

# Sara Ushpitsene

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Sakiai

Lithuania

Interviewer: Zhanna Litinskaya

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I found out about Sara Ushpitsene in the Jewish community of Kaunas. We agreed on the interview in advance. On Saturday Sara refused to meet me because of Sabbath, so I went to her place on Sunday. I had to cover 60 kilometers – the distance from Kaunas to Sakiai – and enjoyed the serenity and beauty of Lithuanian nature. Sakiai is a tiny, neat, pretty town, which is not densely populated. It was hard for me to find my way as the locals pretended that they could hardly understand my Russian. Here Russians are out of favor, since they are still considered as occupiers, along with all those who speak Russian. If I spoke Ukrainian with them, the result would be the same as they would merely misunderstand me. Finally, I found Sara's house – clean, well-kept and white – which speaks of the well-being and neatness of the hostess. Sara is a plump, brisk, gray-haired woman, who welcomed me amiably, though she said she had forgotten about our meeting and was going to spend the day making juices. There was a Lithuanian lady in her kitchen, who boiled apple juice in pots and canned it. I barely talked Sara into giving me the interview. So we had to interrupt it a few times, for Sara to take care of the jars with juice. It was difficult, but still I found it pleasant to communicate with this energetic elderly lady. Like a true Jewish woman, Sara didn't let me go without having lunch. We ate stew and potato fritters.

With the exception of years of evacuation during the Great Patriotic War <sup>1</sup> my family and I lived in small Lithuanian towns that were located close to each other – in Lukšiai [about 140 km from Vilnius], where I was born and in Sakiai [about 150 km from Vilnius], where I am currently living. I didn't know my maternal grandfather. He died before I was born, but my mother told me many things about him. His name was Adam Plager. He lived with Grandmother and their children in the village of Plegai, not far from Lukšiai. He was born in 1834 and lived in Lithuania all his life. Adam was very educated. As an adolescent he got Jewish rabbinical education, but he was a farmer. He toiled the land with his wife, and when their children grew up, they started helping them. Grandpa had a large husbandry – apart from owning land he also had cattle and poultry. He had a lot of work to do in spring and fall. When land was to be ploughed, he hired some farm hands, but still he worked himself. No matter what season it was, what work was to be done, Jewish traditions were the priority for Adam. They observed the kashrut, Sabbath, fasts and celebrated all Jewish holidays in accordance with the tradition. Besides, Grandfather prayed daily. In the morning he put on tallit and tefillin and read prayers from his prayer book. There was no synagogue either in the village or in Lukšiai. Here the Jews got together in a minyan to pray together and celebrate Sabbath.

My grandpa had a long life. He had a premonition of his death. Mother said that during the hard times in 1918, during World War I, he looked in the mirror and told my mother, his favorite daughter, that he would die soon. Mother started calming him down. He was a tall and handsome man and there were no signs of illness, but he died two days later. There was no place to bury him in Lukšiai as there was no Jewish cemetery. Mother's brother, the only man who stayed in the

family, was taken to another city by the Germans, who occupied the town. Mother had to take care of Grandfather's burial. She put him in a cart and went to Sakiai, where there was a Jewish cemetery. She wanted to have her father buried in accordance with the Jewish rite, but the Germans didn't allow Mother to have Grandpa buried there, either because there was no permit for that or for some other reason. During the first occupation, the Germans had a very good attitude towards the Jews and that deed was not characteristic of that time. Mother had to take Grandpa from Sakiai, cross the Neman River and go to Vilkiiai, where there was also a Jewish cemetery. By the way, that cemetery is still there. I always attended the grave of my grandfather Adam Plager.

My grandpa was married twice. I don't know his first wife's name, all I know is that she gave birth to girls. I cannot recall their names either. One of them lived in Marijampole. She had two sons and two daughters. Once they came to see us in Luksiai on Pesach. Mother's second sister lived in another town. Both of them perished with their families during the German occupation.

His second wife, my grandmother, was 20-25 years younger than him. Her name was Sheine Reizl. I don't remember her maiden name. All I know is that she came from a rich family. She had a lot of jewelry - golden lace, chains and bracelets with diamonds, which she kept in a small chest. She always cleaned her jewelry before putting it on, on holidays. Probably some of the locals noticed it. A couple of days after Grandpa's death somebody broke into the house. People could hear the noise, but were afraid to get up. In the morning it turned out that the chest was stolen, but Grandma was thankful to God that nobody was hurt. Grandma survived Grandfather by 20 years and died in 1938. She was buried in Sakiai in accordance with Jewish traditions - carried on the boards across the town and put in her grave in a shroud. The whole family mourned and observed shivah for seven days after the funeral.

Grandmother gave birth to three children. The eldest was Mother's brother Berl, born in 1893. He lived in Sakiai with his wife Beile and their children. There were four of them. I remember the boys, Shanke and Orke, and one of the girls, who was two to three years younger than me. Berl had his own kosher store. There was a wooden house nearby. When the war broke out, Berl left with his family. Someone said that he was seen in Kaunas, from where he came back to Sakiai. Lithuanian neighbors said that Berl and his family came back to his house several weeks after the beginning of the occupation, hoping that that they would be safe at home. If they had stayed in Kaunas, they might have survived, as some prisoners of Kaunas ghetto [2](#) did survive. There was no chance to survive in Sakiai. It was a small town and there were about three thousand Jews. All of them were shot during the first days of occupation. Berl, Beile and my cousins died. More than 60 years have passed, but I remember them as if they were alive.

My mother had a younger sister, who was born in 1900. Her name was Basha. She and Mother lived with their parents. After getting married Basha stayed with Grandmother Sheine Reizl. Basha married a local Jew, Shmulke [Shmuel] Kaganas, and bore two daughters. They also died during the first days of occupation along with other Sakiai Jews.

My mother, Dveire Plager, was born in 1896 in the same village of Plegai, where my grandparents were living. She didn't go to school and got home education. She was taught to read and write by Grandfather. She knew Ivrit and could read prayers. Her Lithuanian was poor and she spoke no Russian at all. Mother was her father's favorite daughter and the love was mutual. After Grandfather's death Mother was grieving for a long time. She was invited to Marijampole by her

step-sister and she accepted the invitation to overcome her sadness. Mother met her fate in Marijampole – my father [Iosif Kacharinskiy]. Mother was a beauty and in spite of her being four years older than Father, he fell in love with her. At first, my mother didn't love him back and tried to avoid him. When she returned to Plegai, Father went there a couple of days later. He started helping about the house and soon Grandmother Sheine Reizl got used to him as to her own son. That is why when he proposed to my mother, Grandmother wasn't against it. My parents got married in 1919. It was one year after Grandfather's death, so there was no feast. My parents were wed under a chuppah and had a family dinner afterwards.

My father came from Poland. He was born in the small town of Ciepliszki of Suwalki province. My paternal grandfather, Avraam Kacharinskiy, born in the 1870s, was a butcher. He was a strong and robust man like most of the men of that profession, as it required strength. Grandfather died tragically when he was 40, in 1915. A large bull was brought from the village, he broke free and nobody could catch him. He was running around the yard as if feeling his approaching death. When Grandpa caught him, the bull wounded him. The doctor was called, but he couldn't help Grandpa. Avraam Kacharinskiy died from severe injuries and my grandmother, Hanna Rochl, remained alone with six children.

Grandmother Hanna Rochl was born in Detroit, USA. During her adolescence she came to Poland and married my grandfather. After Grandfather's death, Father's four sisters and brother gradually left for USA and my father and grandmother moved to Lithuania. Later on Grandmother got married again. Her husband's name was Popelyanskiy. Hanna Rochl and her husband, a very handsome and rather well-off man, lived in the vicinity of Marijampole. I rarely saw Grandmother Hanna Rochl. They came to see us in Lukšiai two or three times, when they were on their way to the seaside, where they went almost yearly. Both Grandmother and her husband were killed by the Fascists in the first days of occupation.

I didn't know my father's siblings. Only when the younger ones – his brother Berl and sister Sara – were going to leave for America, they came to say good-bye to us. I was little, but still I remember how my mother gave Father's sister a beautiful towel and table cloth. Father's brother asked for a pen knife. Father also liked it and didn't want to give it to his brother. Mother rebuked him for that and finally he gave it to his brother. This is my only recollection about them from childhood. Sara married an American Jew, Eisenstadt. She had a son, who died at the age of 70 and her daughter Ester is still alive. Sara died in 2002 at the age of 96. Berl married an American Jew, Katrin. He had lived many years with her. His son, whose name I cannot recall, came to see us in Lithuania in the early 1990s. I traveled with him to the places associated with the life of our family. When he left, he stopped writing and now I don't know anything about him.

Father's elder sister Nunya was born in the 1890s. I think her real name was Hanna and she was affectionately called Nunya by her family. She was the first from the family to leave for America. There she married a Jew, Dinkin. They had a son. He is currently living in New York. Nunya lived a long life and died at the age of 90. I know hardly anything about the life of Rochl and Basha. Both of them were married and also died when they were about 90.

My father was born in Ciepliszki on 15th May 1900. He became a butcher, like his father. He came to Lithuania with his mother after Grandfather's tragic death. After a long courtship, Father finally reached his goal and married the woman whom he fell in love with at first sight. The newly-weds

settled in Plegai with my maternal grandparents. In 1922 my elder brother Meishe was born. After him my mother gave birth to babies almost every year, but many parturitions were preterm and there were miscarriages. There were seven parturitions, but only Shmuel, born in 1923, I, my brother Leiser, born in 1927 and my sister Bashe Feiga, born in 1928, survived. I was born in 1925. I remember that two children – a girl who was one year younger than me and a boy who was born in 1926 died at an infant age.

The elder children, Meishe and Shmuel, were born in Plegai. I was born in Luksiai. Father decided to move to the town. Mother's younger sister got married and there was not enough room in Plegai. Father bought a small wooden house in Luksiai, where I was born and spent my childhood. The house was purchased on loan and it took a long time for Father to pay it back.

The town where I was born – Luksiai – looks like any small Lithuanian town, but it seems to me to be the most beautiful one. I think it's not only my opinion. Luksiai is a very nice town indeed. There is a large cathedral on the bank of the lake. It is nice and fancy looking. There is a gorgeous park beside the lake. We used to walk there in my childhood. The downtown is typical for towns like that – a lot of stores, groceries, mostly belonging to Jews, and a market. There were a lot of Jewish families. A large family, the Korenfields, lived on the other side of the lake. I also remember the families Gerzman, Berenstein, Gertner – they were rich people. The elderly Bernchik couple was poor; they had a spinner and span wool for a living. Finkelstein was one of the most respectable men in town. There was no synagogue and the minyan gathered in his house. My grandfather Plager and later on my father went to his house for praying. Apart from the Bernchiks there were many children in other families. Almost all of them – the spouses, children and grandchildren – were taken to Sakiai in 1941 and shot during the first days of occupation. They were buried in a common grave along with three thousand other Jews.

I have vivid memories of our house. It was a rather spacious house with the kitchen in the center. There was a huge stove in the kitchen, where Mother baked bread and challot and cooked food. There were three more rooms on the ground floor. A Lithuanian lady lived in the smallest room. She helped Mother with house chores. Her duties were mostly connected with Sabbath, as nothing could be done on Saturday. She had a lot to do – stoke the stove, turn on the light, take care of the husbandry – two cows, chicken, ducks. We had a kitchen garden, where Mother and two more helpers were working. My mother taught me since childhood. I knew how to plant, weed and harvest. All crop surpluses – potatoes and vegetables – were sold by my mother, which was pretty handy for our family budget. We also planted fresh vegetables – onion and parsley. There was a lot of milk from the two cows we had, which was enough for the family needs and for sale. There was an ice-cream café in Luksiai and the owner of the café purchased milk from us, as it was the best and the cleanest in town.

My father also worked very hard. There was a small shop by the house, where he sold meat. There was a small abattoir in the yard, where the carcasses were cut. Father needed an assistant in that hard job and he hired a lonely Jew for that. His name was Girsh. He was from Varenna. Girsh was a butcher and a teacher for us [melamed], as he was an educated and religious man. He was kind of strange like most religious Jews. I remember, right after he appeared in our house, he decided to saddle a horse. Most likely, he had never ridden a horse before. We, the kids, were standing in the yard and trying to cheer him up. He managed to sit on the horse facing the tail and ride like that in the yard, making us burst into laughter. When Girsh appeared in the house, the Lithuanian lady left

our place, as Girsh couldn't live in one house with a non-kosher woman. She kept helping mother and came over on Sabbath as usual.

It was easier for Dad when Girsh appeared in the house. Girsh and Father slaughtered and cut the cattle and poultry in a kosher way. Jews from Lukšiai came to him to get kosher poultry at an affordable rate. Father didn't serve only Jews, as Jews were prohibited from eating the rear part of the cattle and the front part was to be without any sinews. Father sold Lithuanians the parts of meat which couldn't be eaten by Jews. Father also had regular customers who could buy things on credit. Father kept his books and had the records of all the debts. There was not a single case when some Lithuanian would let father down. When we grew up, we started helping Father by delivering meat to regular customers – in summer on bikes, in winter on toboggan. Father wasn't ashamed of any work – apart from maintaining a large family he also had to pay for the house. Father bought old horses, slaughtered them and sold their meat for sausage and the bristle for brushes.

Girsh was a good teacher. Jewish kids from the whole town came to him. There was a kind of cheder in our yard. Though, we had co-ed classes. Girsh was my first teacher and I often remember him with gratitude. It is his merit that I know Yiddish very well and have an idea about Ivrit, enough to know how to read prayers.

Our family wasn't rich, but we lived comfortably. The furniture was simple, but solid. The house was clean, cozy and warm. My parents were religious. Mother didn't go outside with her head uncovered, Father also wore a cap or a kippah. Father went to the minyan every Friday, before Sabbath. Mother got ready for it – baked challot, made gefilte fish, chicken broth with kneidlakh. The mandatory Sabbath dish was chulent: meat stewed with potatoes, onion and beans. Chulent was kept in a warm stove until Saturday. Father tried inviting some of the poor Jews on Sabbath, especially those who couldn't afford having Sabbath meals. On Pesach seder two or three poor people were sitting at our table.

I loved Jewish holidays, which were always celebrated in our house, as well as in other families. For Pesach, my favorite, we had to get ready beforehand, right after Purim, which was the forerunner of Pesach. Mother baked a lot for Purim – traditional triangular pies with poppy seeds – hamantashen –and all kinds of rolls and cookies. She also liked making imberlach – a desert made of carrot and ginger. On Purim we were supposed to take shelakhmones to all friends, pals and relatives. All of us had fun running from house to house with trays full of deserts and comparing whose was better.

There was a fuss right after Purim – Mother took the carpets and quilts outside for cleaning and drying. Floors were waxed, curtains were changed; furniture had dressy covers. All spoke of the anticipation of the holiday. Father brought matzah. I don't remember who baked it in our town. Sometimes, Father went to Sakiai to get matzah. We knew that there shouldn't be a single bread crumb by the beginning of the holiday. My parents were very frugal and they figured out how much bread should be purchased so that there wouldn't be any left before the Pesach holiday, as they respected bread. We, the children, were given presents. As a rule it was some necessary clothes or footwear. The chests with kosher Pesach dishes were taken from garrets before the holiday. The other dishes – pots and pans – were koshered in a large pot in our yard. Long before the holiday, Father made Pesach wine. It was made from raisins and honey in Lithuania.

There was a seder. Usually it was carried out by Girsh. I think my parents paid tribute to the religious man. Besides, he knew the customs and traditions best of all. Girsh was reclining at the head of the table. My father was next to him. Sometimes Mother's sister Basha and her children came to see us from Plegai. We, the kids, looked for the afikoman, knowing that it was under Girsh's or Father's cushion. Those who found it got the present. In the end all of us got a present, as Father didn't want to hurt any of us. The younger children, usually my brother Leiser, asked questions about the holiday. All of us waited with bated breath for the Prophet Elijah – Girsh opened the door and left the glass of wine for the Prophet.

I don't have bright impressions of other holidays. In summer, for Shavuot Mother cooked milk dishes – casseroles and pies with curds. Rosh Hashanah was also fun. There were a lot of tasty dishes and deserts for the New Year to be sweet. On Yom Kippur Girsh spun roosters over boys' heads and hens over girls' heads and read prayers. The cut bits of chicken were given to poor people.

Yom Kippur was followed by Sukkot. We ate in a sukkah – a tabernacle placed by Father by the kitchen window – for the whole period of the holiday. Mother served food straight from the kitchen, and the food was put on the table in the sukkah. Mother made a good festive dinner on Simchat Torah. On Chanukkah, the kids were looking forward to Chanukkah gelt and presents. Mother lit the channukiah and every day added another candle. The channukiah was placed on the table. The lights in Jewish houses made the town look even more beautiful. On Chanukkah we had potato fritters and potato tsimes.

When it was the time for me to study, I went to a Lithuanian lyceum. There was no other place in town, neither Jewish nor any other. Beside me, there were several more Jewish kids in our class. I was friends with both Lithuanian and Jewish kids. After school we went to the park or to the lake, which was most attractive in winter. There we skated and went tobogganing. My siblings and I had to study after school. Girsh kept teaching us religion. Daily after school we had to study Yiddish, both written and oral, as well as Jewish history. Sometimes we even cried, envying the Lithuanian kids, who had no extra load, but my father was adamant. His dream was for his kids to be true Jews.

I had a lot of other duties apart from my studies. I helped Mother with gardening and house chores. We took water from the water pump, which was about 100 meters away from the house. We took meat to Father's clients, worked in the kitchen garden and sold milk. In a word, I got used to working since early childhood. I wasn't a bad student at school, but I didn't get straight excellent grades. The teachers treated me fairly. We didn't feel any different attitude towards us. I had studied in that school for six years and then left for Sakiai to study at the lyceum.

I successfully passed the entrance exam and became a lyceum student. Every day I had to go to Sakiai, which was eight kilometers away from the place where we lived. At times Father took me in a cart. There were times when I had to walk there along with several other students. I also had Lithuanian friends in Sakiai. There were no Jewish girls in my class at the lyceum. By that time there were cinemas in Sakiai and Luksiai. We went dancing and watched movies. I was totally apolitical. Of course, I knew of Zionist organizations [3](#) and underground Komsomol [4](#), but I wouldn't join any of them. At that time the daughters of Mother's sister from Marijampole became members of Jewish Zionist organizations and left for Palestine to work in a kibbutz, but I didn't find that



interesting.

Our family wasn't used to discussing politics. Of course, we were aware of the things going on in Germany, of its intention to exterminate Jews, but we didn't speak about it at home. I took no interest in the Soviet Union. In general, our family was absolutely apolitical, mostly for the reason of working hard. My elder brothers, Meishe and Shmuel, having finished four classes of elementary school, didn't go on with their studies. By that time Girsh had left and Father needed help. Meishe and Shmuel went to the villages to purchase cattle and brought it to Luksiai for slaughtering and further sale. The younger children – Leiser and Bashe Feiga – were studying at school. We were very friendly, therefore I practically had no friends, as communication with my siblings was enough for me. I loved my younger sister Bashe Feiga and it seems to me that my love was almost maternal.

In June 1940 the Soviet Army [5](#) entered Lithuanian territory as Lithuania was annexed to the USSR [6](#). First, things remained unchanged. Though, there were empty shelves in the stores. Sausage, cheese and other things, which used to be abundant in capitalist Lithuania, became deficit; only two sorts of bread remain: wheat and rye, and there wasn't enough of it. We ate what we could grow, therefore those reforms practically had no influence on us. When Father's store was nationalized, he still was running it, but not as an owner, but as a manager. His position almost didn't change. There were no wealthy people in our town, but well-off people were turned out of their apartments and housed in smaller places. Those people, whose lodging and bread and butter were taken away, were expecting the changes even for worse. They knew that rich people were exiled to Siberia [7](#) and they were ready for that morally. Unfortunately, they didn't manage to exile anybody from Luksiai and my remaining compatriots had a much more horrible fate here: all of them were murdered by the Fascists.

When the Soviets came to power, our family wasn't affected by any changes. Our house was small. There were a lot of children, so nobody was housed in with us. At school, all the subjects were taught in Russian, which I absolutely didn't know. It was hard for me to study. Besides, I understood that I was supposed to help my parents. In fall 1940 I left lyceum and found a job. I was a sales assistant at a small store in Luksiai. There were only three people working in it – a Lithuanian man, the former owner of the store, a Lithuanian lady and I. I was proud of making money and sharing it with my family, making a considerable contribution to our family budget. Thus, 1940 was over and 1941 came.

My younger siblings, Leiser and Bashe Feiga, went to a Soviet school. In spring 1941 there was a tribulation. Bashe Feiga had a serious illness. First the doctors said it was influenza, but she felt no better. She cried from a splitting headache. My sister was taken to Sakiai, where the doctors said that it was too late to treat her. Then she was taken to Kaunas, where she underwent an operation, but it was too late. Bashe Feiga died of brain fever at the age of 13. I didn't see my sister dead as my parents had her buried at the Kaunas Jewish cemetery. They came back home grief stricken. I couldn't calm down for a long time. Even now I am remembering it with tears. It was in April 1941. Soon, there were events, which replaced the grief over my sister with new horrors: the war broke out.

In the night of 21st June 1941 we slept calmly. My brother Shmuel came home in the wee hours of the morning as he was at a dance club and then took a walk with his beloved. I woke up from the

knocks on the window. It was Shmuel knocking on the window and crying out that the war had started. Everybody woke up and then Father was joking that drunken Shmuel appeared to see the war in his dreams. He walked outside and came back with a serious look on his face: 'Kids, the war has begun. We have to run away immediately!' Fascist planes were circulating over the city and dropping bombs. My parents had no doubts regarding the escape, contrary to most of the Jews who were saying that Germans were cultured and would do them no wrong.

Father horsed two carts, tied our cows to the cart, Mother packed our things in bundles, even bed linen, and we left town. We were moving very slowly as the cows were lagging behind. There were a lot of fugitives on the road: going on bikes, carts, on foot. Many soldiers were wounded. We reached the town of Letichev, where Father's good friend was living. When he saw us he opened the gate and came out in his yard. We had not unloaded our things yet, when the bombing started. My parents decided to move on and we headed straight for Kaunas. We were panic-stricken when we reached Kaunas. People were running on the bridge across the Neman River and local Fascists – Lithuanians – were shooting at them from both ends. Father untied the cows and Mother cried saying good-bye to them. Father told us to hurry up. We moved towards Belarus, and through panic and constant bombing, we reached Minsk. We met my cousin on our way. It was one of the daughters of my mother's step-sister from Marijampole. She hauled a heavy bag. She didn't want to go with us, just put her heavy suitcase on the cart and left. We even took it with us when we came back from evacuation. Mother tried hard looking for her, but couldn't find her. She must have perished during the evacuation.

The trains heading for the East were at Minsk railway station. We left the cart with the horses and took the locomotive train which was packed with people. There were a lot of Jews from Lithuania, Poland and Belarus. Fortunately, my mother took food, rusks and some fats with her and we weren't starving. We traveled for two weeks and reached Cheboksary in the Urals [about 600 km from Moscow]. Many Jews got off the train here and we decided to do the same. We were given a warm welcome. At first, we were at the evacuation point, where we had a chance to take a shower. Then we were housed with local Russians. The six of us lived in one small room and were very happy for it. The hosts were very hospitable. They treated us to cabbage pies. In a couple of days my brothers went to work at a dairy farm. Father also found a job, only Mother and I stayed at home. While it was warm, my brothers slept in a hay stack. We weren't starving as my mother had some flour in stock. Besides, my brothers started getting rations. When it started getting cold in the fall, we realized that we wouldn't survive the cold Ural winter without warm things. One of Father's young friends, an intelligent Jew from Minsk, talked Father into leaving his job. In the fall of 1941 we took the train to Tashkent [today capital of Uzbekistan] – fugitives went there because of the warm climate, abundant fruit and vegetables.

We were sent to Bukhara from Tashkent, wherefrom we went to the small Kirmenekh station. The conditions there were terrible. The locals didn't have a better life than us. We slept on the floor. We were happy to have our own linen, which Mother took from home. Mother managed to take a lot of necessary things with us. We had threads and needles. Once some evacuees came to us: a man and a woman, who looked like intelligentsia. They had coats without buttons, which were in high demand. Mother took the buttons from her reserves and sewed them on their coats. Father and my brothers found a job. I also had a job as a cashier at a barbers' shop. I learnt how to do hair cuts and shaving. I worked there until 1943. Then I left for the factory, where we made ropes. We were



given food cards there [8](#), with the help of which we could get more bread.

Father was drafted into the labor army [9](#). He worked at a military plant in the Ural. In 1943 Shmuel was drafted into the army. He was sick for a while. He was to be hospitalized for a couple of weeks with dysentery. He lost a lot of weight and was pretty feeble, but he still went to the military enlistment office. He was drafted into the 16th Lithuanian division [10](#). Shortly after that, Shmuel was sent to the front, but Father was sent home. Meishe was no good for military service as he was of a very short height since childhood. All of us worked, but Mother. She took care of the household. Of course, we soon ran out of flour and food taken from home, but Mother knew how to use them economically. I cannot say that we had lavish food, but we didn't starve.

Mother was very good at knitting. After work, I also helped her with that. We had a lot of customers, who called us European girls. We knitted pretty hats, blouses, gloves, remembering the prewar patterns. Soviet ladies didn't see anything of the kind even before the war, so we were getting more and more clients. As a rule, we were paid with food products. The wife of the chairman of the regional consumers' council helped us the most. She brought delicacies, butter and sausage to us. In general, we got acclimatized in evacuation. My brother Shmuel wrote letters from the front. We were looking forward to every letter. Shmuel took part in the battles for the liberation of Lithuania. He was in Luksiai, saw our house and wrote in detail what he knew about perished Jews. We got his last letter in October 1944. He wrote about severe battles, about deaths of thousands of people. He said he was missing us a lot. Shmuel said that he wanted to live. It was his last letter. Mother cried and cried waiting for his letter and looking out for the mailman, who wouldn't stop by our house.

Leiser was also in the army. When Shmuel was drafted into the army, he constantly paid visits to the military enlistment office, asking to draft him as well. He was not in action anyway, by the time he was drafted, the war was over. Leiser was sent to Korea, then he served in Manchuria. He became a career officer. My brother never told me about his service in Manchuria. The four of us were living together – I, my parents and my eldest brother Meishe.

We celebrated the victory day [11](#) in Uzbekistan. People were laughing and crying at the same time. Every family had someone who perished during the war. We felt sad as well, as we understood that Shmuel was dead. We decided to come back to Lithuania. We had to receive the invitation letter and tickets. Only in November 1945 did we come back to our native town. We were given a very warm welcome. A Lithuanian family lived in our house. They left our house right away and then our neighbors started bringing in our furniture. The neighbors told us about things that happened during the occupation, about those Jews who were taken to Sakiai and shot. There were traitors among Lithuanians. One person, whom I knew, gave away Jews and took part in mass executions of Jews. People said that after the war he started seeing apparitions of those who perished because of him. He used to know them very well in peace times and even loved some of them. That man ran amok. When Luksiai was liberated, he was arrested and convicted. I don't know what happened to him.

I found a job right away. At that time literate workers, fluent in Russian, were in need. I was in charge of the army provision warehouse, where there were both groceries and primary goods. At that time there was a regulation for all peasants to submit vegetables, meat and other products to that warehouse and I was supposed to receive those goods from them and then distribute them to

the military units. We wrote letters to all kinds of authorities trying to find Shmuel, but in reply we got that there was no data about him. Once, a colonel came to my workplace. He was the representative of one of the military units. I asked him to assist us in our search. I invited him to come for dinner to our house. In two months, we got a response. My brother Shmuel Kacharinkas perished in the town of Lvovo in Latvia on 24th December 1944. It turned out that we sent the request in the name of Kocherinkas, and because of one wrong letter we couldn't find the information about the death of my brother. We went to Latvia and saw the farmstead where my brother perished. Then we went there every year on the day of Shmuel's death. There is a large common grave there, the burial place of 22 thousands Soviet soldiers, who perished during the liberation of Latvia.

We lived comfortably. I got a good ration at the warehouse. Father and Meishe also worked. They became translators from Russian into Lithuanian for the KGB [12](#) in Lukšiai. They didn't speak about their job at home. I think they fought with the Lithuanian resistance, who had been fighting with the Soviets for a long time. My brother is still afraid that some of his Lithuanian neighbors might find out about his service in the security agency. That is why he refused to be interviewed. I was respected at work and was promoted. In 1949 a new department store was built in Sakiai and I was appointed its director and given a plot of land for construction. My parents sold their house in Lukšiai and moved to Sakiai. Here we built the house, where I am still living.

I did well at work. I was called in to the municipal Communist Party committee and offered to join the Communist Party. I kept refusing. I wasn't afraid to lose my job. Even if I was fired, I would still find another job. The management decided not to put any pressure on me. Thus I remained in my job without entering the Party. In 1952 I was assigned to courses for sales agents in Kaunas. I studied there for half a year and then came back to Sakiai. At that time our store had motor bikes on offer. One of them was to stay in our stock to service the department store. I was a brave lady and thought that I could ride a bike myself. I fell off the bike, broke my arm and leg and was out of kilter for a long time. In a year I had to undergo an operation in Vilnius and was jobless for almost half a year.

In 1952 my brother Leiser came home on vacation. He stayed at home only for a month and then left for the Far East. Father and Meishe didn't enjoy their job for the state security department and both of them left the job as soon as they got the offer from a grocery store, which was run by a Jew from Odessa called Gorodetskiy. I can say that they left on time. In the early 1950s state anti-Semitic campaigns commenced [13](#), and they would be mostly likely dismissed from the security agency. However, in our town no Jews were fired or repressed, so we were not affected by it. Stalin's death in 1953 was taken with relief. Father and Meishe knew perfectly well how the KBG did away with people.

In that period of time I met my future husband. His name was Meishe Ushpits. He was born in Sakiai in 1914. Meishe's family was rich, but the life of the young man was not easy. Meishe's mother died young and he was raised by his step-mother and father. When he was an adolescent, he left for Klaipėda, where he worked at a plant. Then Meishe moved to Kaunas, where he saw the beginning of the war. Meishe and his sister Leya didn't manage to get evacuated and they became ghetto prisoners. Meishe's father perished in occupation in Sakiai. Leya and Meishe had to spend horrible years in the ghetto, but fortunately they survived.

When Kaunas was liberated by the Soviet troops, one of the former ghetto turnkeys informed against Meishe that he allegedly gave away the hideout of some children, and Meishe was arrested. He was sentenced to 15 years in the camps [14](#) and became a prisoner of a Stalin's camp in Vorkuta. Many ghetto prisoners protested against such a ruling of the court and told how Meishe helped them during the occupation, but his verdict remained unchanged. Meishe spent eleven years in the camps. He was a kind and outgoing person and even in a Stalin's camp he was treated very well. At first he worked in a mine, where the conditions were inhuman. Meishe managed to get into a course for driving electric trolleys. Right after that he drove coal and other cargoes. Meishe was released from the camp by amnesty after Stalin's death. In 1956 Meishe was fully rehabilitated [15](#).

Meishe's family had known my family and when we met he started insisting that we get married. On 18th February 1956 Meishe and I were wed under a chuppah. It was in Kaunas in the house of my husband's sister Geta Entele. The rabbi carried out a traditional Jewish wedding ceremony. I moved to Kaunas after our wedding. At first, my husband and I rented an apartment. When I found a good job, I was given an apartment. I worked as a forwarding agent at the regional consumer's council and constantly traveled from Kaunas to Sakiai, where I purchased products.

On 11th November 1956 I gave birth to a daughter. My husband asked me to name her Hanna Rochl after his mother. On 15th May 1961 I bore a son, whom we called after my perished brother Shmuel. We had a good life. We were not needy. I made pretty good money. My husband was also well paid despite being a common worker. We were one of the first people in Kaunas who bought a car for the whole family. My children were raised by their grandparents in their house in Sakiai. My husband and I went there every weekend. Only when it was time for them to go to school, I took Hanna and then Shmuel to the city. We went to the seaside in Palanga with our children. We also went to Vilnius. We didn't leave Lithuania.

We tried to observe Jewish traditions the best way we could. We went to the synagogue with our children on Sabbath and on holidays. Both of us were members of the Jewish religious community of Kaunas in the Soviet years, which was quite frowned upon, to put it mildly. The monument to the perished Jews in Sakiai was set up on the donations from the relatives of the perished. We went there every year on the day of execution. When our children grew up, we took them with us. We told them about things that took place during the war. I communicated with Lithuanians and with Jews. Both Lithuanians and Russians treated me very well at work. I felt no anti-Semitism. My children identified themselves as Jews. Yiddish was spoken at home. At the age of 13 we celebrated our son's bar mitzvah. Unfortunately, my mother didn't live to see that, but my father and brother were very happy to see it.

My mother was buried according to Jewish rites in 1968. We were carrying her body on the boards across the whole town. Father lived much longer. He died in 1984. I had become a widow by that time. My Meishe, whom I loved very much, died in 1975 at the age of 61, as a result of stress from the years in the ghetto and the camp. I worked for quite a while after my husband's death as I wasn't willing to stay at home. When my daughter Hanna got married, I left the apartment to her, quit my job and left for Sakiai to live in my parental house. When I retired, I started taking care of the husbandry.

I was never interested in politics. I think that in any country and under any regime there will be a good life if people work hard and in good faith. If someone is lazy, hoping that he would be given something for free, life would be bad anywhere. I love my town, my country, my neighbors and friends. I am comfortable in my house and I don't want to change it for anything.

Hanna got secondary medical education and became a nurse. She married a Jew from Kiev, called Shirman. In 1987 she bore a son and named him Mark after her husband. Her husband loved Hanna and she loved him, but her mother-in-law was constantly interfering in their life when she lived with them. She constantly insisted on immigration to the USA. They got the letter of invitation and processed all the documents in Moscow. Hanna wasn't willing to go and asked for separate documents for her and her son. First, my son-in-law and his mother left for the USA and then they started talking Hanna into that. My daughter and my grandson also left there. They lived a couple of years together and then divorced. Nevertheless, Hanna doesn't regret leaving for the USA. She finished masseuse courses and works as a nurse in a nursing home. She lives comfortably. Hanna lives with a man. She often comes to see me. Earlier, she used to send her son to Lithuania very summer. He is a student now and doesn't come that often. He is very attached to me.

My son Shmuel finished eleven grades and entered the evening department of the Kaunas Machine Building Institute. He was drafted into the army after he had finished the first year. He served in the Far East. He sent good letters home and I had no idea that he had problems in the army. At first, it was physically hard for him, then he was called by the special department and asked questions about his communications with foreign countries [16](#). I wrote letters to my aunts in the States, and it was not an issue for me, but for some reason my son had to worry about it. When he was dismissed from the army, he came back to Kaunas and was employed at a silk production factory. Shmuel turned out to be very talented and knew how to make money. He has his own business. He and his partner own a large wholesale grocery warehouse.

Shmuel is married to a Lithuanian called Inga. She is a lovely woman: she treats me with respect and loves my son. Inga learned how to cook Jewish dishes. She knows about Jewish holidays and makes all the necessary arrangements before them. She takes me to the synagogue on holidays. According to the tradition, on the eve of Rosh Hashanah Jews are supposed to wash off their sins, so Inga takes me to the Neman River or to our lake. Inga cooks all Pesach dishes and buys matzah. She is like a daughter to me. Inga and Shmuel have two children: Sima who finished the 12th grade this year [2005] and entered a university and the 15-year-old Elvis. Both of them often come to see me in Sakiai.

I am living by myself in our large house in Sakiai. Fortunately, my brother Meishe is also living in Sakiai. He was married twice. Both of his wives were Lithuanians. He has four daughters – Riva, Edita, Miropa and Daiva. The elder ones are living in Marijampole and the younger one – in Kaunas. Meishe visits me every day at lunch time. We have enough topics to discuss: remembering our kin, children, grandchildren. Before Jewish holidays my brother and I go to the market to buy things necessary for the holiday, the way it was done by our mother. I still keep kosher Pesach dishes in the garret. We buy matzah at the synagogue and light candles at home. No matter how busy they are, our children and grandchildren come to see us on holidays, we carry out seder, read prayers and try to tell them more about our traditions and treat them to even more delicious food.

After demobilization our brother Leiser came back to Sakiai in 1961. First, he lived in our house, then he was given an apartment. Leiser turned out to feel unwell after the army. In his last six years he kept to bed. He also became blind. Leiser died in 1993. His wife is also dead. His son Alis is living in Kaunas. He is friends with my Shmuel.

I don't feel lonely. Luckily, I am energetic. I enjoy planting flowers, vegetables and fruits. I get a good pension. I have a plot of land which was returned to me in accordance with the law on restitution. I lease it and get paid well for that. The land was the property of my husband's parents. I get along perfectly with my Lithuanian neighbors. They know that I don't do anything on Saturday. I even don't buy anything on that day as on Sabbath we are not supposed to touch money. On Friday, I light candles and pray. I celebrate all Jewish holidays and respect the Catholic holidays of my neighbors.

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 Kaunas ghetto**

On 24th June 1941 the Germans captured Kaunas. Two ghettos were established in the city, a small and a big one, and 48,000 Jews were taken there. Within two and a half months the small ghetto was eliminated and during the 'Grossaktion' of 28th-29th October, thousands of the survivors were murdered, including children. The remaining 17,412 people in the big ghetto were mobilized to work. On 27th-28th March 1944 another 18,000 were killed and 4,000 were taken to different camps in July before the Soviet Army captured the city. The total number of people who perished in the Kaunas ghetto was 35,000.

### **3 Revisionist Zionism**

The movement founded in 1925 and led by Vladimir Jabotinsky advocated the revision of the principles of Political Zionism developed by Theodor Herzl, the father of Zionism. The main goals of the Revisionists was to put pressure on Great Britain for a Jewish statehood on both banks of the Jordan River, a Jewish majority in Palestine, the reestablishment of the Jewish regiments, and military training for the youth. The Revisionist Zionists formed the core of what became the Herut (Freedom) Party after the Israeli independence. This party subsequently became the central component of the Likud Party, the largest right-wing Israeli party since the 1970s.

### **4 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.

## **5 Soviet Army**

The armed forces of the Soviet Union, originally called Red Army and renamed Soviet Army in February 1946. After the Bolsheviks came to power, in November 1917, they commenced to organize the squads of worker's army, called Red Guards, where workers and peasants were recruited on voluntary bases. The commanders were either selected from among the former tsarist officers and soldiers or appointed directly by the Military and Revolutionary Committee of the Communist Party. In early 1918 the Bolshevik government issued a decree on the establishment of the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army and mandatory drafting was introduced for men between 18 and 40. In 1918 the total number of draftees was 100 thousand officers and 1.2 million soldiers. Military schools and academies training the officers were restored. In 1925 the law on compulsory military service was adopted and annual drafting was established. The term of service was established as follows: for the Red Guards- 2 years, for junior officers of aviation and fleet- 3 years, for medium and senior officers- 25 years. People of exploiter classes (former noblemen, merchants, officers of the tsarist army, priest, factory owner, etc. and their children) as well as kulaks (rich peasants) and Cossacks were not drafted in the army. The law as of 1939 cancelled restriction on drafting of men belonging to certain classes, students were not drafted but went through military training in their educational institutions. On the 22nd June 1941 Great Patriotic War was unleashed and the drafting in the army became exclusively compulsory. First, in June-July 1941 general and complete mobilization of men was carried out as well as partial mobilization of women. Then annual drafting of men, who turned 18, was commenced. When WWII was over, the Red Army amounted to over 11 million people and the demobilization process commenced. By the beginning of 1948 the Soviet Army had been downsized to 2 million 874 thousand people. The youth of drafting age were sent to the restoration works in mines, heavy industrial enterprises, and construction sites. In 1949 a new law on general military duty was adopted, according to which service term in ground troops and aviation was 3 years and in navy- 4 years. Young people with secondary education, both civilian and military, with the age range of 17-23 were admitted in military schools for officers. In 1968 the term of the army service was contracted to 2 years in ground troops and in the navy to 3 years. That system of army recruitment has remained without considerable changes until the breakup of the Soviet Army (1991-93).

## **6 Occupation of the Baltic Republics (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania)**

Although the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact regarded only Latvia and Estonia as parts of the Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, according to a supplementary protocol (signed in 28th September 1939) most of Lithuania was also transferred under the Soviets. The three states were forced to sign the 'Pact of Defense and Mutual Assistance' with the USSR allowing it to station troops in their territories. In June 1940 Moscow issued an ultimatum demanding the change of governments and the occupation of the Baltic Republics. The three states were incorporated into the Soviet Union as the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republics.



## **7 Deportations from the Baltics (1940-1953)**

After the Soviet Union occupied the three Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) in June 1940 as a part of establishing the Soviet system, mass deportation of the local population began. The victims of these were mainly but not exclusively those unwanted by the regime: the local bourgeoisie and the previously politically active strata. Deportations to remote parts of the Soviet Union continued up until the death of Stalin. The first major wave of deportation took place between 11th and 14th June 1941, when 36,000, mostly politically active people were deported. Deportations were reintroduced after the Soviet Army recaptured the three countries from Nazi Germany in 1944. Partisan fights against the Soviet occupiers were going on all up to 1956, when the last squad was eliminated. Between June 1948 and January 1950, 52,541 people from Latvia, 118,599 from Lithuania and 32,450 people from Estonia were deported in accordance with a Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the USSR under the pretext of 'grossly dodging from labor activity in the agricultural field and leading anti-social and parasitic mode of life'. The total number of deportees from the three republics amounted to 203,590. Among them were entire Lithuanian families of different social strata (peasants, workers, intelligentsia), everybody who was able to reject or deemed capable to reject the regime. Most of the exiled died in the foreign land. Besides, about 100,000 people were killed in action and in fusillade for being members of partisan squads and some other 100,000 were sentenced to 25 years in camps.

## **8 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.

## **9 Labor army**

it was made up of men of call-up age not trusted to carry firearms by the Soviet authorities. Such people were those living on the territories annexed by the USSR in 1940 (Eastern Poland, the Baltic States, parts of Karelia, Bessarabia and northern Bukovina) as well as ethnic Germans living in the Soviet Union proper. The labor army was employed for carrying out tough work, in the woods or in mines. During the first winter of the war, 30 percent of those drafted into the labor army died of starvation and hard work. The number of people in the labor army decreased sharply when the larger part of its contingent was transferred to the national Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian Corps, created at the beginning of 1942. The remaining labor detachments were maintained up until the end of the war.

## **10 16th Lithuanian division**

It was formed according to a Soviet resolution on 18th December 1941 and consisted of residents of the annexed former Lithuanian Republic. The Lithuanian division consisted of 10.000 people (34,2 percent of whom were Jewish), it was well equipped and was completed by 7th July 1942. In 1943 it took part in the Kursk battle, fought in Belarus and was a part of the Kalinin front. All together it liberated over 600 towns and villages and took 12.000 German soldiers as captives. In summer 1944 it took part in the liberation of Vilnius joining the 3rd Belarussian Front, fought in the Kurland and exterminated the besieged German troops in Memel (Klaipeda). After the victory its headquarters were relocated in Vilnius, in 1945-46 most veterans were demobilized but some officers stayed in the Soviet Army.

## **11 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.

## **12 KGB**

The KGB or Committee for State Security was the main Soviet external security and intelligence agency, as well as the main secret police agency from 1954 to 1991.

## **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 Gulag**

The Soviet system of forced labor camps in the remote regions of Siberia and the Far North, which was first established in 1919. However, it was not until the early 1930s that there was a significant number of inmates in the camps. By 1934 the Gulag, or the Main Directorate for Corrective Labor Camps, then under the Cheka's successor organization the NKVD, had several million inmates. The prisoners included murderers, thieves, and other common criminals, along with political and religious dissenters. The Gulag camps made significant contributions to the Soviet economy during the rule of Stalin. Conditions in the camps were extremely harsh. After Stalin died in 1953, the population of the camps was reduced significantly, and conditions for the inmates improved somewhat.

## **15 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.

## **16 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.