Lev Khapun

Saint-Petersburg
Russia
Interviewer: Sophia Kozlova
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Lev Borisovich creates a very nice impression. He is an elderly man with massive features and a kind glance.

His speech is rather monotonous, unemotional, he narrates a bit laid-back.

However, Lev Borisovich remembers a lot of interesting details and sometimes talks about his life with great enthusiasm.

The furniture in his apartment is rather modest, but at the same time everything is very clean and neat.

Family background

My paternal grandfather, Elyukim Khapun [1863-1914], was a blacksmith; and all his relatives and brothers were blacksmiths, too. His daughters only married blacksmiths; thus all men in the family were blacksmiths. They lived in Vinnitsa, in Kamenetsk-Podolsk province of Ukraine. There was not much work for a blacksmith in Vinnitsa, so they left for neighboring villages looking for day labor.

Exactly at that time [1870-1880s] the Odessa-Kishinev railroad was being constructed. Some of the relatives went there, since they lived poorly and the payment at the construction site was good. In Vinnitsa they usually repaired fences and shoed horses; such work was not difficult. At the construction site they made parts for the railroad. After that they returned to Vinnitsa.

At that time, by the beginning of the 20th century, the population of Vinnitsa was 80,000-100,000 people. My father's family had a monopoly for blacksmith's work in town. There were four marketplaces in Vinnitsa, and since peasants came there on horseback, each marketplace had to have a smithy. All blacksmiths at the marketplaces were brothers. Grandfather could not work at that time because he was old.

His brothers were very well known; they were highly-qualified blacksmiths. They didn't only repair things, they also made equipment for wells. Gypsies were their competitors, for example, they

made copper basins. There was no aluminum at that time, only copper and tin.

Vinnitsa was a 70% Jewish town. Besides Jews Poles, Ukrainians and some Germans lived there, but almost no Russians. Jews were in very close relations with each other and talked only in Yiddish. If they didn't speak Yiddish, then they talked in Ukrainian with the Ukrainians who lived in town. Russian was also well known. For example, before the war people in a tram only spoke Yiddish, and some Russians and Ukrainians spoke Yiddish as well. There were beggars sitting in front of the marketplace, and they knew how to beg in Polish, if a Pole approached, and in Yiddish, if a Jew approached. All in all several languages were popular in Vinnitsa. There was a Roman Catholic church and a Lutheran Church in Vinnitsa. When the Soviets came into power, an aero club was organized in the Roman Catholic church. The Roman Catholic church was so big, that inside it an airplane was disassembled and assembled again, and it remained there. Later the Znaniye Society was set up there. Now it is the Roman Catholic church again.

There was a district in Vinnitsa, which was called Jerusalimka. There were several streets with a lot of alleyways in between. Even when one walked there with eyes closed, one knew that it was Jerusalimka because of the dreadful stench. There were two-storey houses where poor people lived. In the course of the Soviet Power all of Jerusalimka was destroyed, and Verkhnyaya and Nizhnyaya streets were built instead. Several houses were constructed in the country and all former Jerusalimka citizens were moved there.

My father, Boris Elyukimovich Khapun [1898-1970], was the youngest in the family, ninth or eleventh. I only know his brothers Nutyr and Girsh by name. They had families, but I can't tell you anything about them. The others brothers I don't remember. As a child my father studied in cheder for two or three years; he did not study anywhere else. He was proposed for some courses later on. Since everyone in the family was a blacksmith, my father also became a blacksmith; it was inevitable. Father didn't shoe horses. Plants were constructed and developed in Vinnitsa at that time [1910-1920s], and various specialists were in demand. Father went to a plant and worked there as a blacksmith. The family expanded during that time and lived in a big house in friendship.

My paternal grandmother, Golda Khapun, born in 1863, was a very gentle person. Her older daughter, aunt Peisya, was managing the whole house and ordered everyone about, including the blacksmiths; such an interesting paradox.

In 1905, they say, there was a big Jewish pogrom. It's not true that the government didn't fight against pogroms. When there was a pogrom in Vinnitsa and Berdichev, the tsarist government sent Cossacks 1, either from Don or Kuban, to suppress the pogrom-makers. Cossacks were heavily built men and behaved conceitedly towards the local population. For instance, they came to the smithy because they also needed to shoe their horses. Cossacks believed that they had a privileged status. They bumped into my uncles, or, to be more precise, grand-uncles. A conversation started and, since they behaved haughtily, they were verbally refused. A scuffle began. There were twelve Cossacks with horses, harness, weapons; and the blacksmiths were fewer in number. But when the brawl began, they beat those Cossacks up so badly that the latter weren't able to leave on their own. The Cossacks complained about it to their officer. The colonel started an investigation. Since it wasn't possible to talk to the beaten, he had to wait for some time.

I know about this incident from what my father told me. He was a small boy at the time (he was only seven years old), and he could not have seen it all, but he knew the story very well. The

policemen visited the colonel, saw the beaten and started an inquest in order to punish those bandits who had beaten up the Cossacks. But the blacksmiths escaped. There was this village fool in Vinnitsa. He was short, weak and a bit twisted. The police and the Cossacks looked for the guilty but couldn't find them. At that time it was impossible not to reveal a crime.

So they caught the village fool and brought him to the colonel. The colonel said, 'What kind of Cossacks I have, that such shabby Jew men can get the better of them?' He turned out that guy and closed the case. The Cossacks suppressed that pogrom, so it cannot be simply said that the tsarist government welcomed the pogroms.

There was another interesting story about those blacksmiths. There was a draft to the tsarist army, and one day in 1898 they were all drafted into it. Since the brothers departed for the army, all their cousins and other relatives came to see them off. The draftees got drunk for courage and arrived drunk for the draft. On that day the natives began to mock at the Jewish guys, who came to the draft. The latter tolerated that for some time, but then beat them up. Blacksmiths were very strong guys, of origin and because of their occupation, since they worked with sledgehammers all day long. A serious fight began, and all draftees scattered away, so the draft was closed for that day. A guard told me about this incident when I worked at a plant in Vinnitsa. He was drafted at that time, too. He told me this story, which happened to him, and when I later asked my father about it, he told me that it had really happened.

For some time all relatives lived together in one big house. They lived in friendship and never discussed each other's family matters. My paternal grandfather and grandmother were religious people. Their family observed all holidays and fasts when they occurred. They baked matzah, kept kosher and took poultry to the shochet at the marketplace, it was not allowed otherwise. Everybody went to the carver. One brought him a chicken; he read a prayer, cut the chicken and let the blood flow. There were also women, who later plucked the chicken. No one cut the chicken on his or her own, only with the help of a carver.

Holidays were celebrated by the whole family. Hamantashen, triangles with poppy-seeds, were made for holidays [for Purim]. When everybody gathered at the table, songs were sung; and the men drank wine and plum or sour cherry nalivka. Wine and nalivka are prepared by different methods. For nalivka a big bottle is used, into which sour cherries, or plums, or raspberries or other berries are poured; then sugar is added, but no water. The sugar melts bit-by-bit and liquid appears; its volume increases and nalivka is ready. Wine is produced when the berries are drafted and wine ferments. When nalivka is produced the berries are not drafted.

The hostess cooked some refreshments; guests didn't bring any food. Men talked about their business and women talked about theirs. Men drank nalivka and women ate wine sour cherries, it was a tradition. But even for the Purim holiday, when according to tradition, everybody had to drink himself into oblivion, they never got drunk. They observed all holidays according to the Jewish tradition. Later they didn't only celebrated Jewish holidays, but also [Soviet] revolutionary ones.

All in all my relatives were superstitious. They believed that if someone was scolded, it would influence his life. And many of them, especially women, were very much afraid to be scolded. There was also a taboo among the Jews: it was prohibited to gossip. Jews have a word called 'mouser' in their language. If a person was given this nickname, everybody started to avoid him. Here's an example: My grandmother had a neighbor. When the Germans came, he, a Jew, became

a priest and behaved really badly. He did not assist his fellow countrymen. Everyone was killed, but they didn't touch him. After the war he put on soldier's boots, breeches and a soldier's blouse and walked with ease. No one informed against him. Mouser means the end, a complete boycott on a person. That's why nobody said anything about that traitor.

Father was taken to the army during the Imperialistic War [WWI]. He didn't want to go to war, but he was a healthy man. However, the conditions were such, that one wasn't accepted to the army in case of absence of teeth. So father went to the dentist and pulled out healthy teeth without anesthesia. But after he had pulled out his teeth, he was nonetheless enrolled for the army. He served in the infantry under Kerensky 2. He had a picture of himself: so slender, with shoulder straps and a red bow on his chest. The Revolution had already begun, and those who were supporting it wore bows. The Jews were suppressed under the tsar, but Kerensky abolished all prohibitions, the Jewish Pale 3, for instance. That's why father supported him.

When the army and the front fell apart, everybody was allowed to go home with their weapons. My father asked for a reference note to prove that he was not a deserter. He was issued a reference note, which said: 'Berka Elyukomovich, released from the army as such.' Later he often told guests about it. He walked home on his own; trains were taken by storm. So he walked and was stopped and asked for his documents; they read his reference note and laughed.

When my father participated in the Civil War [1918-1921], there was no Communist Party in Vinnitsa; there was a trade union. The trade union protected itself from gangs, which consisted of peasants. Why not rob the Jews with impunity? The peasant bandits took carts, stole things and left. People tolerated it for some time, but then they lost all patience. They organized their own guard and began to defend themselves from the gangs. Once they rushed into a village with a weird name, there was Malye Khutora and Bolshiye Khutora, where the bandits came from.

They were in different locations. The townsmen mutilated a lot of people; some were killed. The bandits were punished, because they were rapists, robbers and mutilators. After that event the peasants' banditry stopped, but new gangs were formed: first Petlyura 4 came and then the Poles occupied the territory. A Jew, whose family was killed by Petlyura's gang, later murdered Petlyura. This Jew pursued him and found him in Paris. Petlyura had one minister who was Jewish, it was only a rumor, and I don't know details. We know his descendants, his relatives.

During the NEP 5 times [1921-1924] my father became a NEP-man and started a cooperative, and relatives joined it. They took a half-dilapidated house near the bridge, repaired it and worked there. They earned some money for their work and it was distributed not according to the contribution of the member, but according to the number of children in his family.

Aunt Peisya and uncle Boris had many children, and since I was an only child, the rule made my mother indignant. Father was the chairman but our family got least of all. Father did earn good money, but mother wasn't pleased with it all the same. However, my father couldn't behave differently. He was the youngest in the family, and he couldn't give instructions to his brothers.

His relatives must have acknowledged my father as chairman because of his organizing capabilities. He even had a nickname in the family: professor. I was surprised at that time that Ukrainians and Russians addressed him by his name and patronymic and with [the formal] 'You'. At the same time father had pupils aged 15-16, who called him Berl and addressed him with [the

informal] 'you', not 'You'. I didn't express my surprise, but thought to myself, 'Why is that so'. The patronymic wasn't used because all were relatives and not only natural relatives. For instance, my aunt Peisya married Boris, and he also joined the team.

When conflicts arose, the Jews didn't appeal to the state court, it was considered indecent. For instance, when there was a conflict between a NEP- man and a worker, or between a husband and a wife (if one wanted a divorce and the other one didn't), no one even considered to appeal to the state authorities, let alone, the court. For example, carts were rented in order to deliver something. When payment time came, a dispute arose, which had to be solved. In Vinnitsa it happened the following way: one party got itself an 'attorney', a representative; the other party did the same. These people got together and settled the dispute.

If they came to an agreement, they parted; if not, both representatives consulted a third party. My father was always invited to be a judge and settle disputes. His decisions were never discussed because it was connected with serious trouble for the defeated party: respect was lost, because Jews were around. Father was respected. There was the Bar Association [a league of attorneys, professional community] with attorneys who obtained their education in Russia and abroad, but they also respected his opinion.

After the NEP time, my father joined the Communist Party, as it was prestigious, in fashion and convenient at that time. He was a man of principle, didn't change his mind and didn't take bribes. Later, when he worked at the chemical plant, he invented some things. But he was semiliterate. He told the shop master about his proposal. And the chief engineer was later given these diplomas and big bonuses for these proposals. When the sugar plant was constructed, automated scales appeared. It was German equipment, and no one knew how to repair it. Father had a look at it and fixed it.

Father's older brother Nutyr left for America in the 1920s. Before the war he wrote a letter to his relatives, saying that he was in a good position and able to assist them, if they gave him their address. They came to my father for advice. He told them, 'Why do you need it, everybody is being put into camps now'. So they never wrote back. I later looked for that uncle, but didn't find him. He sent pictures with his letter. I remember that my father was filled with indignation because of them: he was of patriarchal breed and in the picture his brother wore shorts and held a tennis racket. In his last letter Nutyr wrote that he was very busy and couldn't write letters.

He said, that his wife would be happy to correspond, but that she knew no Russian or Polish, only English. If they were satisfied with that, she would write to them. No one knew English at that time and everyone was scared. My wife is still afraid of the NKVD 6. Thus the contact was lost. Mother also called me Nutyr sometimes. She thought that I was stubborn, and that uncle was also very stubborn. He left for America in spite of his relatives asking him to stay.

When the pogroms began, and after the Soviet Power and other trouble came, many of our relatives emigrated. It was possible to emigrate during the NEP time and after. Several families got together, not only relatives, and left for America. However, when they arrived, they were not let in, embargo was already introduced. So they decided to go to Mexico. Thus five or six families lived and worked in Mexico. Aunt Sonya, Peisya and Clara also went there.

Father also wanted to leave for Mexico, but grandmother didn't want to. She had daughters and she wanted to take them with her, but father said that would be too many people and refused. So they stayed while the others left. They had a boss there who they worked for. They were semiliterate people, but craftspeople of very high qualification.

They decided to return after some time. They had no money, and were five or six families, each with no less than three or four children. They started to write to father, 'Save us, we want to come back home'. My father was well-off. He owned two houses in Vinnitsa, one of them a two-storey building. He sold the houses for nothing and sent the money to his relatives in Mexico. He also sold the houses because the collectivization started and everything would have been taken away anyway.

When his relatives were ready to go home, they told their boss about it. And he replied, 'What are you, fools? You're going to join the polar bears. The climate here is wonderful, earnings are good, why don't you stay? I will give you a raise and a house, which you will be able to redeem gradually.' But they left, suffered in the war here and almost everyone perished. Unfortunately, I don't know more about my grandparents.

My grandfather on mother's side, Leiba Simkhanovich Gutkin [1885-1918], was a tailor. To be more precise, he was more of an organizer than a tailor. He set up several tailor's workshops in Odessa, which sewed clothes for sale, mostly suits. He was mobilized into the army and fought in the Russian- Japanese war [1904-1905]. He came from Odessa, which means his behavior was rather peculiar. There was a colonel, also from Odessa. My grandfather helped that colonel very much, almost saved his life. The colonel told my grandfather: 'Why are you a Jew, get converted into Russian Orthodoxy, or at least Islam, but don't be a Jew. Then I will make you an officer and you'll be a respected man.'

In order to avoid the conversation, my grandfather told him, 'I'll think about it.' The war ended, he returned to Odessa, and the colonel started to serve at the Odessa garrison. My grandfather found out that he had come back and wanted to pay his respects to the colonel. And the latter told him again, 'I will make you an officer, reject Judaism.' My grandfather didn't. So he told him again, 'We will organize shvanya for you.' Shvanya is a tailor's workshop. Since that man was a colonel, he began to place orders with my grandfather for soldier's uniforms. Thus grandfather became the owner of several workshops.

My maternal grandmother, Lyubov Rafailovna Gutkina, nee Zakhterova [1885- 1967], came from a prosperous family. Almost all her relatives had left for America. She fell in love with grandfather and wasn't able to leave for America, because she stayed with her husband. She got married, first a son was born and then my mother. All in all she had five daughters; her son died. During World War II my mother's sisters were evacuated; only one, the youngest, perished. She had health problems, stayed in a boarding school or some special home, and for some reason they couldn't find her.

Grandmother fed the tailors at the workshops, because they worked long hours and had no time to go out to eat. She cooked lunch for them. From that time the following joke survived: Those Jews, who worked at the cooperative, were always very hungry. When grandmother gave them lunch, she had to bring bread, then the first course and then the second course. So, once she brought some bread and went to get the first course. When she came back she saw that there wasn't a

breadcrumb left on the table. So she went to get some more bread. She brought it and left again to bring the first course. When she returned, there wasn't a single piece of bread left. Then her little daughter began to pull her skirt, and grandmother, strung-up with the situation, told her, 'Stop that or I'll put you on the table.'

In 1918 my grandfather died of typhus. He was looking for food in different towns, fell sick and died. My grandmother was left with four or five children in Odessa without any livelihood. The Civil War was at its height. My mother, was 13 years old. My grandmother had a sister in Vinnitsa. They exchanged letters and she moved to Vinnitsa with her children. Her sister's name was Sonya and her husband's last name was Ulman.

When my grandmother came to Vinnitsa, she lived at her uncle's place with the children for some time, but then she realized that she had to live on her own. They lived poorly and had to work. My mother and her sister Vera went to work, I don't remember what they did. The third sister entered a college and became an obstetrician, and the fourth sister became an economist. Later their condition improved but it was very difficult at first. My grandmother believed in God, but when the collectivization started and non-ferrous metals were collected from the citizens, grandmother handed in her copper candlestick for Chanukkah, and her menorah.

My mother, Esfir Lvovna Khapun, nee Gutkina [1905-1975], helped all her family after she got married. My father was a very active and hard-working man, but he worked at two or three places. In 1934-1935 a serious famine 7 broke out in Ukraine and one third of the population died. My father always worked hard and earned a lot. As a matter of fact he supported grandmother and all my mother's sisters. They needed clothes, since they were young girls. My mother always helped. My father did not interfere; he merely brought the money. My mother was a housewife. Later she worked as a nurse in a hospital.

My aunts, those who did not perish, received a higher education or secondary special education. Both my grandmothers were literate, could write in Russian, read prescriptions and understood German. I don't know where they studied. My mother went to a common school, she had beautiful handwriting, but she wasn't very literate and usually made three mistakes per page.

I would like to say a few of words about the Jewish way of speaking. Jews have always been teased for their incorrect speech, but I say that no one speaks better than a Jew. When one wants to imitate a Jew, one speaks smoothly and with a singing accent, but this isn't correct. Maybe they did speak that way in the past, but it doesn't exist anymore. Among those Jews whom I knew in Vinnitsa, everyone had higher education.

My parents met when they were both in their early twenties. After they saw each other for some time they got married. At first they lived with father's family. My mother was a young wife and wanted to cook some meal for my father, for example, a pie or vareniki, which were very popular in the Ukraine and were cooked with sour cherries' or other berries' filling. But when the boys, rather frank and spontaneous, saw such food cooked by her, they ate everything immediately. Mother was indignant with their behavior, she did not want to cook for all of them. She was an individualist. She made father move and they started to live on their own. I was already born by that time. At first father left, then his brother Girsh became a trade-union figure and was provided with an apartment; later someone else left. So one by one many departed. At the same time a lot stayed behind and lived in one house, both before and after the war. Some separated but paid

visits to each others families.

Growing up

My parents were religious, but not Orthodox. They didn't pay a lot of attention to praying, but observed the traditions. We had guests on Saturdays. Father's friends came, drank nalivka, but there were no drunk people. The traditions were observed, yet not strictly; matzah was cooked. Later it was sold in stores but it was seldom purchased, because everyone got used to making it at home.

There was a synagogue in the main street in Vinnitsa. It was of the same type as the Leningrad one: A gallery for women above and places for men below. A philharmonic society was set up there during the Soviet times. There was another synagogue, in which a gym was built. Father adhered to democratic views. He didn't like the atmosphere at the synagogue. They didn't only pray there, but also solved public problems. Jews got together and settled some problem. Everyone had to speak in order to come to a mutual agreement. But if a poor man stated that something had to be done, they showed him well-off Jews and told him, 'Where are you sticking your nose into? Don't you see there are respected people here?' Father didn't like it at all, that's why he almost never attended the synagogue. He didn't like the attitude towards the poor, who were treated as if they were people of second quality.

In the Soviet time [1930s] the Vinnitsa community still existed, though the synagogues didn't operate anymore. There were four or five of them in Vinnitsa before. The main synagogue was shut down earlier, in the 1920s. There are prayers according to Jewish tradition, which can only be said if there's a minyan - ten people, all men. Such meetings were held in private houses and were half-legal. They gathered mainly at widows' places. If a widow allowed people to come to her place, they were all anxious to do so, because it was some kind of assistance to her. Money wasn't only collected for this widow, but also for some other good causes. People came to pray and make donations. As a matter of fact, I never attended these meetings; neither did my mother. But father did, since he considered it a tradition. All in all, however, he believed that if God existed, it was possible to address Him and talk to Him directly. He is Almighty, so why gather in a certain place?

Earlier people attended one certain synagogue in each district. It wasn't allowed not to come to the synagogue, because it meant loss of authority and prestige. Even if one was an unbeliever or unserious believer, or simply a sympathizer, he attended the synagogue. People came to the synagogue both to pray and to communicate. There was no other way.

Every well-off Jew had paupers whom he patronized. These people came to eat at his place not only on Saturday. Such beggars also visited our house. I remember one poor woman, who often came to our place. She always smelled very bad and I had an aversion to her. When mother took care of her, gave her bed-sheets, shirts or something else, I did not understand why she did that. But it was impossible not to help.

In Russian Orthodoxy when a person dies, funeral repast [commemoration] is organized. The deceased and his good deeds are recalled at the repast. Jews have no such funeral repasts. On the contrary, a fast was organized; people took off their shoes and sat in mourning for a whole week. We observed it all, everybody without exception.

Jews always have a matchmaker, and everybody knows that woman is a matchmaker. She has a list of all marriageable girls and young men. It was not necessary to ask her for help. If there was a pair that saw each other and planned to get married, it was still on the matchmaker's list. The matchmaker saw that there was a beautiful girl and a handsome man, who deserved each other. So she went to the family of the young man or the girl and offered them to get acquainted. They were very good psychologists and could organize it all. The tradition wasn't always maintained but matchmakers existed. They were paid for what they did. Sholem Aleichem 8 has a story about male matchmakers, two friends, who met and in the end matched two girls.

The family of the girl was supposed to pay dowry. If the family was poor, the wedding was arranged on the condition of parity. If the young man was poor and the girl was rich, her family paid. Poor girls were called soykha. They had no dowry, but they also needed to get married. So balegoles [carters] visited various houses. They were robust guys accompanied by several women. They talked to the host and hostess, 'This girl is getting married, and dowry is required.' Normally it happened in the yard, there were yards at that time and all doors and windows faced the yard.

When a certain amount of money was brought out, the balegoles looked at it and said, 'No way, that's not enough.' And if they were told, 'I have no more money', a scandal started. Women screamed, balegoles yelled and all neighbors ran out of their houses. They also visited mother, she gave money, but she usually checked, who approached. If it was a brawler, she tried to secretly leave the house. All in all, if the man said that he had no money, he was told, 'I can lend you some, you can pay back later.' It was impossible to wriggle one's way out of it. This was how a girl was prepared for a wedding if she had no parents.

Klezmer musicians were definitely present at weddings. It was an interesting Jewish tradition. They were not invited, but they wandered about looking for a wedding. Sometimes two bands came to one wedding. Such situations sometimes ended with a fight about the use of musical instruments. Why? Because the wedding organizers never paid the musicians. Those guests who ordered the music paid them. When the guests came to a wedding, they entered one by one in order to pay respect to each guest. The musicians played a flourish to each, a welcome march. And the guest in his turn had to give the musicians some money. It was all agreed beforehand. At one of the weddings my grandmother Lyubov was lost in contemplation over something, and when the musicians suddenly started to play flourish to some guest, she had a stroke. She died. She was 82 years old.

There were sahvors. If the hostess couldn't cook properly, she didn't invite the cooks, but the sahvors. They were both bakers and organizers. It wasn't their occupation in the full meaning of the word; they were just people who could cook very well. They were paid for their work, and the musicians paid them, too. If a woman was invited to organize a wedding, she immediately ran to the musicians to tell them about it. Klezmer musicians paid her for the information.

The most important dance was cher. Only the Jews have this dance. People stood in four couples crosswise. There were special figures. Gradually all these couples had to exchange partners. That is why in this dance a certain number of bars has to be played. It wasn't allowed to stop in the middle, because some of the dancing couples would go through the ritual, and others wouldn't. That's why this dance was the most expensive one. Just imagine a man, who wants to improve his image in the eyes of other guests, and for this purpose orders cher. Everybody orders dances, but

those who want to prove their authority, order cher, because it's very expensive. If a waltz is ordered, the musicians, having received their payment for it, will play only several bars. Then another pays, and another. A Jewish dance is like a Georgian one, or any other Caucasian. When you see Russian or Slavic dances, you see that dancers stamp their feet. Negroes [African Americans] tap-dance, but Jews jump like dragonflies. When cher started, only those danced, who liked to dance and could dance well. And they performed such unbelievable things with their legs with such ease! It was a wonderful sight.

When I was small, five or six years old, a Jewish teacher, a melamed, began to teach me. He was hired by my parents. He was supposed to teach me Yiddish. At home I spoke Russian. But he just visited me for a short time, about a month, because I didn't understand what he wanted from me. The teacher was old. Jewish families merely hired teachers if they wanted their kids to have Jewish education because there were no cheders at that time.

There was no bar mitzvah. My parents were communists. Maybe they did something according to tradition but I don't remember. There were no special celebrations. However, when I was thirteen years old, and took liberties, violated something, or behaved badly, they reproached me, saying that I was already thirteen, how could I behave that way, one could get married at that age.

I was mainly brought up in the street, but I saw all traditions and ceremonies. Mother followed the rules and wanted me to be a decent boy, not a hooligan, who does blameworthy things. I was almost never blamed for anything. We had this boy in the neighborhood; his name was Boma. He was so fat that it was impossible to go anywhere with him, as he attracted everybody's attention. His brothers decided not to give him food anymore, and he was very hungry. They had a house with a cellar. There were no fridges at that time, and there was ice in the cellar. Ice was procured in winter, put in the cellar, so that in summer the temperature was low there. Soup, second course and other food were stored there. Since Boma was very hungry, he went into the cellar, where several neighbors kept their food (each had soup, second and third courses) for several days. And Boma ate each neighbor's food bit-by-bit. When mother found out about it, she repeated to me a hundred times that what he had done, was very bad, that it was a crime.

I remember that in my childhood theaters in Vinnitsa were always packed, especially when popular Jewish actors arrived. There were such festivals. For example, there was Epelbaum, a famous Odessa and Vinnitsa singer. Then Clara Yung came. When she arrived, there was a welter in the theater. I actually didn't seen any pure drama performances there. They were all musical shows.

I started school in 1932. There were around 70% Jews in our class. There were also Poles, Ukrainians and one German. There was no anti-Semitism in our class. One trick was played on someone once, but the person who had done it, was blamed for that and never repeated it. There was no difference between the pupils. Poles lived at the place where Boma lived. It turned out that they formed a group of their own. When I visited their place to see my friends, who lived in that house, I didn't need an interpreter. I listened to what they said and understood everything perfectly. They spoke in Polish, and I replied in Russian, and we understood each other very well.

Germans also lived in Vinnitsa. When I worked in Vinnitsa at the chemical company, a funny episode happened. I worked as an engineer in the Management Department. A large German delegation arrived in order to solve some assembly and operation problems. The General Manager invited me to the meeting. Germans sat on one side, our administration team on the other. A

Russian interpreter came to help with the conversation. He was a Chekist [State Security Office employee], all interpreters were freelance Chekists. The General Manager gave an introduction speech. The interpreter translated it into German. After the German representative gave his speech, when it would have been the interpreter's job to translate, it turned out that no one needed a translation, everybody understood him. When the Germans ended their speeches, they immediately received answers to all their questions. Judging from their age, the Germans had participated in the war, and thus knew Russian. So the interpreter sat there like a dummy.

During the War

After I finished school war broke out. I was in evacuation in Tashkent with my family. We got there by train as soon as the war began, that was in 1941. I entered Ashkhabad Infantry College and was enrolled into the army from the second year of my studies. I was in the army until the end of the war. I stayed in Stalinsk, now it is called Novokuznetsk, after I was wounded. There was a metallurgical plant there. I found myself in the labor army. Those, who could not serve in the army, because of wounds, but could work for the frontline, were enrolled into such labor army. They worked in the hinter-front and close to the frontline. The college was there and it was possible to study part-time, which I did.

When my father was in evacuation, he worked at a plant. Every time they came to mobilize, father was not touched; no one could imagine that the plant management would send him away. Father worked until he fell ill. When he became very weak, he asked my friend, the manager of a park, if he could work at the attractions, because they also came out of order. The manager said, 'He's an old man, why does he want to do that?' I told my father, 'You have a pension, I'll give you money, get some rest, why work?' This was exactly what disappointed him. He didn't reply but I knew that he was displeased.

Our relatives in Vinnitsa, who were young, were evacuated. Those who were of mobilization age were enrolled into the army. Part of them perished, part came back crippled, some returned fine. Many of those who were older stayed in Vinnitsa, and they all perished. But since they were blacksmiths, and the Germans located their administrative unit in Vinnitsa and required blacksmiths, they killed aunt Mekhlya, but did not touch her husband. They took him to the unit to work for them. He was a skilled blacksmith so they kept him. They told him not to go outside, because his appearance left no doubt about his nationality. But he couldn't stand it and one day went outside. One Ukrainian saw him and told him to follow him. That Ukrainian decided to hand him over to the police, since the police paid money for each handed over Jew. Uncle was walking, thinking, 'I can kill him with one blow, but everybody in the street will see it; what else can I do?' Suddenly he saw German soldiers from the unit he worked in and they read in his eyes that he begged for assistance, though he didn't say a word. They told him, 'Follow us.' The Ukrainian said, 'I have to bring him to the police.' They started to argue. The Germans said, 'We have a military unit of our own and we are police, follow us.' The Ukrainian followed them to the unit and they started to beat him. Then he disappeared, and my uncle never saw him again. The Germans must have killed that Ukrainian.

Later on when our units began to advance, it was possible to hear artillery firing. Vinnitsa is crossed by the Buk. Germans found themselves on one side and our forces on the opposite side. And those guys, the Germans, told my uncle, 'You know, we have to leave, your forces are

attacking. You have to save yourself, we can't help you anymore.' The Germans brought all men of call-up age and older, around fifty years old, to Germany. Uncle got into a former lyokh, a type of cellar, where a warehouse had been organized before. In winter pieces of ice were sawed off and that cellar was filled up with them. During summer the ice was used. But there was no ice at that time, because no one needed it under the Germans. My uncle got inside. But other men knew about that place, too. They also started to look for a hiding place and stayed in that cellar. They knew my uncle. Machine-gun firing could already be heard. One of the men said, 'If the Germans come in and see that there's a Jew among us, they'll kill us. Let's kill him, then we can say that we killed a Jew.' Some of them began to approach him, but there was this decent man, a Ukrainian, who said, 'What are you doing? You're saving your life and want to murder a man?' They calmed down. Then our people came into the cellar and my uncle was released. When his son Mordkha returned from the army, my uncle climbed onto the cart in order to go meet him. The horses got frightened, uncle fell off the cart and killed himself. He tried to save his life during the war but later perished like that. Mordkha had a family, had daughters and lived in Vinnitsa all the time. He was a very nice man. His last name was also Khapun. Once workers came up to me and said, 'Do you have relatives named Khapun?' I said, 'I don't know.' They told me, 'We know one very decent man, is he a relative of yours?' I didn't know what to say, because there were Khapuns in Vinnitsa who were Ukrainians. It turned out that it was my cousin Mordkha's relative.

There was a synagogue during evacuation in Tashkent. To be more precise, it was a big room in a private house. I went to a rabbi and told him, 'We have relatives in Odessa.' We failed to find them. One of them left for the Far East. He was in the army, graduated from college, became a lieutenant and was assigned to work in the camps [The Gulag] 9. He rescued a lot of people. My future wife's uncles were also imprisoned in the camps, and he helped them as much as he could. He almost got into prison for that himself. He had a decent commander, who told him, 'Stop it, or you'll get into prison yourself.'

After the War

When the war ended, I wanted to leave the plant where I worked. I wanted to return home. I wrote an application asking for release. But they didn't want to let me go. The chief electrician didn't even want to hear about it, he just spat at me. The plant was very big, almost as big as the Moscow district. I took them to court and the court released me, so I left to continue my studies. After the war my older cousin lived and studied in Dnepropetrovsk. I already worked as a mechanic at that time, but I needed higher education. My cousin studied at a similar metallurgical institute. We exchanged letters and he invited me to come. I visited him and we studied in the same group. I graduated from the Dnepropetrovsk Metallurgical Institute named after Stalin.

When we finished our studies, my cousin was already married and stayed in Dnepropetrovsk. I was not captivated by the city, and left. I was assigned to work in Makeyevka, in the Donetsk region. It was impossible not to go; otherwise one would have been imprisoned. I was severely injured at the plant there. There was an accident: I stepped on a hot object, tripped and burnt my hands, both palms. The pain was unbearable; I almost fainted. I was told to put my hands into cold water, I did so and it became less painful. When I took them out I felt terrible pain again. I couldn't put on my pants and eat because of the burns. I even thought that they were completely burnt, but my hands got better within a month. I don't know how they healed. I left for my home place and began to

work at the chemical plant in Vinnitsa. My parents lived there, too. They came back straight after the evacuation; their house was demolished by the Germans.

In 1966 I moved to Leningrad, where I worked in Sevmormontazh, then in Glavzavstroy. [Enterprises specializing in the field of installation of various structures, like ore reloading complexes at marine ports.] I both liked and disliked my work. When I recall the brightest moments of my life, I can only recall a few events. I worked in the North and in the South, in Mariupol and in Murmansk; I was an assembler and had to travel a lot. Later I worked in Krasnoye Selo.

My boss was Jewish. I got fewer bonuses, awards and gratitude. He wanted to show that he didn't pay attention to nationality. It was very unpleasant for me. When he was on vacation, he was replaced and my relationship with the new boss was totally different. Later his attitude towards me influenced other people, too. I was Deputy Secretary of the Party Bureau. And the Party Bureau Secretary, Osetrov, had no leg. He was injured and ill most of the time. I had to do all the work for him. I was responsible for ideas and propaganda. All communists and non-party men had to attend the studies. We had a group of propagandists; I had to give them material, which I received from Raykom. [The committee of the local department of the Communist Party.] And they conducted further studies at the workshops. Sometimes I conducted these studies. It wasn't difficult for me; I managed to do everything.

There was the Marxism-Leninism University. It had to be attended by young communists; it was the supreme level of studies. I wasn't only a student there, but also a lecturer. I certainly understood the nonsense of those studies, I believed in a lot of things. First of all, now capitalism and competition are discussed, but at that time there was planned economics. I considered that nothing could be better than planned economics, where everything was prescheduled, completed; everything was known and there was no anarchy. Now it's all being denied.

My wife, Larisa Lvovna Sterenberg, was born in 1927 in Vinnitsa and lived there before the war. Later she was in Kuibyshev [Samara] in evacuation. After the war her family returned to Vinnitsa, and Larisa soon left for Moscow. She entered the Foreign Language Institute there and moved to Leningrad after graduation.

I have known Larisa since my childhood. We went to the same Russian school. She knew our class, and she even liked boys from our class, but I didn't pay attention to her. Later we became students and found ourselves among a group of friends. Our mutual friends still keep in touch. At first Larisa didn't pay attention to me. We had been dating occasionally since she was 18, but she only agreed to marry me when she was 29. We met sometimes and lived in different places. I lived in Makeyevka and she studied in Moscow. She came to Vinnitsa for holidays. I also went there for my vacation. We saw each other and there were 'high and low tides' in our relationship. She even wanted to move to my place in Makeyevka, but I understood that she wouldn't do it, so I didn't propose it to her. Later I lived in Vinnitsa, and she was already in Leningrad. She entered the Pedagogical Institute, then the post-graduate department and became a teacher of English. I worked in Vinnitsa. Once, when I went on a business trip to Leningrad, I married Larisa. After that I had to return to Vinnitsa. I lived there for some time but soon moved to Leningrad for good.

The difference between my status in Vinnitsa and in Leningrad was huge. I was an engineer and later a chief engineer in Vinnitsa. When I came to Leningrad from this rural town, people looked at me as a villager. Vinnitsa was totally different. I was 37 years old. Those, who I played with as a

child, had grown up. One of them was a Raykom Secretary, another was an Obkom Secretary [Obkom, or regional committee; boss in Soviet slang] and another was an Ispolkom 10 Secretary. They all knew me perfectly well, we were in close relations and I felt at ease. There was no question whether to accept me to work or not. There were friends around, I had a name and proven myself. Once there was this man who came from Kiev, the capital of Ukraine, and decided to criticize me. And the Gorkom Secretary stood up and said, 'Look for someone else, because we know him very well, he does excellent work.'

When I came to Leningrad in 1960, I started to look for work. However, it didn't appear to be easy. All chiefs saw that I was a Jew and told me that they weren't in need of specialists. Once I came to a plant to talk to the chief. I felt that he looked at me trying to figure out if I was a Jew or not. Then he asked me to show him my passport, which I didn't need to do. I felt his peering look. He certainly didn't reject me openly. This was a peculiar diplomacy. He told me that just the day before a person was found for the position, but that he wanted to write down my data. I understood he was bluffing. I was embarrassed by the laws of that time: If one stayed without work for a month, the record of service would be interrupted. I was afraid that my work experience would be interrupted. This influences the pension and sick-list payment. I decided not to spend any more time looking for a job and took the first decent position that came along.

In 1960 our daughter Olga was born. After finishing school she wanted to go to university. I consulted a man who worked at our plant, who graduated from the university recently. We decided not to take the risk. Olga went to the Railroad Institute instead. She was the only girl at the faculty and always got excellent marks. She became a mechanical engineer. Not long ago she was at the graduates' party and everybody remembered her as being the best student. One of the teachers persuaded her to enter the post-graduate department at the Water Transport Institute after graduation. But Olga was rather indifferent to it. That teacher even called my wife, tried to persuade her and asked her to influence our daughter's decision.

I can't say that my wife and me tried to follow Jewish traditions in our family or tried to raise our daughter that way. We visited the synagogue very rarely, almost never. Of course I remembered my family's traditions, but that was more of the past, just memories of my childhood. At the same time I often tell my only grandchild, Alexandra, stories from my childhood. I want her to know what the life of her great-grandparents was like. Now that my wife and me are old, we have become more interested in our heritage, Jewish traditions and Jewish community. This is mostly thanks to Hesed. We don't only get help from it, but it also keeps us in touch with the world. We enjoy reading its newsletters, and if we could only move around better, we would take part in its social events more actively.

Glossary:

1 Cossack
A member of a people of southern European Russia and adjacent parts of Asia, noted as cavalrymen especially during tsarist times.

2 Aleksandr Feodorovich Kerensky (1881-1970) Russian revolutionary

He joined the Socialist Revolutionary party after the February Revolution of 1917 that overthrew the tsarist government and became minister of justice, then war minister in the provisional government of Prince Lvov. He succeeded (July, 1917) Lvov as premier. Kerensky's insistence on remaining in World War I, his failure to deal with urgent economic problems (particularly land distribution), and his moderation enabled the Bolsheviks to overthrow his government later in 1917. Kerensky fled to Paris, where he continued as an active propagandist against the Soviet regime. In 1940 he fled to the United States.

3 Jewish Pale of Settlement

Certain provinces in the Russian Empire were designated for permanent Jewish residence and the Jewish population (apart from certain privileged families) was only allowed to live in these areas.

4 Simon Petlyura (1879-1926)

Ukrainian nationalist politician. In January, 1919, he became leader of the independent Ukrainian republic that emerged after the collapse of the Russian empire and the defeat of Germany and Austria-Hungary in World War I. His power was challenged from the north by the Red Army, from the south by the anti-Soviet Russian forces of General Denikin. In 1920, Petlyura allied himself with Poland under Joseph Pilsudski, but the 1921 peace of Riga between Poland and Soviet Russia recognized Soviet control over Ukraine. Exiled to Paris, Petlyura was later assassinated in revenge for the pogroms that occurred during his rule.

5 NEP

The so-called New Economic Policy of the Soviet authorities was launched by Lenin. It meant that private business was allowed on a small scale in order to save the country ruined by wars and revolution. After the October Revolution and the Civil War, the economy of the USSR was destroyed, so the government decided to launch a New Economic Policy (NEP). They allowed priority development of private capital and entrepreneurship. But at the end of the 1920s, after a certain stabilization of these entrepreneurs, they died out due to heavy taxes.

6 NKVD

In 1934, the Government Political Administration (GPU) became known as the Peoples Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD). Later that year the new head of the NKVD, Genrikh Yagoda, arrested Lev Kamenev, Gregory Zinoviev, Ivan Smirnov, and thirteen others and accused them of being involved with Leon Trotsky in a plot to murder Joseph Stalin and other party leaders. All of these men were found guilty and were executed on 25th August, 1936. The NKVD broke prisoners down by intense interrogation. This included the threat to arrest and execute members of the prisoner's family if they did not confess. The interrogation went on for several days and nights and eventually they became so exhausted and disoriented that they signed confessions agreeing that they had been attempting to overthrow the government. After the World War II the Communist Secret Police was renamed the Committee for State Security (KGB).

7 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.

8 Sholem Aleichem (1859-1916)

His real name was Shalom Nohumovich Rabinovich; Jewish writer and humorist. He lived in Russia and moved to the USA in 1914. He wrote about the life of Jews in Russia in Yiddish, Hebrew and Russian.

9 Gulag

The Soviet system of forced labor camps in the remote regions of Siberia and the Far North, which was first established in 1919. However, it was not until the early 1930s that there was a significant number of inmates in the camps. By 1934 the Gulag, or the Main Directorate for Corrective Labor Camps, then under the Cheka's successor organization the NKVD, had several million inmates. The prisoners included murderers, thieves, and other common criminals, along with political and religious dissenters. The Gulag camps made significant contributions to the Soviet economy during the rule of Stalin. Conditions in the camps were extremely harsh. After Stalin died in 1953, the population of the camps was reduced significantly, and conditions for the inmates improved somewhat.

10 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.