

Esphir Kalantyrskaya

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Kiev

Ukraine

Interviewer: Zhanna Litinskaya

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My family background

My grandfather on my father's side, Abram Persov lived in Pochep, a small town in Briansk region, Russia. This town consisted of two parts: the central Jewish part and the suburbs populated by Russians that were involved in farming. Jews were handicraftsmen, jewelers, tradesmen. There was a church and a synagogue in town. People were friendly and supported each other. My grandfather was born around 1840s. I don't know where he was born. He got married in Pochep and lived there. My grandfather was a very good jeweler. His jewelry was in big demand of the local merchants. Even representatives of the noble circles were his customers. My father's mother Malka was a housewife and looked after the children. My grandfather had a big house. His shop was on the first floor. It was a small shop. He didn't need much space. The rest of the house belonged to the family. They had many children: their older son Pinhus and younger son Samuil and daughters Hana, Riva, Dora, Bertha and Zhenia. They were a wealthy family and could afford a housemaid and a cook. My grandfather's family was rather religious. At least even in the late 1920s when I knew them my grandfather had a pew at the synagogue, prayed every day and observed religious holidays and traditions.

In the early 1920s my grandfather and grandmother moved to Kiev. They probably did it because the Soviet power took away my grandfather's house leaving them one room. Besides, there was no profit from jewelry business during the civil war: neither my grandfather nor my father had any orders. They rented an apartment and my grandfather didn't work anymore. My grandfather and grandmother died in the early 1930s in Kiev.

My father's older brother Pinhus was recruited to the tsarist army and perished during the Russian-Japanese war at the beginning of the 20th century. My father's sisters got education at home and got married in due time. Some of them lived in Pochep, some – in Pagar and other nearby towns. I saw little of them and know very little about their life. I know that Hana's name after her husband was Agranovich. Her daughter Bluma and her sons Samuil, Lazar and Aron were my friends for many years. Lazar became my sister's husband.

Hana died before the Great Patriotic War. Her daughter Bluma that lived in the town of Klinty with her husband was killed during the war along with other Jews. Lazar and Samuil perished at the front and severely wounded Aron died around 1948. That's all I know about my father's sisters and brothers.

My father Samuil Persov was born in Pochep in 1875. Like all boys in the family he went to the cheder and then he studied language and basics of mathematic with teachers at home. My father didn't have any document about getting education. But he was an intelligent, well-read and modern man. He followed into his father's steps and became a good jeweler and a watchmaker. They said in town that if Samuil repaired a watch it would serve its owner until to the end of his days. My grandfather and my father were very honest people. My grandfather's customers became my father's in due time. However, my father had a different attitude towards religion from my grandfather's. My father was an atheist although he had finished cheder. He was fond of books, read many Russian classic novels, met with young people and emancipated girls and acted in the amateur theater. He didn't date Jewish girls and wasn't going to get married. When he was 32 he allowed matchmakers to find him a fiancée giving in to his parents' begging. My father didn't like anyone in Pochep. He liked emancipated and educated girls. They were not to be found in the distant Pochep. Girls in Pochep had traditional education and only took interest in the family life and religion. They brought him a girl from another town.

My father liked Bluma and they got married in 1907. They didn't tell me any details of their wedding, but it was a traditional Jewish wedding with a huppah and a rabbi. I don't know anything about my mother Bluma. I don't know whether she had brothers or sisters or what her nee name was. The reason I don't know it is that I left my mother and Pochep when I was very young. I know that her family was much poorer than my father's family. My mother had no education and could hardly read. They spoke Yiddish to one another. However, my mother and father spoke Russian to us. My father spoke fluent Russian and my mother spoke it with an accent. My father insisted that we spoke Russian. My mother was a very religious woman. She prayed, followed the kashruth, lit candles on Saturday, celebrated all Jewish holidays and fasted at Yom Kippur. I have dim memories of these holidays. I found it boring to sit and wait until they finish the ritual and prayer and we could start eating. I don't remember any joyful activities in our house related to religious traditions. There was a synagogue in Pochep. My older brothers went to the synagogue with my mother. I was small and didn't go with them. I don't remember what the synagogue was like. My mother went there every week. She always wore a shawl, but she didn't have a wig. My parents were very different people. My father was a cheerful modern man, reading newspapers and books and having many books and my mother was a sullen woman, interested in nothing but her house, her children and the God.

My parents had a traditional Jewish wedding. After their wedding my parents lived in my grandfather's house. In 1908 their first baby was born – my sister Luba. My father bought a part of a house for his family not far from his father's house.

Growing up

The children were born almost every year. Ania was born in 1911, Grigory was born in 1912 and I was born in 1913. Clara was born in 1914. My younger sister Fania was born in 1917 and my brother Iosif was born in 1918. My father earned well, and we were a wealthy family. In due time

he purchased the remaining part of the house for his family. I remember that the house seemed huge to me. There were few rooms: a living room, my parents' bedroom and children's rooms. I remember beautiful dark furniture and velvet curtains. We had a housemaid, a cook and a nanny. My mother was fully absorbed in pregnancies, deliveries, children bringing up and the house.

My father didn't change his bachelor's way of life: he met with friends, went to restaurants and played in the amateur theater. In this theater he met a young Jewish girl Sophia Kazakova. They were of different age: my father was 43 and she was 18. They fell in love with each other and my father left the house. I don't know what a divorce was like in those years, but I believe they had to obtain rabbi's permission. It couldn't have been otherwise. In 1918 right after my younger brother was born my father divorced my mother and married Sophia. It was a big scandal in the town. People discussed this divorce and Sophia's conduct everywhere: at the market, in stores and at the synagogue. My father left the house and everything in it to my mother and gave her money at the beginning. My mother had a very hard time: she didn't leave the house, didn't even go to the synagogue and hardly paid any attention to us, children.

Sophia's family couldn't live through such disgrace that she had married a married man taking away the father from his children. Sophia's parents told her to get out of their house. Her mother fell ill and died of heart attack. My father and his young wife rented an apartment in the Russian neighborhood of the town. Only many years later when I grew up I came to understanding of what a hard time my father had. He defied the Jewish way of life in a patriarchal town formed throughout decades by falling openly in love with a young woman.

My father and Sopiha lived in Pochep for a few years. The revolution of 1917, civil war of 1914-1918 didn't impact life in our town, fortunately. There were no gangs or pogroms. Around 1919 my father's parents Abram and Malka moved to Kiev. I believe that my father's divorce also played its role in my grandfather's decision to move to Kiev. They didn't approve of my father's conduct and sympathized with my mother. On the other hand, they understood my father's feelings and couldn't ignore them. However, my grandfather continued writing to my father trying to persuade him to move to Kiev. He believed that life might be easier in Kiev, considering that people didn't know the story of my father and Sophia. My father didn't want to leave his children behind. He loved his children. He often visited us and my mother allowed him to come and see us. My father told us about beautiful life in Kiev trying to persuade us to go with him. I always looked for some explanation of why I agreed to go with my father. There must have been several reasons. Firstly, I loved my father and couldn't imagine living apart from him and of course I must have been driven by my interest towards everything new and unknown, thirst for traveling and new impressions.

In 1922 my older brother Grigory, my younger sister Clara, my father, pregnant Sophia and I secretly left for Kiev. My mother would have never allowed him to take us if she had known about his plans. My mother didn't know about it. My father took us away from a walk. We left without any clothes or luggage. My father wrote my mother from Kiev, asking her forgiveness and reasoning with her that her life would be easier with fewer children. I don't know why, but my mother never tried to find or return us. Perhaps, it was because she was hoping that our father living in a big town would have the opportunity to give us more than she ever could.

In Kiev my father rented an apartment in Podol, a Jewish neighborhood. We lived in Konstantinovskaya street, not far from my grandparents. In 1922 Sophia gave birth to a boy – Efim

and in 1924 her daughter Polia was born. Manya, the youngest, was born in 1933. We lived in a small two-room apartment. My father rented it at first and then he purchased it from the owner. One room served as my father and Sopha's bedroom and another room was for children. My father took up any job: repairing watches, furniture, doing other repairs in the houses. Later he obtained a patent for manufacture of toys. There were heaps of fabrics, pieces of wood and doll's heads in our apartment. My father taught us to do small work and we began to help him. Every day we glued, painted things and made doll's clothes. My father was a very good handicraftsman. He was offered a job at the state factory, but my father refused every time he got an offer. For some reason he thought that those that worked at state enterprises were stealing, while he was an honest man.

After Sopha's kids were born my father stopped caring for us who were born by an unloved woman. He hardly ever talked with us and never took any interest in our life. He didn't want to send us to school as he didn't want to lose his workforce. He hired teachers to teach us at home. We actually received education equal to 4 years of primary school.

My grandfather Abram and grandmother Malka often visited us and invited us to visit them. They wanted to share their warmth with us. They often went to the synagogue located in Schekavitskaya street not far from us. My father and Sofa didn't go to the synagogue. Only Pesach of all Jewish holidays was celebrated at our home. My father just loved this holiday. He baked matsa by himself, cooked delicious food and the whole family sat at the table. We didn't know the history of the holiday. My father didn't conduct the sedder according to the Jewish tradition. It was just a fancy family dinner.

Our stepmother treated us nicely. She was a nice woman and felt sorry for us. She made no difference between her own children and us. That was how it happened in my life that I was separated from my mother and my brothers and sisters.

My older brother Grigory and my sister Clara were very close to me. Grigory went to work at the military plant when he was very young. He became a turner apprentice and had to stand on a box to reach his lathe at the beginning. Later he finished a work school (*rabfak*) [1](#), technical school at the plant and in due time he was promoted to shop supervisor. During the war he evacuated to Kuvandyk with the plant. Kuvandyk is a town near Chkalovsk in the Ural. He stayed there after the war. He married Nadia, a Russian girl and lived in Kuvandyk all his life. Grisha died in 1980. His daughters Ania and Luba live in Omsk.

My younger sister Clara worked few years at the same plant as Grisha. In 1934 she married her cousin Lazar Agranovich. In 1935 their son Miron was born. Lazar was recruited to the army at the very beginning of the war and perished at the front in 1941. Clara was in the evacuation with Grisha and me. In 1942 her younger son Valery was born. After the war Clara lived in Kiev. She never got married again. Clara died in 1999.

In 1932 I went to work at the knitting garments factory of NKVD (People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs). My job was to wind the yarn onto huge bobbins. In 1933 I went to Pochep for my first vacation. I met with my mother for the first time in 11 years. I spent there almost a month. It was a happy and sad reunion. One night my mother came to my bed, adjusted my blanket and kissed me. I cried for the rest of the night. I felt mother's care for the first time in many years.

My mother told me a lot about this period of life when we were not with her. She didn't work in the first year after we had left. My grandfather Abram was supporting her. Later she learned to sew and took some work home. She opened a small store. Basically, she got adjusted to life. In 1933 when I met with my mother she didn't work any longer. Older children were supporting her. That was the only time I saw my mother. When the Great Patriotic War began my mother stayed in Pochep. She didn't want to evacuate. Her Russian neighbors gave her shelter for some time, but in 1942 somebody gave her up. Policemen took her to a ravine in the outskirts of the town and shot. All Jews of the town were shot there.

I also met with my sisters Luba, Ania, Fania and my brother Iosif for the first time in all those years. My sisters studied at school and later they graduated from the Pedagogical Institute in Briansk.

My older sister Luba worked as the Russian language and literature schoolteacher in Pochep. Later she became director of this school. She married Mikhail Shatukha, a Russian man. After his service in the army Mikhail got a job assignment in Nevel of Leningrad region. Luba followed him. Mikhail Shatukha became secretary of the Nevel Town Party Committee. In 1937 he was called to Moscow and arrested. He didn't stay under arrest long. Luba said that it was *Lazar Kaganovich* [2](#), one of the Soviet leaders that contributed to his liberation. During the war Mikhail and few other members of the Town party Committee stayed in town to organize underground movement in the rear of the enemy. One of his co-workers turned out to be a traitor. He told Mikhail that he had been ordered to escort him to the partisan unit in the woods. He shot Mikhail in the outskirts of the town. In the morning collective farmers found Mikhail's body and buried him in secret from Germans. Luba buried her husband at the town cemetery after she returned from the evacuation. After the war the monument to Mikhail Shatukha and other comrades that had perished after the war in Nevel. Luba died in 1962. Her son Arnold lives in St.-Petersburg.

My sister Ania was also a teacher. She lived in Moscow with her husband Arkadiy Levin and their son Misha. Arkadiy perished at the front in 1940s and Ania died in the first post-war years. Their son Misha lives in Moscow.

Our younger sister Fania graduated from Pedagogical Institute before the war and worked as a schoolteacher in Pochep. During the war she joined a partisan unit in the Brianskiye woods. In 1942 Fania was told about our mother's death. She went to Pochep to find out whether it was true. In Pochep a policeman saw her. He was the man that had proposed to her earlier, but she refused. So, he grabbed his chance to take revenge. He gave Fania up to Germans. They captured and shot her in the same ravine where our mother had been shot. Mikhail's sister Maria told us about mother and Fania. Maria was in the partisan unit with Fania. Maria survived and met with Luba after the war to tell her what she knew.

My younger brother Iosif finished school and was recruited to the army. He was supposed to demobilize in 1941 when the war began. He didn't demobilize but became a communications operator. He perished in 1943.

My mother remained religious and observed traditions until the end of her life but all her children grew up to be atheists. As far as I know, none of my sisters or brothers observed any religious laws or rules.

In summer 1933 I visited my mother in Pochep and in the autumn of this year *famine* [3](#) began in Ukraine. I remember dead bodies near the buildings and at the entrances in Kiev. I saw them in the morning. During the day they were removed from streets. I received a food package at the factory where I was working. Of course, I shared it with my father's family. They had 3 children. Later I got a job at shoe factory #6. They paid more. I wasn't a Komsomol member and didn't take part in public life. But I had many friends: Jews, Russians and Ukrainians. Nobody cared about nationality at that time. To be a good person was sufficient. My friends and I went to the cinema in Podol, to the beach and for walks. We always celebrated Soviet holidays: 1st of May, October Revolution Day, etc. We went to parades. Several times the factory trade union committee granted me a free trip to a recreation home. I rested at the Belaya Dacha recreation center in Irpen near Kiev. I felt very comfortable and equal to other young people staying there. I also rested in Kislovodsk, Caucasus, and went to the sea.

I still lived with my father and Sophia before WWII. Clara lived with her husband and Grigory went to the hostel. I could go to the hostel, too, but my father fell very ill. He had cancer and was ill for a very long time suffering great pains. I couldn't leave Sopha alone with him. Father died in 1938. Sopha didn't remarry.

During the war

On the first day of war - 22 June 1941 [4](#) Grisha's call up notification was delivered to our apartment. At that time Grisha was at the military training near Kiev. I went there on foot to give him this call up. All employees of the military plant were exempt from service in the army. Grisha went to the military registry office and they released him from service. He went back to his plant to continue preparing equipment to the evacuation. At the beginning of July refugees from Western regions of Ukraine began to arrive in Kiev. They were living in the open air in the botanical garden. They were telling people about the Germans exterminating Jews on the occupied areas. We understood that we had to evacuate. At the end of August we, factory employees, went to dig up trenches near Kiev – Germans troops were coming nearer. One day I stayed at home because I was not feeling well. I didn't want to go without Clara whose husband was in the army. Grisha obtained a permit for Clara and her child to go with plant. He came back and I told him that I didn't want to go without Sopha, Polia and Manya. My brother got angry with me telling me that the plant couldn't take all of us, but he went back to the plant to obtain another permission. He was only allowed to take Manya, the youngest. I remember myself crying when I was saying "good-bye" to Sopha and Polia. Sopha was saying that they would also go to the evacuation, but I knew they wouldn't. She had no money for that. We went to the evacuation by train. We reached Dnepropetrovsk and it was decided to deploy the plant there. While they were unloading equipment, the Germans came very close to Dnepropetrovsk. We had left on the last train before the town was occupied. Our trip was long. We crossed the Volga on barges. Our point of destination was the town of Kuvandyk near Chkalovsk. The plant was commissioned there.

At first we were renting apartments, but later the plant constructed barracks for its employees. I went to work at the plant. Clara, her son Miron and our sister Manya were staying at home. Life was very hard. I received 400 grams of bread and Clara and her children received 200 grams each. In 1942 Clara's son Valeriy was born. She knew already that her husband Lazar had perished and that she was a widow. Life was very difficult, but we supported each other. When we had nothing to eat Manya and I sang pre-war songs and recalled Kiev. Manya went to school and after school

she was helping Clara to grow vegetables in the kitchen garden that we had received. In November 1943 Kiev was liberated and Manya was eager to go home. She was missing her mother and sister in all those years. We heard about shootings of Jews in the *Babiy Yar* [5](#) in Kiev, but we still had hope that Sopha and Polia managed to evacuate. Grisha sent several requests for information to the evacuation center in Buguruslan, but their answer was that Sopha and Polia Persov were not among the evacuated.

After the war

In autumn 1944 all of us but Grigory returned to Kiev. I was sure that he didn't want to go back to Kiev, because he believed that Sopha and Polia had perished and that it was his fault. He failed to obtain permission for them to evacuate with the plant as members of his family.

We returned to Kiev and all our suspicions about their fate turned out to be correct. Our Ukrainian neighbors told us that all Jewish population of our neighborhood, including Sopha and Polia, went to the Babiy Yar on 29 September 1941. In few days the postman brought us "death notification" about Fima's death. So, there was only Manya, my stepsister, left. I have always felt like a mother towards her and felt responsible for her life.

When we returned to Kiev we found our apartments (ours and Clara's) occupied. I turned to court. It took me 3 years to return our apartments. This issue could have been resolved sooner if we bribed an official at the executive committee. But we didn't have any money. During the war everything that we had in our apartment vanished: furniture, clothing and my stepmother's inexpensive jewelry. In 1946 Clara's apartment was returned to her, and in 1947 Manya and I received one room of the two that we used to have.

I went to work at the Kiev meat factory. They paid good salary. I had a difficult task to bring up Manya. I realized that I wouldn't cope alone. I had met Grigory Kalantyrskiy, a Jew, before the war. He was ten years older than me and was at the war from first to last day. He had a wife (Lisa) and a daughter (Sima) before the war. Lisa and Sima stayed in Kiev and shared the fate of thousands of Jews – perished in the Babiy Yar. Grigory proposed a marriage to me. I didn't love him at all, I didn't even like him, but I agreed. He was a butcher at the market, he earned a lot of money and he treated Manya and me well. I agreed for the sake of Manya who I loved with all my heart. She loved me, too, and sometimes she called me "Mummy". In 1946 we registered our marriage. We didn't have a wedding party. My daughter Faina was born in 1947. There were four of us living in one room in Podol. After finishing school Manya finished a technical college and worked as design technician at a plant. In 1954 she got married and moved out to live with her husband. They lived in Podol near where we were living and we saw each other rather often. Manya was a sickly woman. She didn't have any children. She died in 1984 after she had just turned 50.

There have been no more significant events in my life. We were "small" people and anti-Semitic campaigns in the early 1950s didn't impact our life. Many Jews were fired from their jobs, there were articles published in newspapers against Jews. One could hear abuses addressed to Jews in the streets, transport or in stores, but we tried to ignore them. We didn't live a happy life. I can't remember celebrations or laughter in our house. My life consisted of work and routinely chores. My husband took to drinking and began to have rows. He had a stroke and died in 1984.

Faina didn't even try to enter an Institute after finishing school. The doors to higher educational institutions were closed for Jews at that time. Faina finished a course of typists and went to work. Later she took a course in computer training and got a good job. She is not married.

Naum, one of my numerous cousins, moved to Israel. He described to us the beauties of this country and tried to persuade us to join him. While we were considering this option Naum died. My daughter doesn't want to go to Germany or USA. She loves Israel, although she has never been there. She studies Hebrew and is very concerned about the situation in this country. I believe, she stays here, because she doesn't want to leave me. I am very old and can hardly move. I think, my daughter will go to Israel when I die. I remain an atheist and I don't celebrate Jewish holidays, but my daughter buys matsa at Pesach.

I will soon turn 90. I am constantly thinking about the life I have lived. My daughter is at work and I am alone at home. I can't watch TV due to my poor sight. So, there is only one thing left for me to do; and that is – to think about the past. I have lived my life without love. Perhaps, it is not good. But what is love if it causes so much suffering as it did to my mother and us.

Glossary

1 Educational institutions for young people without secondary education, specifically established by the Soviet power

2 Lazar Kaganovich

1893– 1991, one of the most outstanding representatives of the “Stalin's guard”, one of the most important people in the highest power hierarchy of the former Soviet Union for over a quarter of a century. He was known for his ruthless and merciless personality.

3 In 1920 an artificial famine was introduced in Ukraine that caused the death of millions of people

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

4 On 22 June 1941 at 5 o'clock in the morning Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union without declaring a war

This was the beginning of the so-called Great Patriotic War.

5 Babiy Yar is the site of the first mass shootings of the Jewish population that was done in the open by the fascists on September 29-30, 1941, in Kiev

During 3 years of occupation (1941-1943) fascists were killing thousands of people at the Babiy Yar every day: communists, partisans, and prisoners of war. They were people of different

nationalities.