

# Vladimir Khalfin

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Chernovtsy

Ukraine

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*Vladimir Khalfin and his wife Silva live in an old house in the central street of Chernovtsy. Their apartment is kept clean. They have furniture bought in the 1970s: polished cupboard and bookcase, table and chairs covered with starched napkins, an old sofa and snow white curtains on the windows. Vladimir is a stout man. He has a limp, but he walks fast. His wife has been confined to bed for many years, she is in pain. Vladimir does the housekeeping and takes care of his wife. Until recently he was a volunteer in Hesed and visited elderly people every day bringing them food and reading newspaper, but he cannot leave alone his wife for long. Their only daughter lives in Kerch in the Crimea.*



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### **Family Background**

My parents' families lived in the town of Luchinets, Kopaygorod district of Vinnitsa region, 250 km from Kiev. At least, few generations of my ancestors lived in Luchenets.

There were about 150 families in the town and over 50 were Jewish families. There was also a Ukrainian and Russian population in Luchenets. They were all good neighbors and helped each other. Ukrainian neighbors of Jewish families knew Yiddish and Jews spoke also Yiddish, Russian and Ukrainian. There were no national conflicts, Luchenets was a distant town and gangs [1](#) did not usually get there. There was a wooden synagogue in the town. Women prayed in a separate room with a little window for them to hear the rabbi's sermon. Jews from surrounding village also came to this synagogue on Jewish holidays. There was a cheder in the synagogue before the revolution of 1917 [2](#). Jews bought chickens and geese to have them slaughtered by a shochet. There was a market in Luchenets on Mondays and Fridays. Local farmers sold their fruit, vegetables, dairy products and poultry. There were no scales at the market. Products were measured by containers: bowls or buckets. On other days of the week there was a big market in Kopaygorod in about 15 km

from Luchenets. Farmers from the outskirts of the town supplied all food products. Jews were mainly craftsmen and tradesmen. Jewish families resided in the central part of the town. Land was more expensive there and they couldn't afford to have big gardens or orchards. Jewish families lived in small wooden houses with thatched roofs and richer families had tiled roofs.

My grandfather on my father's side Aron Khalfin was born in 1862. My grandfather was a shochet in Luchenets. He inherited this job from his father after his father died. Grandfather Aron died in 1920 – long before I was born. We didn't have any of his photos. I remember my grandmother Hayka. She was born in 1867. She married Aron when she was very young. My grandmother was a housewife. It was customary in Jewish families that women kept the house and raised children. My grandmother was a short fat woman with a kind smile. She had pink complexion. She didn't wear a wig. She wore a dark woolen shawl in winter and a white cotton kerchief in summer. This was common casual clothing worn by women in villages.

Of all grandmother's relatives I only knew her sister Rieva who was widowed when she was still young and raised two children. Rieva lived in Luchenets. My grandmother's two older brothers lived rather far in Vinnitsa region. I don't have any information about them.

The paternal grandparents had four children: Yankel, the oldest, was born in 1895. Then came Haim, born in 1897. The third was Moshe, born in 1898. My father Ruvin was the youngest of brothers. He was born in 1900. All children got Jewish education. They studied in cheder. Grandfather trained the two older sons to be shochets. Since there was only one shochet needed in the town Haim studied a tailor's profession. Moshe became an apprentice of a shoemaker. My father Ruvin became a locksmith.

My grandfather's family was religious. Every day, my grandfather went to pray to the only synagogue in the neighborhood. Grandmother joined him on Jewish holidays and Sabbath. My grandparents observed all Jewish traditions. Grandmother followed the kashrut strictly. She had specific dishes and utensils for dairy and meat products. She even washed her kitchenware with separate cloth. There was no bakery in Luchenets and my grandmother baked bread for a week and made hala bread for Sabbath. The only place to buy matzah for Pesach was in Kopaygorod, in about 30 km from Luchenets. My grandmother and other Jewish women got together in my grandmother's kitchen to make matzah for all families. It took them quite a while since Jewish families were traditionally big and they needed a lot of matzah. Each family needed at least 16 kg matzah since it wasn't allowed to eat bread or have any at home at Pesach. Grandmother had boards for rolling out dough, rolling pins and bowls for making dough. There was also a special wheel for making holes in matzah. Women worked in a team: one group sieved flour, another group mixed it with water in strict proportion, some kneaded dough and others rolled out dough. This process had to be very prompt since dough couldn't be exposed to air for long. All families had big white linen bags used specifically for matzah. Grandfather conducted Seder at Pesach. My father posed traditional questions, but he didn't tell me any details about the Seder night. All sons had bar mitzvah ritual when they turned 13.

After the revolution of 1917 collectivization [3](#) began in Luchinets. A Jewish collective farm was formed that included Jewish families from surrounding villages. The management was in Luchinets. Farmers were not enthusiastic about joining the collective farm since they had to give their cattle and all tools to common use. Those that hesitated to join the collective farm were having problems

they didn't get a horse to plough their field or a cart to go to Kopaygorod or Vinnitsa. Collective farmers received coupons to do shopping in the store and all goods were sold only to collective farmers. Those that did not join the collective farm couldn't even buy a candle. My father and his brothers joined the collective farm. My father worked as a locksmith, Yankel made heavy coats in the collective farm shop and Moshe was a shoemaker. They were all married to Jewish women. Yankel had two children and so did Haim. Moshe had three children. The brothers were close, but didn't see each other often. They were busy at work and at home. The synagogue in Luchinets functioned, but the cheder was closed. Instead, a Jewish 5-gread school was opened where all subjects were taught in Yiddish.

After my grandfather died in 1920 Yankel became a shochet. His job in the collective farm was to slaughter at the market and he received his wages.

My grandfather on my mother's side Haim Bergheener was born in the 1860s. He was short, thin and wore a beard. He wore a yarmulka or a big black cap. He had several brothers and sisters, but they were all gone before I was born. Some died, some moved to other locations or emigrated to Argentina or Palestine. My grandmother on my mother's side Leya (I don't know her maiden name) was born in 1860s. She was of average height and had a very straight posture. She had wavy hair that she wore in a knot. She wore casual clothes like any other woman in the town. I remember that grandmother was duck-legged.

As far as I can remember the maternal grandparents had four children. I remember Hana, the older sister, born around 1893, Aron, born in 1895, and Gedalie, born in 1898. My mother Golda was born in 1902. I might have forgotten other children, if any. The boys studied at cheder. My mother and her sisters were taught at home. A melamed from cheder taught them Hebrew, Torah and Talmud. My mother could read and write in Yiddish and Hebrew. She had a book of prayers in Hebrew that she received from her father at bat mitzvah - 12 years old. The sons of the family had bar mitzvah conducted at the age of 13.

They spoke Yiddish in the family and Ukrainian to their neighbors. They were a religious family. On Saturdays and Jewish holidays grandparents went to synagogue. When children grew older they also attended the synagogue. They all had special fancy clothing that they wore when they went to the synagogue. My grandmother wore a black shawl to the synagogue and the girls didn't need a headpiece. This is all my mother told me.

They observed Sabbath. There was a big kitchen with a stove of two ovens in the corner, one stove for baking bread and the other for Sabbath meal where pots with cholent were kept overnight. Grandmother made food for two days on Friday. On Friday evening grandmother lit candles and said a prayer over them blessing her family. After saying a prayer the family sat down to dinner. Grandmother always made gefilte fish and hala bread for Sabbath. No work was allowed to do on Saturday, not even heating meals or turning on a kerosene lamp. Grandmother left food in pots in the oven and it stayed warm until Saturday. On Sabbath evening their Ukrainian neighbor came to light a kerosene lamp and stoke the stove in winter. They couldn't even boil a kettle and children ran to their neighbors with a kettle to get some boiling water for tea.

The family observed all Jewish holidays. Grandparents and their children fasted at Rosh Hashanah (children fasted from the age of 6-7) and Yom Kippur. [Editor's note: fasting at Rosh Hashanah probably derives from some regional religious influence since it isn't required by traditions.] My

mother told me that when she was a child she took part in performances at Purim. Children dressed as Purim characters performed in Jewish houses and received small treatments or money for their performances. These performances were short in order to show them in as many houses as possible to get more money.

My grandfather owned a big store before the revolution. He sold food, groceries, clothing and shoes and haberdashery. Grandfather inherited this store from his father. Grandfather provided well for the family. His children started working at the store when they reached the age of 7-8. Only members of the family worked at the store. There were no other employees. After the revolution the Soviet authorities nationalized the store, but my grandfather's family kept a part of the house where they lived. They had 3 rooms, one room was my grandparents', another was their sons' and one other room was for the girls. After losing his store grandfather had to do something else to make a living. He learned to make winter coats and his sons assisted him in this business. Farmers kept sheep and my grandfather purchased sheepskin from them. Grandfather and his sons made good coats and had many clients. They got money or food products for their work.

My mother's brothers got married and lived in Luchinets. Aron had three children and Gedalie had a son and one daughter. My mother and her sisters became apprentices of a dressmaker. My mother learned to make plain clothes for village women. Hanna and mother worked for the dressmaker until they got married. Hanna married a Jewish man from Shargorod, but I don't remember anything about him. She moved to her husband's house, and she was a housewife. They had three children.

My mother never told me how she met my father. They probably got married through matchmakers since it was a common way of getting married for Jewish families at that time. My parents got married in 1925. They had a religious wedding since they both came from religious family. The young couple married standing under the chuppah and the rabbi registered their marriage in his books.

The collective farm gave my father a small wooden house with tiled roof. There were two rooms and a kitchen in the house. There was also a backyard with a shed and a toilet in the yard. There were few fruit trees in front of the house that my parents planted after their wedding: two apple trees, one pear tree and a plum tree. My mother was a housewife.

## **Growing Up**

In 1927 my older sister Clara was born. On 5th April 1928 I was born. I got a Jewish name of Velvl at birth. Later I was called Vladimir, but I have the name of Velvl written in my birth certificate. My younger brother Itzyk was born in 1934. My brother and I were circumcised as required by Jewish tradition.

1932-33 was a period of famine in Ukraine [4](#). Many people starved to death at that time – whole villages got deserted. The Soviet authorities forced farmers to give them all agricultural products and grain. I have dim memories of this period. All I remember was that my sister and I woke up at night crying and asking for food. I remember mother dividing a slice of bread between the two of us. She ate breadcrumbs from the table. Mother had a bag of black flour on the attic that saved us from death. She added it into boiling water and we ate this sticky mixture. (Later we ate the same food in the ghetto during the war.) My paternal grandmother Haya, starved to death in 1933. Her

sons were trying to help her as much as they could, but grandmother didn't eat anything so that more meal remaine for the children, so she was fading away. She died in her sleep and was buried near grandfather Aron at the Jewish cemetery in Luchinets.

I don't remember my father. He drowned in a lake in 1933. I was only 5 and all I remember is that my father went fishing and never came back. My mother was pregnant with Itzyk who was born after our father died. My father wanted his son to be named Itzyk after his distant relative and mother named him Itzyk. My mother was alone with three children and the chairman of the collective farm suggested that she sent my sister and me to a children's house to be able to raise our baby brother, but my mother refused saying that Jews never gave up their children however hard life might treat them. My mother didn't have any savings. Her brothers and sisters and in-laws provided some assistance, but they didn't have much and mother went to do field work in the collective farm. After work she came home and did some sewing. She got orders from village women. I woke up at night from the sound of my mother's sewing machine. Grandmother Leya came to look after the children during a day. Now I understand how difficult it was for my mother, but she never complained. I cannot even imagine at what cost our mother supported us.

Grandmother Leya taught me and my sister some Yiddish. She also told us stories about the history of Jewish people and Jewish holidays. I remember the story of David winning a battle with Goliath, the story of Purim and how Mordecai saved Jewish people. We spoke Yiddish in the family. When my sister turned 8 she went to the Jewish school. I went to the same school in 1936. We studied all subjects in Yiddish. We had classes in Jewish history and general subjects. There were not many children in the Jewish school since many Jewish families preferred to send their children to Ukrainian school. There was a 5-year Jewish school and after finishing it children had to continue studies in a Ukrainian school. We also had to continue education in the Ukrainian lower secondary school. Besides, all higher educational institutions were Ukrainian or Russian and it was easier for Jewish children to have knowledge of these languages if they studied in Ukrainian or Russian schools. I was successful with all subjects, but I was particularly fond of mathematics. I became a pioneer at the Jewish primary school. There wasn't much of a ceremony. We were lined up and said a pioneer oath. Then red neckties were tied. My life didn't change after I became a pioneer.

My classmates were children of our neighbors and acquaintances. I had many friends. After classes, we played football with a ball that we made from rags and other games. We didn't have any books at home. I borrowed books in Ukrainian and Yiddish from the school library. The Ukrainian books were about pioneers that were helping old people and struggled against enemies of the Soviet power. I remember reading a book of children's poems by Ovsey Dreeze, a Jewish poet that wrote in Yiddish. When I grew up I read his lyrical poems.

At that time the Soviet authorities began struggle against religion [5](#). We learned at school that religion was vestige of the past and that religion helped capitalists to suppress working people. This was how it was described in our history textbooks and how our teachers and pioneer tutors taught us. We were told to educate our underdeveloped parents explaining to them that it was stupid to believe in God living in the country building communism. I once tried to tell my mother, but she firmly stated that Jews had carried their religion through centuries and that it was going to survive regardless of the Soviet persecutions. I didn't quite understand the depth of this statement at that time, but I always remembered these words of my mother's.



My mother kept on observing Jewish traditions. Since she had to work on Saturday she couldn't observe Sabbath, but she observed the Jewish holidays. On holidays our mother dressed up and went to the synagogue. The synagogue was closed in 1938 or 1939. We, children, didn't go with her since we believed there was no God and became atheists, but we enjoyed observing the Jewish holidays at home. Mother made matzah and traditional food at Pesach. We were poor, but mother always saved for a festive dinner at Pesach gefilte fish, chicken broth with matzah dumplings and boiled chicken. Mother baked strudels with jam, nuts and raisins and cookies in the shape of hexagonal stars. We liked matzah pudding with eggs. On the first day of Pesach we visited mother's parents. My mother's brothers and sisters and their families also came there. Our grandmother wanted her family to get together in their parents' home on high holidays. Grandfather conducted the Seder. I remember children waiting intently for Elijah the Prophet to come into the house. My mother explained to us that we couldn't see him since he was a spirit, but every time I hoped to see wine in his glass stirring up when he touched it.

Mother fasted at Yom Kippur. My sister and I also fasted from the age of 5. Only little Itzyk didn't have to fast. At Purim mother made hamantashen – triangle pies stuffed with poppy seeds and raisins. At Chanukkah mother always had her bronze chanukkiyah, her wedding gift, polished until it shined. On the first day of Chanukah mother lit two candles and every following day she lit one more candle. We got money from our relatives at Chanukkah. We bought sunflower seeds and lollypops with this money. At Sukkot we went to our neighbors that made a sukkah in their yard. We had meals there.

In June 1941 I finished Jewish school (5 years) and took my documents to the 6th form in Ukrainian school. I was looking forward to my summer vacations. In the morning of 22 June 1941 [6](#) we woke up from the roar of explosions. In some time our neighbor came to tell us that it was the bombing of Mogilyov-Podolskiy in 30 km from our town. I remember that it didn't raise any concern in us. We had no information about the war in Europe. We didn't have a radio and mother didn't buy newspapers. We were sure that our army would defeat enemy before we know. At 12 o'clock Molotov's [7](#) speech was broadcast on the radio in the central square of the town. He announced the treacherous attack of Germany and declared that the Soviet army would beat the enemy soon.

## **During the War**

Soviet troops were retreating past Luchinets. It was hot and soldiers came into the town to ask for water. Nobody was going to evacuate from the village since we didn't know anything about brutality of fascists and were not afraid of Germans. In less than one month Germans came to the village. On the next day they shot over 100 Jewish men in the outskirts of the town. My father's three brothers were among them. The central area of Luchinets where Jews resided was fenced with barbed wire. There were German posts along the fence. We were told that the area fenced with barbed wire was a Jewish ghetto and that we were not allowed to leave it. This happened in the first half of July 1941. We stayed in our house. Germans took groups of Jewish men to shoot in the vicinity of the village every day. They were forced to dig a long trench and then they were made to stand on its edge before they were shot. Some of them didn't die at once and were buried still alive. One of them managed to crawl out of the trench and get back to the ghetto. He was hid in a basement for a long time until his wounds healed.

Groups of exhausted and dirty Jews began to be taken to Luchinets. One could tell they had made a long trip. Many of them stayed overnight to continue on their way. Germans left Luchinets leaving Romanians and local police to guard the ghetto. After Germans left the ghetto the shootings stopped, but Romanians didn't provide inmates with any food or medications and people starved to death or died from diseases. There were doctors and nurses among inmates of the ghetto, but they didn't have any medications to give treatment. There was no place to get medications in the ghetto and inmates were not allowed to leave the territory of the ghetto even to buy drugs in the village. Romanians told us that all villages in Vinnitsa region were turned into Jewish ghettos. They also said that the opposite bank of the Dnestr River where Jews lived was also turned into a ghetto called Transnistria [8](#). There were Jews from Moldavia and Bessarabia taken to Luchinets. They were accommodated in local houses. We all lived in one room in our house and another room was occupied by a family from Bessarabia: a husband and wife and 12 children. They walked all the way from Ataki and the mother of the family carried a baby. There were groups of Jews walking through Luchinets. We didn't know what to expect. Jewish men were taken to do road construction and repair work. They worked from 8 am till dark. They left the ghetto at 7 am and returned with convoy at 7 pm. The only food they had was what they could find in the fields around. Women worked inside the ghetto doing cleaning and work in the canteen. My mother also went to work.

In autumn 1942 Romanians became more loyal allowing inmates to leave the ghetto. They understood that we couldn't escape anyway. My sister and I crawled under the barbed fencing to get some wood outside the ghetto to stoke the stove. We had a knife to cut branches. We had to get back before dawn. We dragged a bundle of brushwood home since we were too exhausted to carry it. My mother went out to work in the village sewing or helping village women to do housework. She got potatoes, flour or even a loaf of bread for her work. Mother boiled flour with water and we ate it in this way. The father of the family who was our tenant in our house was a strong man. He also went to do field work for villagers. He received a bucket of potatoes for three days of work. When he brought it home they ate all potatoes in half an hour. They starved even though we tried to support them.

Mother celebrated Jewish holidays even during the war. She prayed before each holiday. Of course, we didn't have any special food, but mother didn't eat bread at Pesach. She fasted at Yom Kippur. Older Jewish men got together for a minian at Sabbath and Jewish holidays. Women didn't attend those gatherings.

In winter of 1942 mother's parents Haim and Leya starved to death. Until March 1944 the population of the ghetto reduced dramatically. Inmates of the ghetto died of typhoid, exhaustion and hard work. There were anti sanitary conditions in the ghetto. Dirt and lice were a common problem. It's hard to say how many inmates of the ghetto survived, but I know there weren't many survivors. Fortunately, my mother, my brother and sister and I survived.

We had the roar of the front near Mogilyov-Podolskiy. We didn't have a radio or newspapers to know the situation. On 28 March 1944 Soviet troops came to Luchinets. Romanians left the village two days before, but no Jews left the ghetto since we were afraid to go anywhere. How happy we were when the Soviet troops came to the village! We kissed the armor of Soviet tanks and hugged soldiers. They gave us sugar and dried bread. Inmates of the ghetto who came from other places left for their hometowns and villages. We had nothing to live on and Ukrainian neighbors supported us at the beginning giving us food and clothes. We heard news about our relatives. My mother's

brothers perished. When the war began they were working in another village. They never returned home from that village and we believed they were captured by Germans. Mother's sister Hanna and her children perished in the ghetto in Shargorod. Her husband was shot there, too.

The synagogue and school were in the same territory where the ghetto was. They were closed during the war. After Luchinets was liberated the synagogue and the Jewish school were not opened. One of the Jewish men arranged a house of prayer for men to pray on Saturdays and Jewish holidays.

### **After the War**

My mother didn't want to stay in Luchinets. She decided it would be easier to find a job in a town. In summer 1944 we left for Mogilyov-Podolskiy. We sold our house in Luchinets just for peanuts. I had to support my family and became an apprentice for a shoemaker in Mogilyov-Podolskiy. My sister went to the 8th form and finished there the secondary lower school. My brother went to the 1st form of a Ukrainian school. Mother went to work in a shop that made working clothing: robes and gloves. We rented a room from a local woman.

Mother heard that there were many vacant apartments in Chernovtsy and we moved to the town in 1946. However, so many other Jews came to town before us that we couldn't find a vacant apartment and we rented a room in a one-storied building in an old Jewish neighborhood. Our landlady, an old Jew, also was in the ghetto that was actually in the neighborhood during the war. There was no running water in the house, but there was a stove. This was the first time we were in a big town and we liked it. We liked the big old buildings with stucco moldings on the facades, big stores and wide streets. Almost 70% of the population was Jewish and one could hear people speaking Yiddish in the streets. We met new Jewish friends. There was a synagogue, a Jewish school and a Jewish theater in the town. My mother was very happy to live in a town with the majority of Jewish population. She was glad to speak Yiddish and go to the synagogue on Sabbath. We couldn't afford to go to the Jewish theater. Only once our mother gave us tickets to the performance of 'Tevye, the milkman' by Sholem Alechem. It was in Yiddish. The acting was beautiful, there was a storm of applause. This was the only time I went to the Jewish theater and I remembered it for the rest of my life. We celebrated Jewish holidays at home. Before 1948 the synagogue sold matzah. Later we had to get it secretly. We were very poor and mother couldn't afford to buy all necessary food for holidays, but she tried to make something special anyway. We didn't celebrate Sabbath since Saturday was a working day and on Friday evening my mother came home too late to conduct the ceremony of lighting candles.

I became an apprentice of a worker at the shoe factory and then worked sometime at the mechanic plant. 1947-48 were hard years. Food sold at the market was far too expensive. After working I studied at the lower secondary evening school to get secondary education. After finishing this school I studied to make shoes. I couldn't afford to continue education. I worked at a shoemaker shop for over 50 years. There were 10 other Jewish employees. I never faced any anti-Semitism at work. I was a skilled employee and my clients treated me with respect.

My sister Clara went to work at the same shop where our mother was working in Chernovtsy. She also studied at the accounting school in the evenings. In 1948 she married a Jewish man Aron, but I don't remember his last name. He moved to Chernovtsy after the war. He was an accountant at a plant. He came to Chernovtsy in 1944 and managed to find an apartment. My sister moved in with



her husband. My mother and brother moved with her. After finishing the accounting school my sister went to work at the accounting office of the mechanic plant.

My mother didn't receive any pension. All pre-war archives were lost and she didn't have any document to prove that she had worked before the war. This was the way the Soviet law worked: they only paid pension to those who worked for the Soviet power. We helped and supported our mother in her old age. She died in 1992 at the age of 90. She was a nice and decent woman. We buried her in accordance with Jewish tradition at the Jewish corner of the town cemetery in Chernovtsy.

I wasn't a Komsomol member or a communist. It wasn't mandatory in the evening school where I studied to join the Komsomol and I didn't feel like becoming a member of either Komsomol or the Communist Party. In March 1953 when Stalin died many people grieved after him. For me his death wasn't something that made me sad. Of course, I was worried about the uncertain future. After XX Congress of the Communist Party [9](#) I believed that life might turn to better if they took the risk of denunciation the cult of Stalin, but I was wrong again. Since then I never took any interest in politics. Somehow I didn't quite like the institution of this state since it only created problems for people. I didn't even try to find a better job or to get promotion since I didn't believe anything. I didn't believe that a decent person could have a decent life in this country and I knew that I couldn't lie to take advantage of things, so why try? I lived a quiet life and I didn't become rich, but I went to bed with clear conscience and didn't trade my principles. Other people that had higher position were worried about it and had to face intrigues and lies, but since I was just a shoemaker there were no problems that I might possibly have in this respect.

My brother tried to make a career. This was the period of state anti-Semitism and Ukrainian authorities preferred to appoint Ukrainians to higher positions. My brother was an economist at a plant and wanted to get another job at a research institute, at the human resources department. He wasn't rejected or accepted, but every time he went there they were telling him to come another time. He wasn't told that he couldn't be employed due to his Jewish nationality, but it was clear that the reason was there. My brother had the feeling of being hurt for the rest of his life. My brother was married to a Jewish woman from Chernovtsy. They had a civil marriage. In 1960 their son was born. My brother wasn't religious and his family didn't observe any Jewish traditions. However, they had their son circumcised. My brother, my sister, their families and I usually met on holidays – birthdays or wedding anniversaries – when we visited our mother. Itzyk died of infarction in Chernovtsy in 1982.

I found my wife through a matchmaker, an old Jewish 75-year old woman. She came to my mother and offered her to introduce me to a nice girl. My mother told me about it and I gave my consent. The matchmaker took me to my future wife's family. My wife Silva Shelak was born in Mogilyov-Podolskiy on 2 March 1928. Her father Gersh Shelak was a shoemaker and her mother Ida Shelak was a housewife. Silva had a younger brother Jacob, born in 1932. Her father was deaf, but he was recruited to the front anyway when the Great Patriotic War began. Silva, her mother and brother were in the ghetto in Mogilyov-Podolskiy during the war. In 1942 Silva's mother died in the ghetto during an epidemic of typhoid. I cannot imagine how two orphan children survived in the ghetto. They stayed in Mogilyov-Podolskiy until their father returned from the front in 1945. They moved to Chernovtsy where Silva finished a lower secondary school and an accounting course. The years spent in the ghetto had their impact on her health – she was weak and sickly. Her brother was also

sickly and died at 40.

We got married in 1955. We had a civil ceremony and a small dinner for relatives and friends where we sang Jewish songs and danced, but we didn't have a chuppah. I moved into my wife's apartment, she stayed at home after we got married. She was too weak to go to work. Our daughter Ida named after Silva's mother was born in 1955. Later we began to call her Ludmila, which is a Russian name. She finished secondary school and graduated from Business College. She married a nice Jewish man Evgeny Smoliansky, who also studied at the Business College with her. They moved to Kerch in the Crimea. She calls us from there and spends her vacations with us, sometimes with the husband and the kid, sometimes alone. Our daughter and her husband both worked. Financially they have been provided - did not starve, but also anything superfluous did not presume. They live amicably. Our only granddaughter Maria studied under Sochnut [10](#) student exchange program in Israel. After finishing her secondary school there, she returned to Ukraine. We couldn't afford to pay for her getting a higher education in Israel. Maria is a student at the Institute of Economy in Simferopol.

My wife and I observed Jewish traditions however difficult it was at different times. During the Soviet times there was an underground Jewish bakery where they made matzah for Pesach. We brought flour there at night and the following night we could pick bags with matzah. It was a problem to buy necessary food products for celebration. One had to stand in line for hours to buy chicken, but we celebrated our holidays anyway. We always gathered with the siblings and our mother. We also celebrated Soviet holidays and the happiest of them was Victory Day on 9 May [11](#). In the morning my wife and I went to the parade where we met our friends. We got together for a party on such holidays. My wife had prepared food for the party. We talked and sang Jewish songs, shared our memories about the wartime and were happy to have survived.

When Jews began to move to Israel in 1970s we couldn't go: my wife was confined to bed. Of course, if it hadn't been for my wife's illness we would have gone to Israel. Our daughter wanted to go to Israel, but she was reluctant to leave us on our own. I would love to visit Israel and hope I will get a chance to go there. It's a happy person who can say that he has had freedom to do what he wanted. I haven't had an opportunity to spend my vacation elsewhere in 20 years. I couldn't leave my wife. She is a nice person and we've lived our life in love and consent. She has cancer in the last stage and all I can do now is just try to relieve her pain, if possible. Since she didn't work due to her illnesses she received a pension of 35 rubles [Editor's note: 35 rubles is less than \$7]. Only in the last 3 years she has received allowances paid to former inmates of ghettos by Germany. We are grateful to those that remember people that suffered from fascism.

I left Chernovtsy only once in 1999 when I had to obtain a certificate of a former inmate of the ghetto from the archive of Luchinets. I was overwhelmed by reminiscences when I came there. The town made an impression of being decayed. There were old houses that I remembered since my childhood. There are no new houses. Where our house was there is a kitchen garden.

After Ukraine declared its independence in 1991 Jewish life began to revive. In 1993 Joint organized Hesed in Chernovtsy. Hesed takes good care of old people. We receive food packages. Hesed also delivers food home. We can ask them to do the laundry. Nurses are visiting us who help to do the shopping and cleaning. There are clubs and various classes in Hesed. Every Jew can find interesting things to do there regardless of age. I began to attend Hesed from the first days after it opened.

My wife and I are members of association of former inmates of the ghetto. Until last years I was a volunteer in Hesed. I visited older people. Once I was asked to pay a visit to an old lonely woman in hospital. When I came to see her I saw that she was blind. Nobody came to pick her from hospital and personnel of the hospital were not willing to take care of her. I think it would be a good idea to organize an elderly people's home or hospital for lonely old people by the Hesed. They are very unfortunate, these people like that old woman. It is hard to see how lonely and helpless people become in their old age. I would like to take part in organization of such hospital, but I don't have time for anything now. My wife needs me and I have to be beside her. It's my duty.

## **Glossary:**

### **1 During the Civil War in 1918-1920 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.

### **2 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 WWI, 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.

### **3 Collectivization**

In the late 1920s - early 1930s private farms were liquidated and collective farms established by force on a mass scale in the USSR. Many peasants were arrested during this process. As a result of the collectivization, the number of farmers and the amount of agricultural production was greatly reduced and famine struck in the Ukraine, the Northern Caucasus, the Volga and other regions in 1932-33.

### **4 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.

### **5 Struggle against religion**

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

and Roman Catholic priests disappeared behind KGB walls.

## **6 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.

## **7 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.

## **8 Transnistria**

Area between the rivers Dnestr and Bug, and the Black Sea. It was ruled by the Romanians and during World War II it was used as a huge ghetto to which Jews from Bukovina and Moldavia were deported.

## **9 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.

## **10 The World Israeli Jewish Agency called Sokhnut was established in 1929**

It is an international voluntary Jewish organization that functions in 58 countries all over the world. Its center is in Jerusalem. Before the state of Israel was created the world Jewish community and the World Zionist organization used Sokhnut as a tool for renaissance of the Jewish national hearth in the former Palestine that was under British mandate at the time.

When Israel was declared an independent state in 1947 the Sokhnut directed its activities into the World Jewish communities focusing its efforts at strengthening peace, friendship and harmony between nations, rebirth and development of the cultural and spiritual heritage of the Jewish people, preservation of its national originality and creation of necessary conditions for further development of the ties of Diaspora with its historical Motherland.

## **11 On May, 9 - The Great Patriotic War ended for the Soviet Union on 9th May 1945**

This day of a victory was a grandiose and most liked holiday in the USSR.