

Leonid Karlinsky

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Kiev

Ukraine

Interviewer: Zhanna Litinskaya

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Family background

My name is Leonid Meyerovich Karlinsky. I was born into the family of an officer of the NKVD (People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs) in Kharkov on 5 August 1930.



My father, Meyer Karlinsky, and my mother, Bertha Karlinskaya, were typical representatives of a generation of Soviet youth who were so fond of the revolutionary and communist ideas that they rejected their past. They didn't recall or tell their children about their roots or about the history of their families. They were obsessed with the idea of communism and rejected everything that had existed before - the Jewish way of life, religion, traditions and their mother tongue. I only realized this when I was a grown man. That's why I know so little about my grandparents and their life. I had to put together the history of my family later on, because my parents never told me anything about it when I was a child.

My paternal grandfather, Pinhus Berkov Karlinsky, was born into the family of a tailor in Poltava around 1872. I have no information about his brothers or sisters. Pinhus followed in his father's footsteps and became a tailor. He was the only tailor in Poltava to receive a license to make uniforms for soldiers, officers and policemen in Poltava province. My grandfather had a lot of work and he hired several assistants. His workshop was on the first floor of his house, and his family lived on the second floor. My grandparents had four children. The family was wealthy. My grandmother, Riva Leya Nohim Aronovna Karlinskaya (I don't know her maiden name), was a housewife, a traditional role for a wife in Jewish families. There were housemaids in the house, and my grandmother was responsible for managing the housework. She didn't do any cooking or cleaning herself, but took on the job of raising her children.

I don't know what my grandmother and grandfather thought about the Revolution of 1917. My father never mentioned it to me. My father's sister, Margola, mentioned once that a police officer saved their family from pogroms and bandits that were terrorizing the population of Ukraine during the Civil War, but I know no details. Perhaps the tailor who made uniforms for the police enjoyed special respect in Poltava.

During the NEP (New Economic Policy) my grandfather worked in his shop. In 1926 he and my grandmother moved to Kharkov. He worked at a shop there, but also took work home with him. During the Second World War my grandfather and grandmother were evacuated to Ashgabad, Turkmenistan with our family. My grandfather was a very kind and nice person. He often visited us and liked to talk with me while having a cup of tea. My grandmother Riva was different. She was tough and selfish. She couldn't forgive my father for marrying a poor communist girl. My grandmother didn't visit us. She didn't like my mother or me or my brother.

I don't know how religious my grandparents were. Any talk about religion was forbidden in our house. But there is a story that I'm going to tell you which shows that my grandparents observed Jewish traditions. Around 1936 we visited my mother's relatives. Grandfather Pinhus and grandmother Riva were living in Kharkov at that time. We were invited to have dinner with the family. During this dinner I dropped my fork and my grandfather sent me to the kitchen to fetch another. I fetched a beautiful silver fork and began to eat. All of a sudden I heard my grandmother screaming. She slapped my face, because I had taken one of her kosher forks and now she had to throw it away. We had never had any discussions about kosher rules or kosher kitchen utilities, and so I didn't understand all that fuss. My mother was quite hurt. She took my brother and me and we left. She never again visited my grandparents, and it seems that this incident was the last straw that spoiled the relationship between my mother and my grandmother.

My grandfather and my grandmother returned to Kiev with the family of their younger daughter Margola in 1947. My grandmother died shortly thereafter and my grandfather lived with Margola's family until he died in 1957.

My grandparents had no children for several years after they got married. Following an ancient Jewish tradition, they adopted Hina, a girl from the family of their poor relatives from Ekaterinoslav (Dnepropetrovsk). Hina was born around 1899. After she was adopted, my grandmother Riva got pregnant and in 1901 gave birth to Aron, my father's older brother. My father, Meyer, was born in 1904, and their daughter Margola was born in 1908. My grandfather used to say that their children were a gift from the Lord because they had adopted a girl from a poor

family.

After Hina grew up she returned to Dnepropetrovsk, her birthplace. She married Anatoliy Krugliak, a Russian who was the director of a plant. In 1937 Anatoliy was arrested and disappeared. We could get no information about him. During the war Hina and her two children, Victor, born in 1933, and Tolik, born in 1938, joined us in Ashgabad. They were very poor. I often brought them food because they were on the edge of starvation. After the war, Hina and her children remained in Ashgabad. Victor studied at the railroad school and Tolik also went to school. Victor and Tolik survived the earthquake of 1948. They were not at home when it occurred,--but their mother was, and died. They lived in a typical Turkmenian clay house, and Hina was found there dead on her bed. Margola adopted Victor, the younger boy, and Hina's relatives adopted Tolik, the older boy. Victor died of stomach cancer before reaching the age of 30, and Tolik had a stroke before he was 35. He was paralyzed for a few years and lived with Margola before he died.

My father's older brother Aron, born in 1901, studied in cheder and then went to grammar school. He was a very talented musically, and could play the violin. Aron was 16 when the Revolution took place and he went to study at the rabfak. Later, he enrolled in the Medical Institute in Leningrad. During the Second World War, he was director of the evacuation hospital. During the war with Japan, he was in Tomsk, and after the war ended, he returned to Leningrad. Aron was married. His wife Bertha and his son Volodia were with us in Ashgabad during the war. Aron was very sociable and easy-going before the war. After the war he became a different person. He was withdrawn, led a secluded way of life, and divorced his wife. He lived alone in a small room for many years, and worked as a physician. Aron died in 1959.

His son Volodia was a very talented man. He wrote a science fiction novel when he was just a boy. As his profession he chose the military. He studied in several different institutes, but didn't graduate. In his last years Volodia was unemployed, but earned some money writing satirical articles. He lives in St. Petersburg.

My father's younger sister Margola married a Russian named Golubev. He was a high official at the Ministry of Agriculture. They lived in the building specifically designed for state officials in Kiev. They didn't have any children of their own and after Hina died, Margola and her husband adopted Hina's son, Tolik. Margola died in 2000.

My father, Meyer Karlinsky, was born in 1904, and studied in cheder like any other Jewish boy, then completed three years of primary school. Sometime in 1921-22 my father enrolled in the shoe manufacture school in Rostov. He graduated and got a job assignment in Kharkov at the shoe

factory. He was an active Komsomol member, and was very enthusiastic about the Revolution of 1917. He believed that it would improve the lives of many people and give them the opportunity to study. He wanted to build a fair society and participated in meetings at factories and plants, speaking on behalf of Soviet power and fighting against those who did not cotton to turning over the government to the proletariat. At one of the meetings, he met my mother, Bertha Tomchinskaya.

My mother was born in 1905 near Golaya Pristan in the vicinity of Kherson. This village was called Kalinindorf in the Soviet era. It was founded in the XVIII century when the tsarist government established national minority colonies in the Azov Sea area, south of Russia and Ukraine.

In the village where my mother was born there was a big German colony with a Jewish neighborhood near it. Its inhabitants were mainly farmers. There was a German church, a synagogue and an Orthodox church in the village. Representatives of various nationalities got along well and treated one another with respect.

My mother was born into a family of nine children. I have no information about her father, Wulf Tomchinsky. I only know that he went somewhere to earn some money and never came back. I have no idea where he went.

My mother never mentioned him, because my grandmother and her children believed that he had another family somewhere and that was the reason for his not coming back. My mother's family was very poor. They kept a few cows and worked from morning till night. They took dairy products to the market in Kherson. It was a big family and they could hardly manage with the money they got by selling their dairy products. My grandmother raised her children all on her own. I don't remember her name. She spent her last years with her oldest daughter, Fania. When the war began, Fania and her family evacuated, but my grandmother didn't want to go with them. She judged the Germans by what she knew about them from the neighboring colony, and she didn't believe the Germans could do any harm to Jewish people. When Kherson was occupied the Gestapo took my grandmother's house and used it as their office, and, of course, my grandmother was one of the first to be shot.

I didn't know all of my mother's brothers and sisters. Ethel was the oldest, born around 1890. Ethel was married to Mihail Krapivnikov, a Jew. He became one of the first managers of the Kharkov tractor plant during the first years of Soviet power. They had four children: two girls, Asia and Fira, and two boys, Vladimir and Arkadiy.

During the war Aunt Etia and uncle Mihail, Asia and Fira were evacuated with their plant to Stalingrad and later, to Nizhniy Tagil.

Vladimir, born in 1925, was a communications operator on the front. He was severely wounded and lost a leg. After the war he married the fiancée of a schoolmate who had perished on the front. He lived in Podmoskovie. In 1990 he emigrated to Israel. Arkadiy studied at a tank school before the war. He received an offer to stay at the school as a lecturer, but he believed that a Jew should be on the front lines in order to avoid any reproaches or mean jokes. Arkadiy perished in his first battle not far from Kursk. Aunt Ethel and Uncle Mihail died in the mid-1960s in Kharkov.

My mother's brother, Mark, was a member of the CPSU Town Committee Bureau in Kiev. When the war began, he was responsible for the evacuation of enterprises from Kiev. He was too late to evacuate himself, and left the town with a group of comrades when the Germans were very close. They were all captured by the Germans in the Darnitsa woods. The Germans shot the communists and Jews. Fania, Mark's wife, heard about it from Mark's comrade, a Russian from this group. He went through concentration camps and survived. Lyonia, Mark's older son, perished during the war. His younger son, Volodia, lives in Israel.

I also knew my mother's younger sister Ida. She married a man in the military and lived in Odessa. During the war she and her children, Tania and Volodia, were evacuated to Ashgabad. Her husband Lyova was at the front line throughout the war. After the war he worked at the Officer Training School in Odessa. Aunt Ida died sometime in 1965. I don't know where her children Tania and Volodia are now - we haven't kept in touch. I don't know anything about the rest of my mother's brothers and sisters. Some of them emigrated to America in the early 1920s, and others perished during the civil war. I don't even know their names.

My mother was the 6th or 7th child in her family. Two years of Jewish primary school was all the education my mother received before the revolution, because she had to help her mother and older sister about the house. The Revolution opened bright prospects for my mother. She was eager to study. She left for Kharkov, where her older sister, Etia, was living. In Kharkov, my mother went to study at the rabfak. However, she didn't study for long and wasn't much of a success at school. She went to work as a seamstress at the garment factory. She became a Komsomol member and later, a party member. In 1929 she became secretary of the Party Committee of the factory and met with Minister Postyshev. We even had a photo of Mama posed with him. Mama destroyed this picture after Postyshev was arrested.

I don't know exactly when my parents met. They married in 1928. At that time it was customary to live together in civil marriage without getting registered at the registry office. Weddings, or Jewish weddings

were considered to be a vestige of the past. My parents just began to live together.

Soon afterward, my father was assigned to the NKVD units. He was sent to Volhovstroy, one of the construction sites of the Belomoro-Baltic Channel. At that time the Soviet authorities imprisoned hundreds of thousands of people, and these prisoners were engaged in the construction of the channel and of Volhovstroy. My father worked as a guard of the camp. Later, he was sent to be trained as a gunman. There were automatic guns around the camp zone, and trained gunmen were needed. After this training course my father was sent to the NKVD Officer Training Course in Leningrad. There he received a room in the hostel for officers, and Mama was able to join him there in the summer of 1930. My mother lived in Kharkov when my father was at Volhovstroy, and they met during my father's vacation. In Leningrad we lived in a room at the officers' barracks. My father's salary was not enough to support the family, so my mother also had to work. We also had a housemaid, and Mama made her go to a school for young working people.

Growing up

In 1934 my father was transferred to Chuguev not far from Kharkov. There was an educational center for NKVD officers in Chuguev. My father became a specialist in protection from poisonous chemical substances. We had a room in a communal apartment in Chuguev, where my father became the Chief of the Chemical Department. I have dim memories of a long corridor and a kerosene lamp near each room. I also remember that we children watched military training sessions: there were clouds of some type of gas, and people in gas masks. It seemed so interesting to us.

In 1935 my mother went to Kharkov. Medical services were much better in Kharkov than in Chuguev, and my mother went there hoping to get better medical treatment. My younger brother Victor was born there. My father and I visited my mother at the maternity hospital and talked with her on the telephone - she had a telephone in her room. This was one of my brightest memories. I held the phone receiver for the first time in my life. I also remember that we went home from the maternity hospital in an open carriage.

In Kharkov, Mama and I stayed with my mother's older sister. Papa went to Chuguev. Although my parents came from traditional Jewish families, they didn't observe any Jewish traditions. Neither my brother nor I were circumcised. I believe my father became a party member under the influence of my mother. We only spoke Russian at home and even when my parents used some Yiddish words, it was meant as a joke, and with some sarcasm. I believe that it was because of my parents' attitude toward religion that my paternal grandmother literally hated my mother. Besides having come from a poor family in the village, my mother turned my father into an atheist and

a communist. My father was ashamed of his Jewish origins. He always introduced himself as Mark Pavlovich or Mihail Pavlovich, but never as Meyer Pinhusovich, his Jewish name.

In 1936 my father was transferred to Novosibirsk. It was the beginning of the repressive period, and the Soviets created a number of prison camps in Siberia and the Far East. They also founded Camp Headquarters (GULAG) in Novosibirsk, as well as other headquarters. My father was appointed Chief of the Chemical Department at the Logistics Department, supporting police, frontier troops and camps. In Novosibirsk we received a two-room apartment and started living as a family. My father came home from work at 2 or 3 in the morning. At that time it was customary to work nights, following the example of Stalin.

In 1936 Anatoliy Krugliak, the husband of my mother's sister Hina, was arrested. In 1938 we received a letter from Zina Levitina, my father's cousin. She wrote that her husband Zinovi Levitin, the Director of a big plant in Moscow, had been arrested. The only message from him was a pack of Kazbek cigarettes that he threw out of the window of the barred railcar taking him to the camp. He wrote Zina's address on the pack and a message "Zinochka, I'm innocent". A stranger, wearing the railroad uniform put this pack near the door to Zina's apartment, rang the doorbell, and ran away. There were no other messages from Zinovi - he perished in Stalin's camps. Zina was a devoted communist and worked as director of the children's home. It was strange, but the authorities didn't touch her. She went on with her work and was evacuated with the children's home.

I studied at an ordinary school. The students in our school were mainly the children of military personnel. There were children of various nationalities in our school, including Jews. But nationality didn't matter back then. We were just Soviet children. I had a carefree life. I went to school, attended the young technicians' club and participated in gymnastics. My brother Victor went to kindergarten because Mama decided to go to work. Although she had no education, the Soviet authorities sent her to study at the school for judges and she finished the course. However, she could find a job, because my father started having problems.

When my father learned that Krugliak and Levitin, the husbands of his sisters, were arrested, he, being a devoted communist, officially reported in his office that two of his close relatives had been arrested, although he was absolutely sure that they were innocent. There was a party meeting where the authorities blamed him for blunting his vigilance and excommunicated him from the party. In a few days my father was fired. I came home from school one day and was surprised to see my father at home so early. When we were having tea my mother said, "You know, son, your father has been fired and we may have to leave". My father kept silently stirring

his tea in the glass. We were sitting motionless. We were struck and didn't know what to expect. We were aware that he might be arrested, sentenced to 15 years in labor camps or even to death, and that his family might suffer from repression. Fortunately for us, my father was only fired from work, but we were very concerned about what was going to happen to all of us.

My father went to work as an accountant at the car maintenance shop. In 1939 his party membership was reinstated, and his position was restored at work. Soon my father requested to be transferred to another town. He didn't want to stay in Novosibirsk any longer. He got a job assignment in Ashgabad, Turkmenia (now Turkmenistan). At first we obtained accommodations at a good hotel, and shortly before the war we received an apartment in a new apartment building.

In 1941 my mother and I went to visit our relatives in Kharkov. On 22 June 1941 we were in Moscow, staying with Uncle Abrasha, our distant relative. On Sunday, 22 June Uncle Abrasha took my brother and me to the Exhibition of the Achievements of Public Economy. We heard about what had happened when we were there (editor's note: Germany had invaded the Soviet Union) and went directly home. At 12 o'clock Molotov made a speech and we learned that the war had begun. We decided to go home. Mama managed to get tickets through the frontier units' headquarters and we went to Ashgabad. We met many acquaintances on the train who had to go back home urgently due to the war. When we were approaching Tashkent there was a rumor in our railcar that a train on the nearby track, carrying employees of the office where my father was working, was to be sent to the front. We heard that my father was there. Mama ran to look for him. She jumped onto the train after it had started moving. She was crying because she couldn't find her husband. We were so happy to see that my father was in Ashgabad when we returned.

During the War

I have few memories of the war. We were living in our apartment and my father provided well for his family. Of course, this was a difficult time, but it didn't touch us. Almost all of my father's and mother's relatives came to Ashgabad: Ida, Margola, grandfather and grandmother, Fania and her children, and Hina with Victor and Tolik. They were having a difficult time and Mama often sent me to take food to them, especially to Aunt Hina. But she never sent anything to my grandmother. Even the war didn't suppress their hostility towards one another.

In 1943 the authorities established NKVD headquarters in the Rostov region, although Rostov was still under occupation. This office was located in Piatigorsk and was responsible for provisioning the frontier units that were following the military units on the front.

My father was appointed Chief of the Chemical Department in this office, and we moved to Piatigorsk in 1943. We rented an apartment from a Russian woman. During the war a German general was her tenant and he left lots of food. She shared it with us. She said that the general was a very nice man. My brother and I went to school. I became a Pioneer. I believed that once the war was over, we would have a happy and fair future. I was fond of technical things and wanted to become a military engineer. My brother Victor wanted to join the military.

In summer of 1943 I submitted my documents to the Suvorov Military School in Stavropol. My friend Sasha Fetisov also submitted his documents to this same school. When my father and I came to find out the results we saw the letter "R" (refused) on my package. I burst into tears and the receptionist erased the letter "R" and wrote an "A" (admitted) instead. I studied well at the school and took part in sporting events. However, I was called a Jew for the first time. While we were having an argument my close friend said to me, "You are a Jew - you will always find an excuse and a way out of any situation".

After the War

I graduated from the school in 1948 with a gold medal. When they were issuing my certificate they called me by my Jewish name, Leonid Meyerovich, although I had listed my last name as Markovich on the Komsomol card. Then I crossed out my Russian name, Markovich, put in Meyerovich instead.

In 1948 I entered Infantry School in Leningrad. During my second year there, I participated in a fight between cadets. As a result, the sergeant had his nose broken. We had been drinking a bottle of wine and gotten into a small argument. There was a Komsomol unit meeting. The secretary looked at my Komsomol membership card, saw the correction I had made, and accused me of trying to conceal my nationality. Because of this fight I was sent to serve in Kamchatka, although I was supposed to be going to Germany.

My performance was good, although they reminded me of that fight in Leningrad. I remember that on 5 or 6 March 1953 we were lined up at Drill Square. We were told that there was going to be an important announcement. Then we were released without being told anything. At 6 o'clock in the morning we were lined up again, and this time they announced that Stalin had died. In the evening we were in our room at the hostel and, pouring alcohol into our glasses, I said, "Well, guys, shall we commemorate the deceased one?" My friend York Repin didn't like me talking disparagingly about Stalin, the leader of the people. But Stalin's death was no tragedy for me.

In the summer of 1953 during my service in Kamchatka I submitted documents to Leningrad Academy of the Rear and Transport Services. I was to

take exams in Khabarovsk. When I was taking my entrance exams I felt to the full what it was like to be a Jew in the Soviet Union. My friend Yulik Mondrus, a Jew, and I had gold medals and could be officially released from taking entrance exams. But we were forced to take all the exams. Yulik "failed" at the exam in physics. I passed all my exams, but the examiners reminded me of all my faults: the correction I'd made on my Komsomol membership card, the fight in Leningrad, and also that my grandmother was under occupation. They didn't care that this blind elderly woman had been shot by the Germans. They were only interested in whether she had done any harm to Soviet power, or cooperated with the Germans. It so happened that during this period there was an announcement on the radio about the rehabilitation of the Jewish doctors from the Kremlin who had been falsely accused of the conspiracy aimed at the murder of Stalin and other Soviet leaders. After this announcement, the attitude towards me changed and I was admitted to the Academy.

In 1957 while studying at the Academy in Leningrad, I became a Party member. Party membership was necessary for any young man aspiring to a career in the army. My brother Victor, who was studying at the Military School of Frontier Units in Leningrad, introduced me to Elina Ferdman, a student at the medical school. We fell in love and married in 1954. We have been together ever since. Elina was from Leningrad. Her father was Jewish and her mother, Russian. Her father was a teacher at the school for factory workers. Her mother was a homemaker. During the war Elina's father fought at the front, and Elina and her mother were evacuated to the Urals. Elina was raised as a Jew and wanted to marry a Jew. Life was not easy for a young cadet and a medical student. My stipend was 200 rubles and Elina received only 30 rubles. We couldn't afford to buy a coat, but we often went to the theaters because tickets were very cheap.

In 1955 our daughter Lenchka was born. My uncle Aron, a consultant at the maternity hospital, helped my wife during the childbirth. By that time, our family was living in Leningrad. - my father had been fired from his job in 1953 after Stalin died, since the authorities didn't have a need for so many punitive guard units. My mother and father came to Leningrad where they received an apartment. They helped us to raise our daughter. My mother died in 1967 and my father in 1976. My brother Victor died of a myocardial infarction in 1975. He didn't do very well in life. He retired from the army due to his heart trouble, and for a long time he couldn't find a job. Back then it was difficult for a Jew to get a job. Victor took to drinking, which led to his heart attack at the age of 40. Victor's two daughters, Marina and Natasha, both lived in Leningrad.

After I graduated from the Academy, I got a job assignment in the vicinity of Osha, where I began my military service as a first lieutenant. Then I moved to Kaunas, Chita and after that, to many other towns. I

finally settled down in Cheliabinsk, where I was a lecturer at the military school. I retired from the army in 1981 with the rank of Colonel. After my retirement, I moved to Kiev with my family. My father's sister Margola helped me with the move by giving me a permit to register for residence at her apartment. We have lived in Kiev ever since.

My daughter Lena graduated from an accounting school in Cheliabinsk. She lives in Alexandrovka near Lugansk. She was married to a Ukrainian by the name of Voloshenko, who began saying and doing things which hurt her feelings because of her nationality. She divorced him when my grandson was 10 years old. Lena is now married to a Jewish man.

I think I had a good life. I have never thought about my roots or Jewish history before. Frankly speaking, I didn't care about Israel or about the Six Day War. I still think that Israel has to return the occupied lands to the Palestinians. We have never discussed emigration to Israel in our family.

Recently I've become more interested in the life of the Jewish community. I read Jewish newspapers and visit the Hesed center. Only when I grew old did I learn about Pesach, Yom Kippur, Hanukkah, etc. I might blame my parents, but I understand that they lived their lives as best as their understanding allowed them. They were raising us as Soviet internationalists with no national roots. Such were the times, and they followed the rules of those times.

Now I'm trying to fill in the gaps. I have enrolled in a course in Yiddish, and I celebrate Jewish holidays at home. My daughter wasn't raised as a Jew and we chose her nationality to be written as Russian (my wife's nationality). This was in tribute to the times.

My wife and I have submitted our documents for emigration to Germany. It is difficult to live in Ukraine. I would hope for the best. Thank you.