This has to be lived through or nobody can understand this. Of course, there were arguments: they have an argument today and forget all about it tomorrow. In trouble all supported each other. We lived like a big family and I've never had this again in my life. The war took it away.

I went back to Mogilov-Podolski and told my family about my trip. We stayed in Mogilov-Podolski. At first we rented a room from an old Jewish woman, whose husband and sons perished at the war. Later we received a room of 13 square meters in a communal apartment [17](#). There were no comforts in the house, and even the toilet was in the neighboring yard. When new houses began to be constructed, we received a two-bedroom apartment in the first 5-storied building. By that time my sister Lubov married Aron Geizel from Mogilov-Podolski, a widower, and moved in with her husband. His wife died after the war and he had two teens: daughter Yevgeniy and son Boris. They entered the Vinnitsa Polytechnic College after finishing school and left their home. My sister's adoptive children treated her like one of their family and I was happy for my sister. There were three of us in the apartment: my mother, my sister Lisa and I.

I went to the education department looking for a job at school after returning to Mogilov-Podolski, but there were no vacancies. I bumped into my former colleague from the Yaryshev school and he turned out to be chairman of the town teachers' trade union committee. He offered me to work as his secretary till the end of the academic year. Of course, I accepted his offer gladly. The trade union office shared a building with the district educational department responsible for employment of teachers. I did well at work. New schools were opened and being a secretary, I knew about new vacancies. Before the start of a new academic year I was employed as a primary school teacher by a new Ukrainian general education school in the very center of the town where I worked for almost 40 years. The classes were big. There were children of different years of birth studying in one class due to the war. Overgrown children felt awkward about it at first before they got used to this.

Gradually, things were getting orderly and our school became the best. I remember all of my postwar pupils well. There were many Jewish pupils and teachers. Mogilov-Podolski was a Jewish town. According to 1969 census there were 6 000 Jews, while now there were a bit over 300 left. Many left the town and the others passed away. We got along well with each other and didn't face any anti-Semitism, though it existed beyond the school already.

In 1948 trials against cosmopolites [18](#) began. Almost each issue of newspapers published articles disclosing another cosmopolite, 'enemy of the people'. They were Jews, activists of science and culture. Dirt was mercilessly poured on them, they were fired and many were sent to the GULAG [19](#). Besides, all articles emphasized and focused on their Jewish identity. The Jewish anti-fascists committee [20](#) that actively worked during and after the war was liquidated. Most of its members were sentenced to death and the others were sent to the GULAG for long sentence. Solomon Mikhoels, [21](#) an active member of the JAFC, a famous actor, was killed. He was hit by a truck, as if unintentionally. Of course, everybody understood what it was all about, but it was dangerous to pronounce such things aloud. There were words 'Zionists', 'Jewish bourgeois nationalists' coming into everyday use. People could be blamed for Zionism for speaking Yiddish or going to the synagogue. In 1953, the period of the 'doctors' plot' [22](#), anti-Semitism grew even stronger. People in clinics refused to be patients of Jewish doctors. There were meetings in organizations where they discussed the article about 'poisoning' doctors titled 'Murderers in white robes' and wrote exalted letters to Lidia Timoschuk, who had 'unmasked' them. However, pupils, their parents and teachers did not change their attitude to Jewish teachers at school. I never faced any anti-Semitic demonstrations, but who knows what it would have led to if it had not been for Stalin's death. Teachers and pupils were crying at school. I remember the day when the radio announced that Stalin died. I also cried asking myself: 'How do we go on living without Stalin?' The time passed and then there was the 20th Congress [23](#) of the party. Believed what Khrushchev [24](#) said about Stalin and his comrade fellows' crimes at once. Probably this was because the arrests of people in Yaryshev imprinted on my memory, though I did not give it a conscientious thought. I hoped that we have a different life after the 20th Party Congress, and that the USSR would become a real country of justice and equality, but time passed and this hope proved to be false. I clearly realized this, when director of my school invited me to his office and said that he had submitted documents to the Town department of education to award me the title of an 'Honored teacher of the USSR'. I was very proud of having deserved this high award, but some time later he told me that he had been ordered to suggest another person with a more suitable surname. This was the crash of my illusions. When this director offered me a recommendation to join the party I refused point blank. I said I was a communist in my heart, but I didn't want to submit an application and then hear that my Jewish surname was not suitable for a Soviet communist. And I never ever took an effort to join the party.

I didn't have a private life. I was the only breadwinner and provider for my mother and sister Lisa, who could not work due to her deafness. They had so-called social pensions since they hadn't worked that were miserable. I knew they needed me and I realized that I would hardly find anybody, who would agree to support his wife and two old and ill women in addition. My school and pupils became my life. I taught my pupils from the first till the 4th forms. Starting from the 5th form they had different teachers in all subjects while in primary school I taught all subjects, but physical culture and singing. My schoolchildren were my children. Parents wanted me to teach their children, when admission to my class started. I was very pleased, I must confess. Then my former

pupils brought their children and then – grandchildren to my class. It was wonderful, but also sad – a reminder of the flow of time.

Teachers got low salaries in the former USSR, and I didn't have any additional earnings. However, we were used to living a modest life and it didn't cause any disturbances to me. Besides, many people lived like this after the war. Even after working a few years I could not afford to buy a watch and I was modest about my need in clothes. The only thing I allowed myself was buying a new suit or dress before the start of a new academic year. There was a military unit in Mogilov-Podolski and there were many children of the military studying in our school. The military received decent salaries and many of them had brought trophies from Germany. Their wives came to parents' meetings dressed up and wearing expensive jewelry. I didn't want to look miserably poor in their eyes, and I had a new suit every year.

When my mother was with us we celebrated all Jewish holidays. Of course, we did it in secret – if someone got to know about it, I wouldn't have worked one day as a teacher. On Sabbath my mother lit candles and prayed and we had a festive dinner, but for me it was a tribute of respect of my mother and not a need. I had to go to work on Saturday. My mother and sister tried to do no work on Saturday, but I didn't feel like following this rule. Before Pesach my mother baked matzah in the gas oven and cooked gefilte fish and chicken broth. She watched it that we didn't have any bread at home on Pesach. At home and at school we celebrated Soviet holidays: 1 May, Victory Day [25](#), 7 November, Soviet army Day [26](#), 8 March – international women's day and New Year. There were concerts and parties at school on holidays where they invited parents. On Victory Day all school children and teachers went to the bank of the Dnestr River where the first tanks that entered the town, when it was liberated from fascists, was installed on the pedestal. There was a meeting, and the children greeted the war veterans and gave them flowers. On 1 May and 7 November the whole school went to the parade. We also celebrated Lenin's birthday [April 22]. On this day schoolchildren became pioneers, and they said their pioneer's vows near the monument. At home we had quiet celebrations. My sister Lubov and her husband Aron visited us. I celebrated my birthday with my colleagues at work. We didn't have a tradition of celebrating birthdays at home. My mother died in 1968. We buried her in the Jewish cemetery according to the Jewish traditions, as she had requested. My sister or I didn't celebrate any Jewish holidays after she died.

I retired in 1975, but I could not lie without my school and I returned to work. I finally retired in 1990.

I felt different about the mass emigration to Israel that started in the early 1970s. I didn't blame these people, but I honestly did not understand what they were looking or hoping for in another country. Many of my former pupils left. Their relatives sometimes told me about their life and I felt happy for those who did well and was sorry for those who didn't have things as they expected them to be. As for me, I did not consider emigration. My life was here, here was my school and the graves of my dear ones – my life that I had here. Besides, I would not have been able to be a teacher in Israel, and this was the most important part of my life. My older sister Lubov's adoptive children moved to Israel. They have a good life there. They correspond with my sister and occasionally send her money. Of course, I am thinking about them. There is no peace in Israel, but the most scaring thing about it is that it is an undeclared war. When there is a war you know where the rear or the front line is, but it is impossible to escape from terror. And I pray to God, if there is God, to send peace and quiet to this beautiful little country.

When perestroika [27](#) started in the USSR, I accepted it fully with all my heart. I liked what Gorbachev [28](#) said about freedom, honesty, openness of policy – everything that we missed so during the years of the Soviet power. Unfortunately, in the course of time perestroika took a different direction from what we imagined and ended in the break up of the USSR [1991]. However, it had positive sides. The Jewish life began to revive during perestroika. A Jewish community began to work in Mogilov-Podolski, there are Jewish newspapers and magazines. The community supports older people. This is the first time in my life, when I feel well provided for. I receive a pension and the community helps me. When my sister Lisa died in 1994, the community made all arrangements and payments for the funeral. Lisa was buried near our mother's grave in the Jewish cemetery in Mogilov-Podolski. My sister Lubov's husband Aron Geisel died that same year. We decided it would be better if she moved in with me. My sister is weak and needs care. The community helps us a lot. They deliver hot meals to us. A visiting nurse takes great care of us. The community celebrates Jewish holidays. I used to attend them, but now it's become difficult. My friends and former pupils visit me. Many of them live in other towns and countries, they write and call me, but when they visit Mogilov-Podolski they always come to see me. The only disturbing thing is my developing blindness. I have retina deformation and there is no cure of it. I hope I will die before I grow blind. God forbid living longer than having the sight... Reading has always been so important for me. It's hard to read now, and I am eager to learn so much! There is so much interesting in life. I don't understand it, when people ask: 'Why do you need it?' And I wonder that people much younger than me ask this sort of question. Don't they find things interesting? I tried to do things at home so that our visiting nurse gets more time to read us something. I receive the 'Yevreyskiye Vesti' [Jewish News] newspaper and like listening to her reading this newspaper for me. They publish many interesting and new things. At times I think – long life is God's gift or punishment? I don't know, but I know one thing for sure. When I was a child, my mother used to say frequently: 'One can find a bit of happiness even in the serving of routine'. I find my bit every day.

Glossary

1 Russian Revolution of 1917

Revolution in which the tsarist regime was overthrown in the Russian Empire and, under Lenin, was replaced by the Bolshevik rule. The two phases of the Revolution were: February Revolution, which came about due to food and fuel shortages during World War I, and during which the tsar abdicated and a provisional government took over. The second phase took place in the form of a coup led by Lenin in October/November (October Revolution) and saw the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks.

2 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.

3 Russian stove

Big stone stove stoked with wood. They were usually built in a corner of the kitchen and served to heat the house and cook food. It had a bench that made a comfortable bed for children and adults in wintertime.

4 Civil War (1918-1920)

The Civil War between the Reds (the Bolsheviks) and the Whites (the anti-Bolsheviks), which broke out in early 1918, ravaged Russia until 1920. The Whites represented all shades of anti-communist groups – Russian army units from World War I, led by anti-Bolshevik officers, by anti-Bolshevik volunteers and some Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries. Several of their leaders favored setting up a military dictatorship, but few were outspoken tsarists. Atrocities were committed throughout the Civil War by both sides. The Civil War ended with Bolshevik military victory, thanks to the lack of cooperation among the various White commanders and to the reorganization of the Red forces after Trotsky became commissar for war. It was won, however, only at the price of immense sacrifice; by 1920 Russia was ruined and devastated. In 1920 industrial production was reduced to 14% and agriculture to 50% as compared to 1913.

5 In the 1920s there were many anti-Semitic gangs in Ukraine

They killed Jews and burnt their houses, they robbed their houses, raped women and killed children.

6 During the Russian Civil War there were all kinds of gangs in the Ukraine

Their members came from all the classes of former Russia, but most of them were peasants. Their leaders used political slogans to dress their criminal acts. These gangs were anti-Soviet and anti-Semitic. They killed Jews and burnt their houses, they robbed their houses, raped women and killed children.

7 October Revolution Day

October 25 (according to the old calendar), 1917 went down in history as victory day for the Great October Socialist Revolution in Russia. This day is the most significant date in the history of the USSR. Today the anniversary is celebrated as 'Day of Accord and Reconciliation' on November 7.

8 Collective farm (in Russian kolkhoz)

In the Soviet Union the policy of gradual and voluntary collectivization of agriculture was adopted in 1927 to encourage food production while freeing labor and capital for industrial development. In 1929, with only 4% of farms in kolkhozes, Stalin ordered the confiscation of peasants' land, tools, and animals; the kolkhoz replaced the family farm.

9 Jewish collective farms

Such farms were established in the Ukraine in the 1930s during the period of collectivization.

10 Lenin (1870-1924)

Pseudonym of Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, the Russian Communist leader. A profound student of Marxism, and a revolutionary in the 1890s. He became the leader of the Bolshevik faction of the Social Democratic Party, whom he led to power in the coup d'état of 25th October 1917. Lenin became head of the Soviet state and retained this post until his death.

11 Komsomol

Communist youth political organization created in 1918. The task of the Komsomol was to spread of the ideas of communism and involve the worker and peasant youth in building the Soviet Union. The Komsomol also aimed at giving a communist upbringing by involving the worker youth in the political struggle, supplemented by theoretical education. The Komsomol was more popular than the Communist Party because with its aim of education people could accept uninitiated young proletarians, whereas party members had to have at least a minimal political qualification.

12 In 1920 a deliberate famine was introduced in the Ukraine causing the death of millions of people

It was arranged in order to suppress those protesting peasants who did not want to join the collective farms. There was another dreadful deliberate famine in 1930-1934 in the Ukraine. The authorities took away the last food products from the peasants. People were dying in the streets, whole villages became deserted. The authorities arranged this specifically to suppress the rebellious peasants who did not want to accept Soviet power and join collective farms.

13 'Likbez' is derived from the Russian term for 'eradication of illiteracy'

The program, in the framework of which courses were organized for illiterate adults to learn how to read and write, was launched in the 1920s. The students had classes in the evening several times a week for a year.

14 Struggle against religion

The 1930s was a time of anti-religion struggle in the USSR. In those years it was not safe to go to synagogue or to church. Places of worship, statues of saints, etc. were removed; rabbis, Orthodox and Roman Catholic priests disappeared behind KGB walls.

15 Great Terror (1934-1938)

During the Great Terror, or Great Purges, which included the notorious show trials of Stalin's former Bolshevik opponents in 1936-1938 and reached its peak in 1937 and 1938, millions of innocent Soviet citizens were sent off to labor camps or killed in prison. The major targets of the Great Terror were communists. Over half of the people who were arrested were members of the party at the time of their arrest. The armed forces, the Communist Party, and the government in general were purged of all allegedly dissident persons; the victims were generally sentenced to death or to long terms of hard labor. Much of the purge was carried out in secret, and only a few cases were tried in public 'show trials'. By the time the terror subsided in 1939, Stalin had managed to bring

both the Party and the public to a state of complete submission to his rule. Soviet society was so atomized and the people so fearful of reprisals that mass arrests were no longer necessary. Stalin ruled as absolute dictator of the Soviet Union until his death in March 1953.

16 Enemy of the people

Soviet official term; euphemism used for real or assumed political opposition.

17 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.

18 Campaign against 'cosmopolitans'

The campaign against 'cosmopolitans', i.e. Jews, was initiated in articles in the central organs of the Communist Party in 1949. The campaign was directed primarily at the Jewish intelligentsia and it was the first public attack on Soviet Jews as Jews. 'Cosmopolitans' writers were accused of hating the Russian people, of supporting Zionism, etc. Many Yiddish writers as well as the leaders of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee were arrested in November 1948 on charges that they maintained ties with Zionism and with American 'imperialism'. They were executed secretly in 1952. The anti-Semitic Doctors' Plot was launched in January 1953. A wave of anti-Semitism spread through the USSR. Jews were removed from their positions, and rumors of an imminent mass deportation of Jews to the eastern part of the USSR began to spread. Stalin's death in March 1953 put an end to the campaign against 'cosmopolitans'.

19 The Soviet system of forced labor camps in the remote regions of Siberia and the Far North, which was first established in 1919

However, it was not until the early 1930s that there was a significant number of inmates in the camps. By 1934 the Gulag, or the Main Directorate for Corrective Labor Camps, then under the Cheka's successor organization the NKVD, had several million inmates. The prisoners included murderers, thieves, and other common criminals, along with political and religious dissenters. The Gulag camps made significant contributions to the Soviet economy during the rule of Stalin. Conditions in the camps were extremely harsh. After Stalin died in 1953, the population of the camps was reduced significantly, and conditions for the inmates improved somewhat.

20 Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAC)

formed in Kuibyshev in April 1942, the organization was meant to serve the interests of Soviet foreign policy and the Soviet military through media propaganda, as well as through personal contacts with Jews abroad, especially in Britain and the United States. The chairman of the JAC was

Solomon Mikhoels, a famous actor and director of the Moscow Yiddish State Theater. A year after its establishment, the JAC was moved to Moscow and became one of the most important centers of Jewish culture and Yiddish literature until the German occupation. The JAC broadcast pro-Soviet propaganda to foreign audiences several times a week, telling them of the absence of anti-Semitism and of the great anti-Nazi efforts being made by the Soviet military. In 1948, Mikhoels was assassinated by Stalin's secret agents, and, as part of a newly-launched official anti-Semitic campaign, the JAC was disbanded in November and most of its members arrested.

21 Mikhoels, Solomon (1890-1948) (born Vovsi)

Great Soviet actor, producer and pedagogue. He worked in the Moscow State Jewish Theater (and was its art director from 1929). He directed philosophical, vivid and monumental works. Mikhoels was murdered by order of the State Security Ministry

22 Doctors' Plot

The Doctors' Plot was an alleged conspiracy of a group of Moscow doctors to murder leading government and party officials. In January 1953, the Soviet press reported that nine doctors, six of whom were Jewish, had been arrested and confessed their guilt. As Stalin died in March 1953, the trial never took place. The official paper of the Party, the Pravda, later announced that the charges against the doctors were false and their confessions obtained by torture. This case was one of the worst anti-Semitic incidents during Stalin's reign. In his secret speech at the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956 Khrushchev stated that Stalin wanted to use the Plot to purge the top Soviet leadership.

23 Khrushchev, Nikita (1894-1971)

Soviet communist leader. After Stalin's death in 1953, he became first secretary of the Central Committee, in effect the head of the Communist Party of the USSR. In 1956, during the 20th Party Congress, Khrushchev took an unprecedented step and denounced Stalin and his methods. He was deposed as premier and party head in October 1964. In 1966 he was dropped from the Party's Central Committee.

24 Twentieth Party Congress

At the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956 Khrushchev publicly debunked the cult of Stalin and lifted the veil of secrecy from what had happened in the USSR during Stalin's leadership.

25 Victory Day in Russia (9th May)

National holiday to commemorate the defeat of Nazi Germany and the end of World War II and honor the Soviets who died in the war.

26 Soviet Army Day

The Russian imperial army and navy disintegrated after the outbreak of the Revolution of 1917, so the Council of the People's Commissars created the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army on a

voluntary basis. The first units distinguished themselves against the Germans on February 23, 1918. This day became the 'Day of the Soviet Army' and is nowadays celebrated as 'Army Day'.

27 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.

28 Gorbachev, Mikhail (1931-)

Soviet political leader. Gorbachev joined the Communist Party in 1952 and gradually moved up in the party hierarchy. In 1970 he was elected to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, where he remained until 1990. In 1980 he joined the politburo, and in 1985 he was appointed general secretary of the party. In 1986 he embarked on a comprehensive program of political, economic, and social liberalization under the slogans of glasnost (openness) and perestroika (restructuring). The government released political prisoners, allowed increased emigration, attacked corruption, and encouraged the critical reexamination of Soviet history. The Congress of People's Deputies, founded in 1989, voted to end the Communist Party's control over the government and elected Gorbachev executive president. Gorbachev dissolved the Communist Party and granted the Baltic states independence. Following the establishment of the Commonwealth of Independent States in 1991, he resigned as president. Since 1992, Gorbachev has headed international organizations.