Lev Drobyazko

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Kiev
Ukraine
Interviewer: Tatyana Chaika

My name is Lev Yevgenyevich Drobyazko, and I was born in May 1937 in
Moscow. Soon after my birth, my parents moved to Kiev. And here I lived all
of my life, with the exception of three years in evacuation. The history of my name has nothing in common with any Jewish traditions, but nonetheless, it is interesting. My parents, especially my father, admired the "leftist front" in literature and art, and that is why they wanted to name me Lef. Fortunately, those clerks who registered my name knew nothing about my parents' intentions and registered me with the traditional name - Lev. And I like it.

My family background

When I was born, my father, Yevgeny Drobyazko, a famous Ukrainian writer and translator, was 35 years old; my mother, Leah Vaisblat, had just turned 32. I was their firstborn. My parents had known each other for a very long time, approximately 10 years before their wedding, but there was a problem with my mother's father. He was the famous Rabbi Nukhim Vaisblat, and he was very much against his daughter's marriage to a Russian Orthodox man, so their wedding could take place only after the rabbi's death. It is also worth noting that my father's father, Anton Drobyazko, never opposed my parents' wedding. So, when I was born, I combined two different cultures and two family lines, each of which is interesting.

I know about the family of my father from family legends, even though I remember my grandfather, Anton Drobyazko. When he was arrested in June 1941, I was four years old. In Kiev, our family lived not far from him, and I saw him quite often. He was very kind, smiled a lot, and expressed a lot of love to me. He came from a family of potters, but for outstanding services as a lawyer the tsar granted him the status of a nobleman at the age of 40. He graduated from Kiev University's Law Department, and began his career in a court in Nezhin, Ukraine. He had a very good career. After

the revolution he worked as an editor and translator in various publishing companies in Ukraine, and in 1926 he and a team of authors issued Ukraine's first Soviet Law Dictionary. He worked as an editor and a translator until 1941, when he was arrested.

His wife, my grandmother, Maria Lebova, also came from a family of Russian noblemen. Having received a wonderful education, she provided the same for her two sons. Having no financial needs in her life, my grandmother spent all her life working as a teacher in various schools, particular, in Kiev. She was a modern, emancipated woman, who wanted to benefit people with her labor.

My grandparents were Russian Orthodox, but they welcomed the Soviet power, nevertheless, and were quite loyal to it. Anton Drobyazko and Maria Lebova had two children: Yevgeny, my father, and Anatoly. Even though both had good educations, their social orientation was quite different. The Civil War, which followed the Revolution of 1917, split the family. My father, just like his parents, embraced the Revolution and everything it brought. Anatoly, however, rejected the Revolution and actively fought against it. He was a White Guard officer, and graduated from the military school of the White Guard. He was reported missing in 1919 during his fight against the proletariat.

After my grandmother's death in 1924, my grandfather Anton lived in Kiev, actively working in Soviet publishing structures. On June 30, 1941, at the age of 71, he was arrested by the State Security Service and condemned, charged with anti-Soviet propaganda and with welcoming Hitler and the fascists, and he was sentenced to death. His court hearings never took place, however, and he, too, was reported missing. I found investigative materials pertaining to his case only in 1997-1998, and they stated that the fate of the condemned Anton Drobyazko is unclear. Most likely he was shot during the evacuation of the prisoners of the Lukyanovksaya prison at the end of August or the beginning of September 1941. As far as I know, the arrest of my grandfather had no effect on my father's career.

It is peculiar that in my memories of my father, I never remember him sleeping. I usually saw him working, or sitting in an armchair with a pencil and a piece of paper in his hand, reading. He was member of the Writers' Union, an author and a translator. He knew eight European and all the Slavic languages. He translated classical European poetry into Ukrainian. The main work of his life was the first translation into Ukrainian of Dante. He also translated many other authors. He learned all these languages in school and on his own. He graduated from the Law Department of Kiev University and from the Department of Film Producers of the Kiev Theatrical Institute. Both prior to and after the Second World War, up to his death in 1981 (at the age of 83), my father translated

poetry, edited and published texts, and staged plays in Kiev theaters. All his life my father was a pioneer in work and in society. He was an atheist.

In 1922 or 1923, at a literature meeting, my father met my mother; they fell in love quickly and lastingly. But this wonderful fact did not mean that they could get married. Young Leah Vaisblat was also an atheist and a person of advanced views. When they married, my mother was 28, and my father 32. Even though she defied her father's will and married a gentile, my mother still remained Jewish. She never gave up her maiden name and remained Vaisblat for the rest of her life as a sign of honor, love and respect to her family.

This was a wonderful family, and I would like to tell you about it. Unfortunately, I know nothing about the history of the Vaisblat family prior to her father, my grandfather, who died before I was born. But I know a lot about him. My grandfather, Nukhim Yankelevich Vaisblat, was born in the middle of the 19th century - between 1850 and 1860 - in the town of Malin, in the Kiev region. Malin then was a typical Jewish town. The first education my grandfather received was in the cheder of Malin, and later he finished his studies at a school for rabbis, probably in Kiev. At a young age he became the rabbi of Malin's Jewish community and became famous for his knowledge and and even his quick wit.

In the 1880s, a so-called Eternal Jewish Calendar was widely circulated around the Malin, Berdichev, and Kiev Jewish communities. This calendar was calculated and compiled by my grandfather. The Berdichev printing house published it in 1887.

During the 1890s, Nukhim Vaisblat and his family moved to Kiev, where, according to my mother, he was the chief rabbi of the so-called Soldiers' Synagogue, a position he retained until the end of his life. According to other sources, he was the chief rabbi of the Merchants Synagogue of Kiev. It was a very good career for someone who came from the small town of Malin. Nukhim Vaisblat held high status not only within the Kiev Jewish community, but also outside it. The family of the Vaisblats settled in Zhilyanskaya Street, which was famous for the fact that only Jewish merchants of the first class and high clergy were allowed to settle there because of the "Jewish Pale" law.

Rabbi Nukhim had eleven children. He married when he was still living in Malin. He chose to marry a poor girl who worked as a twister at the rag workshop of the Malin Paper Factory. It was hard work that did not pay well. As a result of this work, my grandmother became ill with tuberculosis. She died from it many years later. My grandmother's name was Basya-Rakhuma Shloimovna; her maiden name was Lerman. She was born in Narodichi.

My grandparents and their eleven children occupied a seven-room flat. This flat belonged to them until the Revolution. They also had servants. After the revolution and before the death of my grandfather in 1925 and my grandmother in 1927, the government began to allow other people to live in the same flat (making it into what was known as a "communal flat") until finally, my grandparents' children had only two rooms left. The Vaisblat family was very Orthodox, keeping every Jewish tradition, holiday, and kashrut. All eleven children received a primary Jewish education in cheder. Later, eight sons and one daughter - my mother - also received a secular education. All eleven became famous and made contributions either to Jewish culture, or to secular science and culture. All of the siblings had different destinies, but one thing they shared in common - none of the rabbi's sons became a rabbi.

The first son of rabbi Nukhim and Basya Vaisblat was born in 1880 in Malin. He left Malin very early, after finishing secondary school. In Kiev he was trained as a builder and worked in construction. Yankel, later Yakov Vaisblat, lived an absolutely secular life; he was very handsome, he played cards and billiards, had lots of girl-friends, and saw many countries during his construction tours. He never had a family of his own. He died at the age of 44 from tuberculosis, catching the infection from his mother, my grandmother.

Their second son, Vladimir, was born two years after Yakov. He received not only a secular, but also a philosophical education in Germany. At the beginning of the 20th century, Vladimir became very famous in Russia as an expert in the arts, as a literary critic and also as a publisher. He was one of the sponsors of the World Exhibition of Kiev in 1913. Even though Vladimir was Jewish, the tsar gave him permission to act as an official representative of Russia at the World Book Exhibition in Leipzig in 1914. In addition, Vladimir was known for his knowledge of theater. He also collected porcelain, carpets and paintings. He died in 1944 from typhus after returning to Kiev from evacuation. He left his wife, Lubov, his son, Alexander, and a daughter, Iya, all of whom preserved his literary and artistic heritage for the rest of their lives.

There is an interesting episode concerning Vladimir in that family's legend. When he returned home from Germany in 1906, being a highly educated man and an atheist, he sat down at the dinner table without a yarmulke and prayer, and Rabbi Nukhim threw him out. No man was ever allowed to sit at the table in that house without a yarmulke and prayer. This is fascinating, because Rabbi Nukhim had paid for his children's higher secular education. (Since he wanted his Jewish children to go to a regular secondary school, he had to pay not only for their education, but also for the education of two poor Russian Orthodox students per each of his own children). Nevertheless, Rabbi Nukhim never denied financial support to his children,

and never forced them to choose any particular profession. But Jewish traditions were considered holy in that house.

Their third son, Solomon, became a famous dental surgeon. He graduated from the Medical Institute of Kiev in 1922 and later created the method of conduction anesthesia in stomatology. Since the 1930s Solomon was Professor of Stomatology at the Medical Institute of Kiev, and after World War II - the pro-rector of this Institute. Solomon Vaisblat had a large dental practice in Kiev both prior to and after the war. Moreover, he insisted that all of his brothers should become dentists as well, and Kiev is very familiar with the dental dynasty of the Vaisblats. During the course of the war - from 1941 through 1945 - Solomon Vaisblat worked as a military dental surgeon in the hospital of Stalinabad (now Dushanbe, the Soviet Republic of Tadjikistan). Solomon performed his first experiments with conduction anesthesia on himself, with the help of his younger brother, Aron. Aron then was the second person to experience the benefits of conduction anesthesia. Later, he, too, became a dental surgeon. Two of Solomon's daughters also became famous doctors in Kiev. Both of them are still living. One of them lives and works in Germany, the other in Australia. Solomon died in 1965 at the age of 79, having left a huge number of students and good memories of his life.

The eldest daughter in the Vaisblat family was my Aunt Genya. Her husband's last name was Genderfeld. She was born in 1890 and was the only child of the rabbi who was home-schooled in Jewish subjects. Jewish teachers taught her at home, and she was good at Hebrew, knew all the Jewish holidays, traditions, and recipes for Jewish cooking, in general everything that a Jewish woman ought to know. Genya could also speak and write French. In 1910-1915 she was considered one of the most beautiful Jewish girls of Kiev. At her wedding at the Brodsky Synagogue in Kiev there were so many guests, that the carriage wagons which brought them to the celebration occupied all the streets within a two block radius of the synagogue. In July 1941 Aunt Genya and her two children, my mother, and I were evacuated together, while Aunt Genya's husband, Israel Genderfeld, who actively propagated the idea that nobody needed to leave Kiev because the Germans were a highly cultured nation, stayed here and was subsequently killed in in Babi Yar[1]. Aunt Genya was the oldest girl in the family, so she brought up my mother, and was like a second grandmother to me. She died in Kiev in 1980 at the age of 90.

The next child in that family was my Uncle Israel. Under the influence and insistence of his elder brother Solomon, he became a doctor -a neuro-pathologist. Prior to the war he was Chief Neuro-pathologist at the Naval Hospital in Odessa. He spent the entire Second World War as a military doctor. After returning to Kiev as a Major in the Soviet Army, Israel could not find a job here. Due to a strange twist of fate he found himself at

Gagres, in the Caucasus, where he became Chief Neuro-pathologist at the "Ukraine" Health Center, which served the Soviet government officials. Israel was the first child in Rabbi Nukhim's family who married a Russian girl. This was sometime in the 1930s, after the death of the rabbi. His wife, Nadezhda Alexeyevna Kiseleva, moved back to her homeland, Siberia, after her husband died, and we lost communication with her and her children. Israel died in 1970 at the age of 70 plus.

The next child in the family was my Aunt Tsipa, Tsipora. Later, she was registered as Tsilya. After getting married, she became Tsilya Medvedeva. Despite her Jewish education and the Jewish lifestyle at home, she, just like her brother, married a Russian man. Her son, whose name I unfortunately don't remember, went deaf after an injury at the age of 4, and since there was no special school for the deaf in Kiev at that time, my aunt and her husband had to move to Leningrad where they could give their boy an education. It will sound strange, but that boy, being almost absolutely deaf physically, had an absolute musical ear. He played the violin wonderfully. Prior to the war, Aunt Tsilya gave birth to another child -a daughter named Maria. During the Second World War that whole family stayed in Leningrad and found themselves in that horrible siege by the Germans. The women survived, while the men - husband and son - died. After the war, Aunt Tsilya and her daughter Maria lived in Leningrad. They are no longer living.

The next one was my Uncle Yosif. He was born in 1897, and in 1920 or 1922 he graduated from the Arts College with honors. He thus "broke the tradition" of Nukhim's children, most of whom became either dentists or doctors. Elder brothers did not like such behavior from their younger brother, and tried so hard to influence Yosif that he had to leave his family and Kiev in 1922 and go to Moscow to pursue his interests. In Moscow Yosif graduated from the Art Institute. Prior to the war he was a famous Soviet artist, who had his own studio in Moscow and exhibitions almost every year. From 1941 through 1945 he lived in Kuibyshev, working as an artist and teaching several children's and young people's art clubs. After the war he returned to Moscow and then to Kiev, but in 1950 he was sent to the gulag. We still have no idea what he was arrested for. Probably, for a bad joke. He had to serve ten years of hard labor in Kolyma (East of Russia). Fortunately, he served only five years there, because times had changed, and he was released in 1956, not after rehabilitation, but for the then customary definition - "for health reasons." From 1958 on, he lived outside Moscow, working as a painter to the best of his abilities. He even married. During the day he was a happy man who smiled a lot, but at night only his relatives knew that he either did not sleep at all, or cried in his sleep. He lived to the age of 82, and if not for the camp, he probably would have lived much longer. He had no children.

My mother had two more brothers - Aron, who was born in 1900, and Emil, or Milya, who was born in 1915. I will talk about them together because their lives were similar and they died together. Aron became a dentist, worked as a senior lecturer at the Kiev Stomatology Institute, and had a private practice of his own. Emil was only able to graduate from the Stomatology Institute before the war broke out. Aron served as a military doctor at the front. In the first month of the war he found himself in the German encirclement and then in the Syrets camp for prisoners of war in Kiev, which was practically the same as Babi Yar. Emil turned out to be there as well. My mother and I learned about them after the war from those few prisoners of that Syrets concentration camp who survived - by the way, due to Aron and Emil. Both brothers worked as doctors and took part in an amazing, even unique procedure that was carried out by the Germans. In addition to the normal procedure employed by the Germans to identify Jewish males, which was pretty simple, due to Jewish circumcision, there was also a skull examination and special blood tests, which were supposed to make Jewish identification definitive. Aron and Emil were supposed to conduct such tests - and they did their best to help people escape being identified as Jews. I personally heard these stories after the war, but unfortunately, I was too young back then, so I don't remember the details. I am not even sure how the brothers died. They may have been shot and thus shared the destiny of all Babi Yar victims. Or they could have committed suicide, taking the poison they possessed as dentists. There was a custom at my grandfather's house: every dentist had in his possession gold and strong poisons. When they went to fight the fascists, they put strong poisons into the lockets they wore around their necks. Both brothers died without families. They left only good memories behind.

However, this was not the end of the story of the dentists from the family of the rabbi - there was one more son, Isaac, who attended cheder, then secondary school, and graduated from the Dental Department of the Medical Institute - this was already a tradition in the family; he became a dentist in Kiev's Military Hospital. He spent the war years as a military doctor. After the war he worked in Kiev, becoming renowned and loved by his patients. He died in 1996 at the age of 93, having seen the death of all of his many brothers and sisters. His wife, Maria Yefimovna Kats, united the line of Vaisblat with the line of Brodsky. She was a relative of the famous Brodsky who was a sugar plant owner, and she was certainly a dentist. Moreover, the son of Isaac and Maria, born in 1925 right after the death of Rabbi Nukhim Vaisblat and was named after him, also became a dentist.

My mother, Leah Vaisblat, Rabbi Vaisblat's tenth child, was born in Kiev in1905 and brought up there. After obtaining a Jewish education at home, she studied at a secondary school and then attended the artistic reading studio of Sladkopevtsev which was very famous and popular in Kiev in the 1920s. Then she worked in a library. By the way, she attended that

studio together with her brother Milya, who was also a very good artist, as good as his brother Yosif. For several years Milya attended the Jewish artistic studio "Esther" and only upon his brother's strong insistence became a dentist.

The turning point in my mother's life was her marriage to my father, Yevgeny Drobyazko. Her elder brothers, Solomon and Vladimir, waited ten years before they would speak with my gentile father, and certainly not until after the death of Rabbi Nukhim and Basya Vaisblat. The marriage of my parents was typical in its other characteristic: apart from uniting people from the Russian Orthodox and the Jewish Orthodox families, it also united two strong atheists. Nevertheless, this marriage was very happy for my father and my mother. From her marriage until her death, my mother's main profession was being the wife of the famous Ukrainian writer and translator Yevgeny Drobyazko, and serving as his literary secretary. Mother's Jewish education was also an advantage in this union: she actively helped father in his Yiddish to Ukranian translations. They translated Sholom Aleichem's works into Ukrainian together. Side by side, my parents lived a long life. They lived through the war, the evacuation, and through post-war hard times. My mother kept father's literary salon in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, and she preserved our house up to her death in 1997. She died at the age of 92.

Growing up during the war

The first things I remember relate to pre-war Kiev. We lived in the same seven room flat; there were seven of us: my parents, Genya and her husband, Milya, Yosif, and me. We lived in three rooms, while the four other rooms were occupied by our neighbors.

My mother's brothers and sisters surrounded me all my life, and I remember most of them pretty well. They all spoke Russian at home, which also became my native language, but Aunt Genya, when she was excited, combined Russian and Yiddish words, and the more excited she grew, the more Yiddish words she used. The adults also spoke Yiddish when they wanted to keep a secret from me. But I learned to understand them very quickly. This understanding came to me automatically - nobody ever taught me Yiddish on purpose. Our neighbors were gentiles, but our relations with them were fine.

At the beginning of the war I was four years old. I remember bombings and people running to shelters. The sound of sirens and bombings made me pass out and get very sick. I began to lose a lot of weight, and doctors insisted that I should be evacuated from Kiev immediately.

In August 1941 we were evacuated from Kiev, having left behind our relatives and my two babysitters - Lyalya and Galya. It was impossible for people to evacuate on their own, so we were evacuated with the Kiev

military hospital, where my uncle Isaac worked. My mother and I, Aunt Genya and her two children, as well as Uncle Isaac's family - we were all put on the medical train to Kharkov. Despite the red crosses on our railcars we were constantly being bombed. German planes were flying low over the train, I could clearly see their pilots. I looked at one of them, and he looked directly at me, smiling ... and bombed us.

It took us a surprisingly short time to get to Kharkov. Life there was almost like before the war: flowers were sold, music was played, only, antiaircraft guns stood on the roofs. But the relative quiet did not last long. Soon afterwards bombing raids began there, too, and I again was losing weight and passing out.

We had communications with Kiev then. We learned that practically all the Vaisblats had left Kiev for various places: the front or evacuation.

At the end of September, right before our departure further eastward, my father came from Kiev to Kharkov on foot. He had spent all that time as a military correspondent of the Writers' Union outside Kiev. When on September 18 he returned to Kiev, he found out that it was no longer possible to evacuate in any normal way, so he packed and went to Kharkov on foot. It took him 14 days. Considering the conditions of those times and his extremely bad eyesight, it was a real miracle he made it. Father brought a special paper for work in Novosibirsk, and so we travelled there by train.

I remember that road as a nightmare. There were a lot of bombing raids. My physical and nervous condition grew even worse. In the town of Votkins, Udmurtia, far from Novosibirsk (Russia), we got off the train and spent the whole evacuation period there. My father found a job at the newspaper of the "Arsena" plant. Gradually, I recovered. I even went to school there and finished first grade prior to our return to Kiev.

During the first two years of evacuation my parents lost a lot of weight because of lack of food and the different climate. They also lost almost all of their teeth. But I don't remember being too hungry there.

Very soon I began to understand the Udmurtian language of the local population, but there was only the Russian school in the town. Soon, the Russian-speaking population multiplied and was greater than the local, and Russian was heard everywhere. I heard no other language spoken besides those two in Votkinsk.

In 1942 my parents already knew about the shooting in Babi Yar. I don't know how this information reached them. Aunt Genya cried hard over her husband's death. During the summer of 1942 they also learned about the death of Aron and Milya Vaisblats. I remember how hysterical my mother and aunt were at the news.

Then we were moved to a two-floor house. It had more room but was very uncomfortable and cold. Our main staple food during evacuation was pumpkin in every possible form. Very seldom we bought milk, which was so frozen that it could be taken home in a sack. Bread was baked with sawdust, then bran, and finally, machine oil. It was practically impossible to eat such bread, but even that was hard to get on bread cards. We could trade additional bread, milk and even bear meat for gold with the local population (we still had some gold left). We could also trade gold for women's underwear, which was very popular among the locals, because the local girls wore the slips as ball-dresses on holidays. My parents were paid with money for their work, but it was practically impossible to buy anything with this money. Paper money was was practically worthless for anything but wallpaper. However, sometimes we could buy pieces of bread and food cards with this money at the market, and then receive slices of bread and bits of other foods at the store.

We lived in Votkinsk almost up to mid-1945. Victory and the end of the war brought practically no change in our lifestyle or diet. I remember that Victory Day was celebrated in Votkinsk. But again, it was impossible to return to Kiev on our own, just as it was impossible to leave it before. We needed an invitation. Fortunately, my father received this special invitation, and I went to the second grade in Kiev in September.

It took us about sixteen days to get to Kiev by train. The main problem on the way was the presence of thieves: homeless teenagers climbed onto the roofs of railcars and put iron rods through the open windows, hooking and taking out whatever they could. Sometimes they even took babies out this way. In general, this was the time when I first encountered bandits and anarchy.

Post-war

I remember that Kiev was in ruins in September 1945. Our flat was occupied by the personal driver of the State Security Minister, so it was closed to us. For some time we rented a tiny flat on Malo-Podvalna Street, and then moved to a semi-basement of the writers' house in Lenin Street. This semi-basement was soon occupied by three professors' families.

To me, our flat in that semi-basement looked like a palace after the tiny flat we had rented on Malo-Podvalna immediately after evacuation. There were seven of us living there, and our "family" comprised a unique combination of nations, cultures and post-war lives.

The second wife of my father's father, Anton Drobyazko, stayed in Kiev during the war to wait for her husband. She hoped he would not be shot by the KGB. She was left alone in a three-room flat. But she was afraid to live alone, so she allowed her laundress to live with her. Her laundress brought her own sister to live with them. After the war, her sister's

husband, who had lost a leg in the war, returned to her, and so all four of them lived in those three rooms. In 1945 someone remembered that grandfather Anton's wife was "an enemy of the people" and was supposed to be thrown out of Kiev. She was spared only due to her old age. But she and her three "guests" were left to live only in one room, while two bigger rooms were given to the chief of the house management department. And a month later we arrived. In the small room we slept like this: grandmother on one bed, the invalid and his wife on another bed; the laundress on the floor between the two beds, while my parents and I slept under the table. We lived like that until 1949. The strange thing is that the atmosphere in that flat was quiet and, I can even say, friendly. Even the anti-Semitic excesses of the invalid did not break the peace, though sometimes he would get drunk and threaten to "get even with all the Jews". By the way, when we finally moved to the writers' house, he personally helped us to settle there and fix all the wooden details of our new home, for we became his "Jewish friends".

I can say that this was the first situation where I first realized I was Jewish. But there was another side to that process. The school I was transferred to in connection with moving to Lenin Street when I was already in the sixth grade, was 80% Jewish. By that time I fully understood what this could mean.

The 1950s were coming, and all of our many relatives from the Vaisblat family had returned to Kiev. We had a lot of victims in the war. In the beginning of 1950, apart from my mother and Aunt Genya, only two of their brothers lived in Kiev - Solomon and Isaac, with their families. Financially, they lived much better than we did. But I don't remember receiving any considerable aid from them, probably because of the proud nature of my mother.

In 1950, Uncle Yosif was suddenly arrested, which ruined my well-measured life. It was a tragedy for our family. The tragedy was aggravated by the fact that by that time, all of the surviving Vaisblats, except for the sisters, had already joined the Communist Party. Moreover, all of them were born into the family of a rabbi, and Vladimir and Isaac used to be BUND[2] members in the past. This combination was too hard to bear. So, all the brother-Communists went to their party organizations and submitted a written denial from their brother Yosif. It was the only way for them to preserve their families, their careers, and their lives. My mother was the only person who did not do it without risking the life of her family. She wrote no denial because she was not a Communist, and because she was the wife of a Soviet writer, that is, a man involved in the Soviet ideology. My mother and father had two packed bags ready in case they would be arrested. They expected to be arrested at any time, but fortunately, they never were. My mother was the only person in that family, who sent regular letters and

packages to Uncle Yosif in prison. All of this changed the atmosphere in our house and made me grow up faster. After finishing school and technical college I tried to find a job in one of the highly controlled organizations. That's where they found out the nationality of my mother - and they immediately rejected me. The shock was especially great due to the contrast with my last school and technical college, which were 80% Jewish. We had both Jewish students and teachers, and Russian and Ukrainian children felt comfortable only when they imitated our mentality, jokes, pronunciation, etc. I never heard the word "kike"[3] at school. I once heard this word said against me when I went to the ninth grade, I believe, and I beat up my offender within an inch of his life. Thus, anti-Semitism became real for me, too. But neither my friends nor I had any parallels with the fascists in our minds. I also had a way of escape, a certain national niche, because I was first the son of a famous Ukrainian writer, and only then the son of a Jewish mother. Being Jewish was a matter of secondary importance when I went to school and to college.

Up to grade 8, I was an excellent student. And then my sphere of interests changed radically and I did not want to study any more. I was more interested in sports, friends and movies. We would go to movies and watch every available one. But we did not go to watch any common movie in any common cinema. The Writers' Union, where I could go with my father's pass, showed so-called "closed" movies, which the general Soviet audience was forbidden to see for a very long time. I finished school in 1954 with not very good marks and certainly failed at the exams to enter the architecture department of the Construction Institute. I worked for one year, then tried to take the same exams again, and failed a second time.

After my second failure I tried to enroll in the architecture college, but I could only enroll in the department of industrial and civil construction. College saved me from mandatory army service, but gave me nothing information-wise, having practically passed by me. I finally finished my studies there in 1958 and received my diploma. It spoke nothing to my heart or to my mind.

In order to avoid army service, I tried to find a job in military or paramilitary organizations, but nobody wanted to take me due to the "bad" last name of my mother, which showed that I was Jewish. Due to the common efforts of our relatives and friends, such a job was finally found, and a few years later the problem of my army service was no longer relevant, because my parents retired on pension and I was their only provider. This is when I finally got real work at the Academy of Architecture and began to prepare for an institute. I entered the Construction Institute in 1960 at the age of 23. At that time I was already married and had a young son. So, naturally, I could study only at evening classes, combining work and studies. Nevertheless, I was so eager to study that I graduated from the

Institute with honors.

I married at the age of 22. I met my future wife, Nelya Aronovna Kantorovich, at a Komsomol[4] meeting at the Academy of Architecture. She was not even 20 at the time. However, our parents, both hers and mine, received positively the news of our desire to marry so early.

But we had no place to stay. First, we rented two small rooms in Klovsky Street, then at our house, from the writer Riva Balyasnaya, who returned from the GULAG in 1962 just as many other residents of our writers' house had. In the 1950s people were arrested from every family that lived in that house. By the beginning of the 1960s, all those who survived the camps and prisons, returned. There were not many. I remember only three Jewish families who returned.

Nobody spoke about Israel at the time. Israel as a reality and as my historical homeland was revealed to me only in 1969 due to the efforts of a friend and colleague. But even prior to that, I was learning some Jewish traditions and history through the family of my wife, starting from the fact that we had an almost Jewish wedding: no chupa, of course, but a Jewish orchestra in a restaurant. It was very seldom done in the 1960s and required a lot of courage.

I should say that the national climate at my work and at my wife's work was quite bearable. The next wave of anti-Semitism reached us through our young son Alexey. I remember when he was six years old he ran to me at the health center, and I first thought he was running because he missed me so much. But as it turned out, he ran to me with the request to show my passport to his friends and prove that I was not Jewish. When I was away, his friends teased him as being a "kike." In general, judging from my son's experience, I believe the anti-Semitism of the 1960s and 1970s was even crueler, but the reaction of the Jewish youth was different. From about the age of ten, Alexey has been wearing the Star of David (5x6 cm), thus far from hiding, but actively demonstrating his Jewish identity. And certainly, unlike me, he knew at a very young age what Babi Yar was all about.

I can say that the 1960s were the years of my Jewish self-identification. And then the 1970s came with their official policy of anti-Semitism, which was provoked, as I understand it now, by the changes in the attitude of the Soviet government towards Israel. After the Six Day War, Israel became not only a forbidden topic of discussion in Soviet society, but also a country, which had to be reproached in every way possible. By the end of the 1970s I was firmly convinced that I would move to Israel. I delayed temporarily because I was waiting for my friends, who were serving in the army or worked in secret establishments at the time. We were planning to leave together with them some time later. Time passed by. Some of my friends left. Not one of our relatives left, though - all of them had

pretty good lives here. Nelya and I also had no economic reasons to leave. We had only ideological and emotional reasons. I was absolutely convinced and sincerely believed that all the Jews should live in Israel. But I had no real opportunity to leave then. My mother, who was surely Jewish in her identification, categorically opposed all talks about emigration. She believed her homeland was here. The enthusiasm of my wife also grew cold with time.

In the 1990s, the priorities of my plans, as well as the plans of my wife, were gradually moving towards our son, his interests and abilities. He finished his studies at the sports boarding school and then at the Institute of Physical Culture. For some time he was involved in big sports (boat-racing), but had to quit for health reasons. For a while he had no work and was very down morally. We were fearful for his future, but strange as it may sound, it was the army service that I once tried to avoid that helped him get up on his feet again. So, our son found his calling in the army service as a paramedic. Genetics is a great thing! In the army he worked in different offices as a paramedic. I believe this is what he really liked in life. But he refused to study at the Medical Institute and instead entered the modern business world. His national and social orientation was moving constantly towards his Jewishness, and now his friends are mostly Jewish. I don't exclude the possibility that this was caused by former complexes and offences he experienced as a child. Even now he wears a huge Star of David, given to him as a present by his gentile wife. As far as I know, Alexey fully identifies himself with the Jews, but economically, socially and morally he is rooted in this country, with its difficulties and problems. Obviously, his view of this country's future is more optimistic than mine.

Very recently I started thinking that maybe he is right. It happened on Hanukkah in December 2001, while I was listening to my 4-year-old granddaughter Zhenya, Alexey's daughter, reading a poem in Yiddish. First, her parents (her Jewish father and gentile mother) brought her to the artistic reading studio, and now my wife and I, her Jewish grandparents, are taking her there. We are doing our best to inspire a love of reading in her, so that she may inherit our library.

Our current activities are now very important to my wife and me. After retiring on pension four years ago, we joined the Jewish Studies Institute. I am now working on the history of Jewish writers in Ukraine, while my wife is working on the history of Jewish theaters.

Glossary

1 Babiy Yar - the location of the first mass shooting of the Jewish population, carried out openly by the Germans on September 29-30, 1941, in

Kiev. After the war, people spoke in whispers about Jewish murders, because according to the official version of the Soviet government, the German Nazis killed Soviet people of different nationalities in equal portions. Whoever expressed another opinion risked being thrown into prison.

2 BUND ("Union" in Yiddish) - a Jewish political organization created in 1897 at the constituent congress of Jewish Social Democratic groups in Vilno

At the 1st congress of Russian Social-Democratic Workers' Party, BUND joined the party as an autonomous organization, which was independent only in questions concerning the Jewish proletariat. After some conflicts in 1903, BUND withdrew from that party and joined the Zionist movement "Poaley Tsion". BUND demanded that a cultural-national autonomy be created. In March 1921, BUND decided to join Russian Communist Party of Bolsheviks, which led to its self-elimination.

3 Kike is an offensive term for Jew

'Ki' is a common ending of names of Jews who lived in foreign countries.

4 Komsomol - the Communist youth organization, created by the Communist Party, so that the state would be in control of the ideological upbringing and spiritual development of the youth almost up to the age of 30