

Vladimir Slopak Biography

Vladimir Slopak

Odessa,

Ukraine

Interviewer: Tatiana Portnaya

My grandfather on my father's side Tsaliy Slopak came from Odessa. They say that my father's grandfather was an opera singer. I don't know if it is true. I know that my grandparents died during the Civil War in 1918. I don't know any details about their death. The Slopak family lived near the Opera Theater in the center of the town. I believe, my father's family belonged to higher circles of the society that my mother's. My parents divorced and my mother avoided any discussions on this subject. On the other hand, I was small and didn't show big interest in the history of my family. And my mother did not want me to have any connection with any of my father's siblings. I only know that my father's brothers and sisters (there were 5 of them) were sent to various children's houses and each of them had to make their way in life on their own. One of the sisters was in a children's home in Sverdlovsk and one of the brothers in Leningrad. I don't know their names. The only aunt that I knew was aunt Raya. She was a ticket collector at the Philharmonic in Odessa. She was a very kind and hearty woman. I met her several times in my life.

My ancestors on my mother's side came to Odessa from Bessarabia (1). They were merchants. My great grandfather Wolf Portnoy owned a butcher's store. He was born in Odessa but I don't know when. He finished cheder there. Unfortunately, we have no photographs of my great grandfather left. They were in our apartment in Odessa which we evacuated during the war and when we returned we found our apartment robbed. I remember that in one of the photographs my great grandfather was wearing a black jacket and hat and had a gray beard. I don't remember whether he had payot. My grandfather told me that he was a cheerful and hardworking man. His mother tongue was Yiddish. My grandfather told me that Wolf was also fluent in Russian and Rumanian. I was named Vladimir after him. It was usual with the Jewish families then to give the children Russian names beginning with the same letter as the Jewish name of a deceased relative. The family of my great grandfather was very religious. They observed all Jewish traditions and celebrated Jewish holidays. But I don't really know how because I was not told much about this.

I know nothing about my great grandmother.

My maternal grandfather Idel Portnoy was born in Odessa in 1882. He studied in a cheder. He learned to read Russian and Yiddish by himself. He could speak Russian and needed to learn only the Russian alphabet. Yiddish was his mother language and he could read Yiddish texts because he learned the Hebrew alphabet in the cheder. He worked as a butcher's assistant at first and later having saved some money, he got a little butcher's store at New Market. In the early 1930s he became a carpenter in a furniture workshop. My grandfather made a desk and a chair for me as a birthday present. He was a religious man. He went to synagogue on Saturday and the holidays. Before the war he went to the main synagogue in Yevreiskaya Street. Shortly before the war this synagogue was closed and turned into a gym. My grandfather was very angry about it. After the

war he went to the synagogue in Peresyp (2), the only functioning synagogue in the town. He always wore a cap going to the synagogue. In summer, when it was too hot, he covered his head with a handkerchief, tied in knots on four sides. He read the Torah at home in the evening when he was free. He prayed at home three times a day. They followed the kashrut in his family. Before Pesach the house was thoroughly cleaned. They bought matzah in the synagogue and made Gefilte fish. The whole family was involved in cooking. I remember this process. I still believe that this was the most delicious Gefilte fish in the world. There were many dishes made from matzah in our family. They were pastries, cookies, puddings and cakes. Elder children and adults fasted at Yom Kippur. Grandfather Idel always prayed for his children and grandchildren at home. They were a religious family, but they couldn't openly express their religious beliefs during the Soviet regime. Churches and synagogues were closed during this time and clergymen and rabbis were persecuted, arrested and many of them executed. However, the family always tried to observe Jewish traditions when possible.

My grandmother Betia (Nesia) Nuhimovna Vinogradova was born to a wealthy, religious family in Odessa in 1887. Her family was much wealthier and more highly educated than my grandfather's family. I have no information about her life before she met my grandfather. I know that she had a sister, because my mother had cousins Heiva and Riva on my grandmother's side. I don't know how she met my grandfather. All I know is that they had a traditional Jewish wedding with a huppah. My grandmother was very young when she got married. My mother recalled that my grandmother wore a wig. She was a housewife and a wonderful cook and so were her daughters. Gefilte fish was always made in our family according to my grandmother's recipe. My grandmother had babies almost every year. She died of a haemorrhage during childbirth in 1924. She was only 36 years old.

My grandparents lived in Meschanskaya Street in Moldavanka (3). It was a Jewish neighborhood and they mostly socialized with Jews. In 1924 they moved to Grecheskaya Street in the center of the town. Their new apartment was in an old two-storied building one block away from the central Deribassovskaya Street in Odessa. There were Russian, Ukrainian and Jewish tenants in their building. They had a two-room apartment on the 2nd floor with very high ceilings. I grew up in this apartment. My grandfather lived in this apartment with his daughters after the war until he died in 1957. My grandparents had 3 sons and 3 daughters.

My mother's older brother Jacob was born in 1906. He finished cheder and continued his studies in a Russian secondary school. I don't know how many years he studied at school. He could read and write in Yiddish. He worked as a butcher at the New Market. His wife was Russian. His father was, of course, against this marriage. He had two children. After the war we lost contact with them and I have no information about them. At the beginning of the war Jacob was in the people's volunteer corps near Odessa. He was captured in 1941 and sent to the ghetto, where he died.

My mother was the second child in the family.

My mother's brother Lev was born in 1912. He studied in the Soviet Jewish secondary school. He sold meat at the New Market. He was married and had a Russian wife. Her name was Vera. I remember that my aunts didn't like them. I don't think it was based on her nationality. They had no children. In 1941 he served in the people's volunteer corps. He worked in Dofinovka, a village in 30 km from Odessa, making defense trenches. They didn't have any weapons. I was a small boy, but I

remember that people were returning from the frontline telling us that there was one rifle for five of them. They were told to get weapons in the battle. After Odessa was occupied by the Germans he returned home. When raids for Jews began, his wife Vera gave him in to Germans. He was sent to the ghetto where he died. After the occupation the neighbors told us the whole story.

My mother's sister Fira (Esphir) was born in 1914. She studied for several years in a Russian secondary school. She could read and write in Russian, but she spoke Yiddish with her father. Fira was a very kind and gentle woman. She worked as an usher in Voroshylov cinema when she turned 18. After she was evacuated, Fira married Michael Shneider, a Jewish man, in Taldy-Kurgan (Kazakhstan) in 1942. My cousin Lyusia was born on 14 March 1944. Lyusia never saw her father. He died at the front in 1944. After the war Fira continued working in the cinema.

In 1918 my mother's brother Misha was born. He was a cinema operator at the "Beau monde" cinema before the war. In 1939 he was recruited to the Red Army. He died at the front near Zhytomir in 1942. His family only found out that he had died in 1945, when the war was over.

My mother's younger sister Sopha was born in 1920. She also studied in a Russian secondary school. During the war she was evacuated to Kutaisi in Georgia where she married Moshe Nahmanovich Shneiderman (born in 1910). On 26 May 1945 her son Ilia, my cousin, was born. Sopha divorced her husband in 1946 and lived the rest of her life with her son in Odessa. She worked as a ticket collector at the cultural center and in the 1970s she got a job at the Musical Comedy Theater where she worked until the end of her life.

In 1924 my grandmother had her last baby. She died during giving birth but the baby survived. The baby was a big, beautiful girl. My mother was 17, she was the oldest girl in the family, but she was afraid of taking responsibility for raising the child. She gave the baby to a wet nurse, but the baby died. My mother could never get rid of her feeling of guilt. She believed she was to blame for her death.

My mother Anna (Hana) Portnaya was born on 5 June 1908. She was a tall blonde with hazel eyes. She studied in a Russian secondary school for some years and then had to go to work, their life was hard. She worked in a baker's shop at the market. It was hard work. She handled tons of bread each day. When her mother died, my mother had to take on all the housework and care for the other children. My grandfather was looking for a wife and grandmother Betia's relatives didn't want to support the family, although they were wealthy people. My aunt Sopha told me that when they visited grandmother's family they didn't get any food and were not allowed to touch anything in the apartment. They were just small children and were hungry. After they left their relatives' apartment the family brushed the copper handles on the doors after them. Sopha saw this once with her own eyes. Such severe life conditions strengthened my mother's character. She was a proud and brave woman, she could always stand up for herself and her younger sisters. A year after his wife died my grandfather remarried. I don't know what happened, but in a week's time my mother packed this woman's belongings and sent her away. My grandfather was very upset about his daughter's behavior and moved to his wife, but he returned to his daughters shortly afterwards.

In 1929 my mother met my father, Grigoriy Slopak. I don't know how they met. My father was born in 1905. He was a very handsome, educated man. But he had a very hard character. Probably the hardships of his life had this impact on his character. He studied at a grammar school before 1917. He was very successful with his studies. He played the piano very well and had private music

classes in his childhood. His parents died when he was 13 and he was sent to a children's home. After the children's home he worked at a printing house and learned the profession of a printer. My mother said that he changed jobs many times. My parents got married in 1929. They had a civil ceremony that was customary during the Soviet period. They lived together for 5 years and separated in 1934, two years after I was born. I don't know why they divorced, because my mother didn't discuss this subject with me. My aunts joked about it saying that my father simply escaped from our mispokhe (Editor's note: family in Yiddish). I never met him again. We had no contact, although he was living in Odessa. I only know that he had another wife. He died at the front in 1942.

I was born on 3 September 1932. My single aunts were very happy about my appearance in this world. I got three mothers at once: Ania, Fira and Sopha. My aunts told me that my first year of life was the most difficult. There was a big famine in Ukraine (4) in 1933. My mother worked at the baker's store and she managed to bring a small piece of bread quite often. This saved us from starving to death. I never felt hungry in my childhood, as I was the only child in the family. I was very loved and spoiled.

After their wedding my parents lived in my grandfather Idel Slopak's apartment. Besides them, the other tenants in this apartment were my mother's sisters Fira and Sopha and her brother Misha. It was a two-room apartment with a big kitchen and a corridor. Before the war our apartment was nicely furnished: I remember beautiful furniture: wardrobes, beds, tables, pictures on the walls and heavy curtains framing the windows. We heated with coal and wood, but it was rather expensive and it was often cold in this apartment. The toilet was in the yard. Cooking was done on a primus stove. There was a sink and tap in the kitchen that served for washing purposes. It was crowded in the apartment, but the atmosphere was warm and sincere. The whole family had meals at the big table in the kitchen. The food was plain. Only on holidays could the sisters afford Gefilte fish, chicken and goose cracklings. My mother and my aunts were very good cooks and there were often pastries in the house. They kept their kitchen utensils clean and shining. There were casseroles hanging in the kitchen. The family followed the kashrut rules and there were specific casseroles for dairy products, meat, soup and fish. There were no religious books other than the Torah and the prayer book. On holidays and Sabbath all close people including neighbors got together in our house and had a common meal. At Yom Kippur the family fasted and we went to the synagogue - all of us. At Hanukkah my grandfather gave me and my cousins Hanukkah gelt and we could invite our friends for a get-together. My "Moms" (that was how I called my aunts) liked guests. We spoke Yiddish in the family and Russian with neighbors. In the late 1930s we switched to Russian - we continued to speak Yiddish only to our grandfather.

I went to the kindergarten near our house. In 1939 I went to a Ukrainian school and to the first form of music school to learn to play the violin. I was a success with my studies and the whole family was very happy for me.

We lived in the Soviet Union and it had an impact on us. Before the war the authorities accommodated other tenants in our apartment. They divided our kitchen and a family of 5 members moved into our corridor (10 square meters). They installed a partition in the corridor to make a small room.

Stalin's regime kept people in constant fear. In 1937 arrests began (5). One night our neighbor was taken away. Nobody saw her again. She perished. Of course, such events caused concerns and worries and then the war turned many lives upside down.

I remember 22 June 1941 (6). There was a radio on a post near our house. At noon we listened to Molotov's speech (7). He made an announcement about the treacherous attack of Germany and that USSR was in a state of war. My mother and my aunts were crying, but we couldn't even imagine what we were to endure. I have bright memories about the first days of the war. I remember panic in Odessa and lack of water. We had to go to the port to get some water. I remember the air raids. I had no father and my mother worked a lot, so I was just by myself (the school vacation had already started). During one air raid my leg was slightly wounded. I remember how I went to Deribasovskaya to watch the houses falling during another air raid. My mother and I went from one bomb shelter to another. Once we were supposed to go to a bomb shelter in Kolodeznyi Lane across the street from where we lived, but we were lucky and went to a bomb shelter at the cinema instead. A bomb happened to hit that bomb shelter killing 68 people. Our shelter was buried under debris and my mother and I had to wait for 24 hours before we were rescued. There were underground trenches in Kirov Park not far from our house where we also found shelter.

We were not planning to evacuate. We didn't believe that the war would last. We thought that our army would be in Germany in a matter of days. Later we were hoping that the Germans would not come to Odessa for some time yet. Only when the town was encircled did my mother decide it was time to evacuate. At that time it was difficult to leave Odessa. My aunts were the first to evacuate. My grandfather Idel, my mother and I left on 6 October 1941 and 9 days later the Germans entered Odessa. We paid a lot of money to fishermen and they took us to the ship 'Georgia' on their boat. There were many wounded soldiers and officers on board the ship. Some time before our ship departed the Germans sank the Lenin ship and we were shocked and scared by the scene. After a few days we reached Novorossiysk (about 700 km from Odessa by sea). From there we went to Stalingradskaya region by train and on horse-driven carts and reached Mikhailovskaya village (about 1100 km from Odessa, not far from Stalingrad). Soon the frontline was near Stalingrad. The frosts were very severe. Our soldiers were retreating. Many of them were wounded, starved, frost-bitten. The soldiers made fires to keep warm. It was a horrible period of starvation. My mother was very worried about me. She understood that we had to move on. We managed to get on a railroad platform and left for Tashkent on a frosty day. My mother's cousins (grandmother Betia sister's daughters) Heiva and Riva were settled there, but they didn't want to help us. This is why we couldn't stay in Tashkent and went to Taldy-Kurgan, in the Alma-Ata region in Kazakhstan, where my aunt Fira lived with her husband. They were living in a very small room. So in the beginning of 1943 we went on, my grandfather Idel, my mother and I, to the October collective farm, about 40 km from Taldy Kurgan.

This collective farm grew sugar beets for sugar. My mother got me a job as shepherd and she worked on the field. I often went to help her. We were accommodated with a Kazakh family. We got a small room. My grandfather Idel was very old and spent all his time praying. We were starving, we only got 50 grams of flour per person. My mother boiled some herbs. We didn't have any real bread for 3 years. Frankly speaking, we didn't think about keeping the traditions at that time. We only thought about how to survive. I didn't come across any anti-Semitism there, because we were

Russians for Kazakh people. In summer 1943 corn grew ripe in the fields and life became easier. We fried corn and ate it, adding some water. In 1943 my aunt Fira came to us from Taldy-Kurgan. She was pregnant. On 14 March 1944 she gave birth to her daughter Lyusia.

I didn't go to school until September of 1944 because we arrived in the middle of the school year in 1943. There was a lower secondary school on this collective farm. The teachers were Russian and Kazakh, and my classmates as well. The language of teaching was Russian. There was no paper to write on and I used newspapers writing between lines. On cold winter days I didn't go to school, because I had no warm clothes. My mother wrapped me in a blanket and I read books. I read Lermontov and Pushkin while evacuated and learned many of their poems by heart. My grandfather told me the stories from the Torah. But I was not really interested in them.

In November 1944 we (grandfather Idel, my mother, aunt Fira and Lyusia and I) went back to Odessa, which had been liberated by then. We went by train. We couldn't wait to come home. We looked forward to hearing about our relatives and our loved ones. The family of a certain Professor Popov was temporarily residing in our apartment. He came from Leningrad in April 1944. Therefore, all five of us had to settle down in a small room on the first floor of the building for some time. My mother and I had to sleep on the table, as there was no other space. My mother and I fell ill with gastric issues after we returned home. I cannot even understand how we survived. It had an impact on my memory and I even forgot the alphabet.

Some time later Professor Popov was transferred to Kiev and we could move back into our apartment. When we moved in we saw that all our belongings including furniture and pictures had been stolen. There was only a huge (about 3 meters high) cupboard and an ancient floor mirror left. Anyway, nobody gave much thought to the loss of things. So many people perished: my mother's three brothers died. Our neighbors, a Jewish family, failed to evacuate. They were taken to the ghetto where the fascists shot all of them. Only one of their daughters survived.

In August 1945 my aunt Sopha and her three-month-old son Ilia that had been born in Kuttaissi in May 1945 returned to Odessa. Our family was reunited. The only man in our family was my grandfather Idel. We were all very close and every child had three mothers: mother Ania, mother Fira and mother Sopha. Only when they went to school did my cousins begin to understand that they had one mother each.

It was a hard time (right after the war). There were no jobs available. Even if there was a temporary job there was very little money paid for it. My mother became a ticket collector in the Odessa Ukrainian Theater. She got meals at work. All support personnel and actors could get meals in the canteen. They had a bowl of soup with cereals. I had a meal at school. It was a miserable meal, but I managed to save a bun to take it to my younger cousin Lyusia. She was so tiny and starved. I studied in a Russian secondary school. Odessa was and still is a Russian-speaking city, so it is self-evident that I went to a Russian school. I first went to the 4th form at school, but I couldn't catch up with the other children due to after effects of my disease and I returned to the 3rd form. I have very warm memories of this period. There were quite a few Jewish children in my class. We were all friends. We spoke Russian, but we often used Yiddish words. Russian and Ukrainian children could understand what we said. There was no anti-Semitism at school at that time. Perhaps it was because most of the teachers were Jews. Boris Lvovich, our maths teacher, was a very kind and considerate man. He was a very good teacher. Our teacher of Russian

literature taught us to love Russian classic literature and read Russian classics. Our teacher of history was also a Jew. He was a very decent man. My favorite subject was Ukrainian. My mother worked at the Ukrainian theater and I often went to their performances. I was good at Ukrainian, as well as geography, history and literature. My spelling left much to be desired, but I tried to improve it. I read a lot and attended additional classes. I was eager to study, even though I had to do my homework by the garbage container in the yard. There was too much noise at home and there was not enough space. I spent my summer vacations at a pioneer camp for the children of cultural workers in Odessa. My mother received a voucher for me to go there for several years in a row. We had good meals there and went swimming. We played a lot and I had many friends. All of us there were fond of sports – football, hiking and ping-pong.

We were like a family with our neighbors. They were not only Jewish, it was a multi-national company. On Saturday and Sunday the gate in the yard was closed. There was a table in the yard where people brought all their food and got together to discuss all kinds of issues, recalled the deceased and made plans for the future. I didn't come across anti-Semitism at school or in the yard. But in the streets I heard things like "zhydovskaya mug" (Editor's note: traditional Russian derogatory name for Jews) or "where were you during the war?", "was there a frontline in Tashkent?".

After I finished the 7th form with honors, my mother insisted that I leave school and get a professional education. She thought that I would be able to complete my studies if I wanted to. In 1949 I entered the Electro-Technical Faculty of the Odessa College of Survey. Most of my fellow students in the group were Jews. After the war Jewish children had problems with entering higher educational institutions. Jewish children that finished school with the highest grades could only go to professional or technical schools while non-Jewish children didn't have this nationality problem (i.e. they were not Jewish), so although they were not so successful in their studies, they could go to higher educational institutions. It was possible to enter an institute without entrance exams if one had a medal after finishing school. Even at school the requirements for Jewish children were higher than for others and as a rule, Jewish children did not receive medals.

I liked to go dancing in my leisure time. My friends and I went to the port-dance and jute factory club - both clubs for the working-youth and of a rather low level. We also went to the theater. My mother helped us to get a free pass to any theater in town. We would attend good performances 10 times. We often went to the cinema, especially to the "Voroshylov" cinema where my aunt Fira was an usher. In summer we spent our days at the seashore. I read a lot in Russian, fiction mostly. We didn't have any religious books at home. We only had the Torah. We were taught to be atheist and we became atheists. Only my grandfather prayed for all of us. He went to the synagogue on holidays. I often accompanied him, but stayed outside. However, we celebrated Jewish holidays at home in accordance with the traditions. We also celebrated Soviet holidays: Victory Day, May 1 and New Year. I didn't have a full understanding of the situation. It was only when I grew older that I came to understand that purpose of the communist ideology was to make us forget our Jewish identity.

When I heard about the establishment of the Jewish State of Israel I was happy about it, because I believe that the Jewish people must have a Motherland, an opportunity to unite and get to the land of their ancestors.

When I was a third-year student at my college I was recruited to the army. I was to serve in Novozybkov (800 km from Odessa). At the beginning I studied in the driving school and later served in the Air Force. During my last year in the army I became a gunner and radio operator.

During the first year of my military service (1951-1954) I didn't face any anti-Semitism. In 1952 when the Doctors' Plot (8) was fabricated, anti-Semites appeared in the army as well. They called me "zhyd" (Editor's note: derogatory term for Jews), but I was a fatherless child and knew how to stand up for myself. I was often involved in fights. My cousin Ilia also faced anti-Semitism in the army. He responded to a wicked comment by hitting his offender with a stool and was put in the guardhouse for this.

I remember the day of Stalin's death very well. He died in March 1953. I was in the army and on that day I was on guard duty. My friends brought chacha (Georgian vodka). We drank a soldier's mug of 90-degree chacha and I went back to guard duty. I was glad that he died. There was a meeting in our military unit. People made speeches and many were sad about it.

In the army I made friends with Arkadiy Waiman, a Jew from Odessa. He became my closest friend. Arkadiy finished school with the highest grades. He wanted to enter the Polytechnic Institute, but he failed. He entered the Polytechnic Institute in Middle Asia after he demobilized from the army. We are still good friends. He lives in Odessa now.

After I demobilized (in 1954) I finished college in 1957 and got a job assignment in Bukhara in Middle Asia. When I arrived there I had to get registered at the Komsomol (9) committee as a Komsomol member. I became a Komsomol member at 14 at school. I never gave much thought to why. Everyone was supposed to be a Komsomol member and I was no different, but at 25 I understood the falseness of the party ideology. So I didn't get registered – and I had no problems because of it.

Life for Jews was easier there, because the locals didn't know the difference between Russians and Jews. We were Russians for them. Besides, we spoke Russian. And I was surrounded by educated, intelligent and advanced people and they never expressed any anti-Semitism or hostility although I never concealed my nationality. I worked as the manager of the State Regional Control Laboratory of Monitoring Equipment. In 1958 I entered the Electrotechnical Faculty of the Bukhara Polytechnic Institute to get a higher degree.

In 1957 my grandfather Idel died. Lyusia and Ilia (my cousins) were in a state of shock. They didn't realize that his condition was so bad. They believed he was going to recover like any other person that had fallen ill. They were taken to our neighbors when grandfather was dying and when they returned in the morning, our grandfather was lying on the floor wrapped in white sheets. There were candles on the floor and his daughters were wearing torn black clothes. He was buried in the Jewish cemetery according to the Jewish tradition. I was in Bukhara at that time, but my mother and my aunts told me about his funeral later.

In 1958 my mother got married for the second time. My stepfather Solomon Kadyshe, a Jew, born in 1905, was a very decent and interesting man. He was born to a religious family in Kazan and studied at cheder. In the 1920s he became an actor at the Jewish theater in Kazan. The theater was closed in the 1930s and he moved to Odessa. He got a job at the shoe factory and became a high-skilled designer. He got married in Odessa and had a son and a daughter. His son Naum and his

family moved to the US in 1979. He lives in Philadelphia. Solomon's daughter Frida lived her life in Odessa. She died in 1995. During the war my stepfather was a mariner and intelligence officer. He participated in the defense and liberation of Odessa, Sevastopol and Novorossiysk. During the war he became a communist party member. After the war he returned to Odessa and reunited with his family. In 1957 his first wife died and he married my mother. He was security manager at the port. Although he was a communist and held various high posts, he went to synagogue once a year on Yom Kippur. He died in 1992. We buried him in the Jewish cemetery, according to his will.

In 1962 I returned to Odessa and got transferred to the evening department of the Odessa Polytechnic Institute. I had to find a job to make my living and support my mother. And there I understood what my nationality meant. I could not get a job for a long time. There was a vacancy as a lab assistant at the Department Physics in the Navy College. I was told to fill out my application form in the human resources department. But when I submitted my application and showed them my passport I was refused immediately. There was another incident. I was trying to get a job at the radio factory, but the departmental head, a very nice lady, said to me looking into my eyes: "If I employ another Jew I will be fired". Managers probably didn't have anything against employing Jews, but they had instructions from higher authorities. They had to follow these directions or they could lose their job. I spent five months visiting factories and plants and everywhere they told me that there were no vacancies for my specialty. It was only by chance that I got a job. My mother had an acquaintance. He was the manager of the municipal power supply network. My mother met him once in town and asked him to employ me as a worker. I got this job. Later I was promoted to the position of technician. Then I was slowly promoted until I became power supply network operations manager. It was a very responsible position. Only communists could hold such key positions and I was a Jew and wasn't a party member.

My management tried to convince me to become a party member. They even tried to force me, but I didn't give in. When I was young I realized that this state killed Jews and non-Jews alike, even though officially the party talked about peoples' friendship and internationalism. That was why I could never become a member of this kind of party. My boss argued with me in strong language and even threatened to fire me, but then the situation calmed down somehow.

I met my future wife Emma Shkolnik in 1963. I was riding a motor scooter with my friend when I saw a pretty girl. She had long fair hair and very beautiful green eyes. I was young and talkative and it was no problem for me to get acquainted with her. We agreed to meet near the Spartak stadium, but she came to the Dynamo stadium and we didn't meet. Some time later I saw her again at the Polytechnic Institute. I believe we were destined to meet.

Emma came from a Jewish family. Her mother Otia Geisman was born in Odessa in 1908. She studied 3 years in cheder (Editor's note: Since 1915 so-called model cheders were set up in Russia where girls studied reading and writing and had also some religious instruction.) She was a religious woman and was fluent in Yiddish. She also had a good command of Russian and Ukrainian. Before the war she worked as a shipment forwarder at the telegraph office. After the war she was a housewife and looked after her grandchildren. She died in 1994. My wife's father David Shkolnik was born in Odessa in 1906. He came from a family of merchants. My father-in-law was a communications engineer. He worked for industrial enterprises in Odessa. He died in 1988 and was buried in the Jewish cemetery.

My wife was born in Odessa on 4 January 1939. After finishing school with honors she graduated from the Faculty of Long-Distance Communications at the Institute of Communications. After her graduation she worked in the design team at the Communications Department in Kiev for 3 years. She was homesick though and was looking forward to coming back to Odessa. After she returned to Odessa she got a job at the Communications Department. Later she was involved in the computerization of technical processes in the canned product industries. She is very intelligent and she always managed well at work. Her colleagues respected her and knew that she could accomplish any task. They knew they could rely on her.

We got married on 3 October 1964 in a civil wedding ceremony. My mother and aunts accepted their daughter-in-law whole-heartedly. They arranged a wedding party with many guests: friends, relatives and neighbors. My “Moms” were very enthusiastic about making all necessary arrangements. My mother and Sopha were cooking and Fira and Sasha, my mother’s husband, were responsible for shopping. They cooked day and night, because we had no fridge to keep the food and everything had to be made fresh. We moved out all furniture from the apartment and put in tables for the guests. It was a merry wedding party. There was a band playing and we danced until 4 in the morning.

After the wedding my wife and I rented an apartment. Later I bought a cooperative three-room apartment, we saved money for it, but I often visited the house where I spent my childhood. We celebrated all holidays: Jewish and Soviet holidays and birthdays with my family in this house. Since childhood I loved the Jewish holidays, as traditional folk festivals of my people, this is why we kept celebrating them although I was not religious. We were always welcome in this house. At the beginning things were difficult for me. I worked during the day and studied at night. I had very little time left for sleep.

On 10 June 1965 my older daughter Irena was born. She followed my footsteps. She finished the Electrotechnical Faculty at the College of Survey. Later she graduated from cryogenic technologies at the Refrigeration Institute. She married Anatoliy Loshmanov, a Russian. I’ve never chosen my friends, acquaintances or my wife based on their nationality, but I didn’t feel quite at ease when my daughter married a Russian boy. It is difficult for me to put that feeling into words. My wife and I wanted our daughters to marry Jews, but they didn’t. Anatoliy is a very nice, caring, hardworking and quiet man. He graduated from the Institute of Navy Engineers. He was a design engineer and he was a very good engineer. He was respected at work. Unfortunately, when perestroika began it resulted in the fall of industries. Irena and Anatoliy lost their jobs. In 1988 my grandson Dima was born. It was necessary to learn to survive. They began to sell toys and later managed to open their own store. They earned well and built a nice house. In 1996 their daughter Olga was born.

My younger daughter Sana was born on 21 August 1972. She graduated from the Faculty of Mathematics and Information Science at the Pedagogical Institute. She married a Ukrainian, Dmitriy Zakrzhevskiy. He finished navy school. In 1997 their son Volodia was born. In 1999 they moved to America. They live in New York. My son-in-law works, my daughter is a housewife and my grandson, who is Jewish according to the Halachah, goes to a Jewish school.

In 1979 my mother died of cancer. It was so sad. She worked as a ticket collector at the Ukrainian Theater and then Musical Comedy Theater after the war. She was well loved. In 1968 when she turned 60 her colleagues gave her a photo album with greetings from all the actors and employees of the Musical Comedy Theater.

3 years later in 1982 my aunt Fira died in a car accident.

In 1987 my last aunt Sopha died.

The 3 sisters, Anna, Fira and Sopha, were buried in the Jewish cemetery. It was their will to be buried near one another so they could be together for good.

My family and I never went abroad, but we traveled a lot across the country. Every year we went on tours. We toured the Caucasus, the Carpathian Mountains and the Urals. We went hiking across Chechnya. I was fond of hiking, living in tents and sitting by the fire in the evening. We've seen a lot and enjoyed traveling.

In the 1970s many people were moving to Israel and America. We sympathized with them and were jealous of them. Most of my friends went to Israel, America and Australia. When in the past I went for a walk in Deribasovskaya Street half of the passers-by said hello to me, but when I go out nowadays I only see strangers. I was thinking of moving to another country, but my wife said to me that our motherland was here where our parents and the graves of our ancestors were. It was impossible to think about leaving and we stayed in Odessa.

I have a sibling: he is my father's son. His name is Mikhail Slopak. In 1970 he was deported to Israel from the USSR as a dissident. He called me to say goodbye and asked me to meet him. I had doubts about whether to go to see him or not, but I decided to go and see him off. Three days later I was called to the KGB office and they kept me for 24 hours. I was questioned there for hours. My family was worried and afraid that I might lose my job. My brother lives in Jerusalem. We talk on the phone.

My cousin Lyusia married Leonid Shyrer in 1963. In 1988 they moved to Israel. They live in Haifa. We keep in touch with them. In 2002 they came back to visit to Odessa.

My cousin Ilia graduated from the Moscow Institute of Foreign Languages. He was a teacher of Italian. Now he is a businessman and sells copying equipment. He is married and has a son. He lives in our grandfather's apartment here in Odessa.

We lived a life full of hardships: war, evacuation and anti-Semitism. There were no Jewish newspapers published and there were no Jewish communities. Nowadays the situation is different. There are Jewish schools in Odessa, two synagogues and there are Jewish newspapers published: Or Sameach and Shomrei Shabos. There is a community for old Jews, the Gemilot Hesed. I do not think I am old, though, so I do not go there.

In 1995 my older grandson Dmitriy Loshmanov, went to the Jewish school Or Sameach. It was the decision of my daughter with full agreement from her husband. Dmitriy studies Hebrew, Jewish traditions and prayers and he explains to his Jewish grandmother and grandfather when and what prayers should be said. He also tells us about holidays. My Russian relatives are happy that he is such an intelligent boy and listen to his stories about what kind of prayers should be said over bread, water and so on. At 11 he had brit mila and at 13 bar mitzvah. I go to the synagogue with my grandson and I am very pleased that many young people attend the synagogue. My wife and I learn a lot from the young and try to follow all Jewish rules. My wife attended lectures on Jewish traditions and rules of conduct for men and women. The lecturers came from Israel. They conduct Sabbath and teach the Torah. Of course, we do not strictly follow all rules of Sabbath, but we light

candles on Friday and get together with the family – my wife and elder daughters – to have a festive dinner.

I've worked hard my whole life. I was a breadwinner and had to support my family. I worked on electric equipment start-up. I believe, I've made my contribution in every enterprise in Odessa.

I am 70 now, but I continue to work. I am supervisor at the laboratory of the electrotechnical center of the power supply agency. I am the only Jew at work. My colleagues respect me. They don't want me to retire.

I can say that I've managed to live my life decently. I have good children and grandchildren. I have a wife and friends: Yuli Goroshyn, Arkadiy Waiman and Edik Mekhanic. I have a job, a three-room apartment and a car. My older daughter supports me well.

I love my town – every street and place brings back memories and is associated with people I knew and with events.

Glossary

1. Bessarabia: historical area the Prut and Dnestr rivers. Now it is the territory of Moldavia and a southern part of Odessa region.
2. Peresyp: an industrial neighborhood in the outskirts of Odessa.
3. Moldavanka: poor Jewish neighborhood on the outskirts of Odessa.
4. Famine in Ukraine: In 1920 a forced famine was introduced in Ukraine that caused the death of millions of people. It was arranged in order to suppress the protesting peasants that did to want to join the collective farms. There was another dreadful forced famine in 1930-1934 in Ukraine. The authorities took away the last food products from the farmers. People were dying in the streets, whole villages became deserted. The authorities arranged this specifically to suppress the rebellious farmers that did not want to accept the Soviet power and join the collective farms.
5. In 1937 arrests began: In the mid-1930s Stalin launched a major campaign of political terror. The purges, arrests, and deportations to labor camps touched virtually every family. Untold numbers of party, industrial, and military leaders disappeared during the "Great Terror". Indeed, between 1934 and 1938 two-thirds of the members of the 1934 Central Committee were sentenced and executed.
6. 22 June 1941 : On 22 June 1941 at 5 o'clock in the morning Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union without declaring a war. This was the beginning of the so-called Great Patriotic War.
7. Molotov (1890 – 1986): Statesman and member of the leadership of the Communist Party. Since 1939, Minister of Foreign Affairs. On June 22 1941 he announced on the radio the attack of the USSR by Germany.
8. Doctors' Case: The so-called Doctors' Case was a set of accusations deliberately forged by Stalin's government and the KGB against Jewish doctors of the Kremlin hospital charging them with the murder of outstanding Bolsheviks. The "Case" was started in 1952, but was never finished because Stalin died in 1953.
9. Komsomol: Communist youth organization created by the Communist Party to make sure that the state would be in control of the ideological upbringing and spiritual development of the youth almost until the age of 30.