

Henrich Zinger

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Uzhgorod

Ukraine

Interviewer: Ella Levitskaya

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Henrich Zinger lives with his wife and daughter Elena in a private house not far from the center of Uzhgorod. The house is rather old, but well kept and clean. There are a few fruit trees near the house. In spring Elena plants flowers around the house. Henrich Zinger is a short, slim and lively man. He doesn't look his age. He likes walking and until lately he often went fishing to the Uzh River. Herman's wife and daughter stayed with us during the interview and listened to Herman's story with great interest. Henrich speaks with an explicit Hungarian accent. He expresses his thoughts very clearly and finds witty definitions. Of course, these reminiscences were hard for him, but when I suggested coming another time to continue he refused and finished his story. In 1997 Henrich gave an interview to the Spielberg Foundation.

My parents' families came from Subcarpathia [1](#). Subcarpathia belonged to Austro-Hungary before 1918. Hungarian was the state language and many residents of Subcarpathia can speak it. In 1918 Austro-Hungary gave the Subcarpathia region to the Czech Republic for the term of 20 years. At the time of Austro-Hungary there was no anti-Semitism, and when the Czechs came to power they encouraged Jews to take official posts and develop their businesses. Czechs were very cultured and loyal people and there was no anti-Semitism during their reign. In villages Jews and the indigenous population lived side by side and developed friendly relationships through generations.

The center of Subcarpathia was Uzhgorod [about 800 km from Kiev]. Before World War II it was a small and quiet town with a population of about 40,000 people. It was multinational: there were Hungarians, Czechs, hutsuls - Ukrainian ethnic people -, Jews, Russians and gypsies. Jews constituted one third of the population in Uzhgorod. There were no nationality conflicts. Jews were craftsmen and tradesmen, doctors, attorneys and teachers. Most of the Jewish families were poor. There was a big beautiful synagogue in Uzhgorod built by the French in the 19th century. After Subcarpathia joined the USSR in 1945 the synagogue underwent reconstruction. The Jewish symbols were removed and it became the building of the Philharmonic. There was a cheder and a Jewish school in town. Jews lived in the center of the town. Before 1918 there were mostly one-storied buildings in Uzhgorod. When the Czechs came to power in 1918 they began to build two and three-storied apartment houses in the central part of the town with spacious and comfortable apartments. There were stores on the ground floor. Subcarpathia came to prosper during the Czech rule.

My father's parents were born and lived in the village of Turi Remety in Subcarpathia, about twelve kilometers north of Uzhgorod. I visited this village only once in my childhood and cannot describe it. My paternal grandfather and grandmother were born there in the 1860s. They died long before I was born. My grandfather's name was Yacob. I don't know my grandmother's name.

My father, Kalman Zinger, was born in 1886. I only knew my father's younger sister, born in 1900. I don't know her first name, but her last name in marriage was Klein. Her daughter lives in Israel. My father also had two older brothers, but all I know about them is that they moved to the USA at the beginning of the 20th century. My father corresponded with them for some time, but then they stopped writing for unknown reasons. My father didn't tell me much about his family. They were very poor and lived from hand-to-mouth.

My father's family observed Jewish traditions. The family was religious. At that time all Jewish families were religious. My grandfather and his sons went to the synagogue and prayed at home. My father's family celebrated Sabbath and Jewish holidays and followed the kashrut. My father and his brothers studied at cheder. The children were raised religiously. When the children grew older they went to learn a profession. My father became an apprentice of a stonemason when he turned 13. This stonemason made gravestones. They didn't pay for my father's apprenticeship, my father worked for the stonemason for two years for free. If after finishing their training apprentices stayed to work for their master they got paid for their work.

My mother's family lived in the village of Velikiy Berezny. It was a big village, 40 kilometers north of Uzhgorod. It's a district town now. There were big fairs in the village. The population consisted of Hungarians, Ukrainians and Jews. There were many Jews like in any other village in Subcarpathia. The Jews spoke Yiddish, Hungarian and Ukrainian. The Jews lived side by side with their neighbors of other nationalities and had friendly and supportive relationships with their co-villagers. Nationality didn't matter at that time. There were earthen floors in most houses covered with weaved rugs. There was a synagogue in the center of the village and two cheders: a cheder for boys and a cheder for girls [2](#). Most of the Jews were craftsmen and tradesmen. All stores in the village were owned by Jews. Some Jews were farmers. All Jews were religious and went to the synagogue on Sabbath and all Jewish holidays. Many Jews attended the synagogue every day. There was a shochet in the village. All Jews followed the kashrut. When a cow was slaughtered Jews could only eat its front part. [Editor's note: This custom was followed in a number of communities, although Jewish law does not forbid eating certain parts of the rear part of a cow.] The rear part was sold to the villagers. Every family had separate utensils for meat and dairy products. They also had special crockery for Pesach.

My mother's father, Yacob Galegrter, and her mother, Zali Galegrter, were born in Velikiy Berezny in the 1860s. My grandmother's maiden name was Ginig. My grandfather was a craftsman and my grandmother was a housewife. My grandmother died in 1907 and my grandfather died in 1914, a few months after I was born. They were buried in the Jewish cemetery in Velikiy Berezny in accordance with Jewish traditions. My mother told me that there were several daughters in the family. I only knew my mother's older sister, but I don't remember her name. My mother, Hana, was born in 1886. My mother's family was religious like all Jewish families at that time. They observed all Jewish traditions.

My parents met with the help of a shadkhan, which was a common way of introducing young people back then. They got married in 1910. They had a traditional Jewish wedding with a rabbi and a chuppah in Velikiy Berezny. My grandmother had died before. The newly-weds settled down in my mother's parents' house where her older sister and her husband lived as well. Her husband was a shoemaker. The house was big and accommodated two families comfortably. My sister Helena was born in 1912. Her Jewish name was Chaya. I was born in 1914. I was named Henrich,

my Jewish name was Chaim. My younger brother Leopold was born in 1918. His Jewish name was Leib.

Some time later my father bought a plot of land near my mother's parents' house and built a house with a thatched roof for our family. We lived there until 1944. The house wasn't big. It was built from air bricks made from the mixture of cut straw and clay placed in rectangular containers to dry in the sun. Many houses in Subcarpathia were built from air bricks. Our house was like many other houses in the village and had a room and a kitchen. There was a big stove in the kitchen. My mother cooked on it and in winter this stove was used for heating. The stove was stoked with wood. Wood was inexpensive since there were many woods in Subcarpathia and brushwood was free. There were fruit trees around the house, a big backyard, a kitchen garden and sheds for grain, a chicken-coop and a barn on the right side of the backyard. We didn't keep cattle, but my mother kept chickens. My father made gravestones and engravings on them. These gravestones were kept in the yard. He did this work from spring till fall and in late fall he started making frames for pictures and photographs. My father provided for the family and my mother was a housewife, which was customary in Jewish families. Married women were responsible for the house and raising children.

My parents were religious. They strictly observed the kashrut. There's a number of rules to be followed. There was a special tray with the sides made of twigs in each house. When a shochet slaughtered an animal and let the blood flow down this wasn't kosher meat as yet. He had to remove pellicles and fat, place this meat on the tray and salt it. The tray was put in slant to let the blood with salt flow down into a bowl. Then the meat had to be thoroughly washed to become kosher. Jewish customs and traditions are complex and were transmitted from one generation to the next.

My mother didn't wear a wig since it wasn't customary in the village, but she always wore a kerchief, even at home. We never saw her without a kerchief. She wore casual clothing like all other women in the village. She wore long-sleeved blouses and long dark skirts. She had a long silk dress to wear to the synagogue. This was her only fancy dress. My father wore a kippah at home and a wide-brimmed black hat to go out. On weekdays he wore his work clothes. He had a black woolen suit to wear to the synagogue.

On Friday evening our family got together. We said a prayer, which went like this 'Barukh ata adonay, elohenu melekh ha-olam, asher kidshanu be- mitzotav v-civanu lehadlik ner shel shabat, and my mother lit candles. She said a prayer over the candles with her hands covering her eyes. Then we said a prayer all together, said 'Shabat shalom!' and had dinner. My father blessed the kids. My mother cooked something special for this meal. On Friday morning she usually told me to take a chicken to the shochet. We didn't have chicken on weekdays. We couldn't afford it. From Friday evening till Saturday evening Jews didn't do any work. It wasn't even allowed to strike a match or stoke the stove. On Friday morning my mother cooked food for Sabbath. In winter our Ukrainian neighbor came to stoke the stove on Saturday. He also lit the lamp. There were kerosene lamps. On Saturday morning my father went to the synagogue. Women only went to the synagogue on Jewish holidays. When my brother and I grew older my father took us with him. After he came home from the synagogue he read a special section from the Torah to us. His dream was to have a seat of his own at the synagogue. He couldn't afford to pay for it. I hoped to earn money and pay for my father to have a seat at the synagogue when I grew up. I wanted all Jews in Velikiy

Berezny to know that I bought it for my father, but unfortunately, this dream of mine would never come true. Life has its own ways.

We spoke Yiddish at home. We also spoke fluent Hungarian. When Czech became the state language in 1918 our parents had a problem learning it. They spoke Hungarian with their neighbors. We, children, picked it up soon. We also knew 'rusinskiy' - a dialect of the Ukrainian language spoken in Subcarpathia.

We celebrated Jewish holidays at home. On Pesach our neighbors came to our house to make matzah for several families. Women got together at the big table in the kitchen to sieve the flour, make dough and roll it, and my father baked matzah in the oven. I liked sitting beside him. They made a lot of matzah to last throughout the eight days of Pesach.

We went fishing to have fish on holidays. There was a small river in Velikiy Berezny. Fishing was different than it is now. We bought some powder to throw into the river. The fish became drugged and turned up on the surface with their stomach up and we picked it. The powder wasn't hazardous for people.

My mother did a major clean up before Pesach. We moved all furniture to clean every corner. We collected all breadcrumbs in a piece of paper. This chametz was burned in the stove. We kept special crockery for Pesach in the attic. My mother did the cooking in advance. There were lines to the shochet before Pesach: women sent their children to the shochet with chicken and geese. Then the skins were removed along with the fat from the poultry. The skin was cut into small pieces and the fat was melted in big cast iron pots. Food was only cooked in this fat. The children had a chore to crush some matzah in a mortar. This flour was sieved. My mother made chicken broth with pieces of matzah. We always had gefilte fish on Sabbath and Jewish holidays. My mother made pudding from crushed matzah mixed with eggs. She also made chicken necks stuffed with fried flour and onions. She baked honey cakes and strudels with jam and raisins. On the first day of Pesach we went to the synagogue in the morning and in the evening my father conducted the seder. Besides other traditional food there was a plate with bitter greeneries, horseradish and a boiled egg on it and a saucer with salty water. We dipped greeneries into salty water before eating it. We knew that in this way we honored our ancestors' exodus from Egyptian slavery. We drank special wine on Pesach, red and very sweet. There were silver glasses for every member of the family and one extra glass for Elijah the Prophet ³. Everybody had to drink four glasses of wine at seder. Children had water added to their wine. I asked my father the four traditional questions [the mah nishtanah] in Hebrew.

On Sukkot we made a sukkah in our yard. The roof was made from corn stems. We decorated the sukkah with ribbons and flowers, put a table inside and had meals in it throughout the holiday.

Before Rosh Hashanah the shofar played after the morning prayer for the whole month of Tishri and Elul at the synagogue. On the eve of the holiday Jews had to offer an apology to those they hurt even if the hurt was unintentional. On Rosh Hashanah my father put on a white shirt and went to the synagogue with my mother. It was mandatory to wear white clothes. When we grew up we also went to the synagogue with our parents. My father had a special prayer book for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. My mother cooked traditional Jewish food: chicken, chicken broth and gefilte fish. We ate apples dipping them in honey and my mother explained that we did this to express our hope for a year full of sweetness ahead.

The family, including children of over five years of age, fasted on Yom Kippur. The kapores ritual was conducted before Yom Kippur. My mother and sister took a white hen in their right hand and my father, my brother and I took a white rooster, said a prayer and waved them over our heads saying in Hebrew, 'May you be my atonement'. We went to the synagogue. Prayers were long on Yom Kippur and when we returned from the synagogue we sat down at the table. After the 24-hour fast all food seemed particularly delicious.

There were the joyful holidays of Chanukkah and Purim. On Chanukkah children received Chanukkah gelt and painted wooden spinning tops. We spent our Chanukkah money on sweets. We played with spinning tops with other children. There were four Hebrew letters, one on each side of the tops, which stood for the words: 'nes', 'gadol', 'haya', 'po', which means 'a great miracle was here'. Every letter had its price. The letter 'nun', which was the first letter in the word 'nes', was the most expensive. Whose spinning top fell on the letter 'nun' took all stakes: candy wrappings, buttons and colorful pieces of glass.

On Purim my mother made hamantashen. There was a custom to take gifts of food to relatives and acquaintances. It was called shelakhmones. All kinds of sweets were put on a tray, covered with a napkin, and children went to deliver the shelakhmones. In the morning of the first day of Purim my father read the Scroll of Esther to us. Purimshpilers disguised as characters from the Scroll of Esther came to perform in Jewish houses. They were usually children of ten to twelve years of age. They were given money or sweets for their performances. I didn't take part in such performances since I was a shy boy.

There were two cheders in Velikiy Berezny: one for boys and one for girls. Girls studied fewer subjects than boys, but they learned everything a Jewish woman should know: to pray and read in Hebrew. Girls went to cheder at the age of five or six - I can't remember exactly - and studied there for a year. Boys went to cheder at the age of three. We had a melamed teaching us, and his assistant helped him to take care of younger children's needs: he gave us food, took us to the toilet, etc. At the age of four we studied the alphabet and reading in Hebrew since we had previously learned words. We also studied Yiddish, learned to read and write, studied Jewish history, traditions and religion. After finishing cheder at the age of seven we went to a general school.

There was no Jewish school in Velikiy Berezny. We went to the eight- year Ukrainian school. My sister Helena and my brother Leopold also went to this school. Boys and girls studied together. There were many Jewish children in this school and there were also Ukrainian and Hungarian ones. There was no anti-Semitism. We used to fight or argue, but there were never any conflicts about nationality issues. I had Jewish and non-Jewish friends. I studied well at school. I was good at all subjects. When I turned 13 my parents arranged for a bar mitzvah and from then on I was considered to be of age. On Saturday during my bar mitzvah I was told to come to the Torah for the first time in my life. I recited a prayer. The first tallit in my life was put on me. In the evening my parents arranged a dinner party and invited our relatives and friends. I remember that my younger brother felt very jealous about it since I was treated as an adult.

I finished school at the age of 14. My parents offered to send me to study at a garment factory in Czechoslovakia. There was a Zionist organization that organized training for teenagers helping them to get a profession and then go to Palestine. The Zborovitz garment factory belonged to this

organization. I don't remember in what town this factory was located. There were other children from Velikiy Berezny and from other towns of Subcarpathia in the factory. We lived in a big building, ten to twelve tenants in one room. There was a canteen downstairs where we had kosher food. We had festive meals on Sabbath and Jewish holidays. We celebrated Sabbath on Friday evening and on Saturday we had a day off. We observed Jewish traditions and laws. We were trained to operate equipment at the factory and studied Hebrew and Yiddish. I worked for two years at the factory. I enjoyed my life there very much. I returned from Czechoslovakia in 1930 and my father sent me for training with a tailor. I studied there for three years. Of course, the training itself didn't take that long, but apprentices used to help their master's wife about the house, too. They fetched water, looked after the children and did what they were told to do.

After finishing my training I began to work at my master's shop. I was a fabric-cutter. I lived with my parents and brother. My best friend was a barber in the village. He wasn't a Jew. He was a very nice person. We didn't care about nationality then. What mattered was whether a person was decent and honest.

My sister Helena got married in 1934. She had a traditional Jewish wedding with a rabbi and a chuppah in Velikiy Berezny. My father bought a house in Uzhgorod for the newly-weds. My younger brother finished school and I began to teach him to be a tailor.

In 1936 I was recruited to the Czech army. I served in an infantry unit in Czechoslovakia. We had military and sport training and studied theory. There were rooms in the barracks, eight to ten tenants in each room. There were beds, tables and chairs, bookshelves and wardrobes in each room. There was a library in our unit and we could read in our spare time. We celebrated the religious holidays of all religions: Jewish, Catholic and Christian, every confession had its holidays. On Jewish holidays Jewish soldiers were invited to the synagogue where festive dinners of traditional Jewish food were arranged for them. Local Jewish families often invited Jewish soldiers to their homes on Sabbath and Jewish holidays. Matzah was delivered for the Jews from the synagogue on Pesach and for Christians Easter bread was made at Easter. The soldiers were allowed to go to the synagogue or church.

We didn't follow the kashrut, but I managed to observe all other Jewish laws. Every morning I put on my tallit and recited a prayer, and on Sabbath and Jewish holidays I went to the synagogue. Religiosity was appreciated. My fellow comrades were of various nationalities. There was one other Jewish soldier. There were Czechs and Hungarians. We never had any conflicts related to our nationality. Officers had a friendly attitude toward young soldiers. There were no brutal attitudes, nothing like what is happening in the Ukrainian army nowadays. We were like a team staying close together.

I returned home in 1939. Subcarpathia belonged to Hungary since 1938. The Hungary of this time was different from the Hungary where my parents lived when they were young. This was a fascist Hungary. There was a war in Poland and the Germans were killing Polish Jews. There were many refugees from Poland. Hungary declared itself an ally of Hitler's Germany. The oppression of Jews in Hungary began. A number of anti-Jewish laws [4](#) were issued. Jews weren't allowed to own enterprises or stores. They had to give them voluntarily into non-Jewish ownership or they became property of the state. Then Hungarian passports were introduced. All Jews had to prove that they were born in Hungary or they were subject to deportation. I don't know where they were deported.

Passports were issued in Budapest, the capital of Hungary. To go there was expensive. Jews had no right to hold official posts. Life became much more difficult.

In 1939 Germany began World War II. Hungary was an ally of Germany during the war. Mobilization to the Hungarian army began. In 1941 Germany attacked the USSR [this was the beginning of the so-called Great Patriotic War] [5](#) and I was mobilized to a forced labor battalion in the army. At the beginning we had German commanders that were later replaced by Hungarians. We were sent to excavate trenches along the Don River in the USSR [Don is a big river in Central Russia]. Hungarian officers were commanders of the Don front. They behaved brutally. We were ordered to do all kinds of hard work. We had no right to refuse and they shot people for disobedience. Our task was making trenches. All roads were covered with snow and we had to clean the snow for the army troops. Frosts were so severe in January - February 1942 that people froze to death within a few minutes if they fell down. We were given spades and if someone dropped his spade he died. There was a strong wind blowing and it was only possible to walk with a spade. I had a woolen mask that my sister had knitted to cover my head and face. There were only Jews recruited to labor battalions. There were about 1,000 Jews in our unit. I don't know how many survived, but I don't think there were many survivors. I believe, about 1%. Besides inhuman work conditions Jews were shot by Russians while they didn't have any weapons to defend themselves.

In February 1942 our battalion was attacked by the Soviet troops. The Hungarian military ran away. There were nine of us left and we were wandering about not knowing in what direction to go. We bumped into a house at the border of a forest with a kitchen where they cooked meals for Hungarian soldiers. We asked them if they wanted to hire us in exchange for food. We had to chop wood and peel potatoes. Soldiers got some black coffee and rum or cognac to cheer up before combat action. We also got some coffee or rum occasionally. Regretfully, we didn't stay there long. One night some drunken German officers broke into the room where we slept. They yelled, 'Wake up, communists!'. They thought that all Jews were communists for some reason. We couldn't understand what it was all about when we were told to get dressed, take our rucksacks with our belongings and go to the kitchen. When we came there the food stock supervisor began to yell at us, 'You, dirty Jews, communists, drank the cognac and rum that our soldiers need so much!' It was the Germans that drank it, but they blamed us. The officers began to beat us. I bowed down protecting my head and they kept hitting me on my rucksack. They wouldn't have been held responsible if they had killed us. When they got too tired they told us to go into the yard.

The snow around was so deep that we couldn't run away. We were lying in the snow. When we pulled ourselves together we moved on. We were looking for our fellow comrades. We couldn't speak Russian. I spoke Ruthenian, but this was the dialect of Ukrainian hutsul people, the language that we spoke in the village. We finally found our headquarters and were sent back to work. We did the hardest work, but we didn't have a choice. There was no escape from there. People got shot for attempting to run away. So, we would have been shot by the Hungarian, German or Russian military if we had tried to escape and were captured.

There was a frontline in the area where we were working. One night the Soviet troops passed to the offensive and we were ordered to retreat. The nine of us stayed together. We decided to hide in a village. This was the village of Oshurki, as the woman who gave us shelter told us. There were bombs falling all around. My fellow comrades followed the woman into the house, but I stayed outside. I saw a big basket near the front door and got inside. Within some time three German

soldiers came to the yard, placed a mortar and started shooting. They were keeping the Russian troops to give their troops an opportunity to retreat. They were very close to where I was hiding. They didn't see me while I could see them through the basket. Then they finally ran away. It became quiet. I got very cold.

Some time after the Germans had left I heard the sound of skis. A Russian officer wearing a white camouflage suit and carrying his machine gun came down the hill to inspect the surroundings. He came into the house and I was still lying in the basket. The Russians were aware that the Hungarians had Jewish labor units. He asked how many of us there were and told us to hurry into the rear, since the army troops might come back, and showed us in what direction to go. It was 2 o'clock in the morning. We still didn't know where to go. We went through some villages. We got thirsty and hungry. Most houses were destroyed. We went into some houses to get warm and get some food. We came to houses like beggars, moving on and on. On the next day we bumped into our fellow comrades lying dead on the road. They had been shot from a plane. There were planes hanging over us, but I remembered from the time when I served in the Czech army that one had to pretend to be dead and walk on after the plane was gone. I don't know whether they were Hungarian or German planes flying over us, but they killed all that didn't follow this rule.

I don't know how many days we roamed about. We were hungry and looking for food. Once we found some pumpkins. We made a fire and fried these pumpkins. They were rotten, but we ate them anyway. Once we found a horse that had frozen to death. We cut pieces from it. We found shelter in abandoned houses. Once we were robbed by some Russians. They were civilians with a gun. They came at night and took away our shoes and clothes. They took my sheepskin vest. They gave us their old clothes.

Finally we bumped into some Russian military. They understood Ukrainian and I asked them whether they needed a tailor or if we could maybe do other work for them. They brought us their clothes and underwear to have them fixed. They gave us some food and when it was time for us to leave they gave us a bag of dried bread. We moved on having no idea where to go. We didn't know the country.

We fell ill with typhoid and some people showed us the way to a hospital. The hospital for patients with typhoid was housed in a school building. Every day dead bodies were taken out of there like logs. The patients were lying on dirty straw on the floor. There were lice that bit patients to death. I don't know where I got the energy, but I didn't sleep at night cleaning my clothes from lice. This probably saved me. There was no water or food. We melted snow to have water. We were so weak that we couldn't walk. We could only move on our fours. Two of my fellow comrades and I survived.

Then some Russian officers and civilians came. There were doctors among them. One doctor asked me where I came from. I replied that I was from Uzhgorod and he happened to come from Uzhgorod, too. He had moved there from the USSR in the 1920s. He asked me more questions and looked around in search of those that could be saved. Those that had a chance to live were taken to another premise. The rest of the patients perished. When we recovered we moved on. We got washed in a sauna and cleaned our clothes.

Then we were sent to Usman [a town in Russia, about 400 km southeast of Moscow], to a camp for prisoners-of-war. There were German, Italian, Romanian, Turkish and other soldiers. There were many military men that surrendered at the front. When we came there we were ordered to take off

our clothes, then we were searched by a doctor and allowed to put on clothes again. This was a transit camp where prisoners were examined and sorted out before they were transported to another camp. I was always looking for work to do. I had needles and other sewing accessories. Only my scissors were taken away during the search, although it was my tool. I got a pair of scissors later. I said that I could fix clothes.

At the beginning my clients were inmates of the camp. I did work in exchange for food. Later I opened a shop. There was a storage facility with stocks of food for the army in the Russian military unit where I was. The Italians went there to steal food. They were starving. Those that were captured were shot immediately and I saw this more than once. Later a shoe shop was opened near my shop. The shoemaker was also an inmate of the camp. I stayed a rather long time in this camp. Newcomers arrived constantly to the camp. Once a train full of former SS military arrived. My friend Schwartz from our labor battalion was among them. He had been hiding with Germans in the house of a woman when they were captured. I took him to my shop.

From Usman we moved to Voronezh [Russia, about 500 km southwest of Moscow], where we were taken to the sauna. We had our clothes disinfected and got them back. We were feeling much stronger than before. There was another big camp there. Its inmates were German, Italian, Romanian and Hungarian. We lived in huge wooden barracks. We slept on two-tier plank beds along the wall. We had sufficient food there. They received American food supplies of lentil with chicken meat. America supplied food for prisoners-of-war under an international treaty. The camp in Voronezh was much better than the previous camp. We had sufficient food and a place to wash. There were Jews in the camp, but we didn't observe any Jewish traditions. We didn't eat pork, but this was the only thing we could do in that respect. This was a different world and we were separated from the reality we were used to. I opened a garment shop there, and it was a good shop.

We made uniforms for Russian officers, women's clothes and fixed clothes. There were very skilled German tailors working in the shop. I learned many things from them. I still have notebooks with my notes from this time and albums with patterns. My shop was located near the military unit headquarters, beyond the camp. The colonel, chief of headquarters, lived upstairs and the shoe and garment shops were downstairs. Schwartz and I lived there. I was a tailor and he was a shoemaker. I didn't have to live in the camp for long. I obtained an identity card with my photograph. Schwartz and I lived in the building of the headquarters and moved around. We got food for our work. There were bed bugs that disturbed us in our sleep. We wrapped wet cloth around the legs of our beds to keep bugs from getting onto the bed. However, they got onto the ceiling from where they fell on us. We survived. Every morning I came to the camp to select 20-25 inmates to work in the shop. They weren't going to escape - there was nowhere to go. The local residents thought they were fascists and wouldn't help them. They worked in the shop during the day and in the evening they returned to the camp.

I met my future wife when I was in this camp. There was a house across the street from the building of the headquarters where we lived. I often saw a girl in a window. There was a big family living in that house. Schwartz and I often watched them through the window. It was an episode of peaceful life for us, associated with home. There was a river and a pump nearby where people came for water. We went to swim in the river and often saw this girl, who came with her buckets to get water. Once I took the courage to talk with her. I was wearing a German uniform that Germans

had given me for my work. Those Germans didn't know that I was a Jew since I spoke fluent German. I also spoke Russian. I talked with the girl and asked if I could see her in the evening. I longed for talking with someone. I was afraid that she would refuse since she didn't know who I was. She agreed and we met in the evening. I chose a spot where nobody could see us since inmates of the camp weren't allowed to be outside in the evening. We walked and talked. It was like a holiday for me.

We began to see each other more often. I brought her food that we received in the camp. Her name was Sophia Belinskaya. I didn't know who she was. She looked like a gypsy girl. Once she told me that her mother told her to stop seeing me. She thought I was a German and might kill her. We talked more and she told me that she was a Jew. I confessed that I was a Jew, too. Her mother didn't believe it was true. She said there were only German inmates in the camp. I began to come to her home in the evening when nobody could see me. Sophia lived in a big family. There were seven children and Sophia was the oldest. She was born in 1924. Sophia's mother was a housewife. Her father left their family. I tried to support their family as much as I could. We made gowns from white fabric in my shop. We received fabric in rolls. Every night I wrapped some fabric around my body and went to visit them. Sophia's mother sold this fabric at the market and bought food for the family. Once Sophia's mother invited me to lunch. I understood that she wanted to talk to me and find out whether I could speak Yiddish. By the end of my visit she knew that I spoke better Yiddish than she did. After that Sophia's mother wasn't afraid of me any more and I visited them every evening. My friend Schwartz also met a local girl from Voronezh.

In May 1945 we heard that the war was over: the inmates were telling this news to one another. On 9th May 1945 all inmates of the camp were lined up in front of the headquarters of the camp and announced that Germany had capitulated and that the war was over. We felt very happy. People in the streets hugged and kissed each other. I hoped to be able to go home soon. I had no information about my family. Sophia and I decided to get married but postponed it until we came to my home. We wanted to celebrate our wedding with my family. I asked Ptashynskiy, the chief of the camp who was Jewish, to get some information about the situation in Subcarpathia. He sent a request about my family and received a response saying that no member of my family was alive. They perished in Auschwitz where the Germans took them.

Before we were released from the camp we were asked where we wanted to live. I could have gone anywhere, but I only wanted to go back home, even though I knew that nobody was waiting for me there. I was in captivity from the beginning of 1942 till September 1946. In September I obtained the required permits to go home. In 1945, after World War II was over, Subcarpathia joined the USSR, but it didn't scare me away. I remembered that the Soviet army had liberated us from the fascists. I was still hoping that I would find at least some of my relatives when I came home. I left for home alone. I wanted to prepare everything for the arrival of my future wife.

I arrived in Velikiy Berezny where my neighbors confirmed that the Germans had taken my whole family to Auschwitz in 1944 and none of them returned. I went to Uzhgorod to obtain my documents, but I couldn't get any. Some other people lived in the house of my sister Helena. My sister and her family also perished in concentration camp. I stayed in the house of my distant relative and tried to have the house of my sister returned to me. An attorney, who was my cousin's acquaintance, agreed to help me in court. I finally obtained an identity certificate in Velikiy Berezny, on the basis of which I received a passport. The verdict of the court was positive and I got

back the house.

I went to Voronezh to take Sophia to our home. We returned to Uzhgorod where Sophia and I got married. We didn't have a Jewish wedding. We had a civil registration ceremony at the district registry office. We still live in this house. When we started repairs of the house in the 1950s I found a gift from my sister. We needed to replace the rotten floors. She must have put an envelope with family photographs under the floor before being deported to the concentration camp with her family. We found this envelope and I was very happy to get it since I didn't have a single photograph of my close ones.

I began to work at a garment shop in the center of the town. My clients mainly wanted to alter their old clothes. I went to work and my wife was a housewife. Our first baby, our son Kalman, named after my father, was born in 1947. He was circumcised according to Jewish traditions. In 1949 our daughter Elena, named after my sister Helena, was born. Her Jewish name is Chaya.

I had to work a lot to provide for the family. This was a hard time. It was difficult to get food. Our shop grew bigger. I worked there for 25 years. I had a crew at the beginning. The procedure was such that I gave a cut to one seamstress and she had a suit or coat completed from beginning to end. I just checked her work. When the shop switched from individual to operational method I quit. I don't think it's good when one employee does only one operation and it takes eight people to have an item completed. I thought it had an impact on the quality of work. My management tried to keep me at work, but I didn't feel like working in this manner.

I went to another shop where an acquaintance of mine worked. They worked as I was used to: one person made an item from beginning to end. There was one fitting with a client, but if a cut was precise the client didn't even need to come to a fitting. There were many clients. Our work was so good that our clients even paid more to encourage us. They were happy with our work and came another time to have another item made for them. I retired when I was over 70. However, I continued working at home. I had many clients. It was impossible to buy good clothes in stores and people had to have their clothes made for them. I earned enough money and we were in no need of anything. I had very little free time that I tried to spend with my family. I took them to the park or to the cinema.

After I returned to Subcarpathia I noticed some demonstrations of anti-Semitism. During the war common hardships made people stick together. There were different values at the front. Shortly after the war life was so hard that people were busy with their own problems and didn't think about nationality issues, but some time later anti-Semitism started to appear. I think one of the reasons was that so many people came to Subcarpathia from the USSR. Many of them were anti-Semites. There was always anti-Semitism and there still is. One can hear, 'Jews, get out to your Israel' in public transport even nowadays. I cannot say that the state persecutes Jews now, but it did before. However, there are demonstrations of anti-Semitism in our everyday life. We are used to anti-Semitism, even though my family or I have never faced it in person. I had clients of many nationalities, but I never heard a rude word from them. They only thanked me for my work.

I didn't suffer during the time of the Doctors' Plot [6](#) at the beginning of 1953, but I was surprised that so many people sincerely believed this evident lie. Though I wasn't interested in politics. Only idle people discuss politics. In March that same year Stalin died. Those that cried for him were mainly people from the USSR. His death wasn't a calamity for me, but I did think about what was

going to happen. I remember how at the Twentieth Party Congress [7](#) Khrushchev [8](#) spoke about Stalin's crimes. I never took any interest in politics, but many of my acquaintances were upset that Stalin turned out to be an oppressor of the people instead of being the father of the people like he was called by the propaganda. We hoped that life would change for the better after the Twentieth Party Congress, but there were no significant changes. We lived under various regimes in Subcarpathia. Working class people cannot be interested who has power in their country as long as this power gives them an opportunity to live, work and be able to provide for the family. Of course, I never wished to join the Party. They wouldn't even have admitted me since I had been a soldier of the German side and a prisoner-of-war in a camp. Anyway, I never even considered this.

In 1948 the state of Israel was established. I was happy that our people got their own state, but there was the Jewish state of Palestine that had existed for a long time before. [Editor's note: There was no Jewish state before 1948, Palestine was under British mandate.] Even before I was born, Jews moved there to work in this country. So for me it was like just changing the name of the country.

My wife and I tried to observe Jewish traditions and celebrate Jewish holidays. We followed the kashrut especially during the time when we could buy the food we needed for it without problems. My relative Roujeana, the daughter of my mother's cousin, and her family lived nearby and on Friday Roujeana and my wife cooked together for Sabbath since it's not allowed to cook or stoke a stove on Sabbath. On Friday evening our family got together for dinner. We prayed and my wife lit candles. However, I had to go to work on Saturday. During the Soviet regime Saturday was a working day. Whenever I could I would come home earlier from work. I was a crew leader and couldn't just leave my colleagues to go home. My wife and I spoke Russian at home, since she could hardly understand Yiddish. Her Yiddish wasn't important for me. All I cared about was that we understood each other.

We celebrated all Jewish holidays at home. The synagogue in Uzhgorod operated until the early 1950s. My wife and I went there together only on Jewish holidays. There was a special balcony for women at the synagogue. However, we had small children and my wife couldn't leave them to go to the synagogue on Saturday, so on Saturday I went to the synagogue alone. Later the synagogue was closed and reconstructed to become the building of the Philharmonic. A prayer house opened where only men could go.

My wife and I fasted on Yom Kippur. We still fast regardless of our age. We also celebrate Pesach. We have special crockery and utensils for Pesach. I conducted the seder on Pesach. When my son grew old enough I taught him the traditional questions in Hebrew that a son is supposed to ask his father during the seder. We celebrated all holidays and I told my children the history of all of them. My wife and I raised our children in accordance with Jewish laws. They identified themselves as Jews and never concealed their identity like others at hard times.

We didn't celebrate Soviet holidays; except for Victory Day [9](#) on 9th May none of them were of significance for us. When our children went to school my wife and I went to concerts at school arranged on Soviet holidays, but it was just another opportunity for us to spend time with our children. We also celebrated family birthdays. We invited friends and relatives. Almost all our friends were Jews. It just happened so, although I don't value a person by his nationality.

I like walking long distances. My wife and I often went for walks with our children. My favorite pastime was fishing. It is only in the last few years that I haven't gone fishing. My family always spent a week with my wife's relatives in Voronezh during summer vacation. Sophia's mother, her sisters and brothers were happy to see us. We spent the rest of our vacation in picturesque Subcarpathia. We rented an apartment and spent our time in the woods or at the river bank.

When our children grew up my wife went to work at the instrument manufacturing plant called Uzhgorodpribor. She worked there for 30 years. She started as an apprentice and finished her career as a crew leader. I provided well for the family, but my wife wanted to work to spend more time among people and, also, to get a pension.

Our children went to school. Our son was very fond of music and learned to play the violin. Later he gave up music. Our daughter also started playing the piano, but she also gave up. After school our son studied to become a photographer and then he began to work as a photographer. He married a nice Jewish girl from Uzhgorod. We made a chuppah for them at home and invited a rabbi. We also organized a wedding party at home. Their son Dmitrii was born in 1982. In 1996 our son and his family emigrated to Israel. His son went to study at school in Israel and then my son and his wife went to visit him there and decided to stay. My wife and I approved of his decision. My son and his wife were young and could start their life anew. Our son works as a driver in Israel. Our grandson finished school and serves in the army. When his service is over he will go to university.

Our daughter Elena went to work at the Uzhgorodpribor Plant where my wife worked. Elena married a Jewish man from Uzhgorod. Elena and her husband also had a Jewish wedding. Her last name in marriage is Goldman. In 1976 their son Edward was born. Our grandson finished school and went to Israel under a program for young people. He lives and works in Israel. He got married in Israel. I have an eight-year-old great-grandson. His name is Daniel. Unfortunately, Elena's marriage failed. Our daughter lives with us now. Elena worked at the plant for 22 years until it was shut down. Since then she has worked with Hesed. She used to deliver hot meals to old people and now she works as a visiting nurse.

Many of our friends and relatives moved to Israel in the 1970s. My wife and I sympathized with them and supported their plans, but we didn't intend to leave. I'm too old to work in Israel and I couldn't think of staying at home receiving a pension. I wanted to work and enjoyed working.

I was enthusiastic about perestroika [10](#), which began in the 1980s at the initiative of Mikhail Gorbachev [11](#). I was glad that people got an opportunity to start their business without obstacles and fear. Private businesses were allowed for the first time in the history of the USSR. Of course, private entrepreneurship existed before, but if a person got caught for working for himself he might have been arrested and imprisoned for it. Besides, anti-Semitism mitigated, both on the state and interpersonal level. Relationships with Israel improved at that time. Soviet people got an opportunity to travel abroad, visit their relatives and friends and invite them to their homes. Official Jewish organizations were established and people got an opportunity to read books by Jewish writers and attend Jewish concerts. In the past even the word 'Jew' wasn't officially used. If they talked about Jews that perished during World War II they called them 'Soviet people' and when they mentioned those that were at the front they said 'Russians, Ukrainians, Belarus and representatives of other nationalities of the Soviet Union'. Now they mention Jews, Heroes of the Soviet Union, scientists and use the word 'Jew' to identify the nation.

In 1997 I went to Israel to visit my son and his family, my grandson and see my great-grandson. I toured Israel. It's such a wonderful country! It's a pity there is no peace. I was pleased to see how much Israelis love their country and how patriotic young people are there. My daughter also went to Israel to visit her family. Perhaps it would be better for Elena to live with her son and grandson in Israel, but she is a loving daughter and understands that my wife and I are in great need of her.

In 1991, after the fall of the USSR, Ukraine became independent. Since then Jewish life began to revive. Many Jews dropped their Jewish traditions in the past. There were often fewer than ten people, which is necessary to have a minyan, at prayer houses and we had to go home without praying. Now many of those that didn't even identify themselves as Jews before go to the synagogue with their children and identify themselves as Jews. I go to the synagogue every Saturday. I'm glad that many young people identify themselves as Jews. Many young people attend the synagogue. There's also a Jewish school in Uzhgorod.

In 1999 Hesed was established in Uzhgorod. It's very important for older people and for children. There are many clubs at Hesed where young people learn Jewish traditions, customs, Yiddish and Ivrit, foreign languages and get computer education. There is a choir and dance club for children and adults. We celebrate Sabbath and Jewish holidays at Hesed. Beside spiritual development and communication Hesed supports and provides assistance to old people. They deliver food packages, medications and hot meals to their homes. This is great assistance to people in this hard time.

Glossary

1 Subcarpathia (also known as Ruthenia, Russian and Ukrainian name Zakarpatie)

Region situated on the border of the Carpathian Mountains with the Middle Danube lowland. The regional capitals are Uzhhorod, Berehovo, Mukachevo, Khust. It belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy until World War I; and the Saint-Germain convention declared its annexation to Czechoslovakia in 1919. It is impossible to give exact historical statistics of the language and ethnic groups living in this geographical unit: the largest groups in the interwar period were Hungarians, Rusyns, Russians, Ukrainians, Czech and Slovaks. In addition there was also a considerable Jewish and Gypsy population. In accordance with the first Vienna Decision of 1938, the area of Subcarpathia mainly inhabited by Hungarians was ceded to Hungary. The rest of the region, was proclaimed a new state called Carpathian Ukraine in 1939, with Khust as its capital, but it only existed for four and a half months, and was occupied by Hungary in March 1939. Subcarpathia was taken over by Soviet troops and local guerrillas in 1944. In 1945, Czechoslovakia ceded the area to the USSR and it gained the name Carpatho-Ukraine. The region became part of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1945. When Ukraine became independent in 1991, the region became an administrative region under the name of Transcarpathia.

2 Cheder for girls

Model cheders were set up in Russia where girls studied reading and writing.

3 Elijah the Prophet

According to Jewish legend the prophet Elijah visits every home on the first day of Pesach and

drinks from the cup that has been poured for him. He is invisible but he can see everything in the house. The door is kept open for the prophet to come in and honor the holiday with his presence.

4 Anti-Jewish laws in Hungary

Following similar legislation in Nazi Germany, Hungary enacted three Jewish laws in 1938, 1939 and 1941. The first law restricted the number of Jews in industrial and commercial enterprises, banks and in certain occupations, such as legal, medical and engineering professions, and journalism to 20% of the total number. This law defined Jews on the basis of their religion, so those who converted before the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919, as well as those who fought in World War I, and their widows and orphans were exempted from the law. The second Jewish law introduced further restrictions, limiting the number of Jews in the above fields to 6%, prohibiting the employment of Jews completely in certain professions such as high school and university teaching, civil and municipal services, etc. It also forbade Jews to buy or sell land and so forth. This law already defined Jews on more racial grounds in that it regarded baptized children that had at least one non-converted Jewish parent as Jewish. The third Jewish law prohibited intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews, and defined anyone who had at least one Jewish grandparent as Jewish.

5 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.

6 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.

7 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.

8 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.

9 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.

10 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.

11 Gorbachev, Mikhail (1931-)

Soviet political leader. Gorbachev joined the Communist Party in 1952 and gradually moved up in the party hierarchy. In 1970 he was elected to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, where he remained until 1990. In 1980 he joined the politburo, and in 1985 he was appointed general secretary of the party. In 1986 he embarked on a comprehensive program of political, economic, and social liberalization under the slogans of glasnost (openness) and perestroika (restructuring). The government released political prisoners, allowed increased emigration, attacked corruption, and encouraged the critical reexamination of Soviet history. The Congress of People's Deputies, founded in 1989, voted to end the Communist Party's control over the government and elected Gorbachev executive president. Gorbachev dissolved the Communist Party and granted the Baltic states independence. Following the establishment of the Commonwealth of Independent States in 1991, he resigned as president. Since 1992, Gorbachev has headed international organizations.