

# Lazar Gurfinkel

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Chernovtsy

Ukraine

Interviewer: Ella Levitskaya

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Lazar Gurfinkel is a short man with thick gray hair. His wife and son moved to the USA in 1997, and he lives alone in a three-bedroom apartment in the center of Chernovtsy now. A nurse from Hesed comes to his home to help him with house chores. She cleans his rooms, does the shopping and cooks for him. Lazar feels lonely, though. He was glad to give us an interview. He told us about several generations of his family, sometimes in amazing detail. He has good manners and a soft voice. Lazar has a clear memory and a sound mind. He is very glad that people show an interest in Jewish life before the Holocaust and in the history of Jewish families. To him it means that people go back to their roots, something that had been suppressed in the USSR before.



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## My family background

My father's parents lived in Khotin, which belongs to Western Ukraine now and was formerly part of Moldavia [Bessarabia] <sup>1</sup> which again was part of Romania between 1918 and 1940. My grandfather, Leizer Gurfinkel, was born in Khotin in the 1840s. He died after a stroke in 1913. My grandmother, Beile-Enta Gurfinkel, was also born in Khotin. She was born in the same year as my grandfather. She fell seriously ill when she was a child. Jews in town believed that her parents gave her the second name of Enta to swindle death, which was to come for Beile. However strange it may sound, my grandmother did recover from the disease that all doctors had diagnosed as incurable.

Khotin was a small district town with Russian, Ukrainian, Moldavian, Romanian and Jewish inhabitants. Jews, about 13,000 people, constituted almost half of the population. There were about seven synagogues and two Jewish elementary schools in Khotin. There were no pogroms in Khotin.

People respected each other's traditions and religions. There were no pogroms in Khotin. Jews were craftsmen and merchants. There were tailors, shoemakers, carpenters, fur and leather specialists. There were several richer Jews that owned big stores. There were also lawyers, doctors and pharmacists among the Jews.

There were also poor people, mostly widows with children, who had lost their breadwinner, or sick people, who couldn't go to work. The Jewish community in Khotin supported poor families. On Fridays poor women and children went begging in the main streets of the town, where the Jewish middle class resided. They got one or two lei in each house. Giving alms on Friday was a tradition. People were willing to help poor people buy a challah, fish and other food for Sabbath. Poor Jews usually went begging on the first half of the day and managed to visit 50-60 houses. But of course, they kept having problems. They needed money to buy clothes, wood for winter and other things. There were about 7 synagogues and two Jewish primary schools in Khotin.

Jews resided in the main streets of Khotin. It was better regarding their businesses to live in the central part of town, where they had more customers. They usually lived in one-storied wooden or stone houses with shops occupying the part of the house that faced the street. The rest of the house served as a living quarter for the family. Non-Jews resided in the outskirts of town, where land wasn't so expensive, and they had bigger plots of land with gardens and orchards. There were many gardens in town.

On Mondays there was a market in Khotin. Farmers from the surrounding villages sold their dairy products, eggs, fruit and vegetables, meat and chickens. There was a yard where they sold pigs, cows and horses. Jewish store owners used to display some of their goods in front of their stores on market days. They had more customers on these days because the farmers usually sold their products before the afternoon and went to buy essential goods in the shops: matches, kerosene, salt and so on, etc. They also bought warm winter boots and clothes. Jews were selling shirts, boots, threads and buttons at the market.

There was a shochet at the market who slaughtered chickens and ducks that Jews bought for a holiday or Sabbath. To buy kosher meat Jews went to the meat factory where cattle was slaughtered in accordance with the rules of kashrut. Jewish butchers bought cattle at the market and cut the meat. Jewish butcher stores had to meet the requirements concerning kashrut. Butchers had no right to sell pork because in that case all other meat on sale in the store became non-kosher. Therefore, they only had Jewish customers because farmers usually bought pork at the market.

My grandfather was a religious man. He didn't work. He spent his time praying and reading religious books. He went to the synagogue every day and observed all Jewish traditions. My grandfather was a very kind, nice and reserved man. He loved his wife and was very attached to her. They spoke Yiddish at home, but they also knew Russian and Moldavian. My grandmother was moderately religious. Friday evening the family celebrated the coming of Sabbath, and my grandmother said a prayer over the candles. They followed the kashrut. My grandmother wore the trousers in the family. The breadwinner who provides for the family is also the head of the family. She was very smart in business. She went to purchase golden jewelry in Turkey to sell it in town. She stored it at home and sold it to her neighbors and other clients.

They lived in a big one-storied stone house in the old central part of Khotin. My father showed me the house, but I didn't go inside because another family lived there. They were a well-to-do family. There was only a small backyard with a shed and a toilet: a wooden booth with a cesspool. Land in the central part of town was very expensive, and people didn't have orchards or flower beds. My grandmother planted flowers on the boundaries of the house.

My grandparents had four sons and four daughters. My father was the youngest in the family. The oldest was Aron, then came Isaac and Samuel. After Samuel three daughters were born: Lisa, Fania and Shesia. There was another daughter after Shesia whom I didn't know and then came my father. My father Michael - his Jewish name was Michel - was born in 1878.

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My father and his brothers studied in cheder. Their sisters studied at home with teachers from cheder. They studied Yiddish, Hebrew, the Torah and Talmud, mathematics, literature and French. After the boys finished cheder they continued their education at the Romanian lower secondary school.

Isaac was a doctor. He graduated from the Medical Faculty of Novorossiysk University in Odessa. He took a course of advanced training in surgery in Berlin. After finishing it he became the chief surgeon at the regional hospital in Kishinev. When Bessarabia joined Romania in 1918, Isaac stayed in Kishinev but lost his position as chief surgeon. Jews weren't allowed to hold high official posts. He became a private doctor. Isaac had three daughters from his first wife. After his wife died in the 1920s, he married a colleague of his, and they had a daughter. Isaac was religious and observed Jewish traditions. He died of pneumonia in 1932. My father patronized his daughters and helped the widow.

Aron and Samuel became pharmacists Two other brothers became pharmacists and lived in Russia. In 1918 the area where they lived joined the USSR, and their family lost track of them. The Soviet authorities were suspicious of families that had relatives abroad. Even questionnaires or application forms had an item line asking, 'Do you have relatives abroad?' A positive answer might have become an obstacle for getting employment, admission to a higher educational institution, etc. During the period of the Stalinist repression [the so-called Great Terror] [2](#) a person that admitted having relatives abroad might have been accused of espionage and arrested. I know that Samuel lived and worked in Yampol, a small city in Vinnitsa region. He perished in the ghetto there along

with his family at the beginning of the Great Patriotic War [3](#). Aron owned a pharmacy in Oriol, a regional town near Moscow. It was nationalized after the Revolution of 1917 [4](#). He moved to Moscow because he was afraid of other sanctions against him, and the family didn't hear from him after that.

My father's older sister, Lisa, got married before the Revolution of 1917 and moved to New York, USA, with her husband. The two other sisters, Fania and Shesia, moved to Odessa. They got married and had children. Fania graduated from the Odessa Medical Institute and became a doctor. Shesia didn't work. After the Revolution of 1917 we didn't have any information about them. After the war we got to know that my father's sisters evacuated to Pyatigorsk at the beginning of the war and perished in 1942 when the town was occupied by the Germans.

After finishing grammar school my father finished a course for pharmacist assistants in Kazan. He wanted to get higher education, but it was difficult for a Jew to enter university [because of the five percent restriction] [5](#). My father's older brother, Isaac, helped him to get into Moscow University. The Association of Noble Families of Kishinev issued a request to the rector's office of Moscow University to admit Michael Gurfinkel, pointing out that his brother had contributed a lot to the Russian Empire. This document was signed by the marshal of the nobility in the province and a gentleman of the monarch's chamber. My father went to Moscow with this paper and obtained a permit to take entrance exams.

He was admitted and studied at the Pharmaceutical Faculty for five years. He was very hard up and if it hadn't been for charity meals at a students' canteen sponsored by Morozov, a Russian merchant, he wouldn't have been able to complete his studies. My father couldn't find a job in Khotin after graduating. There were only two pharmacies in town and no vacancies. He found a job at a private pharmacy in Tambov, a Russian provincial town. Later he worked in Fastov, near Kiev, for several years. When the owner of one of the pharmacies in Khotin died, his widow inherited the pharmacy. She had no special education and was looking for a manager. My father's sisters wrote to my father and told him to come to Khotin. He arrived and became the manager of that pharmacy.

My mother's parents lived in Kamenets-Podolsk. Her father, Yankel Akkerman, was born in Kamenets-Podolsk in the 1840s. Her mother Pesia Akkerman [nee Lukacher], was a few years younger than my grandfather. My grandmother's parents also lived in Kamenets-Podolsk. My mother, Sarah Gurfinkel [nee Akkerman], was born in 1881. She was their only child. She was named Sarah after her father's mother but called Sopha at home. My grandmother died of typhoid in 1884 when my mother was 3. My grandfather didn't remarry.

My grandfather's sister, Feiga, lived in Khotin with her family. She raised my mother while my grandfather provided for her. Feiga was a widow and had two children of her own. She married her deceased husband's brother, and they had two more children. . Feiga owned a small fabric store. She bought fabrics at the fabric warehouse to sell them in her store. She provided well for the family. She was moderately religious. They celebrated Sabbath and Jewish holidays. They spoke Yiddish and Russian in the family. Feiga didn't have a housemaid. Her husband replaced her in the store when she needed to cook for the family. She was tall, thin and strong. She was an intelligent businesswoman. I met her several times and it was always interesting to talk to her. She died in the ghetto in 1942 at the age of 98.

My grandfather rented fields from a landlord and leased smaller plots to farmers. After the harvest he received his share of crops. During the harvest season he stayed in villages, and on the weekends he came to stay with Feiga. He led the same life after my mother got married. My grandfather died in 1925. He was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Kamenets- Podolsk, near the spot where my grandmother was buried.

There was no grammar school for girls in Khotin. My mother and Feiga's children studied at home with a teacher who came to teach them Hebrew, Yiddish and the Torah. Another teacher came to teach them the educational program of elementary school. At the age of 10 my mother went to grammar school in Kamenets-Podolsk, not far from Khotin. She lived in the hostel on weekdays and went to Khotin on weekends. My mother spoke fluent Russian and read a lot of Russian books. When she was younger she went on trips to Kiev and Odessa.

After finishing grammar school my mother returned to Khotin. She didn't continue her studies and didn't work. She was a young lady preparing to get married. My mother was a friend of my father's sister Fania. Fania introduced her to my father sometime in 1911. My mother was very beautiful. My father and mother liked one another and got married shortly afterwards in 1912. They had a civil ceremony in the town hall and a traditional Jewish wedding with a chuppah. They rented a big hall for ceremonies in Khotin and had the chuppah and the wedding party in that hall. After their wedding my parents spent their honeymoon in Italy.

When they returned they stayed with Feiga for some time, but then they moved in with my father's parents. The owner of the pharmacy where my father was working moved to live with her son and sold the pharmacy and her house to my father. The pharmacy and the house were in the same building, so my parents had their own dwelling. In the beginning my father managed in the pharmacy alone, but then his work-load increased. At that time prescribed medication had to be prepared within two hours, and my father hired a young assistant to help him.

## Growing up

My older brother, Moisey, was born in 1913, and my sister Pesia, named after my mother's mother, followed in 1916. She was called Polia at home. I was born in 1924. I was named Leizer after my grandfather on my father's side who died in 1913. In Hebrew my name is Eliezer, which means 'God is help'.

In 1925 my grandfather Yankel, my mother's father, died. He was buried at the Jewish cemetery in Kamenets-Podolskiy, near where my grandmother was buried. In 1918 my parents moved into another house. My father bought a big house in one of the main streets - a better location for his business - and he moved his pharmacy into it, too.

Romanian was the state language in Bessarabia from 1918, but Jews mostly spoke Yiddish or Russian. We spoke Russian at home. Sometimes my parents spoke Yiddish when they didn't want us to understand what they were discussing. We had a Ukrainian nanny. She was kind to me, and I was attached to her. I learned Ukrainian from her and Russian from my parents. I actually spoke a mixture of these two languages. I learned Yiddish when I was about 5 years old from the children I was playing with. We lived in a Jewish neighborhood, and all our neighbors were Jewish. I couldn't read or write in Yiddish, but I spoke it fluently.

We lived in that house until World War II. There was a backyard, a shed and a well in the yard. The pharmacy occupied three rooms, the biggest of which served as the sales area. Powders were prepared in another room, and tinctures and decoctions were made in the third room. There were also storerooms for pharmaceutical utensils. Our family was lodging in four rooms: a living room, a dining room, my parents' bedroom and a children's room. There were also a kitchen, a verandah and a few storerooms in the house. When I was small I slept in my parents' bedroom. Later, me and my brother and sister shared the children's room. There were two beds, a wardrobe, a sink, a table, two chairs and a bookcase in the room. We dined and received guests in the dining room. There was a table, six chairs, a cupboard and a sofa in the room. Our living room was beautifully furnished. There were four windows, carpets and curtains on the windows. There were pictures on the walls, ancient vases and a crystal chandelier.

My father's mother lived with her older son Isaac, but later she moved in with my father. She was old and weak and couldn't cook herself or walk outside. After Isaac's wife died he found it difficult to look after her, and he wrote to my father asking him whether he could take care of their mother. My grandmother arrived shortly afterwards. She had a housemaid whose task was to look after her. My grandmother died in 1938 when she was over 90 years old.

My nanny died when I was about 6 years old. We also had a housemaid and a cook. They were Ukrainian. The housemaid was responsible for cleaning the rooms. She had to clean seven rooms every day. In winter she had to stoke the stove and clean it. The cook did the shopping and cooking every day because there were no fridges to store food. There was a built-in boiler in the stove for heating water. My mother didn't work - she had housekeeping responsibilities.

## Our religious life

My parents didn't follow the kashrut. We ate all kinds of products, including traditional Jewish food. When my brother was a student in Bucharest he had meals at a restaurant, and when he came home on vacation he always demanded pork chop, the food he was used to. The cook made pork chops for him, and we took advantage of the chance to have pork, too. We didn't observe Sabbath, but we celebrated the major Jewish holidays: Pesach, Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashanah, Chanukkah, Purim and Sukkot. My parents weren't deeply religious people, but they paid a tribute to religion.

Before my brother was to have his bar mitzvah my father hired a teacher to teach my brother Jewish traditions and religion. He taught him Hebrew, prayers and other things. My father hired a teacher for me when I was 10 years old. He taught me Hebrew but translated things into Yiddish for me to understand. I studied the Pentateuch Torah and the Talmud. When I turned 13 my father took me to the synagogue in a cabriolet. I had my bar mitzvah ritual. I said a prayer, and my father treated all community members with traditional vodka, wine and honey cookies. I got tefillin and came of age. My mother arranged a party for me at home. We invited many guests: our family, my parents' friends and my friends.

My father went to the synagogue on all big Jewish holidays and on the death anniversaries [Jahrzeit] of his parents to say prayers for them. He took me with him after I turned 7. While my brother was still in Khotin we went there together. My father had a seat at the synagogue. This synagogue had a special meaning to our family. My father's grandfather on his mother's side had funded its construction, and it was called after my great-grandfather, Avrum Shai Yoffe. My father also made contributions to charity and the maintenance of the synagogue. He had a seat of honor



in the eastern part of the synagogue as the grandson of the man who had constructed the synagogue. The Holy Ark, where the Torah scrolls are kept, and the place where the cantor sings or says prayers are traditionally located in the eastern part of a synagogue. All believers must face the East during praying because our religious capital Jerusalem is in the East. There were benches along the eastern wall of the synagogue for the citizens who had contributed their lives to the Jewish community and the synagogue. On Saturdays, when my father wasn't at the synagogue, somebody else took his seat, but it was his on Jewish holidays when he attended the synagogue. I usually sat beside him. My mother attended a different synagogue, the one that her deceased father had attended. She went there on holidays.

My mother knew all the traditions. She kept fancy dishes and utensils for Pesach in a special box. She made traditional food on Pesach. Our cook helped her with the cooking. We didn't have any bread in the house during Pesach but ate matzah instead. All Jewish bakeries in Khotin sold matzah. Before Pesach the rabbi went to all the Jewish bakeries to issue a certificate confirming that they had cleaned the bakery of all the bread and bread crumbs. They made matzah flour for sale, too. We had gefilte fish, chicken broth and boiled chicken on Pesach. My mother also made chicken cutlets, stuffed chicken neck and pudding of matzah and eggs. There were also delicious pancakes from matzah meal that we ate with jam or honey. My father conducted the seder very ceremoniously. He had several prayer books. I also had a few of those books. I still have one that my parents gave me before the war. During seder I asked my father the traditional 'four questions' [the mah nishtanah]. Each member of the family drank a glass of wine. We opened the front door. It was a tradition that any traveler that didn't get home could enter the house and join the family for seder. There was also an extra glass of wine for Elijah the Prophet. It was believed that he visited every family at seder.

On Chanukkah our father gave us some change and a spinning top [dreidel]. I also remember Tu bi-Shevat. We had various fruit growing in Israel: dates, figs and raisins. We could buy them in stores and had them on the table.

We had guests for Purim. Poorer Jews, adults and children, gave performances in the houses of wealthier people and received money for them. These performances were short, because Purimshpilers had to make the rounds of as many families as possible to earn more money. It's obligatory to partake a festive meal on the day of Purim. It is customary to eat food with seeds, for example, hamantashen with poppy seed filling. One should drink more wine than one is accustomed to. It's correct to invite guests, especially the needy. The conversation should be focused on words from the Torah.

On Yom Kippur and before Rosh Hashanah we fasted for 24 hours including children over 5 years of age. After going to the synagogue [on the day of Yom Kippur], when the first evening star appeared in the sky, the family sat down for a festive dinner.

## **My school years**

Neither my brother nor I went to cheder or a Jewish school. There were two Jewish schools in Khotin: a private one and a state-funded one. According to the Rumanian constitution the children of ethnic minorities could study at a national school. In the state-funded school pupils studied in Yiddish and Romanian. The other school was a Talmud-Torah, a religious school where children studied the Torah and Hebrew. It was funded by the Jewish community and Jewish organizations.

According to the Romanian constitution the children of ethnic minorities could study at a national school. We studied at the Romanian elementary school. My father wanted us to continue our education and believed that we would be better off if we started our studies in Romanian. Our primary education was free of charge, but when we went to grammar school our parents paid a set amount for each year. Students wore uniforms. Poor people couldn't afford to pay for their education, but for the middle class it was affordable. My brother and sister went to a lyceum after elementary school. After that they entered the Pharmaceutical Faculty of Bucharest University. They both wanted to follow into my father's footsteps.

I went to the state elementary school when I turned 7. I faced anti-Semitism from the first days of school. There were only two Jewish pupils among the 40 of us in class. There were Romanian, Russian and Ukrainian pupils. They called me 'zhyd, zhydiura' [kike]. Sometimes I fought with them, sometimes I kept silent. Our teachers didn't encourage anti-Semitism and didn't demonstrate any. After finishing elementary school I went to the Romanian grammar school.

In 1933 Hitler came to power in Germany. Romania was a military and political ally of France and England that won in World War I. Under the Versailles Peace Treaty Romania received Bessarabia and Bukovina at that time. We believed that Romania wouldn't enter a treaty with Germany. We were hoping that France and England wouldn't allow Germany to occupy Romania, but it happened otherwise. There were fascist organizations in Romania. Two parties the Iron Guard [6](#) and the Cuzists [7](#), openly declared that they were against Jews. They were saying that Jews were robbing the Romanians and took hold of all key positions in trade and economy. But they weren't in power. The Liberal Party was in power, and it was loyal to Jews. There was no oppression of Jews. Only officers' schools and seminaries didn't admit Jews.

In 1937 my brother graduated from university and came back home. He began to work at my father's pharmacy. My father was the manager of the pharmacy, and my brother joined two other pharmacists to do everyday work.

My father died in 1939. He died within two days. He had intestinal obstruction that caused peritonitis. My father was buried according to Jewish traditions.. After the funeral my brother and I went to the synagogue every day to recite the Kaddish for a whole year. My brother went to the cemetery twice or three times a week. Somebody reported to the rabbi that my brother was a frequent visitor at the cemetery. The rabbi explained to my brother that it was against Jewish rules to come to the cemetery so often. He told him that a deceased relative needed to have his peace. My brother became the manager of the pharmacy. The pharmacy generated a good income, and my mother didn't have to worry about how to support the family.

We read about the situation in the USSR in a daily Russian newspaper issued by Russian emigrants. What we read there made us feel scared: continuous trials over 'enemies of the people', former revolutionaries and communists [during the so-called Great Terror]. The middle class had a very negative view of the situation in the USSR.

We heard on the radio that Bessarabia was to become a part of the USSR a day before the Soviet army units came to town. They entered it in the fall of 1940. Almost all Romanians had left their homes the night before. We had nowhere to go. On the first days of the Soviet power we were told about equal rights, freedom and the brotherhood of all people. Later we found out that people were arrested for no reason and put to prisons without a trial. Many wealthier people perished in prisons



in the first days of the Soviet regime. Then the authorities turned to the middle class. They took away our pharmacy. We were afraid of further actions on their part, but they left us alone.

My sister was a student in Bucharest, but when she got to know that the Soviet army occupied Bessarabia she came home. My brother and sister couldn't find a job. They moved to Chernovtsy due to the unstable situation in Khotin. My brother became the manager of the regional veterinary storage facility. My sister found a job as the manager of the railroad pharmacy. My sister and brother spoke fluent Russian and had no problem with their work. I went to the 10th grade of a Soviet secondary school at the time.

My mother and I stayed in our house. All the best apartments in town were given to Soviet and party bosses. The Soviet and party authorities selected houses to their liking and forced their owners to move out. People were afraid of the tyranny and didn't resist especially because of all the previous arrests of innocent people and the pressure on wealthier citizens. Then there was another boss, the deputy chairman of the town council, who wanted our house. The Soviet authorities suggested to my mother that we kept one room for ourselves and gave the rest of the house to the family of this man. My mother refused, and the authorities just took all our belongings outside the house and sealed the apartment. The director of the pharmacy allowed us to take books and bed sheets to the storeroom but asked us to do it secretly. We stayed overnight in the house of my father's friend ( a doctor) and left for Chernovtsy in the morning.

My brother arranged a meeting with the regional prosecutor for us. The prosecutor told us that unless our house had been nationalized what had happened was a gross violation of the law. He asked us to wait at the reception. It took him a few minutes to solve our problem. When he came back he told us to go to Khotin and get our house back. We did as he had told us and got it back. The same manager of the housing department that had forced us to move out of our house brought us our keys and apologized. My mother and I arrived in an empty house. All our belongings had been taken outside the house. My brother and sister saved some money for us to hire loaders to take our belongings back into the house. The authorities left us in peace - they didn't dare to disobey orders that they received from higher authorities.

At the beginning of May 1941 my sister and her fiancé, Boris Leikin, came to visit us. Boris was Jewish. He was the secretary of the party organization of the railroad in Chernovtsy. My sister met him at work. She was beautiful and smart, and they took to liking one another and decided to get married. On 1st May 1941 my sister took him to Khotin, and after a few days they registered their marriage.

## **During the war**

In June 1941 I passed all my exams successfully and obtained my certificate of secondary education. Three days later the war began. On the night of 22nd June my mother and I were woken up by an explosion, followed by many more. I saw a plane flying so low that I could see black crosses with a white stripe. Then a vehicle stopped near our fence. The military in it began to shoot at the plane from anti-aircraft weapons. This happened at 5 o'clock in the morning. We went outside. A military told us to stay calm and that it was just another military training. I went into the street and saw wounded soldiers on a vehicle.

By 9 o'clock the director of the pharmacy told us that the war had begun. I had a radio. I switched it to the Moscow frequency, but there were no announcements. I switched to short waves and heard an announcement in Russian, but I could hear that it wasn't the mother tongue of the speaker. He said, 'Farmers, don't burn your fields or take away your cattle. Such actions will be viewed as sabotage against the German army and punished according to the war laws'. Then another program announced that Adolf Hitler would be on air at 10 o'clock in the morning. I could understand German and listened to his speech. He explained that he decided to attack the Soviet Union and that it was a pre-emptive step, as the Soviet Union had plans to attack Germany. That was all he said.

We were hoping that the Soviet army would be strong enough to hold back the German troops, but after a few days we saw them retreating. My sister and her husband evacuated to Samarkand region in Uzbekistan. He became the secretary of the party organization of a mine near Samarkand. My sister became a lab assistant in the chemical laboratory at the sugar factory. My brother came to us from Chernovtsy.

On 6th July the Romanians occupied Khotin. The three of us failed to evacuate. After a week or two the Romanian police ordered the Jewish population to come to the central square at 8 o'clock the following morning to be deported to a different area. They threatened to shoot all Jews that stayed in their apartments after noon. We packed our winter clothes and valuables, because we understood that we wouldn't come back home for a while. The doctor, my father's friend, a Polish man, lived nearby, and my mother asked him whether we could leave some of our belongings with him. We left some valuables and family photographs, and he kept them for us.

We were taken to the ghetto in Mohilev-Podolsk [250 km from Khotin]. We were convoyed by gendarmes. The Romanian police obliged farmers from the surrounding villages to provide horse-driven carts, and older or sick Jews and children climbed onto them. My mother's sister, Feiga, was with us. She was an elderly woman. We were on the way for about two weeks. We exchanged the few clothes that we had and my mother's jewelry for food. Local farmers came to the side of the road with the products they wanted to sell.

The territory of the ghetto was fenced with barbed wire. There was one gate guarded by Ukrainian police. The ghetto was in an old Jewish neighborhood, and the newly arrived Jews were accommodated in the existing houses. There were about 12,000 Jews from Khotin alone, and there were many from other locations, too. The Romanian authorities decided where to send people. There were ghettos and camps all over Vinnitsa region. Two or three families lived in one room. People were sleeping on the floor and didn't have any sanitary facilities. Many inmates were dying from diseases and starvation. Feiga died there, too. During the first winter there was no heating, and it was a severe winter. We were only allowed to fetch water from the well at set hours. Carpenters, construction men and tailors, etc. had a right to leave the ghetto to go to work. They had a special pass.

The local Ukrainian farmers knew that the inmates of the ghetto had no food. They brought milk, apples and homemade bread to the ghetto to sell it three times more expensive than the market price. A pile of potatoes or a bottle of milk cost a golden ring or a nice jacket. We lived on my mother's golden jewelry for a year. Then we had good luck. There was a vacancy at the pharmacy of the town hospital. My brother spoke fluent Romanian and Russian and had a diploma from a

Romanian university. He was employed and received a salary for his work. He was also allowed to leave the ghetto. In the evening he bought milk, vegetables, apples and butter at a low price at the market, and we didn't starve.

There was a Jewish self-government in the ghetto. The Germans called it (Judenrat [8](#). The Romanians authorized a Jewish attorney to select representatives for this Judenrat. The Judenrat was responsible for sending people to work on the roads and bridges. The Romanians needed roads for transportation purposes and involved many workers to have all the repairs done. I worked in the ghetto team. Other inmates were sent to other locations where they worked to exhaustion and were then shot. Basically, members of the Judenrat were trying to take care of their families and relatives.

In 1943 the Romanians got concerned about the development of the situation and became less strict with the rules. Romanian Jews began to send parcels with food and medication through the Red Cross charity organization. Once a month the Jewish community council gave us cereals and mamaliga. The Swiss Red Cross obtained permission to take orphaned children from the ghetto to Jewish communities in Romania. Later, when Israel was established, these children were moved there.

The Jews didn't celebrate any holidays in the ghetto. Religious Jews prayed in expectation of death, but it only scared the others. They got together for a minyan and prayed droningly for days in a row. It sent shivers down your spine.

We were liberated at the end of March 1944. We met the Soviet army units with joy. At least they didn't shoot us. We arrived in Khotin with another family. Half of the town had been burned down. My brother thought it would be easier for him to find a job in Chernovtsy and left. He was offered a job at the veterinary department of the town administration. The authorities promised to give him an apartment in Chernovtsy, and he came to Khotin to take us to Chernovtsy with him. We liked the town. It was clean and homely. People spoke Yiddish in the streets, and there were synagogues and a Jewish theater. We rented an apartment while waiting for my brother to receive the apartment that he had been promised.

My brother and I were registered at the military registry office. It was obligatory. My brother got the rank of an officer and obtained the status of a reservist. I went to serve at a reserve regiment in the Ural. I had a two-month training and then our units were sent to the front. I became a gun-layer of 82mm mortar in a mortar unit. Officers didn't demonstrate any anti-Semitism, but soldiers were prejudiced towards me. When I came to the unit the first time I was asked how I happened to be at the front when all Jews were 'fighting' in Tashkent [Editor's note: Tashkent is a town in Middle Asia; it was the place where many people evacuated to during World War II, including many Jewish families. Many people thought that the entire Jewish population was in evacuation rather than at the front, and anti-Semites spoke about it in mocking tone.] I replied that I got there exactly as they did.

We went across Latvia, Lithuania and then to Eastern Prussia. I knew German and became an interpreter in the counterintelligence unit in Königsberg. I interpreted at the interrogations of German prisoners of war. After the unit left Germany I was transferred to another division. When the war was over our division was sent to the Far East and from there to the People's Republic of Mongolia. In August 1945 we were sent to the front in the war with Japan [9](#). I stayed there for three

months. I participated in combat action in Manchuria which was occupied by Japanese troops. Manchuria is a mountainous area. It was difficult to fight with the Japanese troops hiding in the hills. The war with Japan was short. After the capitulation of Japan we were sent to Zabaikaliye where I completed my service term. In summer 1946 I demobilized and returned to my mother in Chernovtsy.

### Post-war

In 1946 Jews, Romanians and Moldavians living in the USSR were allowed to move to Romania. The Soviet power allowed the population living in the areas that had joined the USSR in 1940 to move out. The border was open, and there was a minimum of formalities for departure. My brother decided to leave the country. My sister, who had divorced her husband in evacuation and came to live with us, decided to go with him.

I was in the army when they made the decision to move. My mother decided to stay and wait for me to come. I was the youngest and my mother's favorite, and she didn't want to leave me there alone. When I came to Chernovtsy I went to the visa department to obtain a permit to move to Romania. I explained that my brother and sister were there and that my mother and I wished to reunite with them, but the authorities refused. I went to their office several times until they told me that if I didn't leave them alone I would move, but to Siberia rather than Romania. So my mother and me stayed in Chernovtsy. Life was very hard: we were starving. There was a system of coupons to get food and everything was a big mess. Anti-Semitism was getting stronger.

I decided to continue my studies and entered the Medical Institute in Chernovtsy. I was admitted without exams because I had been at the front. I didn't face any anti-Semitism at the Institute. Most of my fellow students were demobilized soldiers, and they didn't assess people by their nationality. Besides, they had met Jews at the front. Many Jews served as doctors. Anti-Semitism was getting stronger and stronger in the town from 1948, during the campaign against 'cosmopolitans' [10](#), and Jewish workers of science and culture were accused of Zionism, espionage and disruption of the basics of the Soviet regime. The Jewish school and theater were closed. Many Jewish workers in the fields of science and art were fired. Many Jews were arrested on charges of espionage or Jewish bourgeois nationalism. Fortunately, there were no close friends or relatives of mine among them.

My friends and I were enthusiastic about the formation of Israel in 1948. We viewed it as a home for Jews. My fellow student, an invalid of the Great Patriotic War and officer of the Soviet Union, a communist, wrote a letter to the Central Committee of the Soviet Union saying that since the Soviet Union voted in the UN for the formation of Israel, veterans of war wanted to go to Israel to defend it from Arabs. They replied: 'We find it unnecessary...'. He moved to Israel in the 1970s when a number of Jews departed. I didn't think about going there at that time.

I graduated in 1951. I wasn't a Komsomol [11](#) or a party member, I just didn't feel any need joining any of them. There were many vacancies in Ukraine, but Jewish doctors were sent to distant areas in Russia, to the Ural and Siberia. I got an assignment to a district town near Leningrad. I finished a course of training in Leningrad and became a radiologist at a district hospital. There were many patients: invalids of war and wounded people - survivors from the blockade of Leningrad [12](#).

My mother was living alone. She got no pension because she hadn't worked. She received a small rental payment for the lease of our house in Khotin to a pharmacy, and I sent her part of my salary.

In 1953 the Doctors' Plot [13](#) began. The chief doctor of the hospital I worked in was an anti-Semite. There were four Jews among the twelve doctors in our hospital. He couldn't fire us and couldn't express his feelings, but he didn't keep his hatred to himself. However, the director of the hospital was a very decent man. We had a meeting to discuss the article 'Killers in white gowns' published in the Pravda [main communist newspaper], and he told us not to believe what was written there and go on working. He also expressed hope that this tendency wouldn't reach our distant location. He told us to put all details in patients' record books to have evidence of our professional approach to work. We didn't have any problems with our patients.

In March 1953 Stalin died. I didn't sympathize with the man, who was the leader of the Soviet power, which caused so much suffering to the people. I was only concerned about what was going to happen in the future.

My job assignment was to last three years, and then I was planning to go back home. But there was a lack of doctors, and I had to work there for another five years. I had to write a letter to the chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR explaining to him that I had to go back to Chernovtsy because my old mother was ill and I had to take care of her, and that I was a veteran of the Great Patriotic War. The Supreme Soviet sent a letter to the hospital to approve my request to quit my job.

I returned to Chernovtsy in 1956. There was anti-Semitism, and it was difficult to find a job. I was offered a job as a radiologist in a district town near Chernovtsy. I worked there and went to see my mother at weekends. I got a good salary and my life was improving, but my mother was growing older and had problems living alone. I began to look for a job in Chernovtsy. I found one at the town children's hospital. The chief doctor of this hospital obtained an employment approval for me from the regional health care department. I worked at the children's hospital for over 30 years. I retired in 1987.

I stopped observing Jewish traditions when I joined the army. On Soviet holidays I went to parades with my colleagues. It was a mandatory requirement, and there were punishments for not attending such political events. Generally speaking I was an atheist, but I didn't get involved in any political activities. My mother didn't observe all Jewish traditions after the war either. She only said a prayer over the candles every Friday night. She didn't go to the synagogue. She prayed at home. My mother had prayer books. On the death anniversaries [Jahrzeit] of our relatives she read prayers in their memory.

My colleague at the children's hospital had a relative. This colleague of mine was also a radiologist and a Jew. His relative again graduated from Chernovtsy University and was an assistant at the Geo-Chemical Faculty. My colleague introduced me to her and her family. It was my future wife, Fania Aizinger, a Jew. She was born in Chernovtsy in 1930. She was reasonable and kind. She wasn't a striking beauty, but she was good-looking.

My sister worked as a pharmacist. She didn't remarry. My brother worked at the factory that manufactured medication in Bucharest. He was the manager of a scientific research laboratory. He was married and his wife was a housewife. My brother and sister didn't have any children. My sister

died in 1993, and my brother died in 1996.

## Married life

I went to visit my sister and brother in Bucharest in 1958. My brother and sister advised me to get married. I returned to Chernovtsy and proposed to Fania. We had a civil ceremony in 1959 and a small dinner party at home. My mother baked a cake and made dumplings with buckwheat. I bought a bottle of wine. There were about ten guests at our party.

Our son was born in 1960. We named him Michael after my father. My wife went to work, and my mother looked after our son. After some time I realized that my wife and I were very different people, but we stayed together for the sake of our son. My mother died in 1966 at the age of 85. We buried her in the Jewish cemetery in Chernovtsy.

After the Twentieth Party Congress [14](#) anti-Semitism began to decline. Khrushchev [15](#) denounced the Doctors' Plot. But then there was a political tendency to employ Ukrainians that was called national workforce. Jews were having problems finding a job. Although all my ancestors were buried in this land, somebody would tell me that I wasn't 'local'. I wasn't afraid to argue when I heard such statements. I knew I had nothing to lose.

When Jews began to move abroad in the 1970s we couldn't leave. My wife's brother was working in the censorship office of the KGB department and he was considered to belong to the officials who had access to sensitive information. He would have had problems if his own sister had moved abroad becoming a 'traitor'. He would have lost his job. He was married and had a child and we closed this issue for ourselves. That was the only reason. I've always felt that I'm a son of my people. I sympathized with the people who were moving to their motherland. I wish I were with my people. Regretfully, I couldn't go there. I wish I could visit Israel and hope I will be able to go there.

Michael finished secondary school with a medal. My wife worked at the Chernovtsy University as an assistant at the Geo-Chemical Department. This helped when my son entered the Faculty of Physics and Mathematics. Upon graduation he began to work as an engineer at the Electronmach Plant, a military plant. I wanted him to get married and have a family, but my wife was afraid that he would become more distant from her if he married and talked him out of marriage. Five years ago my wife and son moved to the USA. I didn't want to go with them. I believed it was time for my son to start his own life without our influence. Fania died of an infarction last year. My son works as an engineer for some company. He writes letters and sends me photographs. He is still single. He is planning to visit me some time. I live alone. I retired in 1987. I had worked at the children's hospital for over 30 years.

In the recent decade Jewish life in Ukraine changed. I believe there are many aspects in this process. We've got in touch with freedom. We can speak our mind without being afraid that we could be arrested. I'm not afraid to speak openly of the past and discuss social or material issues. Jews have recovered their national identity. We can say openly that we are Jews and we don't have to change our names to 'better sounding' ones. Many people have a difficult life receiving miserable pensions though, whereas people could manage with their pensions during the Soviet power. Nonetheless there's more freedom.



I attend Jewish concerts and performances. I'm also involved in public activities. As a war veteran I often visit Jewish secondary schools. I'm invited to meetings with pupils on all significant phases of the Great Patriotic War, such as the victory in Stalingrad, Moscow, Victory Day and the liberation of Ukraine. I talk with children, tell them about the war and about the ghetto where I almost starved to death. I'm a live witness of the Holocaust. I just do what I can.

## 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 Great Terror (1934-1938)**

During the Great Terror, or Great Purges, which included the notorious show trials of Stalin's former Bolshevik opponents in 1936-1938 and reached its peak in 1937 and 1938, millions of innocent Soviet citizens were sent off to labor camps or killed in prison. The major targets of the Great Terror were communists. Over half of the people who were arrested were members of the party at the time of their arrest. The armed forces, the Communist Party, and the government in general were purged of all allegedly dissident persons; the victims were generally sentenced to death or to long terms of hard labor. Much of the purge was carried out in secret, and only a few cases were tried in public 'show trials'. By the time the terror subsided in 1939, Stalin had managed to bring both the party and the public to a state of complete submission to his rule. Soviet society was so atomized and the people so fearful of reprisals that mass arrests were no longer necessary. Stalin ruled as absolute dictator of the Soviet Union until his death in March 1953.

### **3 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.

### **4 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.

## **5 Five percent restriction**

In tsarist Russia the number of Jews in higher educational institutions could not exceed 5% of the total number of students.

## **6 Iron Guard**

Extreme right wing political organization in Romania between 1930-1941, led by C. Z. Codreanu. The Iron Guard propagated nationalist, Christian-mystical and anti-Semitic views. It was banned for its terrorist activities (e.g. the murder of Romanian prime minister I. Gh. Duca) in 1933. In 1935 it was re-established as a party named 'Everything for the Fatherland', but it was banned again in 1938. It was part of the government in the first period of the Antonescu regime, but it was then banned and dissolved as a result of the unsuccessful coup d'état of January 1941. Its leaders escaped abroad to the Third Reich.

## **7 Cuzist**

Member of the Romanian fascist organization named after Alexandru C. Cuza, one of the most fervent fascist leaders in Romania, who was known for his ruthless chauvinism and anti-Semitism. In 1919 Cuza founded the LANC, which became the National Christian Party in 1935 with an anti-Semitic program.

## **8 Judenrat**

Jewish councils appointed by German occupying authorities to carry out Nazi orders in the Jewish communities of occupied Europe. After the establishment of the ghettos they were responsible for everything that happened within them. They controlled all institutions operating in the ghettos, the police, the employment agency, food supplies, housing, health, social work, education, religion, etc. Germans also made them responsible for selecting people for the work camps, and, in the end, choosing those to be sent to camps that were in reality death camps. It is hard to judge their actions due to the abnormal circumstances. Some believe they betrayed Jews by obeying orders, and others think they were trying to gain time and save as many people as possible.

## **9 War with Japan**

In 1945 the war in Europe was over, but in the Far East Japan was still fighting against the anti-fascist coalition countries and China. The USSR declared war on Japan on 8 August 1945 and Japan signed the act of capitulation in September 1945.

## **10 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 antisemitic 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'.

## **11 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.

## **12 Blockade of Leningrad**

On September 8, 1941 the Germans fully encircled Leningrad and its siege began. It lasted until January 27, 1944. The blockade meant incredible hardships and privations for the population of the town. Hundreds of thousands died from hunger, cold and diseases during the almost 900 days of the blockade.

## **13 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.

## **14 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.

## **15 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.