# Ida Kristina

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Ukraine
Interviewer: Zhanna Litinskaya
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Ida Kristina lives in the very center of Chernigov, an old green town with ancient Christian monument in the Kiev Rus. Ida has a two-bedroom apartment in a nine-storied apartment building constructed 25 years ago. There is good furniture, bought in the 1980s, in the rooms. The apartment is very clean and decorated with embroidered or knitted napkins, fancy pillowcases and embroidered pictures of landscapes made by the mistress of the house. Ida is knitting something again since she has her knitting basket in the kitchen. She makes an impression of being a very reserved, but hospitable and amicable woman. She welcomes me warmly and apologizes that she may have forgotten some names or dates due to her age of 83 before we start the interview. We talk in the kitchen where a branch of blooming acacia was knocking on the window. After the interview we went into the living-room where we took turns to play the piano and sang Jewish and Russian songs.



## Family background

My parents' families came from Chernigov region. I know very little about my father's family. They lived in Oleshevka, a Ukrainian village, where two or three other Jewish families lived apart from them. My grandfather's name was Zalman Rubin, but I don't know my grandmother's name. I don't know what my grandfather did for a living, but my father told me that his family was very poor but very religious. There was no synagogue in the village, of course, since there weren't even enough men for a minyan. Therefore, the Jews of Oleshevka often went to pray with other Jews in the neighboring village. There were five children in the family: three daughters and two sons.

My father's older brother, whose name I don't remember, was born about 1870. He lived in the town of Gomel in Belarus where he was a craftsman. He had five daughters. I saw two of them only once, around 1960, when my husband and I went on a tour to Belarus. We met with our relatives briefly and I only know that they had families and children and were wealthy. I don't even remember their names. We never corresponded or met again and I have no information about my cousins. My uncle died in evacuation in the 1940s.

My father's sisters were married. They didn't have any education and became housewives. They observed Jewish traditions and celebrated holidays in their families. However, they or their

husbands weren't real believers and their children, who grew up in the Soviet times, were far from religion and didn't even celebrate holidays.

My father's older sister, Tsylia, born in 1872, was married. I don't remember her husband's name. He died in the early 1920s when I was just a child. Tsylia had three children: two daughters and a son. Her older daughter died in infancy. The other children, Basia and Michael, who I knew, lived in Chernigov with their mother. I have very little information about them. After the Great Patriotic War 1 they stayed in the town in the Ural where they had been in evacuation. Aunt Tsylia died shortly after the war in the early 1950s. Basia and Michael have also passed away by now.

My father's sister Riva, born in 1875, lived in Chernigov with her husband. Riva died in the early 1930s, shortly after her husband passed away. Her only daughter Manya got married. Her last name after her husband was Nepomniaschaya. Her husband was the manager of the planning department of Chernigov wool yarn factory. Manya finished an accounting school and worked as an accountant. During the war Manya, her husband and two sons were in evacuation. Regretfully, I don't remember her sons' names, but I know that they got a good education. Her older son was a journalist and worked in Leningrad. He died three years ago. Her younger son was at the front during the war. He was a professional military and retired from the army in the rank of lieutenant colonel. Now he lives in Israel with his family.

My father's younger sister Vera, her Jewish name was Dvoira, was born in 1880. She was married. Her husband died before the Great Patriotic War. Vera had no children. She was in evacuation during the war. She died in Chernigov in the middle of the 1960s.

My father, Yankel Rubin, was the youngest in the family, a nipper. He was born in Oleshevka in 1882. There was no cheder in the village. My father and his brothers and sisters attended classes with a melamed, who came to the village once a week. He taught them to read and write in Yiddish. My father didn't have the traditional bar mitzvah at the age of 13 since in 1895, shortly before he was to come of age, my father's parents died one after another. My father's older sisters and brother had their own families. My father became an orphan. A Jewish joiner, who lived in the same village as my father, took him to teach him his profession. So my father became his apprentice. My father followed his family to Chernigov in 1907. He became a skilled cabinetmaker. In 1907 my father met my mother through matchmakers and they got married a year later.

My mother came from a Ukrainian village in Chernigov region. Her father, Samuel Kantor, born in the 1860s, owned a small store in the village of Tarkhovka near Oleshevka. I don't know my maternal grandmother's name. My mother told me that they were a wealthy family. They had a big house and kept livestock: three horses and several cows. They were one of the wealthiest families in the village. My grandfather sold all essential goods in his store: haberdashery and household goods, tools, instruments and fabrics. Villagers often bought goods on credit and respected my grandfather for not charging them interest. My grandfather's family was very religious. They strictly followed kosher rules and celebrated Saturday. They often invited poor Jews from Tarkhovka and neighboring villages to share a meal with them. My grandfather prayed every day, before and after the [Russian] Revolution of 1917 2 when he lived in the family of his older daughter, Etl. He put on his tallit and tefillin and prayed for a long time. There were three daughters in the family: Etl, the oldest, born in 1885, my mother Leya, born in 1887, and the youngest Basia, born in 1898. There were other children in the family, but they died in infancy.

In 1905 escaping from pogroms 3 that rolled over Russia - Kishinev and Odessa, Kiev, Chernigov and towns in Belarus - the family left their house and belongings and moved to Chernigov taking only money and valuables. My grandmother died shortly afterward and my grandfather lived with his older daughter Etl.

Etl's last name after her husband was Levitina. Her husband inherited a store from his father, but after the time of the NEP 4 authorities expropriated his store and his belongings; he fell ill and died shortly afterwards. Etl had five children: four sons and a daughter. By the time their father died the oldest children were old enough to go to work to support their mother and their younger siblings. Etl didn't work. She stayed at home and helped her children with the housework: cooking, cleaning and fixing their clothes. Aunt Etl died in Leningrad in the middle of the 1960s. Her daughter, whose name I don't remember, finished a pedagogical college and worked as an English teacher. She married a Russian man, a commissar of division, and hero of the Civil War 5. They moved to the Far East and I had no information about her after that. One of their sons, Mikholka, perished at the front during the the Great Patriotic War. Boris and Matvey worked in cinematography. Boris was a cinema operator. As for Matvey, I don't know what exactly he was doing. Their younger son, Michael, became a professional military. They lived in Leningrad after the war and were married, but I have no more information about them. We weren't in contact with them.

My mother's younger sister, Basia, married a Jewish man from Gomel region. They lived in the town of Novo-Belitsa. Her husband, whose last name was Gomelskiy, was a member of the Party and worked as a secretary in the Gomel party committee. I never met him. I know that he perished during the Great Patriotic War. Basia and her children were in evacuation. She had six children: five girls and a boy. Basia died shortly after the war. Her daughter, Maria, also passed away and the rest of her children live in Israel and America. We don't correspond.

My mother Leya, born in 1887, got practically no education. However, she could read and write in Yiddish. My grandfather Samuel taught her and her sisters the basics of Jewish education. After my grandmother died my mother was busy with housework. She also learned sewing. My grandfather bought her a Zinger sewing machine and my mother earned some money by sewing at home.

In 1907 my mother met my father through matchmakers, which was customary in Jewish families. It was also a tradition that girls got dowry from their parents and my grandfather gave my mother 400 rubles, which was quite a lot of money for the time. My parents got married in 1908. They had a traditional Jewish wedding with a chuppah in the synagogue and many guests from Chernigov, Gomel and other nearby towns came to the wedding. At that time the population of Chernigov was almost half Jewish. There were several big synagogues near the ancient Christian churches, a cheder and several prayer houses. There were also Ukrainian, Russian and Belarus citizens. There were no nationalitly conflicts among the people. Jews were craftsmen in their majority; they made clothes, shoes and furniture, cut glass and owned stores.

After the wedding my father rented an apartment for his family. He became a very skilled cabinetmaker and could provide well for the family. My mother became a housewife.

My older sister, Riva, was born in 1910 and my second sister, Sonia, followed in 1914. Riva finished a lower secondary Russian school and went to work as a typist, an assistant accountant, an accountant and then became chief accountant with Energosbyt company [a power supply company]. At 23 Riva married David Strashnoy, a very nice Jewish man. They didn't have a Jewish

wedding. They had a civil ceremony and in the evening our mother arranged a wedding dinner for relatives and friends. The young people considered themselves to be progressive people without any patriarchal illusions. David finished Kharkov Construction College. He worked with Gorplan company and the town executive committee in Chernigov. Their son Felix was born in 1935. He followed into his father's footsteps and became a construction man. He is an honored constructor of Ukraine. He lives and works in Chernigov. During the Great Patriotic War David went into evacuation with us, but then he was recruited to the army. After the war he returned home. Riva and Felix were in evacuation in the town of Mirzachul, Uzbekistan, with us. Their daughter, Ada, was born in 1946. Ada finished Polytechnic College in Chernigov. She moved to Israel in the late 1970s with her husband and two children. Riva's husband died in 1996. Riva moved to her daughter in Israel in 1997. She died at the age of 91 in 2001.

My second sister, Sonia, finished a lower secondary school and entered a veterinary school. When she was on a training session in a kolkhoz 6 she met a veterinarian called Leonid Safroniev. He was much older than Sonia and was married. His wife was severely ill. She died and Leonid came to Chernigov to seek my mother's consent to their marriage. My mother turned him down at first. It had nothing to do with his nationality; my mother just thought that Sonia was too young. Leonid continued to court Sonia and after a year my mother gave in. She wanted her daughter to be happy. They got married in 1932, and in 1934 their son, Edward, was born. Leonid was at the front during the Great Patriotic War. He served as a veterinarian. Sonia and Edward were in evacuation with us. After the war Sonia lived with her husband in Kazakhstan and then they settled down in Stavropol. Leonid was promoted to the rank of colonel and Sonia was a housewife. Leonid died in the 1970s, and Sonia passed away in 1978. Edward finished two colleges in Leningrad. He is a physicist. He lives and works in Novgorod. Edward was married, but he divorced his wife. They had no children.

When Sonia was about two months old my father was recruited to the tsarist army. World War I began and our father went to the front. Our mother received two letters from him and then she received the notification that he was missing. It turned out that he was in captivity in Austria where he stayed until 1918. Our father told us that prisoners of war were treated decently. They wore their uniforms and insignia. My father worked for a master in Austria and returned home as soon as he got a chance after the October Revolution of 1917.

My mother had a very hard life throughout all these years. She had practically nothing to live on. She even went to see a governor with her small children. She asked him to release our father from the army to support the family, but this was impossible at that time. However, the governor's wife felt sorry for our mother and tried to keep her busy to provide for the family. She gave her orders for making clothing and sent her clients, who paid well, to my mother.

## Growing up

Our father returned at the end of 1918. I was born on 17th August 1919. I was their youngest and favorite daughter, a 'love child', as my father used to say. My mother and father loved each other, even though they got married through a matchmaker, and my mother was happy that my father had come back from Austria.

At that time, during the Civil War, the power in the town often switched between Reds 7, Whites 8 and Greens 9. If a gang 10 came to town a pogrom was inevitable. When I was six weeks old a

Makhno 11 gang came to town. Our family and our landlords, old Jews, found shelter in the basement. My mother told me that I screamed very loudly and she pressed me tightly to her chest to stop me from crying because if bandits had found us they would have killed us.

There were two rooms and a kitchen in our apartment. We lived in one room and the owners of the apartment in the other one. There was too little space for the five of us, of course. My father worked a lot saving money to buy a house. He continued to work for his master, the man that taught him his profession. Besides, our father brought a small machine for making cigarettes from Austria. My mother and my father made cigarettes and sold them. This was some additional income for the family. However, they didn't have a license for making cigarettes and at that time any private business was persecuted by the authorities. One of my first memories was that my mother closed the door to the room and windows when they were busy doing their business. They were afraid that somebody would see them and report them to the authorities. Finally, in 1935, my parents bought a small decrepit house with a ground floor and a half-destroyed ceiling. However my father was nimble-fingered. He repaired the house. There were three small rooms and a kitchen with a Russian stove 12. There was an orchard and a kitchen garden. My mother kept chickens and geese. We also had three little goats that followed me like puppies since it was my responsibility to feed them.

My parents went to the nearby synagogue on Saturday. There were several synagogues in Chernigov. My mother, my sisters and I went upstairs and our father stayed downstairs with the other men. Women prayed and cried and I couldn't understand why they were crying [Editor's note: the interviewee may remember the ceremony of Yom Kippur]. The synagogue was big. It was fancy inside. There were many children and a handsome man with a well- groomed beard wearing long black clothing; he was the rabbi. I couldn't see much from the balcony and was bored. I couldn't understand the words of the prayer recited by the women around me.

On Friday my mother made dinner. We got together at the table. My mother lit candles and prayed over them. My father said a blessing and we had dinner. Friday dinner was different from others; more plentiful and delicious. On Saturday morning our parents went to the synagogue. We went with them and waited for them in the yard of the synagogue. We had lunch after we came back from the synagogue. Lunch was still hot in the oven where it was kept from Friday. Nobody did any work on Saturday. We all rested. I remember a merry Simchat Torah in fall when a rabbi and Jewish men following him with Torah scrolls went around the square in front of the synagogue. At Yom Kippur my parents fasted and went to the synagogue. My sisters and I didn't have to fast. We celebrated Chanukkah, when our mother made sweet doughnuts with jam and gave us some money, and Purim when she made hamantashen pies.

The biggest preparations in the house were for Pesach: we cleaned and washed the house, dusted all rooms, covered sofas and beds with starched white cloths and washed the curtains. We washed all crockery and utensils with soda powder and koshered them at the synagogue. We didn't have special crockery for Pesach. We sometimes bought matzah at the synagogue and sometimes made some in our Russian stove. Before the holiday our mother took a chicken to the shochet at the synagogue to have it slaughtered. She made gefilte fish and chicken broth with dumplings made from matzah flour - we called them 'galki'. There was a silver dish on the table with all the different food on it which is required to be on the seder plate by tradition: an egg, horseradish, chicken bone. Grandfather Samuel came to the celebrations. He lived with Aunt Etl, but he liked to

celebrate Jewish holidays with us. He liked to attend the seder that our father conducted. I asked my father the four traditional questions [the mah nishtanah] about the history of Pesach and he answered them.

We followed the kashrut, didn't eat pork and didn't mix meat and dairy products. This was before I went to school. Later, when I went to school and became a pioneer, we celebrated Jewish holidays, but it was just a festive meal and we didn't observe traditions. My parents went to the synagogue and celebrated holidays, but they mostly did it for the sake of Jewish traditions. They weren't extremely deep believers. At least, when religion was persecuted [during the struggle against religion] 13 and synagogues were closed in the middle of the 1930s they still celebrated holidays, but it was more like a habit. My father tried to get the day off at work on Saturday, but he didn't always succeed. They didn't always follow the kashrut, especially during the period of famine in 1932-33 14. We had to eat what we managed to get.

I went to a Ukrainian school in Leskovitsa in 1927. There were still Jewish schools in the town, they were closed later, in the late 1930s, but my father thought it was better for me to study in a Ukrainian school since religious persecutions had already begun. My parents were convinced that life would be easier for me if I spoke without a Jewish accent and that it would be easier for me to enter a higher educational institution since the language of teaching there was Russian, the state language. I was the only Jewish girl in my class; my classmates were Ukrainian and Russian. Most of my classmates were Ukrainian boys and girls from the neighboring villages. I got along well with my classmates and there were no conflicts. Nobody ever hurt me and basically nobody cared about nationality. After I finished the 4th grade I went to study at another Ukrainian higher secondary school. I got along well with my schoolmates. I liked studying at school. I became a Young Octobrist 15, and then a pioneer. I took part in public activities. I sang in our school choir. At home I had classes with a private music teacher. She taught me to play the piano. My music classes didn't last long since my parents couldn't afford to pay for my classes. However, I liked playing the piano and picked up tunes by myself.

When the collectivization 16 began and kolkhozes started to be organized in the 1930s we often had guests from villages. Our house was across the street from the prison and our acquaintances from Oleshevka and Tarkhovka, or acquaintances of our acquaintances or just strangers, came to visit their relatives that were arrested for being kulaks 17. All those people stayed in our house. Our father came from Tarkhovka and our mother came from Oleshevka and all their acquaintances came to see their relatives in prison. Prisoners' relatives arrived on horse-drawn carts that they parked in our yard. They tried to bribe the guard to take parcels with food to the prisoners, but only occasionally they managed to do this. I remember that I went to stand in line to the window to hand over parcels early in the morning and my mother or somebody else brought boiled potatoes or soup later. Those visitors rescued us from starving to death during the famine in Ukraine in 1932-33. They brought us potatoes, vegetables, pumpkin, sunflower seeds and pork fat. Yes, that's right, my mother and father ate pork fat during that period and there was no observance of kosher laws. We didn't have bread in the house, but we didn't starve. Many people stayed in our house. Their relatives were sent to exile [during Stalin's forced deportation to Siberia] 18: they marched in columns of 400-500 people under a convoy to the railway station and from there they proceeded by train. Many of them disappeared for good. Very few survived: most of them died on the way or in Siberia from hard work, hunger and the cold.

Many people starved to death during this period and I saw dead people in the streets of the town. But I was young and forgot bad things and kept thinking about bright and nice things. We celebrated Soviet holidays at school: 1st May and October Revolution Day 19. We went to parades. We celebrated revolutionary holidays at home. Riva's husband David and Sonia's husband Leonid were sophisticated people. David Strashnoy was a communist. He was well-known in the town and was elected town council deputy several times. Leonid was eager to join the Party. He even rejected his father, who was a priest, in public when the persecution of religion began. His father was sent into exile to Siberia and we never heard about him again. We didn't blame Leonid. We believed he was right and religion was opium for the people. Leonid became a communist while at the front in the 1940s.

I liked to go to the cinema with my friends. There was a jazz band playing in the vestibule before the screening of a film. I liked the young fair- haired pianist that played in the orchestra. I simply fell in love with him. I dreamed that we would be together. He rented a room from our neighbor. One evening this man came to our home and asked my parents their consent to our marriage. They were stunned since I was just 15 years old and studied in the 9th grade at school. Boris Kristin, that was his name, told my parents that he would wait until I finished school and my parents gave their consent. My parents didn't mind that he wasn't a Jew. I became his fiancée. I looked forward to coming of age and getting married.

Boris' grandmother was Czech and his grandfather was French. Boris' real last name was Kristain. I don't know how his family came to live in Russia. They lived somewhere in the south of Russia. Boris' father, Alexandr, was a postmaster before the Revolution. He died a long time ago, leaving his wife with 13 children. I didn't know them. I only knew Boris' sister Lidia and his brother Alexei. Boris was much older than I. He was born in 1906. He was very good at music. Besides working in the orchestra Boris played at a restaurant in the evenings.

A year and half passed quickly. Boris and I were never alone, we could only meet in the presence of adults. They probably stood guard over my virginity. He visited us at home and we had tea with our family. Sometimes he took me to the cinema holding my hand. Boris addressed me with the formal 'You' until we got married. He promised that after we got married he would take best care of me.

During my last year at school my parents prepared me for getting married. They bought me two dresses, a crepe de Chine one and a woolen one, fabric for a suit and a woolen coat. Before this I had walked in the street barefoot wearing my sister's clothes.

We had a small wedding party in 1936 when I was 17 years old. A big table for guests was set up in our garden. Our guests were musicians from the orchestra, colleagues from the cinema, my sisters and their husbands and our neighbors. Pronia Sereda, my schoolmate, also came to the wedding. We were life-long friends with her. She was Ukrainian.

After the wedding Boris came to live in our house and my mother gave us a room to live in. I was happy. My dream had come true: the most handsome man I had ever known was with me. He was also a very decent man. My parents liked him and my father, who was very ill at the time - he had lung emphysema, a typical disease among cabinetmakers - was very happy for me and said that he was sure that the family was in good hands.

Our son, Stanislav, was born in 1938. My mother adored him and helped me with everything. When my son turned a year and a half I decided to go to work. My husband believed that I had to be among people and find a job that I liked. I became an assistant accountant with a bookselling company where I worked for almost two years. My mother looked after my son.

I was happy and didn't see what was happening around me. This was the period of arrests [during the so-called Great Terror] 20. There were again crowds of downcast women at the gate of the prison waiting to meet with their relatives or get some information about them. The director of our company was also arrested. He was kept in prison for several months. I don't know what he was accused of, but he died in prison. Later people said that he was acquitted of all charges, but it was too late. Sonia's husband Leonid also had problems, but thank God, everything turned out all right. They lived in a village in Chernigov region were Leonid was a vet in a kolkhoz. He was charged for sabotage and for the death of cattle in the kolkhoz. Sonia and their child came to us in Chernigov and Leonid stayed in the village waiting for his arrest. It never came to it though, due to Poland joining the Soviet Union: he was recruited to the army.

In 1940 I was fired due to reduction of staff and I went to work as a secretary at the Mechanization College.

## During the War

My husband Boris had to go to the annual military training on 15th June 1941. He served in VNOS troops [air observation, notification and communication]. When war was declared on 22nd June I was alone at home: my husband was in a barrack, my mother was at the market and my father went for a walk with my son. I was optimistic about this announcement: I just didn't know what a war was about. I heard that there was a war going on, but it seemed to be so far away. I couldn't imagine that somebody dared to attack our powerful country. I went to weed radishes and onions in our kitchen garden. When I went back home my mother was already in. She was crying bitterly since she knew what a war was like, but she couldn't imagine how horrible this one was going to be.

Soon residents of the town began to panic, especially Jews. They said that the Germans exterminated the Jewish population in the occupied territories and that it was necessary to evacuate. A few days after the war began Sonia and Edward arrived. They fled from Rava-Russkaya where Leonid was on military service without any luggage. We were in town until 20th August. Riva's husband, David Strashnoy, who was the director of the water supply agency in Chernigov made the necessary arrangements for us to leave Chernigov on a truck on 20th August. He couldn't go with us since he had the order of the Town Party Committee to hide the equipment by burying it.

Boris was a military man: he taught younger officers and soldiers military disciplines, theory and tactics, and he conducted political information classes. Boris was lucky to be on service in his own town and he came home every day. Many of his fellow comrades came from other towns and had to live in barracks. We understood that we were going to have to part soon. On 19th August he came home and said, 'Ida, I had a dream. My brother Alexei [he perished in WWI] came to me in this dream, I took my green suitcase and we left. Ida, I know that I won't be back from the war and that this is the last time we see each other'. It was the last time we saw each other and our last night together.

In the morning we boarded a big truck: my mother, my father, my sisters and I and our three children - each of us had a son. The family of joiner Shehtman - his wife and their three daughters - and some other people were on this truck apart from us. Boris held Stanislav for the last time, gave me a hug and a kiss and left. Grandfather Samuel stayed in Chernigov. He was over 80 and didn't want to leave. He told everyone that the Germans were cultured people and weren't going to hurt him. People told us later that my grandfather was shot during the first shooting in town. The cabinetmaker that actually raised my father and taught him the craft also perished. His Russian wife followed him and was shot, too. We heard this when we returned from evacuation.

On 20th August we left for the unknown. When we reached Nezhyn [a small town in the East of Ukraine, about 100 km from Kiev], we felt like refugees. We were thirsty, but not in one single house did we get anything to drink. They said 'zhydy are fleeing' ['Kikes' are leaving in Ukrainian]. On 23rd August some people that we met on the way told us that Chernigov was being bombed. So, we left at the last moment, so to speak. There were several trains in Nezhyn. Nobody asked in what direction they were going. We just boarded one. It was a freight train and we were going on an open platform with some equipment under tarpaulin cover. Our trip lasted a month. We often stopped on the way. The train was bombed many times. During one of them our mother and father ran to hide in the steppe and my sisters and our children stayed on the platform. We lay under a blanket and thought, 'Be what may, at least, if we perished, we shall all be together'.

We reached the town of Azov, Rostov region, 1,500 kilometers from home. We were accommodated in a kolkhoz; I don't remember the name. We got an apartment and were given food. We went to work at the kolkhoz: we picked stems of cotton plants for the manufacturing of aviation oil. We worked very hard and people respected us for that. In villages they judge people by how hard they work. My mother stayed home with the children. Later, when the front was getting closer and we began to pack to move on, other kolkhoz people said, 'Let the zhydy go, and you stay.' And when they found out the truth they said, 'You are Jews, too? Well, but you are nice people, so stay'. But we knew that the frontline was getting closer and asked the chairman of the kolkhoz to help us leave. He gave us a big cart, we put our children and luggage onto the cart and we walked 30 kilometers to the station. Walking was difficult for my father. His emphysema got worse and we had to make frequent stops.

At the station we got on a train that took us to Makhachkala, the capital of Dagestan in Northern Caucasus, near the Caspian Sea, 2,500 kilometers from home. We stayed there on the ground near the seaport for about two weeks. There were tens of thousands of refugees, there was no food or water. Later we boarded the 'Derbent' tanker; there were tanks with oil in the ship's belly and about 5,000 refugees on the deck. There was no water and many people were seasick. There were only two toilets on the tanker and after using it one had to stand in line to the toilet since it took two to three hours before one could get there again. We were sitting on the very top. We crossed the Caspian Sea to Kazakhstan. When we got off the tanker I saw that dead people were being taken off the tanker. The trip had been too hard for them. In some time we boarded a train. On 7th November 1941 we reached Golodnaya Steppe station in Uzbekistan, near Mirzachul town, 3,500 kilometers from home.

Mirzachul was a small town with a population of 7,000 consisting of half- ignorant Uzbek people. Many people were in evacuation there, but there were no arrangements made for us. Some locals were sympathetic with us, others were indifferent. Uzbeks didn't speak Russian and we couldn't

speak their language, so we didn't mix. We rented a small room of nine or ten square meters and a kitchen in a pise-walled hut. Shortly afterwards Riva's husband, David, joined us. He had passed by Kharkov on his way to evacuation. He told us that he saw Grandfather Samuel before leaving Chernigov and and offered my grandfather to go with him, but my grandfather refused. We lived in this small room together: our family of ten people and the Shehtmans - there were four of them. We slept on the floor in the kitchen and in the room. Somebody slept on the table. My mother and father slept on the only bed in there.

David became the director of the district industrial association and helped my sisters and me getting employment. My sisters and I worked in a special cardboard shop. We applied a special casein mixture on carton sheets and dried them. Later this carton was used to make filling for bullets, I think. I received 600 grams of bread per day with my worker card and 400 grams for the child. I worked there less than a month. In late December 1941 my son fell ill with measles and then pellagra. There were no medications available. David and I took our son to a doctor, but he couldn't do anything. Almost all children under five died from pellagra in Mirzachul at that time. At the beginning of January 1942 my son died. My father made a small casket and buried my little son in the Uzbek cemetery. My father said a prayer. I kept crying and constantly thought what I was going to tell Boris when he returned and how to explain the loss of our son.

I went back to work. I was transferred to the spinning shop that produced cotton wool for the front. My mother made rope on a spinning machine at home. This rope was used to make bags to pack cotton wool and wound textile. Later I went to work in the knitting shop: I knitted gloves, socks and hats for the front. Sonia worked with me and Riva became chief accountant at the district industrial association. David was recruited to the army in early 1942. Sonia and Riva received food packages for being officers' wives. Since I was a soldier's wife, this privilege didn't apply to me.

Once, when I was standing in line for food our neighbor approached me and said, 'It's all right. Sometimes they write that a person perished while he's still alive'. I didn't understand what she meant. At home I noticed that my relatives looked sad and avoided my glance. I asked what had happened. Sonia showed me a letter from Boris' sister Lida that she had received a couple of weeks before. Boris' friend, who was recruited along with Boris from Chernigov, had written the letter. There were three friends and they had an agreement that each of them would notify the family if one of them perished. They didn't have my address and so that man wrote to Lida that Boris and the other friend had perished. This happened in summer 1942. I don't even remember how I felt. I stayed in bed and didn't talk to anyone. I didn't go out for over a month and stopped eating. Only my father could convince me to swallow some food. I didn't even feel the taste of it. But I was young and life went on. I went to work and began to talk with people again.

Life was hard. Although Sonia and Riva received food packages and my mother and I had workers' cards and dependants' cards for the children we never had enough food. Everything that we planted on the plot of land that we received, dried up since we didn't have the knowledge of how to grow plants in this dry soil. Once I bought a bucket of inexpensive cherries that I took to the station to sell. I walked 30 kilometers to sell them, but nobody bought them and I brought them back home. The cherries became wet and dark and my mother sold them to someone for peanuts.

My father didn't go to work. He was feeling worse. There was no goat milk that my mother had given to him at home, or decent food. In September he fell very ill and was getting worse and

worse. Once in early October, before leaving for work I looked at him and said to my mother, 'Father will die today. Please bury him without me. It's too much for me to bear!' And it happened. A girl came to the shop where I was working and began to whisper something to the others without looking at me. I understood that my father had died, but I continued working. I loved him dearly and was unable to see him dead. I didn't go to the funeral. I was told that there was no casket since there was nobody to make one. They put planks at the bottom and on the sides of the grave, lay my father's body into a shroud and put in into the grave. A few weeks later, when my mother and I went to the cemetery, we couldn't find neither my father's nor my son's grave: jackals had destroyed the graves and eaten the bodies. That's what we had to live through.

In 1943 the situation improved a bit. We began to have hope for victory: we listened to the news from the front on the radio and cheered up. I was very young and life went on. I made new friends. We often got together and sang: my sisters and I and our friends that evacuated from various towns of the USSR. We sang Soviet and moving Ukrainian songs and Russian ballads. When Kiev was liberated in 1943 we organized a big celebration. By that time we received an apartment from the cotton factory in a barrack-type building. We had many neighbors. We laid a table and everybody brought what they had. We partied, sang and drank to our motherland, Kiev and Moscow and to the great Stalin, of course, all night long. Young men courted me, but it never occurred to me that I might get married again. I loved my husband and besides, I didn't receive a notification that he had died and I was hoping for a miracle. Efim, a Jewish man from Western Ukraine, visited me more often than anybody else. I didn't like him for his lack of education and hatred for the Soviet power. I didn't even say goodbye to him when we were leaving.

After Kiev was liberated we applied to obtain permission to go home. We wrote to the director of the water supply company where David Strashnoy had worked before the war and he mailed the documents that served as permission for us to come home. There was some confusion with me, though, since he wrote my maiden name Rubina in the permit while my last name at that time was already Kristina. I had to prove that I was Rubina.

The family of Shehtman, the mother and three daughters, had died of pellagra in evacuation. We got to Tashkent where it was impossible to get tickets. There were crowds of people going home. We had to bribe employees at the station: 1,300 rubles for tickets and 1,200 for getting on a train without waiting in lines. There were crowds of people trying to get on a train. We boarded a military train that took us back to Chernigov. I was feeling very ill; I had pellagra and I was swollen from hunger and diseases. My legs were like lumps, I had a huge belly and high fever, and there was blood in my stomach. When we were getting on the train my mother didn't know whether I would survive this trip. I stayed on the upper berth in the train. I was unable to get up. A military doctor examined me and told my mother to buy good food for me at stations and when we reached another climatic zone with no heat my condition would improve. That was true. I remember that my mother bought me fish, sour cream, cottage cheese and fruit at stations. When we arrived at Chernigov I felt all right, only my belly was still swollen for a long time and people thought I was pregnant.

We arrived at Chernigov in November 1944. Immediately after we arrived I received the death notification for Boris at the district military registry office. My last hope was gone. There were other tenants in our house that were very aggressive when we arrived. They said, 'Zhydy are back'. However, an old woman, who lived in our kitchen met us saying, 'Welcome back, owners of the

house' and left. We stayed in our kitchen several days until Sonia went to the executive committee, showed them our documents for the house with our names on them and we got back one room. In 1947 our whole house was returned to us.

I went to work as an operator at the post office. I did well at work and made many new friends and acquaintances. I also met with my pre-war friends: Pronia Sereda and others. Pronia, who had been in Chernigov during the occupation, told me about the brutality of the Germans in Chernigov and about my grandfather Samuel, who had been shot.

We arranged quite a celebration on 9th May 1945, Victory Day 21. We sang and danced in the central square, cried for our lost ones and laughed of joy that the war was over.

### After the War

Life was very hard. 1946/47 were hungry years and we lived on food cards. David, who returned from the front with many orders and medals, helped us. He began to work at the town executive committee [Ispolkom] 22. Leonid also returned. He and Sonia and Edward got a job assignment and left for Kazakhstan. I was always hungry, but I was very proud. I was seeing a young man and when he invited me to a café or restaurant I declined, saying I didn't feel like eating, although I was hungry as usual.

I was 25 and I began to think about what I should do with my life. We had Jewish neighbors: Manya Belmont and her husband, who lived in the same street as us. Once Manya came to our house and said that she wanted me to meet her son, who had returned from hospital. They came to see us that evening and I met my second husband, Iosif Zalevski.

Iosif was born to a Jewish family in Chernigov in 1919. His father died in the early 1920s. His mother came from Novie Mliny Chernigov province. She didn't have any education. They had a hard life. His mother took various jobs; she sold ice cream, sewed and did laundry until she got married for the second time. After finishing a higher secondary school Iosif worked as a mechanic in the port. He was recruited to the army in 1939. When the war began he was on service in marine troops in the Crimea. Germans sent their landing troops at the very beginning of the war and Iosif was captured. Iosif pretended he was Ukrainian. He kept it a secret that he was Jewish by applying much soap foam in the shower and sleeping under a blanket at night. During a check-up in a concentration camp Iosif ran out into the snow naked to avoid the check-up because he was circumcised. I don't know in which camps Iosif was. All I know is that they were in Poland. He escaped three times and was captured twice. They beat him and put him back into the camp.

In early 1944 Iosif and his friend Alexandr made a hole into the floor of the railcar during transportation and escaped. People around told them they were in France. Iosif found partisans that helped them to get to Belgium. In Belgium Iosif got accommodation with a family of farmers that was aware that their tenant was a partisan. Iosif and his friend worked at the farm helping their landlords. They got a message about when they were needed at the partisan group. When Iosif and his friend returned to the farm they knew that if there was underwear drying on the line that meant Germans were in the village. This served as a warning. Iosif and his friend did mining and blasting work. He didn't tell me any details of his participation in the partisan movement. I believe he was a good performer since he got a wonderful letter of evaluation of his performance after Belgium was liberated in December 1944. Iosif liked his landlords very much. He said they

treated him like a son.

When Belgium was liberated Iosif got an invitation to go to USA, but he turned it down. He was dreaming about returning home, but his motherland was not as welcoming as he had expected. All those that returned from concentration camps or occupied territories were subject to the so-called filtration. Fortunately, Iosif had a certificate that he was a blaster otherwise he wouldn't have escaped Stalin's camps. During the war Iosif was severely wounded and shell-shocked. He had splinters in his head and for a year and half after the war he spent most of the time in hospitals.

I liked Iosif. I looked forward to seeing him again. I thought he would invite me to the cinema or to a park. Two weeks passed. It turned out that he called me at work and asked Rubina to the phone, and was told that there was no such employee. I still had my first husband's last name, Kristina. About two weeks later he came to my workplace and invited me to the cinema. I cannot say that I fell in love with Iosif like I had with Boris. Besides, I had another fiancé. There was a nice Russian guy courting me. We went to the cinema and dance parties, but I wasn't in love with him. I felt sorry for Iosif. I saw that he loved me very much and I agreed to marry him. Of course, there was no such passion as in my first marriage, but I never regretted marrying him. We got married in 1947. We had a small wedding dinner with our relatives.

Iosif was a very ill man. He had trauma epilepsy and I often called an ambulance at night, but they were helpless. My husband was an invalid. He couldn't go to work and thought he was a burden on me. My husband decided to go to Kiev where doctors offered a surgery that might either improve his condition or be lethal in the worst case. He didn't want to continue living with his problems and decided for the surgery. Fortunately, the surgery was a success. The doctors removed the bone splinters, but they couldn't reach the steel splinters in his head. Iosif was acknowledged as a war invalid and had some privileges. He stayed in Kiev for a long term of rehabilitation. Kiev is a two-hour drive from Chernigov and he came home at weekends, holidays or just to stay home a couple of months before he had to start another course of treatment. I also visited him there when he couldn't come home. Only 13 years after we got married his condition improved significantly. While he was in Kiev Iosif finished Construction College and entered the Leningrad Water Transport Institute by correspondence, but he couldn't study there due to his illness. Iosif was the director of a hostel and then worked at a shop. I always tried to take good care of him.

I was eager to have a baby, but doctors told me that my husband's trauma epilepsy could have an impact on the baby and so we didn't have children. I took care of my husband as if he were a child. His mother died in the early 1950s; we buried her in the town cemetery. Iosif liked my mother very much. We got along very well. Iosif was grateful for my care and was very good to me. We had many friends and when my husband was feeling okay we went to the cinema or theaters. We traveled in summer. We visited many towns and historic places. We went to the Crimea and Caucasus, Middle Asia and the Carpathians. Every Sunday we went to a village on the Desna River on a motorcycle. We fished and made a fire. We always enjoyed being together.

My colleagues treated me well. In due time I was promoted to the position of supervisor at the post office where I worked for 35 years. There was a hard time in the early 1950s, during the Doctors' Plot 23. Although nobody said anything directly every Jew felt suspicious attitudes. We felt like outcasts. We didn't even feel comfortable to go out, but I didn't face anything like that at work. I remember Stalin's death. I didn't cry, but I remember the feeling of irreplaceable loss. We never

took any interest in politics. We were busy with our own life. Nobody in our family was a member of the Party.

In the early 1960s we received a one-bedroom apartment in the center of Chernigov and later we received this two-bedroom apartment where I still live. My mother always lived with us. She liked Iosif a lot. We always celebrated Pesach. My mother managed to get matzah even at the time when one couldn't get it anywhere. There were underground bakeries in the houses of older Jews. They made matzah for sale. All religious Jews knew these addresses and placed their orders at night. We celebrated Purim and Yom Kippur. We had a festive meal, and there was always the spirit of a holiday in the house. For my mother it was important as a tribute to traditions and my father's memory and we respected her desires. My mother died in 1978; we buried her in the town cemetery.

Perestroika 24 didn't bring anything good into our life. We became poor in one day. We lost all our savings. Our pension in the past was sufficient for a vacation or medical treatment, our monthly bills and food. Don't we deserve this? In the late 1980s our pension was hardly enough for food.

Iosif and I lived 48 and a half years together. In the early 1990s we decided to move to Israel. It was always our dream to go there, but in the 1970s when the majority of Jews were leaving, my mother was ill and the issue of emigration was out of the question. We failed to leave since my husband fell severely ill. He died in 1995. His death didn't come as a surprise to me since he had been suffering for a long time before he died, but it was a terrible loss nonetheless. I didn't even have money to bury my husband. The Jewish community that was established in Chernigov helped me. I have been a member of the community since then. I attend every meeting or event and read Jewish newspapers. I don't go to the synagogue since I don't consider myself a believer, although I think there must be a God and I'm grateful to Him for my basically happy and interesting life. One thing I cannot forgive God is that He took away children's lives: the life of my son and others. They were innocent souls.

I attend the 'Warm House' in Hesed where I have meals with other old Jews like myself. However, I'm not a passive consumer - I try to give people what I can. On Jewish holidays our group from Hesed sing songs and I rehearse with my friends playing the piano. We celebrate holidays and birthdays together and get together at hard times, when somebody loses their relatives. We support each other.

In 1997 I visited my sister Riva and my niece Ada in Israel. I liked the country very much. I visited the country when it celebrated its 50th anniversary. Anyway, I don't have any friends there and I don't want to be a burden to my sister. I have the friends of my life here, at Hesed and our community - it's not about assistance, this is my life now!

## Glossary

**1 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.

**2 Russian Revolution of 1917**

Revolution in which the tsarist regime was overthrown in the Russian Empire and, under Lenin, was replaced by the Bolshevik rule. The two phases of the Revolution were: February Revolution, which came about due to food and fuel shortages during World War I, and during which the tsar abdicated and a provisional government took over. The second phase took place in the form of a coup led by Lenin in October/November (October Revolution) and saw the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks.

**3 Pogroms in Ukraine**

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

**4 NEP**

The so-called New Economic Policy of the Soviet authorities was launched by Lenin in 1921. It meant that private business was allowed on a small scale in order to save the country ruined by the Revolution of 1917 and the Russian Civil War. They allowed priority development of private capital and entrepreneurship. The NEP was gradually abandoned in the 1920s with the introduction of the planned economy.

**5 Civil War (1918-1920)**

The Civil War between the Reds (the Bolsheviks) and the Whites (the anti-Bolsheviks), which broke out in early 1918, ravaged Russia until 1920. The Whites represented all shades of anti- communist groups - Russian army units from World War I, led by anti- Bolshevik officers, by anti-Bolshevik volunteers and some Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries. Several of their leaders favored setting up a military dictatorship, but few were outspoken tsarists. Atrocities were committed throughout the Civil War by both sides. The Civil War ended with Bolshevik military victory, thanks to the lack of cooperation among the various White commanders and to the reorganization of the Red forces after Trotsky became commissar for war. It was won, however, only at the price of immense sacrifice; by 1920 Russia was ruined and devastated. In 1920 industrial production was reduced to 14% and agriculture to 50% as compared to 1913.

**6 Kolkhoz**

In the Soviet Union the policy of gradual and voluntary collectivization of agriculture was adopted in 1927 to encourage food production while freeing labor and capital for industrial development. In 1929, with only 4% of farms in kolkhozes, Stalin ordered the confiscation of peasants' land, tools, and animals; the kolkhoz replaced the family farm.

**7 Reds**

Red (Soviet) Army supporting the Soviet authorities.

**8 Whites (White Army)**
Counter-revolutionary armed forces that fought against the Bolsheviks during the Russian Civil War. The White forces were very heterogeneous: They included monarchists and liberals - supporters of the Constituent Assembly and the tsar. Nationalist and anti-Semitic attitude was very common among rank-and-file members of the white movement, and expressed in both their propaganda material and in the organization of pogroms against Jews. White Army slogans were patriotic. The Whites were united by hatred towards the Bolsheviks and the desire to restore a 'one and inseparable' Russia. The main forces of the White Army were defeated by the Red Army at the end of 1920.

**9 Greens**
members of the gang headed by Ataman Zeleniy (his nickname means 'green' in Russian).

**10 Gangs**
During the Russian Civil War there were all kinds of gangs in the Ukraine. Their members came from all the classes of former Russia, but most of them were peasants. Their leaders used political slogans to dress their criminal acts. These gangs were anti-Soviet and anti-Semitic. They killed Jews and burnt their houses, they robbed their houses, raped women and killed children.

**11 Makhno, Nestor (1888-1934)**
Ukrainian anarchist and leader of an insurrectionist army of peasants which fought Ukrainian nationalists, the Whites, and the Bolsheviks during the Civil War. His troops, which numbered 500 to 35 thousand members, marched under the slogans of 'state without power' and 'free soviets'. The Red Army put an end to the Makhnovist movement in the Ukraine in 1919 and Makhno emigrated in 1921.

**12 Russian stove**
Big stone stove stoked with wood. They were usually built in a corner of the kitchen and served to heat the house and cook food. It had a bench that made a comfortable bed for children and adults in wintertime.

**13 Struggle against religion**
The 1930s was a time of anti-religion struggle in the USSR. In those years it was not safe to go to synagogue or to church. Places of worship, statues of saints, etc. were removed; rabbis, Orthodox and Roman Catholic priests disappeared behind KGB walls.

**14 Famine in Ukraine**
In 1920 a deliberate famine was introduced in the Ukraine causing the death of millions of people. It was arranged in order to suppress those protesting peasants who did not want to join the collective farms. There was another dreadful deliberate famine in 1930-1934 in the Ukraine. The

authorities took away the last food products from the peasants. People were dying in the streets, whole villages became deserted. The authorities arranged this specifically to suppress the rebellious peasants who did not want to accept Soviet power and join collective farms.

**15 Young Octobrist**

In Russian Oktyabrenok, or 'pre-pioneer', designates Soviet children of seven years or over preparing for entry into the pioneer organization.

**16 Collectivization in the USSR**

In the late 1920s - early 1930s private farms were liquidated and collective farms established by force on a mass scale in the USSR. Many peasants were arrested during this process. As a result of the collectivization, the number of farmers and the amount of agricultural production was greatly reduced and famine struck in the Ukraine, the Northern Caucasus, the Volga and other regions in 1932-33.

**17 Kulaks**

In the Soviet Union the majority of wealthy peasants that refused to join collective farms and give their grain and property to Soviet power were called kulaks, declared enemies of the people and exterminated in the 1930s.

**18 Forced deportation to Siberia**

Stalin introduced the deportation of Middle Asian people, like the Crimean Tatars and the Chechens, to Siberia. Without warning, people were thrown out of their houses and into vehicles at night. The majority of them died on the way of starvation, cold and illnesses.

**19 October Revolution Day**

October 25 (according to the old calendar), 1917 went down in history as victory day for the Great October Socialist Revolution in Russia. This day is the most significant date in the history of the USSR. Today the anniversary is celebrated as 'Day of Accord and Reconciliation' on November 7.

**20 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.

**21 Victory Day in Russia (9th May)**
National holiday to commemorate the defeat of Nazi Germany and the end of World War II and honor the Soviets who died in the war.

**22 Ispolkom**
After the tsar's abdication (March, 1917), power passed to a Provisional Government appointed by a temporary committee of the Duma, which proposed to share power to some extent with councils of workers and soldiers known as 'soviets'. Following a brief and chaotic period of fairly democratic procedures, a mixed body of socialist intellectuals known as the Ispolkom secured the right to 'represent' the soviets. The democratic credentials of the soviets were highly imperfect to begin with: peasants - the overwhelming majority of the Russian population - had virtually no say, and soldiers were grossly over-represented. The Ispolkom's assumption of power turned this highly imperfect democracy into an intellectuals' oligarchy.

**23 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.

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