

# Fenia Kleiman

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Chernovtsy

Ukraine

Interviewer: Ella Levitskaya

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Fenia Kleiman and her husband Esiah live in a comfortable two-bedroom apartment in the center of Chernovtsy. Their apartment is shinningly clean and there are many plants around. They have heavy wooden furniture of light shades set against the background of light-colored walls. The apartment is very cozy and one can tell that Fenia takes good care of her home. She is a short and hot-tempered woman. She is very quick in her reactions. She looks small sitting beside her husband. Esiah is the chief editor at the Hesed newspaper office and Fenia assists him with his work. There is love and mutual respect between them. They are volunteers with Hesed visiting patients in hospital and at their homes. Fenia and her husband are very friendly and sociable. Their former pupils call and visit them, which shows their positive influence on people. It was difficult for Fenia to speak about her life in the ghetto. She gave a life history interview to the Spielberg Foundation as well.

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## Family background

My grandfather on my father's side, Pinkhas Trachtenbroit, was born in the town of Briceni, Bessarabia [1](#), which belonged to Russia before 1918 and then became part of Romania. My grandfather's father, Duvid-Leiba Trachtenbroit, had many children: 12 or maybe even more. I didn't know any of my grandfather's relatives. My grandfather was born in the 1860s. My grandmother, Motel Trachtenbroit, nee Broonshtein, was born in Mogilyov- Podolsk, Vinnitsa region, in the 1860s. Her father's name was Joseph. I didn't know any of my grandmother's relatives and I don't know how my grandparents met either.

Motel and Pinkhas had seven children: four sons and three daughters. I knew them all. Their older daughter Adel - her Jewish name was Eidl - was born in 1890. My father Aron followed in 1893. In 1895 the twins Jacob and Rieva were born. Tsylia followed in 1898. The next child, Grigory, was born in 1902, and the youngest, Abram, followed in 1905.

My father told me little about his childhood. His father owned a small stationery store. My grandmother was a housewife. My grandfather's store provided enough income for them to make their living and afford education for their children. The house was built with a narrow façade to save money. The front door of the house led to their store. Then there was a room occupied by

Adel and Yuzik, another room was my grandparents' bedroom and then came a living room, where we had meals on Jewish holidays. The room next to that was a big kitchen, and there was a storeroom near the kitchen.

My grandparents' family was religious. I don't know whether my grandfather prayed at home since we didn't live with them, but on Saturdays and Jewish holidays my grandparents went to the synagogue. They celebrated Sabbath and Jewish holidays and followed the kashrut. The boys didn't study at cheder, but had a melamed, who came to teach them Hebrew, Yiddish, the Torah and the Talmud at home. The sons and daughters received Jewish education at home. They had another teacher that taught them Russian and mathematics. My grandfather wanted his children to get a good education. At the age of nine they went to a Russian grammar school, which they finished successfully.

After finishing grammar school Adel married Boris Fukelman, a Jewish man. Their son Joseph, who was called Yuzik in the family, was born in 1917. Adel had a hard life. After the Russian Revolution of 1917 [2](#) Adel's husband left for Russia with Adel's younger sister Rieva. Since then nobody in the family was allowed to mention Rieva's name. Adel couldn't remarry since she wasn't divorced. Adel and her son lived with her parents. After finishing grammar school Yuzik became a violinist.

After finishing grammar school Jacob and Tsylya entered university in Odessa. The Revolution of 1917 divided the territory of Russia: Odessa was part of Russia and the place where we lived belonged to Romania. We couldn't correspond with them since Soviet authorities didn't allow correspondence with relatives abroad [3](#). We had no information about them until 1940 when Bessarabia joined the USSR. Jacob visited his parents. He worked as an engineer in the flour grinding industry. His wife's name was Esphir; they didn't have any children. Jacob didn't tell us about his life in the USSR. When Jacob left my grandparents gave him presents for his family.

It was a surprise for them to receive a letter from Dusia, the daughter of Rieva and Boris. She was asking them to send her some presents, since she was their granddaughter, too. The postman gave this letter to Adel. She read it and cried bitterly. My grandparents were sorry for her, but they sent Dusia presents, of course. After the Great Patriotic War [4](#) my father received a letter from Rieva, which he tore apart without even reading it. He couldn't forgive her for betraying her sister Adel. Rieva and her family lived in Odessa.

My father's brother Jacob and his sister Tsylya kept in touch with Rieva. Later they moved to Bobruysk. In 1949 my parents and I went to Odessa to visit our relatives. That's when I met my cousin Dusia. My father's sister Tsylya graduated from university. I don't know what profession she got, though. She was married. Her husband's name was Naum. They had two sons: Yuri and Felix. Unfortunately, we lost track of them.

My father's brother Grigoriy received commercial education in Yassy. After finishing his studies he returned to Briceni where he worked as an accountant and then as a cashier in the bank. After the Great Patriotic War he lived in Chernovtsy. In the early 1970s he left for Israel where he died in 1980.

My father's younger brother, Abram, studied at university in Bucharest. His older brother supported him financially. Abram became an engineer. He worked in Bucharest. Abram married a Jewish girl. After 1940 we had no contacts with him since Soviet authorities didn't allow correspondence with

relatives abroad. I don't know anything about his life. His son lives in Moscow. He is a Professor and Doctor of Technical Sciences. We keep in touch with him.

After finishing grammar school in 1907 my father volunteered to the tsarist army where he served for two years. I know that Adel's future husband, Boris Fukelman, was his fellow comrade. My father returned to Briceni and decided to continue his studies in Odessa. He entered the Medical Faculty at Odessa University.

I didn't know my mother's parents. They died before I was born. My grandfather's name was Khaskel Zilberman. He and my grandmother Feina - I was named after her - came from Briceni. My grandmother was born in 1868. We had portraits of her parents, my great-grandparents Moishe and Mindl. My grandfather Khaskel owned a wholesale fabric store. His family was wealthy. My grandmother Feina was a housewife. They had housemaids.

My grandparents had two children: Joseph, born in 1886, and my mother Mina, born in 1898. My mother only told me shortly before she died that Joseph was her stepbrother. His mother was my grandfather's first wife. Joseph was a shy and humble man.

My mother's family was religious. They celebrated Sabbath and Jewish holidays. My grandparents went to the synagogue on Saturdays and Jewish holidays. I know about it from my mother. The children were educated at home. My mother had fluent Hebrew so she could read the prayers. She could also read and write in Yiddish. They both finished grammar school. I don't know where Joseph continued his education. My mother studied at the high school for girls in Odessa. She met my father in Odessa in 1915. They both came from Briceni, but hadn't known each other before. They met by chance. Someone from Briceni came to Odessa. My father and mother's parents sent parcels for their children with him. He got in touch with my mother and father to tell them to pick up what he had for them. My parents came to see him in the hotel and that's where they met. They fell in love with one another. The Revolution brought an abrupt end to their studies and they returned to Briceni.

My father and my mother were dating for almost eight years. Grandmother Feina had breast cancer, so my mother couldn't get married because she had to take care of her mother. She loved her mother and wanted to spend as much time with her as possible. My father was a frequent guest in my mother's house. When her older brother got married my father was made responsible for the fluden because when fluden was made for a celebration, the proves had to be watched by a 'master of ceremony'. Joseph had a luxurious wedding. There were many guests that enjoyed themselves; they were dancing and singing while klezmer musicians were playing.

Grandmother Feina died in 1922. She was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Briceni. My parents got married after the traditional mourning of one year. They had a modest wedding. They got married under a chuppah at home. A rabbi conducted the wedding ceremony. There were only close friends and relatives at the wedding. My parents lived at my mother parents' home along with Joseph and his family.

Grandfather Khaskel died in 1929. He was buried in accordance with Jewish traditions in the Jewish cemetery. My mother and her brother divided the house in halves. Each family got four rooms and a kitchen. We had a door in our living room leading to Joseph's apartment. Joseph also inherited my grandfather's store. He turned it into a retail store.

My father worked as an accountant at the buttry. A few years later he became an accountant with the Jewish community where he worked until Bessarabia joined the USSR in 1940. My mother was a housewife. My father hired a housemaid called Olga, a Russian woman. She lived with our family until the Great Patriotic War.

## Growing up

I was born on 3rd January 1931. My Jewish name is Feina. I was an only child. I was much loved and cared for. Joseph's older daughter was born shortly after grandmother Feina died. She was named Feina. His younger daughter, Sarah, was born one year after me. We were growing up together and lived as one big family.

The population of Briceni was about 10,000 people. There was a big Jewish community. There were about 6,000 Jews in town. The Jews were mostly involved in crafts and trades. There were no national conflicts or pogroms [5](#) in town.

There was a choral synagogue and a number of smaller synagogues in Briceni. My parents visited the choral synagogue. In the small synagogues there was a special area with a small window for women through which they could listen to the rabbi's sermon. There were a few shochetim in town. There was a shochet's house across the street from where we lived. His wife, Rivka Leibusha, was my mother's close friend. When my mother made pastries she always took some to Rivka's family. Rivka's husband worked as a shochet before Jewish holidays and for the rest of the year he was a chazzan. We liked to listen to him when he rehearsed his singing. His children were my friends. There were two other shochetim in town and people could also buy kosher meat from them.

There was a market in Briceni, but we never went there, so I don't know what it was like. We had a big balcony with two benches where my father liked to sit early in the morning when the farmers brought their products to the market. My father used to stop them to buy what he needed: onions, fruit and vegetables. He also bought bundles of bagels that he used to hang on a lamp.

I loved my grandparents on my father's side dearly. My grandfather Pinkhas was a short, slim man. He wore elegant suits, light shirts and ties. He wore a hat to go out. He worked at the store and I didn't see much of him. Grandmother Motel often came to see us. On Friday mornings she made challah and she always brought me one. I always looked forward to seeing my grandmother and ran to her to hug her as soon as I heard our housemaid opening the door. My grandmother loved my mother and me. She cared about my mother as much as she would have about her own daughter. My mother often had angina and Grandmother Motel stayed with us through the period of my mother's illness. She looked after my mother until she got well and slept on the sofa beside my mother's bed.

My grandmother didn't wear a shawl at home. She didn't have a wig either. She wore a shawl to go out. She wore long skirts and loose shirts: dark colors in winter and light ones in summer. In winter she wrapped herself in a thick woolen plaid instead of wearing a winter coat.

We celebrated Sabbath our own way at home. My mother lit candles and prayed in the evening. She knew all prayers in Hebrew by heart. We prayed for the health of the family members. Besides, my mother always recited the Kaddish for grandmother Feina, although, according to Jewish law, this must be done on death anniversaries. My mother said she felt the need to do it. We had a

festive dinner: gefilte fish and challah. I can't remember if my parents strictly observed the law that says you're not allowed to work [on Sabbath]. Anyway, we had dinner cooked and lamps lit by the housemaids.

Before the Great Patriotic War we had kerosene lamps. Shortly before the war a small power plant was built in Briceni. Uncle Joseph had electric power supplied to his part of the house, but my parents couldn't afford it. Kerosene lamps required significant maintenance with cleaning and adding kerosene. This work was done by our housemaid.

We didn't follow the kashrut. My father even bought pork ham, which he liked a lot. My father's parents did follow the kashrut. Grandmother Motel knew that we didn't have kosher food and only ate cookies when she came to our house.

Pesach was my favorite holiday. We had a special set of dishes for Pesach in the cupboard and kitchen utensils in a box in the attic. We didn't have bread in the house throughout the eight days of Pesach. I remember matzah being brought to the house in a big basket. My mother made traditional pastries and bagels for Pesach, potato pancakes stuffed with ground meat - I make those, too - matzah pudding with eggs, chicken broth, which we had every day, meat stew and borscht.

My mother's brother Joseph conducted the seder and we joined their family for the seder. Grandfather Pinkhas and Grandmother Motel invited us for at least a second seder, but I preferred to have it with Uncle Joseph. I went there with a small pillow to sit on. It was marvelous to listen to my uncle saying prayers. I wish I had joined my grandfather's family for seder and heard my grandfather Pinkhas conducting it.

On Purim all my grandparents' children who lived in Briceni got together at their parents' home. My grandmother made delicious food. I had a moneybox where I saved money for Purim to give it to needy Jews. Purimshpil actors came to the houses to perform and they also received money for their performances. Later in the evening, when we sat down to have a Purim seudah [meal], musicians came to the house. I always looked forward to them.

We also celebrated Sukkot. We arranged a sukkah in the storeroom of our house. There was a folding ceiling in this room. On Sukkot we brought a table there and had meals.

On Rosh Hashanah my parents went to the synagogue, and on Yom Kippur they fasted and went to the synagogue for the whole day. We had guests and went to visit our relatives. Before Yom Kippur we conducted the kapores ritual. I had the kapores conducted for me by my mother. She turned a white hen over my head. This hen was given to a poor family afterwards. I had a white towel covering my head to avoid a 'chicken surprise'. Children didn't fast on Yom Kippur. As for Chanukkah, the only thing I remember was that my cousins and I got some money.

We spoke Russian in the family. I studied Yiddish from the age of five. I had a teacher of Yiddish and another teacher of Russian, who came to teach me at home. I had many Jewish friends just because we had Jewish neighbors. My cousin Sarah was my closest friend.

When I turned seven my mother refused to send me to school. She thought I was too young and tiny. My teacher of Russian began to teach me Romanian and mathematics. My teacher's brother ran a private Jewish grammar school. I passed exams for the 1st grade and became a pupil of the

2nd grade. After finishing the 2nd grade I went to a state-run Romanian school for boys and girls. My father believed that it would be easier for me to continue my education after finishing a Romanian school. Our housemaid Olga took me to school and stayed there until classes were over.

We studied general subjects in Romanian at school. Every morning before classes started, we said a prayer. There was a Christian icon in the corner of our classroom. All Christian children were on their knees while saying the Lord's Prayer. Jewish children kept sitting. We didn't go to school on Pesach or Easter, since the school was closed during Easter. On Pesach only Jewish children had holidays. The other children were jealous about this privilege we, Jewish children, had.

There was no anti-Semitism at school. I made friends with Russian children, too. I shared my desk with a Russian boy and we were friends. He visited me when I missed school and had tea with cookies or chocolate when he came to our house. I finished my 4th year at school in 1940.

In summer my parents rented a summerhouse with a garden and took me there for vacation. My mother stayed with me at the summerhouse. Olga made lunch and dinner and brought it to the house. My father worked during the day and only joined us in the evening. The last time we rented a summerhouse was in 1939. There was a radio there and we listened to programs from Moscow.

Uncle Grigory, who lived with his parents, got a radio around 1939. When I got the invitation for his son's birthday, Grigory promised to show me little men playing and singing inside the radio, and, I believed it was true. Adel's son Joseph sympathized with communists. He liked the idea of communism, but he didn't attend any political groups' meetings. He made a detector radio with headphones and also listened to programs from the Soviet Union. Soviet newspapers and magazines were sold in my grandfather's store. My parents also believed that there was a just and fair society in the USSR.

When we heard that the USSR demanded Bessarabia from the Romanian authorities we were very happy. We believed that we would live in a realm of justice and equal rights. When Soviet troops entered Briceni at the end of June 1940 people met them with flowers and great enthusiasm. My cousin Yuzik organized band rehearsals in my grandmother's dining room. They rehearsed The International to meet the Soviet troops. Grandfather Pinkhas hung up a portrait of Stalin in his shop window. Later people began to understand that things were different from how they were presented back then. The Soviet authorities didn't touch my grandfather or Uncle Joseph since they didn't have employees in their stores and weren't referred to as 'exploiters'. However, all goods in stores were sold out in no time and there were no new supplies. The storeowners used to purchase goods in Bucharest, but they weren't allowed to go there any longer. Stores were soon closed. Joseph got a new job as a janitor and my father became an accountant at the health department in Briceni.

Many wealthier people were arrested and exiled to Siberia. My father's cousin, Abram Trachtenbroit, was one of them. Abram owned fields and had employees working for him. When he was taken away from town many people came into streets and begged the authorities to let him go, but it was in vain. He returned home in 1946, but in 1948, during the campaign against 'cosmopolitans' [6](#) he got to know that the authorities were planning to arrest him again. He and his wife took poison to commit suicide, but they were rescued and sent into exile to Siberia anyway. They returned in the 1960s.



Our housemaid Olga spoke Ukrainian and I learned the language from her. She made traditional Ukrainian food at Easter and went to church. The Soviet authorities arranged a meeting for housemaids and servants and tried to explain to them that wealthy masters were their exploiters and that the Soviet power granted them freedom. Olga ignored what they said and stayed with us. She lived in our family until the Great Patriotic War began.

In September 1940 I went to the 4th grade of a Russian school. The Soviet authorities ordered that children went to the same class for another year to learn Russian. I liked studying in a Russian school. Since I was fluent in Russian I had no problems at school. I became a pioneer. We swore the pioneers' oath, got pioneer neckties and were greeted with flowers. I liked the ceremony. I also liked celebrating New Year's. We prepared a concert. I got a costume and recited a poem about winter. My parents were in the audience. We were applauded and called back on stage again and again.

### During the War

In June 1941 we were planning to go to the summerhouse for vacation. When the Great Patriotic War began on 22nd June 1941 it divided our life into two periods: the one before and the one after the war. I remember refugees from Lipkani and Sekiryany, which were closer to the border with Romania, coming to Briceni on the first days of the war. People let them stay in their houses. Joseph's sister-in-law, Molka, and her children came to stay with us. During one air raid my parents hugged me and each other: they thought that if we were destined to die it was better to die together. Later we began to hide in the basement during air raids. One of the bombs fell near our house and when we came out of the basement I saw many splinters covering the area. That's all I experienced of the war. It went past our small town somehow.

We couldn't evacuate since we didn't have any transportation. Only my father's brother Grigory and his family managed to evacuate: he was chief cashier in the bank and they evacuated with the bank. He lived with his parents, but he left them in my parents' care. My parents also wanted to evacuate, but they were afraid to go with their old parents. We stayed in Briceni. Older people, who had survived World War I remembered Germans as civilized people and thought they weren't likely to do any harm. We didn't know what fascism was back then.

At the beginning of July Romanian troops came to Briceni. They declared that local people were given three days to rob and kill Jews. We locked our house and went to my father's cousin Isaac, who lived on the outskirts of town. He had cornfields near his house where we stayed for three days. After that we lived with Isaac. My mother only had a small purse with her into which she had put a thermometer, just in case I should get a fever, and a few pills. She also had her jewelry with her: diamond earrings, a golden watch and a golden chain that she had been given by her mother. My mother had thick hair that she wore plaited and she hid her jewelry in her hair.

About a hundred people were killed within these three days. Then the pogroms were over, but Romanian soldiers came to the houses demanding valuables. They came to Isaac's house, too. My father gave them his golden watch. My parents went to see what had happened to our house. There was nothing left there. Even the family photo albums were gone. We had a few photographs returned to us after the war.

About two weeks passed. In the middle of July 1941 the Romanian commandment ordered all Jews to come to the main square. My parents and I, my grandparents, Adel and her son Yuzik and my mother's brother Joseph, his wife and two daughters went there. All Jews were ordered to go in the direction of Sekiryany [50 km from Briceni]. My grandparents could hardly walk. It was hot and we were desperate of exhaustion and fear. In Sekiryany we were ordered to stay in abandoned houses. We stayed there for a while. My mother gave away her jewelry in exchange for food. Later we continued on our way until we reached Transnistria [7](#), across the Dnestr River. Joseph and his family happened to be in another group and we lost track of them. We only returned to Briceni in 1944, and a neighbor, who was in the same group of Jews as Joseph and his family, said that Joseph and his wife perished on the way to Kopaygorod and that their daughters died later. Nobody could tell us where and how.

My grandmother Motel died near the village of Vendichany. My father and two local villagers buried her on the roadside near Vendichany. My father made a note for himself about the place where my grandmother was buried, but when we went to Vendichany after the war the village was destroyed so much that it was impossible to find her grave.

We reached Kopaygorod, in Vinnitsa region, 150 kilometers from home. Many Jewish families lived in Kopaygorod, and we were put into the houses of local Jews. This area hadn't been turned into a ghetto at that time yet. There was no barbed wire, but we couldn't leave either because we were encircled by Romanian soldiers, who guarded us. Jews kept arriving and were accommodated in Jewish houses in Kopaygorod. We got accommodation in a room with three other families. I remember a little girl called Ada, the daughter of one of these families, who continuously repeated one phrase, 'Mama, Ada wants a piece of bread'. She was only silent when she slept. When I think about that period I recall her thin, monotonous voice.

I have dim memories of this period. The sanitary conditions were terrible. We didn't have water to wash ourselves. I had my hair shaved, but it didn't help against lice. We were starving. The only food we had were frozen beets. I can't remember where we got them from. The streets in Kopaygorod were patrolled by armed Romanian soldiers. People weren't allowed to leave the town and it was dangerous to even go out into the streets.

In summer 1942 we were taken to a forest along with local Jews. There was an area fenced with barbed wire where we stayed until fall, when groups of Jews were taken to the ghetto in Kopaygorod. We got a small room in the house of Leiba and Rivka Shnaiderman. A Romanian family by the name of Pasternak lived in another room of this house. When the owners of the house returned from the forest we moved into the even smaller kitchen. There was a stove and a bed on which we all slept. The owners of the house had some food stocks and I can still remember how dizzy I got when they made cereals.

There was a typhoid epidemic in the village. My mother fell ill and then my father and I got typhoid. There was no medication. Many people died. We had high fever. When we regained consciousness we were told that my grandfather Pinkhas and my father's sister Adel had died of typhoid. Every morning dead corpses were picked up and put onto a horse-driven cart. My grandfather and Aunt Adel were buried in a common grave and we don't know where it is. Yuzik, Adel's son, was with us.

The Romanians took the adults to work. My parents began to earn money by replacing shoemakers or tailors, who could make money working at home. These people paid other inmates 1 mark per



day to replace them at work. Adel's son Yuzik also made money by replacing other inmates at work. In winter 1942 the Romanians were taking people to the wood-cutting site. Yuzik replaced another worker. When the workers returned to town after work, Yuzik was found frozen to death on a cart.

I had poor Yiddish before the war, but in the ghetto I became fluent in Yiddish. In 1943 a Jewish community began to operate in the ghetto. Its head was a very decent Jewish man called Orenshtein. He even opened a Jewish school. This wasn't an official school. We just came to his house secretly to have classes. There was one class of about ten Jewish children. They studied Yiddish and mathematics at this school. Our teacher of mathematics was a young engineer, a very nice person. He praised me for my success in mathematics. This school operated until the liberation.

I don't know what the criteria were to become a member of the Jewish community in the ghetto. Officially the community was responsible for the liaison of Romanians with inmates. Most of the inmates didn't celebrate Jewish holidays in the ghetto. The Romanians persecuted any demonstration of the Jewish way of life. However, some older Jews got together secretly in somebody's house for a minyan on Sabbath and Jewish holidays and prayed. I never saw it, but I once heard my parents talking about it.

By March 1944 the Romanians were prepared to leave. We were so scared that they might kill all the inmates of the ghetto before leaving. My father's friend Yanek, a young Jew from Chernovtsy, was in touch with the partisans. He told my father that the Soviet troops were close. My father shared his concerns with Yanek, but Yanek told him there was nothing to be afraid of since the partisans were on guard around the ghetto, and if they heard shooting, they would come to our rescue. I don't know whether this was true or not. One night the Romanians left quietly and in the morning Soviet tanks entered the ghetto. We were overwhelmed with joy. Perhaps, this feeling was similar to what a bird feels when it is released from a cage.

## After the War

The three of us walked back to Briceni. We had survived and we believed it to be a miracle. Our house was there, but my parents didn't want to live in a place, where everything reminded them of Joseph and his family. They couldn't sell it either because it wasn't their property any longer: now it belonged to the state. We settled down in an outhouse with my mother's cousin. She had seen our family pictures and my grandmother Feina's picture in one of the houses. We demanded them back and we got them, but we didn't get back any of our belongings. We didn't have anything left. My mother bought an old uniform overcoat at the market. She altered it to make a coat for me. My father worked as an accountant in the district department of health and I went to school.

There were a few Jews left in Briceni but no synagogues. My school friend Benia's father, a tailor, arranged a prayer house in his home. They got together to pray on Sabbath and Jewish holidays. They made matzah on Pesach in this house. Baker Shymon baked matzah for those that brought him flour. Our neighbor was a militia officer, and my father couldn't take the risk of having matzah made for us. If that neighbor had noticed my father taking matzah home, we might have had problems with the authorities. Baker Shymon brought matzah to our house at night and stored bags in the shed pretending they were just some tools. When our neighbor went to work we took the bags with matzah home.

After the war we collected money to erect a gravestone for murdered Jews in Briceni. Non-Jews also gave money. Names of members of our family that perished during the Holocaust are also inscribed on the stone: Grandmother Motel and Grandfather Pinkhas, my father's sister Adel and her son Yuzik, my mother's brother Joseph, his wife and their two daughters. We don't know where their graves are, but this stone is our tribute of love and memory to them.

In those post war years I faced direct anti-Semitism at school. The senior pupils at school were to become Komsomol [8](#) members. I didn't feel the need to join the Komsomol league, but when I heard that only Komsomol members could enter university I submitted my application. I was one of the best pupils and had the highest grades in all subject so I didn't have any problems at school. After I was admitted I went to the district Komsomol committee to have an interview. They said to me, 'Your father owned a store, didn't he? He exploited working people'. They told me that I was a class alien [i.e. not a member of the working class or the peasantry of the Soviet Union]. I don't remember any details, but I remember that these accusations seemed to last forever. Of course, I was admitted in the end because they didn't make any exceptions and admitted everybody, but I felt hurt and was hysterical when I came home.

I was in the 10th grade during the period of the struggle against cosmopolitans. My friend's father and my father's acquaintances were sent into exile. Our neighbor's husband was arrested and sent into exile. Again our life was filled with fear. I remember that our neighbor once left her food in our cellar. One morning somebody knocked on our door and my father was putting on his clothes with trembling hands. It turned out our neighbor just wanted to pick up her food.

My mother and I went to Chernovtsy in 1949 where I was to take entrance exams to the Faculty of Physics and Mathematics at Chernovtsy University. I had to take five exams. I passed them with good grades and went home to wait for the notification that I was admitted. I received such a notification before the final lists were issued, but when I saw the final lists I didn't find my name there. My mother and I went to find out what had happened. In the Dean's office I was asked who my father was. My mother said he was a clerk and they said that they preferred to admit children of workers and peasants. My mother and I understood what the real reason was [the real reason was that Fenia was Jewish] but what could we do? They advised me to agree to become a candidate of this faculty. Mathematics and physics were difficult subjects and children from villages often gave up their studies and then a candidate could take their place. I could attend lectures, but I had no right to even borrow textbooks from the university library. One of the students borrowed them for me. However, I studied well and was admitted even before the first semester was over. Our lecturers went to the Dean's office to ask for me. I lived in my Uncle Grigory's apartment. I didn't face any anti-Semitism at university. Students and lecturers treated me well. I received a small stipend and my parents supported me. My mother got a job as a receptionist in a polyclinic in Briceni in order to earn some money to support me with.

I met my husband, Esiah Kleiman, when I was a 1st-year student. He was my group mate. We fell in love and got married before graduation. My husband's Jewish name is Shaya. He was born in the small town of Vad-Rashkov in Bessarabia in 1931. His father, David Kleiman, owned a store before 1940. His mother, Golda Kleiman [nee Uchitel] was a housewife. My husband's younger sister, Beila, perished in Rostov during the war. Esiah and his parents were in the Jewish ghetto in Peschana, Odessa region, during the Great Patriotic War. After the war they stayed in Vad-Rashkov for a short while and then they moved to Chernovtsy. Esiah's father worked at a store. After

finishing secondary school Esiah entered the Faculty of Physics and Mathematics at Chernovtsy University. Before he began to study at university, he joined the Communist Party. At that time he strongly believed that the Party united the best individuals, people that had a strong commitment to give everything to restore the economy after the war and improve life. Later the feeling of disappointment replaced his previous faith in the Party.

Esiah and I had a civil ceremony and a small wedding party arranged in my husband's home. My parents came to the wedding from Briceni. We don't have children. Doctors said this was the consequence of the ghetto. It is such a shame to have no children.

When we were students at university the Doctors' Plot' [9](#) began. It was next to impossible to believe that the best doctors in the USSR, Jews, intended to poison Stalin, but there were people that did believe it. Patients didn't want to consult Jewish doctors. Many doctors lost their jobs. I know that an order was issued to fire my father from the district department of health in Briceni. I didn't know about it at that time. I think if Stalin hadn't died in March 1953 my father might have been fired. I'm ashamed to say it now, but when Stalin died I kept crying for five days in a row because I felt such strong grief. I was supposed to give a speech at the meeting of the association of mathematicians on 5th March. I was prepared to speak, but when I came to the blackboard I couldn't squeeze out a word. I was choking with tears. It took me quite an effort to pull myself together, but my speech was still interrupted by sobbing.

After the Twentieth Party Congress [10](#) I believed every word of Khrushchev [10](#) about the denunciation of the cult of Stalin. Esiah had always been critical about Stalin's personality and his actions, and he helped me to see the truth. If it hadn't been for my husband I wouldn't have believed Khrushchev.

I faced anti-Semitism again when I received a mandatory job assignment [12](#) upon graduation. I was the best student and lecturers kept telling me to stay for post-graduate studies, but during the process of issuing job assignments this wasn't even discussed. My husband and I were sent to work as teachers of mathematics at the secondary school in the Romanian village of Vanchikovtsy. We were teachers there for two years before we moved to the town of Yedintsy where we worked for twelve years before we received an apartment. My parents lived in Briceni and my husband's parents lived in Chernovtsy. They were getting older and we wanted them to be with us. We exchanged our apartment in Yedintsy to one room in a communal apartment [13](#) in Chernovtsy. My parents joined us there. Their house in Briceni was sold to be removed.

Just when we were planning to move to Chernovtsy our friends advised us to get information about vacancies, otherwise authorities would just tell us there were none. After we moved to Chernovtsy my husband made an appointment with the manager of the regional department of public education, who used to be a teacher of physics at the school where my husband worked. He pretended he didn't know my husband. Yet, his secretary registered all villagers, putting down their name and purpose of visit. So, when Esiah entered his office he was aware why he came to see him, but he asked Esiah about the purpose of his visit anyway. When my husband explained that we were teachers of physics and wished to get a job in Chernovtsy, the head of the department asked my husband about our nationality. Esiah's nationality was imprinted on his face, but he replied that we were Jews anyway. The head of the department said, 'You know, you and your wife will never get a job in Chernovtsy'. By the way, he is an old and sick man now and his

granddaughter, who has nothing in common with Jews, studies in a Jewish school.

We were jobless for a year and lived on my parents' pension and our miserable savings until our friend from university helped my husband to get a job in a school in the village of Gorbovo, near Chernovtsy. I became a teacher in a cooperative company providing services to the population. My management didn't give me a single chance to work. They didn't send me any pupils and I put fictitious names in my records paying money for them. I received a salary nonetheless, but I just wished I had a chance to work and earn my living. Then I decided to bribe a receptionist - this was the first and the last time in my life that I did something like that. I promised her 5 rubles for each pupil she sent me. When I returned home two pupils were already waiting for me. They recommended me to their acquaintances, and soon I had so many students that I gave a few to my husband. I worked four times more than any teacher, but how I wanted to work in a school! Soon I got a chance to get a job at a school. There were a few teachers that fell ill in a Romanian school, and I was offered to replace them for a few months. I was so happy to get this job that I quit my job at the cooperative company. Later I became a full-time employee at the school when there was a vacancy. I worked at school for 11 years before I retired at the age of 51. Some time later my husband got a job at this school.

I retired in 1982. My work didn't give me any satisfaction. The children weren't interested in studying. They just wanted a certificate of secondary education. I didn't regret my decision to quit work. My husband worked until he turned 68. He had good relationships with his colleagues and they are still in touch.

We didn't celebrate any Jewish traditions. Teachers were ideological workers and weren't allowed to celebrate religious holidays or have anything to do with religion.

My parents celebrated Jewish holidays after the war. If we were on vacation at the time of any holiday we always tried to join our parents for a celebration. I remember Pesach in Briceni. There was an underground bakery in Briceni. My father didn't feel well and my mother went to get matzah at the bakery with my husband. When they were on their way back home my mother heard the voices of her colleagues. She and my husband hid round the corner, waiting until her colleagues passed by to continue on their way home. It was sad and humiliating that we had to keep our wish to lead a Jewish way of life a secret. In the evening we drew the curtains to sit at the table for dinner and seder on Pesach. We had matzah and traditional Jewish food. We also celebrated Soviet holidays, but it was just an occasion to get together with those we loved and were close with. We were sincerely happy to celebrate one holiday: Victory Day [14](#).

When Jews began to move to Israel in the 1970s my husband and I sympathized with them, but we didn't have any plans about leaving ourselves. We had to support our aging parents. They couldn't travel and we couldn't go and leave them behind. Besides, we were, and still are, very attached to our home and we were afraid of losing our surrounding and friends.

My father died in 1977 at the age of 84. Since we worked as teachers we couldn't have a Jewish funeral at the cemetery, but we buried him in accordance with Jewish traditions. We bought him a tallit - he didn't have a tallit after the war. We invited a chazzan from the synagogue to have all the prayers said as required. All rituals were conducted at my father's funeral. The Jewish cemetery was closed at that period, so we buried my father in the new cemetery. I need to mention that I wasn't embarrassed about having my father buried in this cemetery. Do people have things to be

discontent about after they die?

My mother lived with a clear mind until the end of her days. In her last years she was confined to bed since she had her hip bone broken, but she read a lot and we discussed what she had read. On 19th May 2001 my mother celebrated her 104th birthday. She died on 27th May the same year. We buried her beside my father. On the day of the funeral we couldn't have Jewish funeral rituals performed because it happened to be on the day of the Jewish holiday of Shavuot. After the holiday we invited a rabbi to say a prayer at my mother's grave. My husband goes to the synagogue on the anniversaries of our parents' death. I make some special food for the mourning and my husband takes a bottle of vodka to commemorate our parents. He also recites the Kaddish.

We were skeptical about perestroika [15](#) in the USSR in the early 1980s. We remembered the period of 'thaw' after the Twentieth Party Congress and hopes that just faded away. But this time we saw actual changes in life. The Iron Curtain [16](#), which had separated the USSR from the rest of the world, fell. People had the freedom to travel and invite their relatives from abroad to visit them. Books by Solzhenitsyn [17](#), Bulgakov [18](#), etc. were published. We were bombarded with true information about our life and history. The attitude towards Jews began to change during the years of perestroika. I wouldn't say that anti-Semitism vanished, but at least newspapers and TV began to use the words 'Jews', Russian, Ukrainian, etc. Also, Jews don't have major problems with entering an institute or getting a job.

After Ukraine declared independence in 1991 our life changed even more. Jewish associations began to revive Jewish culture. It became particularly evident after Hesed was established. Old Jewish people found care and support. Hesed provides medication and food packages for old people. Volunteers from Hesed visit old people and help them about the house. There's a number of clubs for elderly people including a choir and dancing club. We celebrate Sabbath and Jewish holidays together. There's a Jewish school and a monthly TV program in Yiddish, broadcasted from Chernovtsy to several regions in Ukraine.

My husband and I didn't return to observing Jewish traditions, simply because we had never given them up. We just do openly now, what we used to do secretly before. We celebrate all Jewish holidays at home. On Chanukkah we have candles burning in the chanukkiyah. I cook all traditional food that I have been used to since my childhood. We observe traditions to honor the memory of our parents, who had observed Jewish traditions through whatever hardships.

My husband is the chief editor of the newspaper published by Hesed. It has issues about our life and activities. We publish articles about the war and the Holocaust. Those that survived will never forget this part of their life and their successors will remember. We write memoirs about the days we spent in the ghetto. These are hard memories, but we have no right to forget them. We need to remember in order to never let it happen again.

## Glossary

### [1](#) Bessarabia

Historical area between the Prut and Dnestr rivers, in the southern part of Odessa region.

Bessarabia was part of Russia until the Revolution of 1917. In 1918 it declared itself an independent republic, and later it united with Romania. The Treaty of Paris (1920) recognized the

union but the Soviet Union never accepted this. In 1940 Romania was forced to cede Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina to the USSR. The two provinces had almost 4 million inhabitants, mostly Romanians. Although Romania reoccupied part of the territory during World War II the Romanian peace treaty of 1947 confirmed their belonging to the Soviet Union. Today it is part of Moldavia.

## **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 Keep in touch with relatives abroad**

The authorities could arrest an individual corresponding with his/her relatives abroad and charge him/her with espionage, send them to concentration camp or even sentence them to death.

## **4 Great Patriotic War**

On 22nd June 1941 at 5 o'clock in the morning Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union without declaring war. This was the beginning of the so-called Great Patriotic War. The German blitzkrieg, known as Operation Barbarossa, nearly succeeded in breaking the Soviet Union in the months that followed. Caught unprepared, the Soviet forces lost whole armies and vast quantities of equipment to the German onslaught in the first weeks of the war. By November 1941 the German army had seized the Ukrainian Republic, besieged Leningrad, the Soviet Union's second largest city, and threatened Moscow itself. The war ended for the Soviet Union on 9th May 1945.

## **5 Pogroms in Ukraine**

In the 1920s there were many anti-Semitic gangs in Ukraine. They killed Jews and burnt their houses, they robbed their houses, raped women and killed children.

## **6 Campaign against 'cosmopolitans'**

The campaign against 'cosmopolitans', i.e. Jews, was initiated in articles in the central organs of the Communist Party in 1949. The campaign was directed primarily at the Jewish intelligentsia and it was the first public attack on Soviet Jews as Jews. 'Cosmopolitans' writers were accused of hating the Russian people, of supporting Zionism, etc. Many Yiddish writers as well as the leaders of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee were arrested in November 1948 on charges that they maintained ties with Zionism and with American 'imperialism'. They were executed secretly in 1952. The anti-Semitic Doctors' Plot was launched in January 1953. A wave of anti-Semitism spread through the USSR. Jews were removed from their positions, and rumors of an imminent mass deportation of Jews to the eastern part of the USSR began to spread. Stalin's death in March 1953 put an end to the campaign against 'cosmopolitans'.

## **7 Transnistria**



Area situated between the Bug and Dniester rivers and the Black Sea. The term is derived from the Romanian name for the Dniester (Nistru) and was coined after the occupation of the area by German and Romanian troops in World War II. After its occupation Transnistria became a place for deported Romanian Jews. Systematic deportations began in September 1941. In the course of the next two months, all surviving Jews of Bessarabia and Bukovina and a small part of the Jewish population of Old Romania were dispatched across the Dniester. This first wave of deportations reached almost 120,000 by mid-November 1941 when it was halted by Ion Antonescu, the Romanian dictator, upon intervention of the Council of Romanian Jewish Communities. Deportations resumed at the beginning of the summer of 1942, affecting close to 5,000 Jews. A third series of deportations from Old Romania took place in July 1942, affecting Jews who had evaded forced labor decrees, as well as their families, communist sympathizers and Bessarabian Jews who had been in Old Romania and Transylvania during the Soviet occupation. The most feared Transnistrian camps were Vapniarka, Ribnita, Berezovka, Tulcin and Iampol. Most of the Jews deported to camps in Transnistria died between 1941-1943 because of horrible living conditions, diseases and lack of food.

## **8 Komsomol**

Communist youth political organization created in 1918. The task of the Komsomol was to spread of the ideas of communism and involve the worker and peasant youth in building the Soviet Union. The Komsomol also aimed at giving a communist upbringing by involving the worker youth in the political struggle, supplemented by theoretical education. The Komsomol was more popular than the Communist Party because with its aim of education people could accept uninitiated young proletarians, whereas party members had to have at least a minimal political qualification.

## **9 Doctors' Plot**

The Doctors' Plot was an alleged conspiracy of a group of Moscow doctors to murder leading government and party officials. In January 1953, the Soviet press reported that nine doctors, six of whom were Jewish, had been arrested and confessed their guilt. As Stalin died in March 1953, the trial never took place. The official paper of the Party, the Pravda, later announced that the charges against the doctors were false and their confessions obtained by torture. This case was one of the worst anti-Semitic incidents during Stalin's reign. In his secret speech at the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956 Khrushchev stated that Stalin wanted to use the Plot to purge the top Soviet leadership.

## **10 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.

## **11 Khrushchev, Nikita (1894-1971)**

Soviet communist leader. After Stalin's death in 1953, he became first secretary of the Central Committee, in effect the head of the Communist Party of the USSR. In 1956, during the 20th Party Congress, Khrushchev took an unprecedented step and denounced Stalin and his methods. He was

deposed as premier and party head in October 1964. In 1966 he was dropped from the Party's Central Committee.

## **12 Mandatory job assignment in the USSR**

Graduates of higher educational institutions had to complete a mandatory 2-year job assignment issued by the institution from which they graduated. After finishing this assignment young people were allowed to get employment at their discretion in any town or organization.

## **13 Communal apartment**

The Soviet power wanted to improve housing conditions by requisitioning 'excess' living space of wealthy families after the Revolution of 1917. Apartments were shared by several families with each family occupying one room and sharing the kitchen, toilet and bathroom with other tenants. Because of the chronic shortage of dwelling space in towns shared apartments continued to exist for decades. Despite state programs for the construction of more houses and the liquidation of shared apartments, which began in the 1960s, shared apartments still exist today.

## **14 Victory Day in Russia (9th May)**

National holiday to commemorate the defeat of Nazi Germany and the end of World War II and honor the Soviets who died in the war.

## **15 Perestroika (Russian for restructuring)**

Soviet economic and social policy of the late 1980s, associated with the name of Soviet politician Mikhail Gorbachev. The term designated the attempts to transform the stagnant, inefficient command economy of the Soviet Union into a decentralized, market-oriented economy. Industrial managers and local government and party officials were granted greater autonomy, and open elections were introduced in an attempt to democratize the Communist Party organization. By 1991, perestroika was declining and was soon eclipsed by the dissolution of the USSR.

## **16 Iron Curtain**

A term popularized by Sir Winston Churchill in a speech in 1946. He used it to designate the Soviet Union's consolidation of its grip over Eastern Europe. The phrase denoted the separation of East and West during the Cold War, which placed the totalitarian states of the Soviet bloc behind an 'Iron Curtain'. The fall of the Iron Curtain corresponds to the period of perestroika in the former Soviet Union, the reunification of Germany, and the democratization of Eastern Europe beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

## **17 Solzhenitsyn, Alexander (1918-)**

Russian novelist and publicist. He spent eight years in prisons and labor camps, and three more years in enforced exile. After the publication of a collection of his short stories in 1963, he was denied further official publication of his work, and so he circulated them clandestinely, in samizdat publications, and published them abroad. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1970 and was exiled from the Soviet Union in 1974 after publishing his famous book, *The Gulag*

Archipelago, in which he describes Soviet labor camps.

### **18 Bulgakov, Mikhail (1891-1940)**

Russian-Soviet writer. His satiric- fantastic writings deal mainly with the relationship of the artist and state power, and of art and reality. He also described the tragic fights of the Russian Civil War. Many of his works were published after his death.