

# Raissa Smelaya

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Chernovtsy

Ukraine

Interviewer: Ella Levitskaya

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*Raissa Smelaya is a stout woman with silver-gray hair and surprisingly young looking gray eyes. She lives alone and is tired of her solitude. It is especially hard considering that she buried her son recently. This wound is still bleeding and the ache is so hard that she even refused to talk about her son during the interview. Her daughter and granddaughters also live in Chernovtsy. Raissa loves her granddaughters dearly. She proudly told me that they both work at Hesed. We met at the Jewish Charity Committee where Raissa has charity meals every day. Raissa is very sociable and friendly.*

My father's parents came from Mozyr town. It is located in Belarus now, but at the end of the 19th century Mozyr was part of the Russian Empire. It was a small patriarchal town. Half of its population was Jewish and the rest of it was Belarus. I know about Mozyr from what my father told me.

I never knew any relatives on my father's side and just know about my grandfather and grandmother from what my father told me. My grandfather, Borukh Ravikovich, was born in Mozyr in the 1870s. My grandmother, Riva Ravikovich, was born to the family of a tailor, who had many children, in Mozyr. I don't know her maiden name. My grandmother was the oldest daughter. She was born in 1873. I don't know how many brothers and sisters she had exactly. My father said there were about 15 other children and my grandmother helped her mother to look after her younger brothers and sisters. The difference in age between my grandmother and the youngest child in the family was a little less than 20 years.

When my grandfather turned eleven his parents sent him to study with a tailor and that was my grandmother Riva's father. They met and fell in love with one another when they were in their teens. After finishing his studies my grandfather continued to work with my grandmother's father. He couldn't afford to open his own shop, but he also wanted to stay close to my grandmother. My grandfather was saving money for the future. He could only propose to my grandmother when he had enough money to buy a house. When he had saved a sufficient amount he proposed to my grandmother. Her parents gave their consent, but they told my grandfather that my grandmother was not getting any dowry since there were many other children in their family to provide for. My grandfather didn't get discouraged and they got married. They had a traditional Jewish wedding.

After the wedding my grandfather took his young wife into the house that he had bought. It was a wooden house. Wood was the least expensive construction material since Belarus is the country of forests. My grandfather had his own tailor's shop in the biggest room of their house. He worked alone. He had a sewing machine and an iron. There were three other smaller rooms. One served as a bedroom for my grandparents and the two others were for their children: three sons in one room and their daughter in the other. My father, Lipei, was the oldest child. He was born in 1899. The

second one was Jacob, Yankel in Yiddish, born in 1904. Then came their daughter Haya, born in 1908. The last child was Oscar, born in 1913. My grandfather earned their living. They even helped poorer Jewish families before holidays. My grandfather believed that charity was his holy duty.

My grandparents on my father's side were religious. They followed the kashrut and observed all Jewish traditions. All boys were circumcised in their babyhood. At 13 my father had his bar mitzvah. He began to attend the synagogue with my grandfather on Saturday and Jewish holidays. All boys went to cheder. Haya studied Hebrew, the Talmud and the Torah with a teacher at home. They celebrated Sabbath and Jewish holidays at home. My grandfather prayed at home every day. As was customary for Jewish families my grandfather began to teach his oldest son tailoring from his early childhood. My father liked sewing and was an industrious apprentice. He told me very little about his childhood though.

My grandfather died of a disease in 1916. He was buried in accordance with Jewish traditions in the Jewish cemetery in Mozyr. My father had to support the family. By that time he could already work independently. In 1922, when his brothers were old enough to provide for themselves, my father moved to Kiev. He wanted to live in a bigger town thinking that he would have more opportunities in a bigger town and more clients. He got a job in a tailor's shop in Kiev. In a short while he became a skilled tailor and had his own clientele. Gradually my father's younger sisters and brothers moved to Kiev as well.

Jacob became a worker at the shoe factory. He married a Jewish girl and had two children. I don't remember them. During the Great Patriotic War [1](#) Jacob went to the front and perished near Stalingrad in 1943. Haya got married in Kiev. I don't remember her husband. They didn't have children. Haya was a housewife. She took my grandmother, who lived alone in her house, to live with her. On 29th September 1941 Haya and my grandmother were shot by fascists in Babi Yar [2](#). I don't know what happened to Haya's husband. Oscar, the youngest brother, finished a higher tank school before the war and became a professional military. He was at the frontline throughout the war. Oscar was wounded several times, but every time he returned to the front when released from hospital. His family perished during the war. I didn't know his wife or child. After he returned from the front Oscar got an assignment at a military garrison in Yurmala, Latvia. He got married and had two children. We had no contacts with his family, I don't know their names. He must have died by now.

I knew my mother's parents well. When I was born they had lived in Kiev for several years already. Before they moved to Kiev my mother's family lived in Gornostaipol, Kiev region, where both my grandfather and grandmother were born. My grandfather, Aron Gorokhovskiy, was born in 1870s. My grandmother Haya was few years younger than my grandfather. I don't know her maiden name. My grandparents got married in Gornostaipol in 1899. They had a traditional Jewish wedding.

There were seven children in the family. The oldest, Shyfra, was called by the Russian name [common name] [3](#) of Shura. She was born in 1901. In 1902 Michael, Munia, followed. The next child was my mother Golda, born in 1904. Then came David in 1907 and Hanne in 1908. In 1913 their son Naum, Nuhim, was born and the last daughter Polina, Perl, followed in 1917. My grandfather Aron was a shoemaker and my grandmother was a housewife. They were a poor family since what my grandfather made for their living was hardly enough for them to lead a hand-to-mouth life. My grandmother kept a few chickens in the backyard. They didn't have a kitchen garden or an orchard.

Their family was religious. All I know is what my mother told me. They observed all Jewish traditions. They spoke Yiddish at home. My grandfather went to the synagogue on Saturday and on Jewish holidays. When Munia grew old enough my grandfather took him to the synagogue with him. On weekdays my grandfather prayed at home twice a day: in the morning and in the evening. Munia and David studied at cheder and the daughters Shura, my mother Golda and Hanne studied Hebrew, the Torah and reading and writing in Yiddish with a melamed at home. My grandfather couldn't afford to pay him, but he fixed his shoes in return. The younger children didn't study at home. They went to a Jewish elementary school.

They celebrated Sabbath and Jewish holidays at home. My mother told me that my grandmother lit candles and prayed on Friday evening. Then the family said a prayer together and had a festive dinner. There was always gefilte fish and freshly made challah for dinner. My grandfather drank a shot of vodka. He didn't work on Saturday. He used to read a section from the Torah to his children. My grandmother didn't cook on Saturday. She had all food cooked the day before. Their Ukrainian neighbor came in to light a lamp or stoke the stove on Saturday. My mother told me that once this woman failed to come one Saturday and they almost froze to death since they weren't allowed to light a fire in their stove.

Their favorite holiday was Pesach. My mother told me how they started preparations ahead of time. My grandmother whitewashed the house on the outside and the inside. They brushed away and burnt all breadcrumbs. They didn't eat bread throughout Pesach - they only ate matzah. My grandmother made traditional Jewish food. Chickens that my grandmother fed were taken to the shochet. My grandmother made chicken broth and stuffed chicken necks. In the evening my grandfather conducted the seder for the family. My mother was a wonderful singer. She often sang Jewish songs in my childhood. She sang at seder, too. That's all I remember about holidays in my mother's family.

Gornostaipol was a small town where half of the population was Jewish. There was a synagogue and a shochet in the town. There were no conflicts between Jewish and Ukrainian inhabitants. Ukrainians switched to Yiddish when they talked with Jews. There was no specific Jewish neighborhood in Gornostaipol. My mother told me that Jewish houses were scattered among Ukrainian houses. They had Ukrainian neighbors. They were all good friends and their children played together. When mothers of families were through with their routinely work they visited each other or sat on a bench between their two houses. At Pesach my grandmother always took honey cake, strudels and gefilte fish to their Ukrainian neighbors. And at Easter their neighbor brought them Easter bread and painted eggs. In the late 1910s there were Jewish pogroms [4](#) in Gornostaipol. Gangs [5](#) from other locations robbed Jewish houses and beat Jews when they captured any. Some Jews got killed in those pogroms. My grandmother's family hid in the cellar when gangs came to town. Once a gang came to Gornostaipol on Saturday when Jews were praying at the synagogues. The bandits closed the door and set the synagogue on fire. The Jews hardly managed to survive by jumping out of the windows.

Before 1917 according to the law of the Russian Empire Jews could only settle down within special restricted residential area [Jewish Pale of Settlement] [6](#) and they weren't allowed to live in bigger towns. Exceptions were made for doctors, merchants and lawyers. After the [Russian] Revolution of 1917 [7](#) many Jewish families moved to cities hoping for a better life and more opportunities for their children to get education. My mother's family moved to Kiev in 1924. They settled down in

Spasskaya Street in Podol [8](#), an ancient neighborhood in Kiev where craftsmen lived. My grandfather purchased a shoemaker shop from an old shoemaker that had decided to retire. This shop was near the house and all tenants of the house were my grandfather's customers.

My mother became a shop assistant in a small food store. David went to the school of political studies. [Editor's note: these were Marxist party schools where future party cadres were trained.] David finished the school of political studies. He was a political officer. He got married to a Jewish girl and had a son, Pavel. The younger children went to a Russian elementary school. Munia went to work at the reconstruction of the garment factory, which was ruined during the Civil War [9](#). When the factory was set up Munia was appointed director of the factory. He received a room in a communal apartment [10](#) on Kreschatik, the central thoroughfare [Kreschatik is the main street in Kiev]. He spent all his time at work. He was single. He lived with his parents.

Naum entered an Air Force school after finishing secondary school. My mother's older sister, Shura, married a Jew named Michael. Of all children only my mother had a traditional Jewish wedding. The rest of them had civil ceremonies and no wedding parties, which was customary after the Revolution of 1917. Sheura had two daughters. The older one was called Maria. I don't remember the name of the younger one. Shura was a housewife.

Hanne finished an accounting school. She married a Jew named Michael. I don't remember his last name. She worked before her daughter was born. When she had the baby she quit. Polina also got married to a Jew and had a son. If I remember correctly, his name was Vladimir.

My father was invited to work at the factory as production consultant. He met Munia at the factory and they became friends. I guess Munia introduced my father to his sister. They were young and handsome and loved dancing. My mother told me that my father met her after work and they went to a dance club. The popular dances back then were the waltz, the tango and the foxtrot.

My parents got married in 1926. My grandparents were religious people. My mother was their first daughter to get married. They insisted on a traditional Jewish wedding. They made a chuppah at my grandparents' house and a rabbi from the synagogue conducted the wedding ceremony. Later my parents had a civil ceremony at a registration office and in the evening they had a wedding dinner for two families. After my parents got married Munia moved back to his parents and gave his room to the newly-weds. Our family lived in this apartment until the Great Patriotic War began in 1941.

I was born in 1927. My name was written as Raissa in my birth certificate, but my Jewish name is Rokhl. In 1929 my parents had another daughter, who was named Bronia, Brukha in Yiddish. She was a premature baby. She was very weak and of poor health. She died in 1931. Only seven years later, in 1938, my younger sister, Maya, was born. Maya was a popular name at that time.

We lived in a big five-storied building on Kreschatik. Our apartment was on the second floor. The entrance door opened to a long hallway with seven doors - there were seven rooms in the apartment: one room for each tenant's family. There was a big kitchen at the end of the hallway with seven tables with a Primus stove on each of them. There was no gas in the house. All cooking was done on kerosene stoves and there was the permanent smell of kerosene in the apartment. There was a common bathroom and toilet and tenants took turns to clean themselves. Only one tenant - Gustav Dreich - was German; his ancestors settled down in Russia. The rest of the tenants

were Jews. We all got along well. I cannot remember any conflicts or arguments. There were children in every family. We were friends and used to play in the hallway. The hallway was our favorite playground. We played hide-and-seek and ball.

My father went to work at a big couture shop. He was a popular tailor. He made men's suits. Party and logistics officials were his customers. My father also took private orders and worked at home in the evening. He arranged a corner for his workroom behind the wardrobe where he had a table for cutting fabrics and a sewing machine. I remember waking up at night because of the sound of the sewing machine. Several times we almost had accidents with irons that were heated with coal; electric irons were rare at the time. My father also had to keep his business in secret since entrepreneurship was almost treated like a crime. My mother always strictly reminded me to never mention it to anyone. My father provided well for us and we led a wealthy life. My mother was a housewife. My father was a hearty eater and I remember my mother buying tinned caviar and expensive sausages.

My mother was a shop assistant and I liked to go to her workplace when I was old enough. I liked my mother wearing a white apron and a lace crown. My mother liked fashionable clothes, but my father didn't have time to make any for her. She learned to sew and made nice dresses for herself and for me. She liked to wear hats and necklaces.

My mother was close with her sisters. They sometimes came to see us. The brothers were too busy at work. My mother's relatives visited us on birthdays and Soviet holidays. On Jewish holidays the family visited their parents.

My parents weren't religious. We spoke Russian in the family. Only when our parents didn't want us to understand the subject of their discussion they switched to Yiddish. We celebrated Soviet holidays: 1st May and 7th November [October Revolution Day] [11](#). We watched a military parade and then a parade of civilians that marched past our house on Kreschatik. My parents always took me to parades and afterwards we had guests at home. My mother made a festive dinner to celebrate. We didn't celebrate Jewish holidays at home. We never ate bread throughout the eight days of Pesach, but in general, my mother didn't observe Jewish traditions.

However, my grandfather and grandmother observed Jewish traditions after they moved to Kiev. There was a synagogue not far from their home. They dressed up and went to the synagogue on Saturday and on Jewish holidays. My grandfather prayed at home every day. I don't remember my grandmother praying at home. Sometimes when I visited them my grandmother told me that my grandfather was not to be disturbed during his prayer. My grandfather was sitting with his tallit and teffilin on his hand and forehead. It was no use talking to him at such moments - he didn't reply anyway.

All tenants in the house were Jews. Before Pesach they got together at somebody's apartment to make matzah for all families. My grandparents celebrated all Jewish holidays and all their children and their families visited them joining the celebration. My grandmother made traditional Jewish food: gefilte fish, chicken broth with finely cut matzah, matzah and egg pudding and strudels with nuts and raisins. When we visited my grandparents on the first day of Pesach we stayed overnight to be present at the seder that grandfather conducted. One of the sons usually asked him the four traditional questions [the mah nishtanah]. Each person had to drink four glasses of wine during the night and there was one extra glass of wine on the table. Grandmother left the front door open and

I was told that they were expecting Elijah the prophet [12](#) to visit their home. Every time I hoped to see him, but always fell asleep before he came.

I also remember the Chanukkah celebration at my grandmother's house. Every day my grandmother lit another candle. I was given Chanukkah gelt. I held my hands to form a scoop and made the round of everybody present. They dropped coins in my hands that I spent on ice cream and lollypops. My mother also bought me these sweets, but they tasted more delicious if I bought them myself. That's what I remember. They probably celebrated other Jewish holidays, too, but I don't remember.

The famine in 1932-33 [13](#) didn't have an impact on us. I remember one incident. My mother bought a loaf of bread and some boys extorted it from her. However, I can't remember people starving in Kiev. Perhaps in villages people starved to death. But this was a forced famine, as they put it now. We didn't starve. My parents were spoiling me since I was their only child at that time. Every summer my father rented a room in a summer house in Boyarka or Vorsel near Kiev. I drank cow milk, not pasteurized, there since my parents believed it was good for my health. I was a sympathetic girl since I was raised in a loving and caring atmosphere. I liked helping other people and enjoyed helping older ladies to cross the street or carry their shopping bags.

I started to study at a Russian secondary school located not far from our house in 1935. There were many Jewish children in my class, but we didn't care a bit about nationality. We were raised in the spirit of internationalism. It happened so that my school friends were Jewish girls. My favorite subjects were literature and mathematics, and I didn't like physics and chemistry at all. I liked poems and collected books. My parents gave me money to buy books. I also borrowed books from libraries or my friends. I knew many poems by heart. I often recited poems at school concerts. There was a corner in the room where I had my desk. There was a lamp with a green shade on it. My parents didn't have books. My mother liked buying little things that she put on the shelf, but she didn't buy books. My parents had a record player and many records. There were Jewish songs and music and pop music. In the evening my parents often listened to records. They were very tired after work, and it was their rest. They hardly ever left the house in the evenings.

In the 1st grade I became a Young Octobrist [14](#). I began to attend the Forpost club for children and teenagers in a basement. There were several rooms in the basement and a sports field in the yard. In the Forpost club I had folk dancing classes and sang in the choir. Our choir took part at a concert in the Philharmonic. There was a volleyball-ground in our yard and we played volleyball when it was warm. The leaders of Young Octobrist groups were senior pupils. They seemed very mature to us. In winter a skating-rink was arranged in the yard of the building next to ours. There was music playing. My mother made me a suit and knitted a hat. I tied my skates together with a rope to go to the skating rink. I was a 'street girl', so to speak. My parents spent a lot of time at work and I spent time with my friends. We went to ballet performances and shows at the Drama Institute. They were free and we didn't miss one single performance.

My friends and I liked walking around Kiev. Kiev is a very beautiful city with beautiful houses in the center. It's a very green city with many parks and old trees. Kiev stands on the Dnepr River. There are beautiful beaches where we liked spending time in the summer. During the tsar's reign Jews were allowed to settle down in Slobodka, a workers' district in the suburbs on the left bank of the river.



The arrests in 1936 [during the so-called Great Terror] [15](#) and the following years didn't have any impact on our family or our relatives or acquaintances. I wasn't even aware that there were arrests at all. The only thing I remember from those years is that sometimes our teachers told us that some of the people whose portraits were in our history and literature textbooks were 'enemies of the people' and we painted them over with ink. And I didn't know why they were 'enemies of the people'.

From the 3rd grade on we had military training at school. The boys formed two groups representing the armies and pretended to fight battles. They were taught to use weapons, clean and put together rifles and machine guns. These were replica weapons. Girls were medical nurses. We were taught to carry wounded patients on stretchers, treat the wounds and apply bandages. In the 4th grade we even stayed in a village for two days. There was a field kitchen trailer. We made cereals in big bowls on the fireplace. We learned to shoot. We had an automatic rattle gun that was very much like a real gun. We learned to assemble and disassemble weapons and provide first aid to the wounded. There was competition between the various groups. It was very interesting.

I was a pioneer at school. We became pioneers in the 4th grade. There was a ceremony on 22nd April, Lenin's birthday. We went to the Lenin Museum where the ceremony was conducted. We were told that capitalists wanted to destroy the power of workers and peasants and that they were our enemies. After classes we patrolled Kreschatik. When we saw a man wearing a hat and decent clothing we understood that he might be a spy. There were articles published in children's newspapers about pioneers that captured a spy and we dreamed that we would get lucky, too.

There were many songs about the war at that time. In those songs the Soviet army defeated an enemy in a matter of days. We sang, 'If there is a war tomorrow and if we have to leave our homes tomorrow, if dark forces attack us all, Soviet people will rise as one to fight for their great motherland'. However, we never believed that somebody would dare to attack our country.

In June 1941 I finished the 6th grade with all the best marks in my report book. My friends and I were planning to go to the circus on Sunday, 22nd June 1941. Early in the morning we were woken up by the roar of explosions. Our neighbors came to the corridor to find out what had happened. German planes were bombing Kiev already. About noon Molotov [16](#) spoke on the radio. He said that Germany was attacking the USSR without having declared a war. My father went to the anti-aircraft headquarters immediately. Volunteers patrolled the streets and put out firebombs. During air raids we ran to the basement of our building. Actually, I ran holding my sister and my mother stayed at home waiting for my father. At the beginning of July my father volunteered to the front.

The enterprise where my mother's sister Hanne worked evacuated. Her husband Michael was at the front. Hanne and her family lived with my grandparents. When lists of people for evacuation were developed at her enterprise Hanne had my mother, my sister Maya and me, Polina and her child and my grandmother and grandfather enrolled. My grandparents refused to evacuate. They said that they weren't afraid of the Germans and didn't believe what people said about their brutalities. Besides, they were too old to leave their home. And they stayed. My mother's older sister, Shura, and her two daughters evacuated to the Ural with the plant where Shura's husband was working. She also tried to convince her parents go with her, but in vain. My mother's brother, Munia, also stayed in Kiev. He was responsible for all the preparations at the factory for evacuation. After the

war we got to know that on 29th September 1941 my grandmother, grandfather and Uncle Munia were shot by fascists in Babi Yar.

We, three women and four children, evacuated on 14th July, 1941. I was 13 and the other children were under five years of age. We had little luggage and food with us. We didn't think we would be leaving for long. My mother took my sister Maya's doll, but she left her winter coat at home. I can't remember how long our trip lasted. I guess we were on the way for several weeks. The train was overcrowded, but at least it was a passenger train with sleeping berths and a toilet. When the train stopped my mother and aunt got off to get some food. We were starving. I got off the train to get some water and was always afraid that the train would leave without me.

There was a horrible air raid near Dnepropetrovsk. German planes were flying so low that we could see the pilots. We got out of the train and ran to a mound. Fortunately, only two railcars were destroyed and the locomotive wasn't damaged. We reached the village of Nikolskoye village, Enataevsk district in Stalingrad region, 900 kilometers from Kiev. We got accommodation in a local house. The owners of the house, Dunia and Vania, were very nice Russian people. They accommodated us and gave us food. Once a funny thing happened. Another train with evacuated people arrived and they invited us to go take a look at the Jews that arrived on this train. My mother replied, 'You needn't go there. Just look at us'. Our landlords were shocked to hear that we were Jews. It turned out they had never seen Jews before and they thought Jews looked different from other people.

I went to work at the collective farm [17](#). We worked in the field picking potatoes and making shieves. My mother and Hanne also worked and Polina took care of the children. German troops were approaching and we had to move on. We got to Astrakhan in Middle Asia by train and from there to Makhachkala across the Caspian Sea. From Makhachkala we went to Kazakhstan by train covering in total over 3,500 kilometers to the East. Those were freight trains that we went by. People put luggage, newspapers and even straw onto the floor to sleep at night. The railcar was stuffed with people. One of the boys in our railcar fell ill with measles. It was impossible to stay intact in such insanitary conditions and soon all children contracted measles including our little ones. My sister Maya, who was two years old, and Hanne and Polina's children died on this train. Polina's son had dystrophy. Almost at every station a cart came to the train to collect the dead. We don't know where the children were buried.

We reached Djusaly station, Karmakcha district in Kazakhstan. We were taken to the town of Karmakchi on a coach. Polina went to the military registry office to volunteer to the front. She perished in action in 1943. My mother, Hanne and I stayed in Karmakchi. We got accommodation in a local Kazakh house. We lived three horrible years in a small dark room. The owners of the house treated us nicely and with understanding though.

Kamakchi was a small town typical for Middle Asia, with narrow streets and small clay houses. There were no trees in the streets due to the desert climate and sand soil. There were wells in the streets but the water was deep down in the well. There were irrigation streams - aryks - in some streets. Children used to have a bath in them. The locals spoke Kazakh. Only few of them could speak Russian.

I went to work at the military mechanic plant that was evacuated from Central Russia. I worked at the foundry that manufactured blanks for shell frames. When a blank got cold I had to remove all



burrs and scars. We worked in two shifts: the first shift from 7am to 7pm and the second shift from 7pm to 7am. I received a worker's card for one kilo of bread. The bread was heavy and sticky and one kilo wasn't that much. My mother and Hanne received cards of non-manual workers for 300 grams of bread. They were nurse attendants in hospital. Workers at the plant got a bowl of soup and cereal at the canteen. I took soup home in a jar. My mother added some water to it and had it with Aunt Hanne. I was growing up and didn't have enough food. We didn't have any clothes to exchange for food. We were on the edge of survival throughout the three years in evacuation. I had dystrophy. Once I found potato peels in a pile of garbage. I brought them home. My mother washed and boiled them and we ate them. Sometimes we received bran per coupons. My mother added boiling water to it to make a meal for us.

There was a school at the plant. There were many teenage workers at the plant that needed to attend school. The school worked in two shifts. I attended classes after work and finished the 7th and 8th grades in evacuation. Later I got a job at the district health department - in the document control section.

Some Chechen people were deported to the town where we lived [forced deportation to Siberia] [18](#). Most of them were ill with typhoid and malaria. Those Chechens were such bandits. When they came to Karmakchi we were afraid of going outside and had to lock all doors, even though there was nothing to steal from us. The health department sent me to make a list of those Chechens. I contracted spotted and enteric fever from them. Later I developed relapsing fever. If it hadn't been for my mother, who worked in hospital and attended to me, I could have died any moment. There were no medications or food. Fortunately, my mother didn't contract the fever from me. Well, however hard life was I don't remember any conflicts or disagreements associated with the issue of nationality or any other issues. People were united and believed in victory. We all tried to support and help one another. There were Jews among them, but I don't know if they observed Jewish traditions.

My mother corresponded with my father. He sent us cards with the address of his field post. Once my mother's letter was returned and there was a stamp saying, 'Addressee left' on it, but soon we received the notification that my father was missing. And almost immediately afterward we received his death notification. This happened in 1942. My father had volunteered to the front when he could have gone with us but he thought that it was his duty to defend our motherland. People believed in the Soviet people and the Party. Soldiers marched into battles in the name of Stalin because they trusted him. They won because they believed.

In November 1943 we learned that the Soviet troops had liberated Kiev. Aunt Hanne left for home immediately. She wrote us about our relatives that had been exterminated in Babi Yar. Our neighbors told her about them. Other people lived in my grandparents' apartment. Aunt Hanne rented a corner in a room and was working on getting back the apartment. She got it back after a trial.

I finished eight years of lower secondary school. There was a college of film operators in Kiev. I wrote a covering letter and attached my school certificate with all highest grades in it. They replied that I was admitted and sent me an invitation to come to Kiev to study at the college. This invitation was a pass for us to return to Kiev. In summer 1944 my mother and I went to Kiev. Our return trip was less difficult. Besides, we were used to hardships after our life in evacuation.

Kiev had suffered a lot from bombing. Kreschatik was all in ruins, but our house wasn't destroyed. High-rank military lived in it. Upon arrival I obtained a certificate from our residential agency to confirm that we had lived in this building before the war. We had a certificate saying that our father had perished at the front and a certificate stating that we had worked in evacuation. There was also evidence from our neighbors that we had lived in this apartment and my mother's passport with a stamp that included our home address in Kiev. However, we didn't get our room back. We didn't even get back our belongings that we had left in the apartment when we left. Hanne and we settled down in my grandparents' room.

Victory Day [19](#) on 9th May 1945 was such a happy day! People seemed to have forgotten about their hardships and losses for the time being. Everybody went to the streets exchanging hugs and kisses, greeting each other, singing and crying.

My mother went to work as a dressmaker at a shop near our house. I studied at the Cinematography College and in the meantime I finished a higher secondary evening school and received a certificate. In college I joined the Komsomol [20](#). I was very happy about it. I still have my Komsomol membership certificate. I couldn't find a job upon finishing college: most of the cinemas had been destroyed during the war. I went to work as an assistant accountant at the shoe factory where my father's brother Jacob had worked before the war. I had a training period and learned to operate calculators promptly. I found my school friends that had survived and returned to Kiev. We went to the cinema and dance parties together; we were young and wanted to enjoy life.

In 1945 my mother's brother David returned from the front. His family perished in evacuation. David remarried a Jewish girl and had a son called Alexandr with his second wife. David lived in Kiev and was an accountant. He died in Kiev in 1980. My mother's younger brother Naum, who had finished a flying school before the war, also returned from the front. He was a fighter pilot throughout the war. After the war he got married and had two children. He didn't keep in touch with his relatives after he returned from the front. I have no information about him or his family. Naum lived in Kiev and was a lecturer at Kiev Air Force College. He died in Kiev in 1984.

My mother's older sister Shura returned from evacuation in the Ural where she was with her two daughters. Her husband Michael also returned from the front. They managed to get their apartment back and lived there all their life. Shura died in Kiev in 1972. None of them was buried in the Jewish cemetery. They didn't observe Jewish traditions after the war.

In the late 1940s we began to face anti-Semitism. This was a hard period: there was lack of food products and there were long queues in stores for any kind of food. I remember the flour sale in a store. A lame handicapped man came to the store and brandishing his stick began to yell that zhydy [abusive name for Jews in the Soviet Union] should leave the queue since none of them had been at the front. In general, people had a very aggressive attitude towards Jews. Most of them were sure that Jews had been sitting in the rear during the war and that none of them had struggled at the front.

I got married at the beginning of 1948. A friend of mine who worked at the Fire Department of Kiev invited me to a party at her workplace. Leonid Yakovenko, the head of the Investigation Department, asked me to dance the whole evening. Shortly afterwards he became my husband. Leonid didn't know his parents. He was raised at a children's home. He is ten years older than I. He returned from the front with the rank of a major. My mother took it easy that Leonid was a

Ukrainian man. What mattered to her was that he had an apartment because I was poor and miserable. My friends were jealous of my luck.

We had a civil ceremony at the registration office. My mother and her sisters bought a big goose; it was their wedding gift. In the evening my mother arranged a wedding dinner for us. We had roasted goose and a bottle of wine. My aunts and my friend Zina, who had introduced me to my husband, came to the wedding. After the wedding I went to live with my husband. He had a two-bedroom apartment in Lipki, the best neighborhood in Kiev. There was heating, gas, a bathroom and a kitchen in this apartment. Soon we took my mother to live with us. My daughter, Irina, was born in February 1949. I left work after she was born and became a housewife. My husband provided well for the family.

In 1950 my husband got an assignment to Dnepropetrovsk, a big town in Ukraine, 400 kilometers from Kiev. My mother and I followed him. We received a three-bedroom apartment. Our son, Vladimir, was born in 1950. I stayed at home. My friends were the wives of my husband's colleagues. There were Jews among them, but not many. I spent little time with them since I was busy at home. I tried to be an ideal housewife. We got together with friends on Soviet holidays and birthdays. In summer I took our children to a summerhouse on the outskirts of Dnepropetrovsk. My husband had a vacation of one month that he spent with us. I dedicated my life to my husband and children. We were well provided for. My husband died unexpectedly of a heart attack in 1956. I went to work as a radio telephone operator at the Department of Internal Affairs where my husband used to work. The children went to kindergarten and then to school. I worked and took part in amateur art activities: I sang in a choir and attended a folk dance club.

My mother left for Kiev. My aunt wrote to her saying that she knew a Jewish man whose family had perished during the war and who wanted to meet a Jewish woman. The most important factor for my mother was that he had an apartment. She moved to Kiev and got married. My mother's husband, Solomon, was almost 20 years older than my mother. He was a very nice and decent man. My mother wasn't in love with him, but she got along well with him. Solomon fell in love with my mother and she treated him with respect and care. They got along well and went to the cinema and theater together. They were pensioners. They didn't observe Jewish traditions. After the war very few people observed Jewish traditions. Every summer my children and I spent two weeks with her. She was very happy to see her grandchildren and me. Solomon also loved my children. My mother died in Kiev in 1988. We buried her in the town cemetery. I'm glad that she lived to see her grandchildren.

In 1953 the Doctors' Plot [21](#) began. There were talks about doctors that intended to poison Stalin. I think anti-Semitism got stronger then. Most of the people had no doubts that newspapers published the truth. Jews had problems with employment. Patients in polyclinics refused to visit Jewish doctors. I didn't face any anti-Semitism personally, but it was certainly there.

I remember what a terrible tragedy the death of Stalin was for me. I listened to bulletins about his condition every day when on 5th March they announced that he had died. How terrible it was! There was a big sculpture of Lenin and Stalin in the central avenue in Dnepropetrovsk. When Stalin died people got together near this monument. They were crying and grieving. There was a memorial celebration and it seemed to me that life was over and there was only uncertainty ahead of us. The railway in Dnepropetrovsk was overcrowded with those willing to go to Moscow to

Stalin's funeral. Many of them traveled on the roofs of the railcars.

I was very upset to hear Khrushchev's [22](#) speech at the Twentieth Party Congress [23](#). Well, yes, people were arrested and sent into exile before and after the war. Don't they do the same now? Well, there might have been innocent people among them. Perhaps, it might have been difficult to find out that they were innocent. But it wasn't Stalin in person that sentenced them! Life was much better during the rule of Stalin and we won in the name of Stalin. And then all of a sudden he became a criminal... He is accused of having deported whole nations. Yes, he deported Chechen people, but I saw that they were bandits and rapists. Besides, he didn't shoot them. After the Twentieth Party Congress the statue of Stalin was removed.

I married a Ukrainian man in 1958. My second husband's name was Petr Smely. We met at our acquaintances' and Petr began to court me. I was afraid that my children would have problems with their stepfather, but they liked him at once. Petr was a very nice man and I agreed to marry him. I took his last name when we got married. Petr came from Dnepropetrovsk. His father, Vassiliy Smely, was a worker at a plant and his mother, Galina, was a housewife. Petr was born in 1921. He was at the front during the war and after the war he studied and graduated from the Faculty of Road Transport Operation at the Road Transport Institute. He was a driver until he retired. Petr accepted my children as his own.

My husband insisted that I quit work and became a housewife. My friends were my colleagues for the most part and there were Jews among them. I didn't care about nationality. I was raised that way. After I quit work I didn't see them often, but I was busy at home and didn't have time to get bored. I didn't celebrate Jewish holidays with my first or second husband. This wasn't just because both of my husbands were Ukrainian. They were raised in the spirit of internationalism. I was raised an atheist. I couldn't even imagine what could make a grown-up person believe in fairy tales about God or Elijah the Prophet. I raised my children in the same manner. They didn't make a difference between nations. Personality is important for them. They didn't identify themselves as Jews, but they knew that I was a Jew, of course. We celebrated Soviet holidays in our family. Soviet holidays always were days off and I cooked a festive meal. My husband's friends and colleagues and my children's friends visited us. In the morning we went to the parade and in the afternoon we had lunch at home. We had a good time and enjoyed ourselves, sang and danced.

We moved to Chernovtsy in 1959. My husband got a job assignment there and my children and I followed him. We exchanged our apartment in Dnepropetrovsk for one in Chernovtsy. Chernovtsy is a nice town. There are beautiful old houses in the central part of the town, which have their own history. I felt at home in this town.

I was very surprised to hear Jews speaking Yiddish in the streets. Jews observed Jewish traditions and celebrated holidays. And they weren't old people, they were the same age as I. There were many Jews living in Chernovtsy. After the Great Patriotic War many Jews moved to Romania from Chernovtsy and from there they moved to Israel, but there were still many Jews left in the town.

When Jews began to move to Israel in the 1970s I didn't even consider this possibility. I was married to a Ukrainian man and my children were Ukrainian, even though they were aware that their mother was Jewish. Many of my friends left then. I wished them a happy life, but I didn't understand why they were leaving their own country for a different one. The non-Jewish population was very loyal to Jews.

I wasn't a member of the Communist Party. I was a housewife and had nothing to do with any public activities. However, I always believed that our country became so powerful because of the guidance of the Communist Party. Like the majority of people I believed that we had a better life than people in capitalist countries.

I didn't work after we moved to Chernovtsy. My children studied and my husband worked as a driver in a car pool. He was very tired when he came from work and went to bed. I read in the evening. We occasionally went to the theater or to the cinema. Sometimes we went to see friends. My husband went to work even at weekends to earn more for the family and it was difficult for us to make plans. We spent vacations with my mother and aunt in Kiev. They were always happy to see us. My mother got along very well with them. Petr died in Chernovtsy in 1987. I live alone now.

My daughter finished Music Pedagogical School in Chernovtsy. After finishing this school she worked as a violin teacher until her retirement. Now she plays the violin in a symphonic orchestra. Irina is married and has two daughters, my granddaughters. Irina took her husband's last name of Kantemir. Irina's husband is Ukrainian, but his nationality was of no significance to me. What I cared for was that they were in love and cared about one another. My older granddaughter, Ludmila, was born in 1969 and the younger one, Tatiana, in 1975. My daughter and granddaughters live in Chernovtsy. My granddaughters are musicians: Ludmila is a violinist and Tatiana is a pianist. Ludmila works at the symphonic orchestra. Although my grandchildren weren't raised religiously they identify themselves as Jews. They care about Jewish culture and traditions. My granddaughter Tatiana works at Hesed. She is the art director and concertmaster of a Jewish song and dance group called 'Mazltov!'. I shall not talk about my son. He died recently and this is still an open wound. It's hard for me to talk about him.

I believe life has got worse significantly after perestroika [24](#) in the 1980s. If it hadn't been for perestroika the great and powerful Soviet Union wouldn't have fallen apart. Young people have nothing sacred nowadays. Lenin and Stalin were our idols and we loved our people and our country while young people now don't believe in anything, but money.

Jewish life has revived in the past decade. Hesed provides great assistance to old people. I live alone and I appreciate the assistance provided by Hesed very much. I receive Jewish newspapers and attend the communication club in Hesed. This helps me to overcome my solitude. I have lunch at the canteen of the Jewish Charity Committee every day. It's not only a big support for me, but also an opportunity to communicate. I know that I will see people that have become close to me. There are 50 of us and we feel like a family. In recent years I've identified myself as a Jew thanks to Hesed. I attend lectures on Jewish history, go to performances of the Jewish drama studio in Hesed and to the communication club for elderly people, where we often watch Jewish movies or listen to life stories of outstanding Jews. It's all very interesting. Regretfully, my memory is getting worse and I can't study Hebrew any more. I've got new friends at Hesed that help me to overcome my solitude.

Glossary

## **[1](#) Great Patriotic War**

On 22nd June 1941 at 5 o'clock in the morning Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union without

declaring war. This was the beginning of the so-called Great Patriotic War. The German blitzkrieg, known as Operation Barbarossa, nearly succeeded in breaking the Soviet Union in the months that followed. Caught unprepared, the Soviet forces lost whole armies and vast quantities of equipment to the German onslaught in the first weeks of the war. By November 1941 the German army had seized the Ukrainian Republic, besieged Leningrad, the Soviet Union's second largest city, and threatened Moscow itself. The war ended for the Soviet Union on 9th May 1945.

## **2 Babi Yar**

Babi Yar is the site of the first mass shooting of Jews that was carried out openly by fascists. On 29th and 30th September 1941 33,771 Jews were shot there by a special SS unit and Ukrainian militia men. During the Nazi occupation of Kiev between 1941 and 1943 over a 100,000 people were killed in Babi Yar, most of whom were Jewish. The Germans tried in vain to efface the traces of the mass grave in August 1943 and the Soviet public learnt about mass murder after World War II.

## **3 Common name**

Russified or Russian first names used by Jews in everyday life and adopted in official documents. The Russification of first names was one of the manifestations of the assimilation of Russian Jews at the turn of the 19th and 20th century. In some cases only the spelling and pronunciation of Jewish names was russified (e.g. Isaac instead of Yitskhak; Boris instead of Borukh), while in other cases traditional Jewish names were replaced by similarly sounding Russian names (e.g. Eugenia instead of Ghita; Yury instead of Yuda). When state anti-Semitism intensified in the USSR at the end of the 1940s, most Jewish parents stopped giving their children traditional Jewish names to avoid discrimination.

## **4 Pogroms in Ukraine**

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.

## **5 Gangs**

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.

## **6 Jewish Pale of Settlement**

Certain provinces in the Russian Empire were designated for permanent Jewish residence and the Jewish population was only allowed to live in these areas. The Pale was first established by a decree by Catherine II in 1791. The regulation was in force until the Russian Revolution of 1917, although the limits of the Pale were modified several times. The Pale stretched from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea, and 94% of the total Jewish population of Russia, almost 5 million people, lived there. The overwhelming majority of the Jews lived in the towns and shtetls of the Pale. Certain



privileged groups of Jews, such as certain merchants, university graduates and craftsmen working in certain branches, were granted to live outside the borders of the Pale of Settlement permanently.

## **7 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.

## **8 Podol**

The lower section of Kiev. It has always been viewed as the Jewish region of Kiev. In tsarist Russia Jews were only allowed to live in Podol, which was the poorest part of the city. Before World War II 90% of the Jews of Kiev lived there.

## **9 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.

## **10 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.

## **11 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.

## **12 Elijah the Prophet**

According to Jewish legend the prophet Elijah visits every home on the first day of Pesach and drinks from the cup that has been poured for him. He is invisible but he can see everything in the house. The door is kept open for the prophet to come in and honor the holiday with his presence.

## **13 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.

## **14 Young Octobrist**

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

## **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 Molotov, V**

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

## **17 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.

## **18 Forced deportation to Siberia**

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

## **19 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.

## **20 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.

## **21 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.

## **22 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.

## **23 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.

## **24 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.