

Alexander Mussel

Alexander Isayevich Mussel

St. Petersburg

Russia

Interviewer: Inna Gimila

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Alexander Isayevich is a very modest and nice person to talk to. He is pretty reserved emotionally, however, he is genuinely sincere and friendly. His school years, which he recalled gladly, seem to be the brightest and most important memories of his life. He also shared his dream with us – to gather all his schoolmates and teacher’s descendants from the Jewish school where he studied.

Slightly rolling his ‘Rs,’ Alexander Isayevich quietly and clearly narrates his story, which appears to be full of interesting events, both tragic and happy. Life taught this

man to distinguish good from bad since his early childhood, that is why at his present age Alexander Isayevich is

treated kindly by fate, has a very friendly and happy family as well as his favorite job, to which he dedicates all his free time.



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My family and childhood

I was born in Leningrad [today St. Petersburg] in 1923. My forefathers both on my father’s and mother’s sides lived in the Baltic Sea region, in Lithuania, in the town of Zarasay [located between lakes Zarasas, Zarasaitis and others, 157 km northeast of Vilnius. Founded in the 15th century, the city is famous for its picturesque surroundings.] In those times the town was named Novoaleksandrovsk, later it was renamed Zarasay. I have never seen any of my grandmothers or grandfathers, as they lived abroad [1](#) and I was born in the Soviet Union. We had no opportunity to see them, because trips abroad were not allowed [2](#). For us Lithuania was behind the Iron Curtain’ [3](#). We received pieces of news very rarely, so we really did not know anything about my grandparents.

I remember very little. However, Father spoke very highly of his parents. His mother Chaya Sarah Mussel died before her husband, before the war [4](#). She was a very kind woman, cooked national Jewish meals and together with her husband, Tsvi, observed all Jewish traditions. Grandpa Tsvi

Girsh worked very hard in order to support his family. I don't know for sure, if my grandpa died before the war in 1941, or if Fascists murdered him. In any case, he perished in 1941. I found out about the following event from my cousin Moisey. He told me that almost the entire population of Zarasay, about 8,000 people, were told to assemble. They were mostly Jews and mostly old people and children. The Fascists forced them to walk to the forest on foot. The forest was several kilometers away from Zarasay. They dug ditches – they were forced to do it themselves – and after that they were all executed by shooting and dumped into these ditches.

I was at that place in 1960. There is an obelisk now and 100 meters to the left and to the right you can see hillocks, where the victims were buried. This place required special care. When I was there I tidied the territory a little bit. We witnessed a horrible thing happening there: some people tried to dig up these trenches looking for valuables. I had a meeting with the secretary of the Communist Party District Committee, and we agreed that this place had to be covered with concrete. It was done later.

My mother's name was Hannah Shlemovna Mussel, nee Stolyar. Her parents owned a nice big house in Zarasay. There was a healing water spring nearby. Grandpa Shlomo Stolyar [?-1930s] was a rabbi. My maternal grandmother's name was Chasya Stolyar [?-1930s]. I have never seen her, only on pictures. She resembled her sister very much, whose photo I still keep. After Grandpa Shlomo died, his children continued to live in his house. They were all murdered by the Germans later. After the war [1945] the parents of a Lithuanian guerilla [Maria Melnikaite, a member of the YCL, was a guerilla in Zarasay. She was caught and executed by a punitive group in the summer of 1943, posthumously awarded the title of 'Hero of the Soviet Union'] settled in Grandpa's house. There is a memorial museum in her honor in Zarasay.

My father Isaih or Shaya Girshevich Mussel was born in Zarasay in Lithuania in 1892. Before the Revolution [5](#) Dad left Zarasay for Arkhangelsk in search of a job. [Arkhangelsk was founded in 1584. It was the first Russian marine port, a center of commercial relations with Western Europe. At present Arkhangelsk is the biggest timber port in the world, a popular traveling center with historical and architectural monuments.] He started to study watch-making there. Later on, before the Revolution [in October 1917] he came back from Arkhangelsk to Petrograd [today St. Petersburg]. He went to elementary school for two years in Zarasay. That school must have been a Jewish one, since he could write and read in Yiddish. Later on he learned to speak and write in Russian.

At first not everything went smoothly, because he didn't speak Russian. However, later on he learned the language. Father met my mother in Petrograd. It is possible that they somehow met each other in Zarasay or in Saratov, where Mom appeared to be during World War I. From Zarasay Mother went to visit her elder sister Rakhil in Vyborg [a city located 40 km from Leningrad]. Rakhil and her husband owned a lady's hat atelier and Mother was studying millinery. In 1917 she moved to Petrograd in search for a job and lived separately from her relatives. Later she met my father and they got married in 1919 or in 1920. There was no chuppah, they just registered their marriage at the official agency and Mother took Dad's last name. My elder sister Chasya was born in Petrograd in the fall of 1920.

Both Mom and Dad weren't members of any political movements. Dad saw Maxim Gorky [6](#), heard his speeches and spoke very positively about him. He also told me about other famous people,

though he was no political activist. Dad worked as a watchmaker all the time. During the NEP [7](#) times he owned a workshop and worked there alone. Later on he worked in a watch-making cooperative in Leningrad, which provided services to people. Mom worked as a hat seller at a store, she was a milliner.

We lived all the time on the 2nd Liniya of Vassilyevsky Island. There were five rooms in the apartment on the 4th floor. At first it was a separate apartment. Later on it was turned into a communal apartment [8](#). After the 'compression' our family occupied two big rooms. The rooms were 25-30 square meters each. One was used as a bedroom for everyone and the other one was used as a dining room and a classroom. There was a big communal kitchen in the apartment, around ten square meters. I was born and grew up in that apartment. Later on, in 1926, my younger sister Liya was born in the same apartment. I lived there until 1941, before joining the army. After returning from the army I lived in the apartment only during my studies at the Military Academy.

Our main neighbors were the Brauer family. He was a flutist in the Mariinsky theater orchestra, a German, married to a Jewish woman named Zimmerman. She was a sick woman and a housewife. She had a serious disease and he cared about her very much. They had a daughter, Tamara. During the war the Brauers starved to death in the blockade [9](#). Their daughter, as a German, was evacuated from Leningrad to Kazakhstan at the end of the war. Later on, after the war she lived in Poltava. She was not allowed to reside permanently in Leningrad [10](#). Her aunt interceded for her, but failed. Another Jewish family lived in our apartment, the Gutkin family. He worked at the militia. They had a daughter, whose name was Zhenya. We had very good relations with our neighbors, especially with the Brauer family.

In 1930 I entered a Jewish school. I studied at the national Jewish school #14 [11](#). Later it became #11. In 1938 all national schools were abolished. Our school remained as it had been: the staff of teachers and pupils did not change; however, teaching in Yiddish was abandoned. Yiddish remained a separate subject; we also had written Yiddish and literature in Yiddish. The school became a common Russian school #30. We had a very friendly atmosphere at school. There was a preparatory grade and grades from one to seven. Little by little the school became an eight-year school, then a nine-year school. Finally it was turned into a standard ten-year school.

Our teachers were very highly qualified specialists; most of them had university education, some even obtained their education at foreign universities. The headmaster, Zinovi Aronovich Kisselgof, was a wonderful man, an excellent teacher and a musician. Besides he taught Mathematics very well. He was one of the tutors of Yasha Kheifitz, the famous violinist. His wife, Guta Grigoryevna Kisselgof, also taught Mathematics in elementary school. Kisselgof also managed the children's home, which was attached to our school.

The construction of the school building was sponsored by Baron Ginsburg before the Revolution. Jewish children's home was accommodated there. Later a Jewish school was organized in the same building, and the school was attended by children from the children's home as well as others. Children from Ukraine and Belarus were brought to the children's home, when the famine [12](#) started in those countries. Children were brought without their parents, by railroad. Some children came from Leningrad, from poor families or from unwed mothers. The atmosphere at school was very good, the attitude was kind and children were brought up very well. The children from the

children's home were always given priorities, since everything was done in order to somehow raise them. This happened because they were completely lonely and we lived with our parents.

I do remember my teachers: preparatory grade – Rosa Lvovna Soloveychik; first grade – Anna Lazarevna Alperovich. I also remember our class teacher, Yevgeniya Zakharovna Ioffe, our teacher of history, Mark Davydovich Domnich; head of studies Lev Markovich Iokhilchuk. All of them had a wonderful attitude to each of us. We were taught very well. Our school was considered one of the best in the city and always won the first place in the district. Most students after finishing our school entered institutes and universities. Some children, who arrived from Ukraine and Belarus, spoke Russian very poorly. At school they were able to learn the language perfectly. They had a certain advantage over us when it came to foreign languages. They learned the German language very well, since Yiddish and German are very close.

We had a Russian theatrical club at school. We had no Jewish clubs. Children staged a 'Boris Godunov' [drama by A. Pushkin] performance. We had very good art directors. Our musical studies were wonderful. The head of the administrative office was a pianist. She taught us music, told us about opera: how an opera was conceived, what an overture was, etc. She played the piano during her lessons. This formed our understanding of music.

I remember Zinoviy Aronovich Kisselgof appearing on stage at our memorable evenings at school. He played the concertino, a small harmonica. He played very well and was a very talented man. He took part in expeditions arranged for the collection of Jewish folklore and recorded Jewish songs during those travels. Those records were kept for a long time on phonograph wax rollers. Later they were forwarded from Leningrad to Kiev [today Ukraine] and were destroyed there. It happened after the war, at the beginning of the 1950s, when bad actions towards Jews started [13](#). Of course it was a very serious loss for the Jewish culture. It contained a lot of Jewish songs.

Yasha Kheifiz, the violinist, came from America to Leningrad in 1934 to visit his teacher. Maybe the encounter with a foreigner was one of the reasons for the repression, which started against Zinoviy Aronovich. He was arrested in 1939 and tortured in the 'Kresty' prison. He did not betray or slander anyone. He was a wonderful person. He died soon after he was released. I was still a student when Zinoviy Aronovich was subjected to repression [14](#). Alexander Ivanovich Korovyev was appointed to his position. He was an Ossetian by nationality. He taught us Mathematics.

My elder sister started to go to this school and finished it. My younger sister went to a different school, which was not far from home, on Syezdovskaya Liniya of Vassilyevsky Island [former Kadetskaya Liniya]. She didn't go to our school, maybe because the other one was located closer.

We were brought up at school in the spirit of internationalism. We had a very positive attitude to Birobidzhan [15](#). Our school corresponded with a school in Birobidzhan and sent cultural parcels and books to this school. [Letter and parcel exchange between schools in different cities was common in the Soviet Union up to the 1990s.] After 1938 when the school became a common one, a few Russian children appeared, however, there was no antagonism between the students. It was even 'fashionable' for Russian girls to marry Jewish young men and for Jewish girls to marry Russian young men [in order to demonstrate the internationalist principles in the Soviet Union]. Everything was fine; both at school and in our families the internationalist principles were cultivated.

We did not feel any anti-Semitism. Such attitude came into the world later on. Our school, though it was Jewish, carried out an atheist policy. On the eve of Russian Orthodox, as well as Jewish holidays we were subjected to certain propaganda. We were told that religious holidays and ceremonies are remains, prejudices and superstitions, which we should not participate in.

Our family had a more tolerant attitude to religion and Jewish traditions. I remember how we celebrated Pesach. I remember the major cleaning, the Pesach plates and dishes and certainly, matzah and other Jewish meals. I think that matzah came from the bakery. My aunt Revekka's husband, Kusiel Abramovich Levin, was an Orthodox Jew. He even worked at the Jewish cemetery for some time. He took me to the synagogue a couple of times and I was present at the religious service. I liked it very much. My sisters and I loved to visit our uncle. Though not our blood relative, he was closer to us than our own aunt. He celebrated all holidays, observed Jewish traditions and all rituals. We saw him pray and we found it very interesting. My aunt's family liked to receive us as guests very much. They did not have children of their own.

Unfortunately, I have never seen any of my father's other brothers and sisters. They lived abroad, in Lithuania. I have seen my mother's brother and her elder sister. I saw my mom's brother Isaac only once, when he came for a visit. I also saw her sister Rakhil. She lived in Finland and also came to see us. They owned a hat workshop; later on they dealt in fur. She resembled her mother, my grandmother, and was a very nice woman. I don't think she was an Orthodox Jew. Her last name was Besprozvannaya [the etymology of the name is 'not given any name']. She had two children: a son and a daughter. Her son became a very famous Finnish artist. Her husband, Besprozvanny, was a Jew. He came to Leningrad several times on business.

The war

I finished the ten-year school in June 1941, right before the war. I wanted to enter a Higher Military College. I thought that the environment in the army was very good, and that it would help me to get rid of some of my drawbacks as well. I considered myself a bit lazy, though I finished school with excellent marks. However, my capabilities were limited. I was shortsighted, so I could not apply to the Engineering College. I applied to the Military Medical Academy and attached all health certificates. At the beginning of the war I was summoned to the medical commission but I was rejected because of my eyes.

I was summoned on 21st June 1941. We were lectured about the international situation at the recruiting center. The lecturer told us that we had very good relations with Germany. The next day when I was preparing for exams at the Military College together with my friend, we heard that the war had begun. I went to my school and helped to evacuate the small kids. Later we were ordered to dig tank ditches in the Luga district. I was summoned to the military registration and enlistment office in July 1941 and assigned to the Antiaircraft College, though due to my sight problem, I suited the task even less than at the Military Medical Academy.

Our college was evacuated in August 1941. We didn't even know where we were going. We were loaded onto the train along with the college equipment and departed. We found ourselves in Omsk [Siberia] where I stayed at that Military College until September 1942. After that our course graduated ahead of the study schedule – we were on an accelerated training program – and sent to the Caucasus. The Caucasus was cut off by attacking Germans. We got there through Siberia and

Central Asia, crossed the Caspian Sea at night on a tanker. I served in the anti-aircraft defense forces for the city of Baku [today Azerbaijan] until the end of the war. Baku was the main source of oil for our country. We were kept in constant alertness up to 9th May 1945 and were always on duty.

There were Jews at the college, in the army, in the anti-aircraft defense forces; however, there was no big difference between the Jews and officers/representatives of other nationalities. Our relations were absolutely normal. There was no nationalism. Internationalism prevailed among our subordinates. Those who served were mostly people enlisted in the army in the Caucasus. They were Ukrainians, Belarusians, Russians, Azeris, Armenians, and Georgians. There was no distinction. Though we did feel some hostility between the Armenians and the Azeris, they never displayed such dislike. There was a huge district in Baku, called Armenikend and there were more Armenians than in Nagorny Karabakh [disputed region of Azerbaijan, inhabited mainly by Armenians]. But there was no antagonism.

I corresponded with my family that remained in Leningrad. Before the end of the war, the Military Marine College named after Dzerzhinsky, which was evacuated to Baku, was on its way back to Leningrad. I asked them to deliver a small parcel for my family – some canned food, which I saved from my officer's allowance. The parcel was delivered fine, nothing disappeared. Strangers delivered the parcel absolutely honestly. I sent two such parcels. One was delivered by mail. An Azeri woman posted the parcel without a receipt after the post office closed. And the parcel was delivered.

During the siege my mother, father and sisters were starving, of course. They told me how they ate cats and cooked joining cement. My sisters worked in military organizations as civilians and this saved them, because they received a certain ration [16](#) there. Father also received a ration as a factory worker though it was much smaller. They divided all food into equal parts. Mother had scurvy and lost almost all of her teeth – absolutely healthy teeth. She was cured only because Father managed to find meat somewhere. She was fed with chicken soup and got well.

They did not get evacuated because Dad worked at the factory named after Gorky, which was not subject to evacuation, so my parents had no one to evacuate with. They hoped that Leningrad would not be surrendered to the Germans. They continued to live in the communal apartment, in two of our rooms.

Later life

My elder sister entered the Foreign Languages University after finishing school; however, she had to quit because of her health condition. During the war, she stayed with our parents and younger sister in Leningrad. She worked at the Hydro-Meteorological Service for the Baltic Navy. At first she worked as a technician-meteorologist, I think she was making drawings. Later on, after special training, she worked there as a technician/meteorologist at the Hydro-Meteorological Observatory.

She married Eliazar Aleksandrovich Smirnov approximately in 1950. His mother, Basya Borisovna, was a Jew and his father was Russian. Both his parents were Communists and took part in the revolutionary movement. His father worked as a Plant Manager and was subjected to repression at the end of the 1930s. Later on he was rehabilitated [17](#). During the war, Eliazar was in evacuation

together with his mother. My sister's marriage was a common-law marriage and the wedding was a standard one, not Jewish. I was in the army at that time and could not be present. They had no children, but lived in harmony. My sister adored her husband. He also treated her very well. They lived together with his mother, first in an apartment on Dzershinskogo Street, later on Malaya Okhta. Relations between the three of them were excellent. Eliazar graduated from the Engineering and Economic Institute and worked as an economist at the Design Institute, developing famous Siberian Gas Main Lines designs. He also went to Siberia on business trips.

Eliazar died a year before Chasya, in 1988. They are buried at the Jewish cemetery. I am taking care of their graves. There is a family burial place: Basya Borisovna, Eliazar Aleksandrovich and my sister Chasya are buried there. My aunt Revekka, my mother's sister and her husband Kusiel are also buried at this cemetery. Uncle Kusiel starved to death during the siege and was buried during the war. A synagogue attendant was invited to read a prayer. The synagogue arranged everything as Uncle had worked at this cemetery for a while.

My younger sister Liya was born in 1926. She stayed together with our parents in Leningrad during the siege. She finished the ninth grade in the course of the war and after the war attended three-year foreign languages' courses for translators. During the war she worked at the Hydro-Meteorological Service for the Leningrad Front. After the war she worked at the Hydro-Meteorological Service for the Baltic Navy. Chasya worked at the Hydro-meteorological Observatory, while Liya was an employee of the Hydro-Meteorological Service. An observatory is a scientific-research institution, which specializes in producing systematic stellar and planetary observations, as well as experiment and theoretical investigations. Meteorological Service does not do any research. The Service is occupied only with telegraph transmission of data, received from the observatory, i.e. transmission of weather forecast data to airports, various enterprises, to the radio and television companies, etc., as per request. Liya worked as a radio operator all the time and worked for a very long time. She retired just recently, several years ago. And she had to retire because of her health condition.

She got married in 1950. Her husband's name is Ruvim Borisovich Kitaychik. He had a technical secondary education, worked as a technician and was responsible for maintaining sanitary equipment in boiler-houses. They constructed a cooperative apartment in the 1960s. Ruvim is safe and sound; he is retired now. They have two children, an elder daughter called Isabella and a son, whose name is Yakov. Both obtained engineering education and work as engineers now. They have children, Isabella has a son, Boris, who is a student of the Electrical and Engineering Institute, and Yasha [Yakov] has a daughter, and she is a schoolgirl. They live separately from their parents, each in their own apartment.

I entered the Military Academy after the war. I had a hard time graduating from the Academy in 1952. The Doctors' Plot [18](#) as well as increasing anti-Semitism influenced both the assignment and the career. People of Jewish nationality were assigned regardless of their desires, capabilities and talents [19](#). I, Kruchinetsky, Dlin and several other officers were assigned to an anti-aircraft-missile range in Kapustin Yar, Astrakhanskaya region, into almost a desert, a dry plain. Missiles were allowed to be tested only in low-populated areas. We did not even know where we had been assigned. When we came to the interview before departure, we were told that the location was 'three to four hours from Moscow.' We were not told that it was by plane. Such a cunning move. We didn't have any choice though. I served in this wild plain for six years. I wanted to get transferred

to Leningrad, but it was very difficult. I think that my nationality [20](#) was also a reason for this difficulty.

I met my wife to be, Anna Movshevna, at a railroad station in Sochi in 1953. I was on vacation in Sochi in the Caucasus. I wanted to send a parcel of fruit to my elder sister in Leningrad. I bumped into a woman at the station, my wife to be, and asked her to deliver my parcel. So this is how our acquaintance started. She left her address and we began to correspond. Later on we came to know each other closer. She turned out to be a Jewess. She really doesn't look like one and I didn't know at first that she was Jewish. Later I invited her to our military station, where I lived near the Kapustin Yar range. She stayed with me for some time, and when I came for a vacation to Leningrad we got married. We had Jewish meals at our wedding; however, we didn't observe Jewish traditions at the wedding. Actually some of our elder relatives, who were present, knew Jewish traditions. We had no chuppah, we didn't pray or invite a rabbi. Everything connected with religion was prohibited in the country since the Soviet regime had been established in 1917 [21](#).

Anna Movshevna's family came from a small village called Pustoshka in Pskovskaya region. Her father, Movsha Vikhansky, was a distiller by occupation. Her mother was a very intelligent woman; however, her living conditions didn't allow her to obtain an education. She finished only four grades of elementary school, but she was a very competent, smart and wise woman. They had two daughters: the elder Agnessa and my wife to be, Anna. They were not Orthodox Jews. They were ordinary people and lived like everyone did. They did not attend the synagogue, did not pray at home, worked on Sabbath and didn't even think of the holiday. Other holidays were never on the mind either, when there was lack of food in the country.

They moved to Rzhev in Kalininskaya region from Pskovskaya region. Anna was born there. Agnessa was born in Pustoshka. They moved to Leningrad before the war. Anya's mother's brother, David Mendelevich Vikhansky, lived there. He worked as Commercial Manager at a Metal Plant and was a very talented engineer and a good organizer in the Communist Party. They all lived in one room before the war. My wife's father had a small commercial business during the NEP. Later on he was subjected to repression and wasn't allowed to live together with his family in Leningrad. However, during the war they reunited and were evacuated with the Leningrad Optical and Mechanical Plant, where their elder daughter worked. They were evacuated to Kazan and Anya was sent to participate in works in Vologodskaya region. Later her father went to pick her up and brought her back to Kazan. He caught typhus on the way back and died in Kazan.

Our son was born in 1960. We waited before having a baby because my wife was first busy with her thesis, then with defending her thesis, and then her mother fell very seriously ill. We lived separately for several years, while being married: I lived at the secret range in Kapustin Yar, and she lived in Leningrad. Later on, when I got transferred to Leningrad, we decided to have a baby. First we lived in my wife's room. After that we built a cooperative apartment.

Now my son Mikhail is married. His wife is Russian and they have two daughters. He didn't become a religious Jew; however, he takes great interest in the history of the Jewish nation. His friends and schoolmates left for Israel and observe all Jewish traditions. They work there now, are very gifted programmers. They attend the synagogue, pray and celebrate all Jewish holidays. They also observe the kashrut and do not work on Sabbath.

I was an Oktyabrenok [22](#), a pioneer [23](#) and a member of the Young Communist League [24](#) from the age of 14. I became a member of the Communist Party after the YCL. I did not feel any bad attitude directed towards myself. There were bad people and there were good people. I remember how my college mate, not a Jew, with whom I served at the range, appeared to be a scoundrel and a go-getter. He undermined the career of one of our colleagues. There was this Russian, Ignat Kuzmich Soldatenkov, a hard worker, a wonderful and honest person. And this careerist 'drowned' Ignat. Not because he was Russian or Jewish, simply because my college mate was a scoundrel. The chief engineer of the range, Yakov Isayevich Troegub, was a Jew, though there were not many Jews at the range. The chief designer of anti-aircraft guided missiles was also a Jew, his name was Lavochkin. He was a very famous aircraft designer. So in this respect everything was fine.

Until I visited Israel in 1990 I had no correct idea about it. Our propaganda gave us a one-side illustration of the state. When I visited the country and saw with my own eyes what kind of a state it was, my opinion changed significantly. My cousins, Moisey and Itskhak, invited me and I went to visit them. I have seen a lot thanks to them. We visited a lot of places; I have seen Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. I visited a city where Muslims, Circassians live and I also saw Bedouins' settlements. Those who practice Islam have all the rights of Israeli citizens and live in good conditions. They serve in the Israeli Army and protect the interests of the state. There is no antagonism with the population of Israel. Circassians and Bedouins have no antagonism with the Jews either. Quite the contrary, Bedouins express antagonism towards the Palestinians, since they do not agree with many of their actions and their way of living. Bedouins are cattle-breeders, a very hard-working nation. Seemingly both Jews and Arabs are Semites. There is no 'biological' racial foundation for hostility. Their relations are an issue of upbringing.

I remained a secular person; however, I take an interest in Jewish history. I have a connection with the Moscow Institute of Judaism; I receive literature from them and correspond with them. I am very much interested in the history of the Jewish nation as well as in the history of the Torah. So I study the history and celebrate holidays. I love the merry spring holiday of Pesach, the celebration of the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah. We do not arrange any special celebrations at home, but we have been attending the synagogue on these holidays for the last several years.

I think this is very important for preserving national traditions and the image of our nation. It is an important matter, owing to which the nation is intact. We celebrate holidays at home – maybe, we don't observe all the rules strictly, but still – and we eat matzah. It has always been like that, especially when we meet our relatives and my cousin. When Hesed [26](#) was established, we started to receive Jewish calendars with holiday dates. We like it very much, because it keeps one disciplined and reminds one when and what to do.

Glossary:

[1](#) Lithuanian independence

A part of the Russian Empire since the 18th century, Lithuania gained independence after WWI (1918), as a result of the collapse of its two powerful neighbors, Russia and Germany. Although resisting the attacks of Soviet-Russia successfully, Lithuania lost to Poland the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural city of Vilna (Wilno, Vilnius) in 1920, claimed by both countries, and as a result they

remained in war up until 1927. In 1923 Lithuania succeeded in occupying the previously French-administered (since 1919) Memel Territory and port (Klaipeda). The Lithuanian Republic remained independent until its Soviet occupation in 1940.

2 Keep in touch with relatives abroad

The authorities could arrest an individual corresponding with his/her relatives abroad and charge him/her with espionage, send them to concentration camp or even sentence them to death.

3 Iron Curtain

A term popularized by Sir Winston Churchill in a speech in 1946. He used it to designate the Soviet Union's consolidation of its grip over Eastern Europe. The phrase denoted the separation of East and West during the Cold War, which placed the totalitarian states of the Soviet bloc behind an 'Iron Curtain'. The fall of the Iron Curtain corresponds to the period of perestroika in the former Soviet Union, the reunification of Germany, and the democratization of Eastern Europe beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

4 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.

5 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.

6 Gorky, Maxim (born Alexei Peshkov) (1868-1936)

Russian writer, publicist and revolutionary.

7 NEP

The so-called New Economic Policy of the Soviet authorities was launched by Lenin in 1921. It meant that private business was allowed on a small scale in order to save the country ruined by the Revolution of 1917 and the Russian Civil War. They allowed priority development of private capital and entrepreneurship. The NEP was gradually abandoned in the 1920s with the introduction of the planned economy.

8 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.

9 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.

10 Residence permit

The Soviet authorities restricted freedom of travel within the USSR through the residence permit and kept everybody's whereabouts under control. Every individual in the USSR needed residential registration; this was a stamp in the passport giving the permanent address of the individual. It was impossible to find a job, or even to travel within the country, without such a stamp. In order to register at somebody else's apartment one had to be a close relative and if each resident of the apartment had at least 8 square meters to themselves.

11 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.

12 Famine in Ukraine

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 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.'

14 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.

15 Birobidzhan

Formed in 1928 to give Soviet Jews a home territory and to increase settlement along the vulnerable borders of the Soviet Far East, the area was raised to the status of an autonomous region in 1934. Influenced by an effective propaganda campaign, and starvation in the east, 41,000 Soviet Jews relocated to the area between the late 1920s and early 1930s. But, by 1938 28,000 of them had fled the regions harsh conditions, There were Jewish schools and synagogues up until the 1940s, when there was a resurgence of religious repression after World War II. The Soviet government wanted the forced deportation of all Jews to Birobidzhan to be completed by the middle of the 1950s. But in 1953 Stalin died and the deportation was cancelled. Despite some remaining Yiddish influences - including a Yiddish newspaper - Jewish cultural activity in the region has declined enormously since Stalin's anti-cosmopolitanism campaigns and since the liberalization of Jewish emigration in the 1970s. Jews now make up less than 2% of the region's population.

16 Card system

The food card system regulating the distribution of food and industrial products was introduced in the USSR in 1929 due to extreme deficit of consumer goods and food. The system was cancelled in 1931. In 1941, food cards were reintroduced to keep records, distribute and regulate food supplies to the population. The card system covered main food products such as bread, meat, oil, sugar, salt, cereals, etc. The rations varied depending on which social group one belonged to, and what kind of work one did. Workers in the heavy industry and defense enterprises received a daily ration of 800 g (miners - 1 kg) of bread per person; workers in other industries 600 g. Non-manual workers received 400 or 500 g based on the significance of their enterprise, and children 400 g. However, the card system only covered industrial workers and residents of towns while villagers never had any provisions of this kind. The card system was cancelled in 1947.

17 Rehabilitation in the Soviet Union: Many people who had been arrested, disappeared or killed

during the Stalinist era were rehabilitated after the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956, where Khrushchev publicly debunked the cult of Stalin and lifted the veil of secrecy from what had happened in the USSR during Stalin's leadership. It was only after the official rehabilitation that people learnt for the first time what had happened to their relatives as information on arrested people had not been disclosed before.

18 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.

19 Mandatory job assignment in the USSR

Graduates of higher educational institutions had to complete a mandatory 2-year job assignment issued by the institution from which they graduated. After finishing this assignment young people were allowed to get employment at their discretion in any town or organization.

20 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.

21 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.

22 Young Octobrist: In Russian Oktyabrenok, or 'pre-pioneer', designates Soviet children of seven years or over preparing for entry into the pioneer organization.

23 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.

24 Komsomol

Communist youth political organization created in 1918. The task of the Komsomol was to spread 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.

25 Hesed

Meaning care and mercy in Hebrew, Hesed stands for the charity organization founded by Amos Avgar in the early 20th century. Supported by Claims Conference and Joint Hesed helps for Jews in need to have a decent life despite hard economic conditions and encourages development of their self-identity. Hesed provides a number of services aimed at supporting the needs of all, and particularly elderly members of the society. The major social services include: work in the center facilities (information, advertisement of the center activities, foreign ties and free lease of medical equipment); services at homes (care and help at home, food products delivery, delivery of hot meals, minor repairs); work in the community (clubs, meals together, day-time polyclinic, medical and legal consultations); service for volunteers (training programs). The Hesed centers have inspired a real revolution in the Jewish life in the FSU countries. People have seen and sensed the rebirth of the Jewish traditions of humanism. Currently over eighty Hesed centers exist in the FSU countries. Their activities cover the Jewish population of over eight hundred settlements.