

Boris Rubinstein

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- **My family background**

My maternal grandfather's name was Yankel Basok. If you believe the legend that I heard some time ago from my distant relative Haim Basok (he had found it digging in the archives of the Prague University), my grandfather Yankel's relatives lived in Spain. They moved to Morocco, then to Lithuania.

The origin of surname Basok is interesting. If you decode the consonants in a certain way - Bait Sofer Kadosh - the surname will mean "the House of the Holy Writer" or "Family of the Holy Writer." Thus, one can suggest that someone of my ancestors during the time when this surname originated was either a Talmudist, or scientist or writer.

When I was a boy, Mum's parents, my grandmother and grandfather, lived in Ukraine, in the city of Nikolaev. I think, that they arrived there from Lithuania or Belorussia after the Great October revolution in Russia.

I remember them very well, especially Grandfather. They were pious, deeply religious, noble people. They were very kind to their friends and adored their children and grandchildren. They had a big family - eleven kids, of which two died in childhood.

Grandmother Sheina was short, her head was always covered with a kerchief, but she did not wear a wig. She was old at the time I remember her, basically pottering about in the kitchen. She was a skillful cook. She died, when I was about four years old.

Grandfather was of average height, very imposing, and wore a beard. He was a melamed by trade, which means he taught children in Cheder. At one time he had his own Cheder (probably supported by the community). As this was Grandfather's basic occupation, financially his family lived very modestly.



When I knew grandfather, he was old, not engaged in any public businesses, and taught Yiddish (his mother tongue) to his grandchildren. For about a year he taught my cousin and me. It found great pleasure in studying, although Grandfather was very strict in teaching Yiddish.

It was very difficult to get an excellent mark from him. He also knew Russian well, and had a very beautiful handwriting.

My mum was the youngest in the family, everybody's favorite, and, after grandmother's death, Granddad lived in our family. Mum tried to maintain his kosher principles. She cooked for him separately because my dad and mum were not strong religious.

Grandfather observed Saturday piously. I recollect such an episode. It was the beginning of Sabbath. My friend (a neighbor girl) and I wanted to put on the light in the kitchen, but could not reach the switch. We addressed Grandfather, who at that moment was covered with a talit, looked to the East and prayed, rocking to and fro.

" - Grandfather! Grandfather! "

"Gehe a wek" (go away) - he said.

I realized that he was entirely submerged in his prayers. When he stopped, he asked:

" - What do you want? "

" - Please, put on the light in the kitchen. "

" Gehe a wek, haint is schabes! " (Leave me alone! It's Sabbath today!)

In his last years he was too weak to attend synagogue services, but earlier he did it regularly. Sometimes his friends used to visit him. They were Jews of approximately the same age, but stronger physically. They would sit down and share news. Once, grandfather's younger brother Faiva Basok came to visit Grandfather from Leningrad. Faiva died during the war, in the blockade of Leningrad. I can not tell anything else about other brothers and sisters of my grandmother and grandfather.

Religious holidays were celebrated at our place. There came the relatives, brothers and sisters of my parents with their families. There were many children. I remember quite well how we prepared for the Hanukkah holiday with Grandfather.

According to family tradition the candles were made from potatoes. You would cut out a cavity in a potato, fill it with vegetable oil, and insert a wick there. On Hanukkah these self-made candles were lit and put on a window sill facing the court yard.

All that happened in 1930-s, when all religious ceremonies were subject to accusations, laughed at and persecuted, that's why placing "Hanuka Candle" on a window sill facing the street was unthinkable.

As a small boy, I liked to get into grandfather's bed early in the morning, where I would ask him to tell me a fairy tale. He would relate to me separate episodes from the Torah and I perceived them as fairy tales. I was a very impressionable boy and afterwards narrated stories about Philistines and other episodes from the Jewish history to my friends in the kindergarten. Naturally, there were not only Jewish children in the kindergarten, but also Russian, Ukrainian and Polish.

And once Mum was invited to the kindergarten for a conversation.

" - Do you know what stories your son is telling?! "

That was the time of fighting with Zionists in the Soviet Union. Study of the Jewish history and observance of the Jewish traditions could have very serious consequences. My parents had a word with Grandfather, and my studying of the Jewish history was interrupted. In connection with my grandfather Yankel I recollect the following episode.

After the prayer grandfather took of his talit and kissed tsitsit [tassels on the ends of talit]. It looked to me very amusing and interesting. Once I asked him to allow me to kiss tsitsit. Grandfather agreed and that's how I took my share of this ceremony.

I never saw parents of my father; I know about them only from stories. They came from Lithuania, and lived and died in Belarus, somewhere in the Mogilyov area.

My paternal grandfather's name was Borukh. He was very vigorous, rigid by nature. He was religious, observed traditions and his attitude to children was austere. He dealt with trading and was very respected in the place where he lived. People say, that he credited the goods to the poor, not disturbing them very much about the refunding time.

My father, Lev (Leiba) Rubinstein, was born in the town of Golovchin in Belarus. I believe he finished Cheder there, because as a thirteen-year old boy Daddy and his cousin Misha set off to study in Vilna in yeshiva. He studied very successfully and completed this educational institution.

Maybe he studied later in a grammar school, I do not know. I do know that Father was a highly educated man. He was an expert in history, literature, and spoke four languages - Yiddish, Hebrew, Russian and German. Later, in Soviet times (in 1920-1921) Father wanted to enter a higher educational institution that corresponded to his talents.

But, as Father was a businessman, he fell under the category of so-called "lishentsy", i.e. people who were deprived of many civil rights. So he was not permitted to submit papers to a humanitarian institute, and had nothing left to do but enter the Agricultural Institute in Kiev. During his study he lived with the family of his older sister Ginda. Father was short, very modest by character, gentle and kind.

In 1924 or 1925 he graduated from Kiev Agricultural Institute, obtaining the specialty of agriculturist and zoo technician and went to work in Jewish settlements in the Crimea.

Zionists were diligently studying agriculture then, preparing to move to Palestine. Besides, the idea was discussed of organizing a Jewish autonomy in the Crimea. Life in the Jewish settlements in the Crimea was arranged according to communal principles.

Father worked there for several years. Mum told me that when he returned, he did not have any property, except the clothes on his back.

My dad met Mum at a family party. My mum, Ginda Basok, was brought up in the Soviet times. I do not know, where she studied in childhood. Possibly, in her Father's house or may be in an elementary school. I know, that in 1924-1927 she studied at a rabfak. [Rabfak - school for adults].

Before marriage Mum worked in a drugstore, helping the pharmacist. Mum and Daddy got married in 1927, and in 1929 I was born. After marrying my father, she was a housewife.

• Growing up

Daddy then worked as a zoo technician in Kupinsk, and we moved to the city of Nikolaev in 1932. We settled in a good (by standards of that time) 2-room apartment on the second floor. It was a small part of an ancient private residence in the city center.

We had electricity, but the heating was by stoves. The kitchen was common with neighbors and we had a rather large verandah. The apartment was very sunny. We had a very largemultinational courtyard, where about 40 families lived. There were many children in the court yard, basically girls, for some reason.

I was on very good terms with them. I remember, how my day began. I got up early in the morning, went down to the courtyard, sat on the granite parapet heated by the sun and waited for my friends to come out. We played many outdoor games.

At that time Daddy worked in a state agricultural farm 14 km from the city - In summer we lived there with Mum and had a rest. I was a very mobile and inquisitive boy then. In the early morning I left together with the workers of the state farm to the fields. It was all the same to me how to go: on a horse cart, on a tractor, by oxen or by car, which was a big rarity then.

There was a small club where they used to show silent pictures on certain days. The display of films was accompanied by music played by astring ensemble. Workers of the state farm with their families came to see the film. Amateur performances were also staged in the club. I, too, participated in them.

I remember, in one performance I played the Spanish girl Teresa, who was a messenger between the Spanish partisan groups. It was in 1936, when civil war was going on in Spain.

When I turned 7 years old, Daddy started to work in the city administration supervising over several state farms. Now he could give me more attention. Daddy loved to read. There were books in Yiddish in our house - fiction, religion.

They were read by Daddy and Grandfather. Unfortunately, in my early childhood I read little. Love for the books came later.

In 1937 I was admitted to school. The school was Russian. But in those times schoolchildren still read verses and sang songs in their native language. I remember that for one holiday I prepared a poem in Yiddish (written by Kvitko, as far as I remember) that was called:

"A brif dem Hawer Voroschilov" ("Letter to comrade Voroshilov"). In translation it sounded as:

" I wrote a letter to Klim Voroshilov, Comrade Voroshilov - the people's commissar " Etc.

They applauded a lot; I was a small boy and read very expressively.

Nikolaev was a multinational city, and a big part of the population was made of Jews. I had many Jewish classmates. But none of us knew about Jewish traditions and Jewish history very much, because all our family lost the Jewish religion and traditions to the Sovietization of Jewish life.

When I became older, it turned out that I had a very good hearing for music and good musical memory. A private teacher was hired to teach me violin. But I was not persevering and I was impatient and very soon I insisted that these lessons were stopped.

Later, in elementary school, I was a member of a musical and rhythmic orchestra. There I played percussion instruments and sang. I had quite a pleasant voice.

We used to sing a lot at home, too. On family and state holidays, many relatives always gathered in our house. Wine was modestly consumed. I do not remember any of my relatives drunk. I remember that there was always a rich table and everyone was in a good mood, with good and warm feelings toward to each other.

And we always sang Jewish songs. Daddy had bad hearing for music and a weak voice, but he too was included in the common chorus and sang. The Jewish songs were very important to me in my life. I absorbed the love to it, so to speak, with mother's milk.

I remember Mum singing lullabies to me. Gesunt solsts sain, main ingele ... (Be healthy, my boy...)

She could as well sing in Russian:

" Hush, baby, hush. Sleep, my sonny May! A-ya-ya, a-ya-ya! "

I knew very many Jewish songs. My family loved, when I performed them. I went to concerts of Jewish singers with my parents and by myself after the war. I remember wonderful Jewish songs by Eppelbaum, Alexandrovich [before 1940 he was cantor in synagogues of Riga, Manchester, Kaunas and after 1940 he lived in the Soviet Union and singed Russian, Italian and Jewish songs in concerts. In 1971 year he left Soviet Union for Israel], Nekhama Lifshitsaite [The famous performer of a Jewish songs on Yiddish in Lithuania.

In 1969 she left Soviet Union for Israel] There were cheerful songs and sad songs. For example, a song about a Jewish tailor - how he couldn't live well doing his tailor trade.

There were new songs in Yiddish, appraising the new life, the development of collective farms.

Here is one of them:

Is geven mit uns a haver, ai-ja-ja-ja
Hot geven a jat a braver, ai-ja-ja-ja
Hot gesinkt un hot geschtern, ai-ja-ja-ja
Mer kolhosn sol uns vern, ai-ja-ja-ja
(We had a comrade!
He was a brave guy.
His dream was to see more collective farms.)
.....

Lo mir trinken a lehaim, ai-ja-ja-ja
Far dem Lebn, far dem majem, ai-ja-ja-ja
Far dem Lenius zavoljutst, ai-ja-ja-ja
Un far Stalins konstitutsi
(Let's drink this toast
To new life,
To Leninist revolution,
To Stalinist constitution.)
In that time these songs were perceived without irony.

In 1939 Mum, Daddy and me went to Father's birth-place in Belorussia, the town of Belynichi, where his older brother and sister with families lived. For me it was a very interesting trip. We arrived in Mogilyov, where Daddy's numerous relatives, cousins and sisters lived.

We were warmly received, spent there a couple of days and then went to the small town of Belynichi. It was quite a big town in Mogilyov district, where many Jews lived in those times. It was very amusing. I met some of my relatives - a cousin, a brother and Aunt - for the first time. With many of them it was my only meeting. There I learned some new Jewish songs, too.

Ich gei aruis afn ganikl
Dem shtetl arumbekukn
Kumt zu nur a kleine feigele
Mit a kleinem butn
OKlaib zuneif ale maine havertee
Soln helfen veinen

I come out on the porch
To look around the place
A small bird flies up to me
Collect all your friends
Let them help me cry.

Such a sad song.

And one more.
In droisn is a triber tog
In shtub schteit a pare
Schen avegifleign schaine junge jor
Azei vi in a chmare

It's a cold day
And it's stuffy in the house
My young years have flown away
Like a cloud...

Daddy probably wrote verses, but I did not know about it. When I was 10, he composed this poem for my anniversary:

I am a quiet boy
All my classmates know that!
I do not like fights and jokes,
I do not make funny faces,
And with the factory hooter
My clear voice will sound!
Songs I memorize,
Dances I repeat,

.....

I will be a Leninist-
Honest and correct!
I will be an excellent pupil,
Always hardworking.
And songs we shall sing!
And dances we shall dance!
That's a cheerfull life!
Life is beautiful!

I will remember the summer of 1940 as long as I live, because for the first time in my life I was in a pioneer camp. It was not a simple camp, and what's more, it was the best pioneer camp in Ukraine - Ukrartek. It was located in Lustdorf - a well-known resort near Odessa, on the coast of the Black Sea.

There were children of different nationalities: Russian, Ukrainian, Jewish. Spanish children, whose parents died in the civil war in Spain also spent their vacations there. The tutors were almost all Jewish for some reason. I remember fascinating crusades, sports competitions and, certainly, pioneer songs by the fire. It was the last peaceful summer.

My parents had many brothers and sisters. I will tell you about some of them. One of Mother's brothers - Shabsai (Uncle Shepa, as we called him) was a very gifted, vigorous, capable man. He completed two faculties of the Nikolaev Shipbuilding Institute, was one of the leading engineers with a large shipbuilding factory in Nikolaev.

He loved me, always showed interest in my studies, my success. He studied music all by himself, played piano and violin. It was in his house that for the first time in my life I saw and listened to the radio receiver. It was a large American radio.

On family holidays Uncle Shepa recited serious or comic verses, devoted to each family member.

For example, these lines he dedicated to his Father, my grandfather Yankel:

Tate-lebn,
Du bist a talmid-hohem.
Ich wil dich fregn a harbe kasche:
Esn fisch un trinkl maschke
Iz a hicorn zi gor a navle?

(Father - my life,
You are wiser then the wise,
I want to ask you:
To eat fish and drink vodka,
What is it:
A sin or is it pardonable?)

In the 1930's Shabsai was teaching one of technical disciplines in the Odessa school for working Jewish youth (Evromol). During the war he was transferred to work to Moscow, where he also worked as a leading engineer. In 1953, in the peak of state anti-Semitism campaign Uncle Shabsai was dismissed from work.

He did not work any more. He died in Moscow in 1969. His children - son Boris and daughter Lida - now live in Israel.

Another of mother's brother's was Pavel (Faiva). During the First World War he was enlisted in the Russian Tsarist army, was in a battle, got captured by Austrians. After returning from captivity he studied, graduated from a medical institute and worked as an obstetrician and gynecologist in Kharkov.

He was a charming and very benevolent person. Uncle Pavel defended his candidate's thesis and worked in the clinic of the Kharkov medical institute.

During the war he was a military doctor, the head of a hospital where heavily injured soldiers were treated.

The hospital was in Izhevsk. After the war he lived and worked in Kharkov again. He died at the end of the 1960-s in Simferopol. His wife's name was Vera. They had no children.

And, at last, the youngest of mother's brothers Uncle Misha (Moisei- Zelik) was a very good cardiologist. As a boy he finished Cheder. Having graduated from the medical institute in Odessa, he worked there as a clinical assistant. When the well-known Soviet polar explorer Papanin was recovering his health in Odessa, Uncle Misha was assigned his personal doctor.

They became good friends. Papanin invited him to Moscow and provided him with housing. There Uncle Misha also worked as an assistant in a clinic. During the war he was a military doctor in the headquarters of the Northern fleet.

During anti-Semitism campaign in the beginning of 1950's, he had been fired and for some time was out of business. Later he worked as Head of cardiology department in a big Moscow clinic. He was a broadly educated man. He knew Jewish literature well, he had many friends among actors of the Jewish theatre and among Jewish writers.

Between themselves brothers frequently spoke Yiddish.

Of Father's brothers, Uncle Israel was a very interesting man, he was older than Father. Having finished only Cheder, he then studied mathematics and physics all by himself. He used to send me, a schoolboy, the original methods of solving complicated mathematical problems. He had made several inventions on technical improvement of certain industrial processes.

One of our relatives showed Uncle's works to a prominent Soviet physicist academician Kikoin. Having studied them, the academician said: "It is a great pity that such a bright significant talent was lost. "

Before the war he lived in Belynichi, Byelorussia. When we were there with my parents, I paid attention to the fact that Uncle Israel was highly respected by all Jews and Belorussians. They used to greet him like this: "Hi, Borukhovich." I also remember clearly that he collected scales.

He had lots of various scales - household scales, post office scales, ancient scales. He had presented me a very interesting sample with a set of small weights in pounds. My friends and I played with them for long periods. He was a deeply religious man, always attended synagogue, observed all traditions.

He and his wife did not have any children and before the war they had adopted a Jewish boy Misha. In the beginning of the war Uncle Israel, his wife Riva-Basya and Misha escaped from Germans by a miracle, leaving Belynichi practically without any belongings.

They spent the wartime in the Urals. In his last years Uncle Israel was taken care of by his niece Rachel and son Misha, who created him all the conditions for observance of Jewish traditions.

• During the war

In the beginning of the war I was just a 12-year old boy. At first I was even amused with shells blowing up. We, children, used to run about and collect splinters of anti-aircraft shells. But, certainly, it was not long before children could also feel all the burden, all the cruelty, of war.

First, a lot of adults were mobilized right away. Crowds of those evacuated from western areas started to arrive. Mainly they were Jews from Western Ukraine, Western Belarus, overtaken by the war in its first minutes. They were tired, anxious people, very shabby and full of fear. They settled down for a short-term rest in our court yards. Local residents provided them with food products, until the people disappeared somewhere.

I remember the first trucks arriving with the injured soldiers from the front. Very many hospitals were put up in the city.

Germans came nearer, and, on September 11, 1941 mother and me with the family of Uncle Shepa got in a train, which took away the workers of the Nikolaev Shipbuilding factory to the rear, to Astrakhan. The trip was very long. It took 5 weeks.

The train often stopped and yielded way to other trains carrying personnel and military equipment to the front. Our train was nothing but freight cars equipped with 2-3-storied plank beds.

At big stations we received hot dinners free-of-charge. Daddy was in Nikolaev in the people's militia at that time. Their battalion dug large anti-tank ditches, built artificial obstacles. All that was meant to hold in the progress of Germans. But it turned out that Germans came from another direction.

The irregulars were evacuated, and Daddy joined us in Astrakhan. Soon we moved to the village of Narimanovo, where Father started to work as a zoo technician. The winter of 1941/42 was very severe. We were suffering from the lack of fuel for a long time. I remember one episode, how we exchanged tobacco (Daddy did not smoke, and we received tobacco as a part of our rations) for fire wood and for the rest of the winter we kept relatively warm.

By June 5 Daddy was drafted to the army, and I was extremely unhappy.

It was in 1942. For the two days that he was at home before he went to the Military Committee, I literally hung on him all the time. We were at the shop where he worked, where he received his last salary, we were at our relatives place (Uncle Shepa's family), said goodbye to them and on the 7th of June, 1942, we saw him off to a large steamship, that took them up Volga River.

At that time a really serious fighting was going on - the Battle of Stalingrad. I wrote letters to Daddy every day through his field mail, every single day. But he had not received any of mother's letters or mine. Soon Mum and me were evacuated from Astrakhan again with the staff of the shipbuilding factory.

Mother's older sister Hai-Sara was in Perm then so we decided to go there. That's how we found ourselves in the village of Chastye of Perm (then Molotov) region.

There we stayed till autumn of 1944. Life was rather hard, we were financially very restricted. Uncle Misha helped us with regular cash transfers, and so did relatives who lived there. Mum exchanged what was left of our belongings for food.

The spring of 1944 was especially hard as far as I can remember. I was extremely undernourished. Mum and I would cook a 3-liter pot of boiled potatoes, which was then consumed in one go. As I had a dependant's ration, I was assigned for 200 grams of bread and Mum -for 400 grams.

I usually divided this daily ration in halves, ate my portion at once, and never touched mother's. Mum worked as a technical secretary in the village council. In autumn of 1944 Nikolaev was already liberated, and mother's niece sent us an invitation for re-evacuation and we returned to the city of Nikolaev.

I remember precisely, that it was at night on the 7th of November. We spent the night in some barn, there was no station building at all yet, and the train arrived at night. In the early morning (Mum stayed with our things) I set off to my cousin, who invited us to Nikolaev.

I remember how upsetting it was to see the destroyed city. A signboard was still hanging on the wall of one of the schools opened before the war: "Übernachtungheim," which I suppose was a barracks for the German Army. Lots of buildings were destroyed.

We lived in the family of mother's older sister, before we could get back to the apartment that belonged to us earlier. I continued my education in the 8th form of a school for boys. I remember, that there was no furniture at that school and we were obliged to bring our chairs from home. We had no furniture whatsoever. We went to the second-hand market, bought a chair and I was admitted.

I met my pre-war friends, who had, of course, grown up, like me. Many of those who I knew before the war, unfortunately, were gone. I know that some children were shot, including children from the mixed families. Mum and I lived very modestly then and suffered privations.

My clothes were very poor. But our spirits, nevertheless, were high. The unbearable war had come to an end. All of us waited for good news from Daddy.

We learned about him from the letter of his younger brother, who was a military doctor. We know, that he underwent training near Stalingrad, completed a short program for officers of meteorological service in the army. His brother received the last letter from him on the 1st of

September. It read:

" We are getting in trucks and going to the front line. "

No more news came from him. We do not know how he died, but, of course, he did die, because his brother was making detailed inquiries about him.

In the years that followed, Mum and me wrote to the state archive, but we found no indications about his fate. 15 men of our large family fought in the war with fascists, serving in the Red Army. They were my Uncles, cousins, sisters and their husbands.

Of this number 5 men perished.

I want to say a few words about those lost in the Holocaust. First is my cousin Bellochka. She was a wonderful, lovely, gentle and very modest girl. She was the favorite niece of my father. Not long before graduation from the medical institute in Kharkov, she married a fellow student, a Russian boy Nikolay.

They loved each other passionately. My Aunt, Bellochka's mother, and her father initially objected to her marrying a non-Jew. But then they reconciled to it. Nikolay was a nice guy, very handsome, and they were young and very happy.

With the beginning of the Polish campaign in 1939 he was sent to the area of Poland annexed by the Soviet Union. They were very happy, but it didn't last long.

In the beginning of the war in 1941 Bellochka was on a visit to her parents in Nikolaev. On September 17 Nikolaev was surrendered. And just one month before, she was called for the army, as she enlisted, and was sent to the front lines. She was already a regular doctor at that time.

After arrival to the station of destination it appeared that it was already seized by Germans. Her friend and she went walking to Nikolaev, hoping to break through the front line and reach their relatives. When they came to Nikolaev, the city was already seized by Germans.

Bellochka was blond and didn't look very Jewish, so her parent's neighbors offered to give her shelter. They were not afraid that it would cause of any suspicions, but they refused to take in her friend. So she refused to be saved alone and let down her Jewish friend in such a hardship.

So they had to register as Jews. For some time they carried out very hard and humiliating slave work in a ghetto. And then, together with other Jews, they were executed. When precisely that happened, we do not know.

Father's younger sister, Aunt Lifsha, safely lived with her husband and two wonderful girls - Golda and Bronya - in Poland. It was not permitted to correspond with one's relatives abroad then. We knew that we had these relations, and I knew that, but I had never seen them.

They lived in the city of Volozhin. My knowing them was limited to one letter and a small parcel that they sent to us when that part of Poland was joined to Belarus. The girls, Aunt Lifsha and her husband perished during the German occupation.

It was impossible to find out how it all happened, whether they were shot in town or died in a concentration camp.

• After the war and later life

In 1946 Mum married again. Her new husband's name was Ionya (Joseph) Boltyansky. He was Jew. We called him Lenya. He worked as watchmaker. He was called for the Red Army in 1939 and went through the entire war. His small daughter died before the war, and his wife and mother were shot by fascists in Kirovograd.

One year later, in 1947, I finished secondary school. On the day when I was preparing for my first examination, my sister Sophia was born. And I decided to enter the Medical Military Academy in Leningrad. In the military registration and enlistment office I was given the train ticket and traveling money. When applying to the Academy, or the first time I felt the manifestation of anti-Semitism: the medical commission rejected me, having found, ostensibly, a rupture (hernia).

More than 50 years passed, and I haven't suffered from a ruptured hernia or anything else whatsoever.

I had no money to go back to Nikolaev, and I decided to stay in Leningrad. I submitted documents to the First Medical Institute, passed entrance examinations successfully and was admitted as a first year student. Our student group was very large.

There were many Jews, both from other cities and locals. There were many guys who went through the war.

The time of my study in Leningrad was the golden time of my life. Leningrad itself, the student atmosphere, learning new things - all that was interesting and significant. Unfortunately, my financial situation was rather tough.

I was badly dressed and it prevented me from going to parties and entertainment events and to fully use the advantages given by Leningrad. Nevertheless, in some degree I could afford the museums, theatres, concerts and so on. The student's life in Leningrad was very interesting with its friendship and communication. I participated in amateur art performances, was engaged in public work in a trade-union, and of course, I was a member of Komsomol.

Having entered the institute in 1947, I finished it in 1953. I combined study and work all those years. I worked as a hospital attendant and later as a laboratory assistant. 1952 and 1953 were the years significant in the life of the Soviet Jews. It was a peak of anti-Semitism, and in 1953 the so-called "doctors' case" was in its full swing.

Many professors, instructors at our institute, Jews by nationality, and, at the same time, some non-Jewish employees, were disgracefully fired from work. Subsequently, when they were rehabilitated, the director of the institute, Major-General Ivanov, paid visits to each of them, apologizing.

When the "doctors' case" was closed, many of Russian teachers of the institute, and in my clinic, expressed their compassion, their solidarity with me as a Jew.

I met my future wife Tamara Rastegina during my first years in the institute. She came from Ulyanovsk and she is Russian, not Jewish. She had traveled across much of the country with her parents, as her father was sent to work in different cities.

Her father was at the front during the war, and Tamara and her mother were in evacuation. My love affair with Tamara inflamed in the sixth year in the institute and it really was an intense spiritual sensation. But, having reached no agreement by the time of final examinations, we, upon graduation from the institute, went to work in the opposite ends of the country. I received a direction to Tadjikistan, the city of Leninabad, and Tamara - to Kohtla-Jarve, Estonia.

We corresponded for a year, clarified our relations, and eventually, in 1954, we got married.

From that time we live in Estonia, in the city of Kohtla-Jarve and for almost 50 years we have been working as medical doctors: I am an endocrinologist and my wife is a tuberculosis specialist.

In 1958 Mum's second husband died, and Mum with my sister Sophia moved to Estonia to be closer to us. Here they lived in our family. Mum did not work and helped us keep the house. After leaving school Sophia entered Tartu University, the philological faculty, and had successfully finished it.

Upon graduation from university she worked for a short period as a teacher of literature, and then got a job in the local newspaper, where she works till now as a correspondent. She has a daughter. Her daughter is grown up now and two years ago Sophia became a happy grandmother.

She was presented with twin girls - Masha and Dasha. Mother spent her last years in Sophia's family and died in the age of 80.

My wife and me have two sons: Leo (1955) and Igor (1962). We are all very good friends. Tamara has always been and remains my best and most loyal friend, a symbol of kindness and fidelity. It is mainly thanks to her that our sons have received such a good education.

She imparted them love to literature, arts, history, music. We frequently went together to Leningrad, visited museums and theatres. We have a good home library. We were immensely happy when our children were small.

I was unable to pass to children any special Jewish traditions because I myself was hardly familiar with them. But 10 years ago, when a Jewish community was formed in our city, both sons took an active part in its life.

My younger son tragically died about 5 years ago, and the older is, unfortunately, unemployed right now, but participates in the Jewish community activities. My younger son was a doctor, he obtained his diploma by graduating from the medical faculty of Tartu university.

My elder son has finished Polytechnic Institute in Tallinn by correspondence and had worked as a programmer for 15-16 years.

It must be said, that thanks to my elder son I have familiarized myself with Jewish history and traditions, because he has many books on these subjects and is very keen about all that.

He works in a small Sunday school, teaching history and traditions of Judaism. He is inclined to humanitarian disciplines and knows the French language well. He does some translations. He's got a large collection of musical recordings, including Jewish songs in Yiddish and Hebrew.

And he extensively uses these recordings at his sessions with the members of the community, which take place quite often.

My wife and me often attend to such meetings. I even allow myself to perform Jewish songs. The listeners always express their pleasure at hearing them.

In 1999, the year of my 70th jubilee, I received a great gift. I was invited by my nephew, who had been living in Israel for 20, to visit this country. I spent precisely 20 days there. My relatives arranged long trips and very interesting excursions all over the country.

During those 20 days I was moving all the time. I traveled from North to South and from West to East. I saw many interesting things, familiarized myself with the country and became inspired with the pride for Jews, for the state, for the numerous breakthroughs that they managed to achieve in developing their country in such a relatively short period of time. I was impressed by so many things there. I managed to pay visits to all my relatives in Israel, my cousins, many of my former institute friends who live there now.

This trip gave me a burst of inspiration and strengthened my feelings as a Jew. Mother was often saying (and it might be somebody else's invention):

"We are who we are,
and we are Jews!"

Let me say the following in conclusion: just recently has the 20th century come to an end. An interesting century that gave mankind a lot of scientific discoveries, numerous works of art and literature. A terrible century that brought fierce battles. A century dreadful for Jews, both in Russia and in other countries, Jews, who suffered violent pogroms and a severe, brutal, unprecedented ordeal - the Holocaust.

But it was also an important century for the Jewish nation that succeeded in establishing its own Jewish state, a state that inspires all the Jews to become aware of themselves as a unique nation, to feel the unanimity of Jews.

I read this phrase in an interesting book: "The world is enlightened by love." I want to wish Love to all my family, all Jews, all people! Love to life in all its manifestations of beauty and kindness, love to their relatives, intimate love, the all-consuming love.

And I want to wish you peace and tranquility, optimism, hope and implementation of all your dreams!