Yevsey Kotkov

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Kiev
Ukraine
Interviewer: Ella Orlikova

My name is Yevsey Abramovich Kotkov. I was born in 1904. At that time nobody took any notice of the day and the month of birth -- that's why I only know the year of my birth.

I was born in Rafalovka , somewhere near Lutsk.
My father, Avrum Leib Kot, was born in 1876. He was a tinsmith. He was the only son, and he had three sisters. I don't remember his parents, and I know very little about his family or his sisters. I only know that all the men in the family were tinsmiths, and that my father was sent to Belarus to study to be a tinsmith when he was a boy, and that is the profession he followed for the rest of his life. It was a tradition in Jewish families that the son inherited his father's profession, and all my father's sons became tinsmiths, too.

Jews hired Jewish employees to work for them. It wasn't quite a usual thing for a Jew to work for Russian people, but [Jewish] builders or decorators could work for Russian people. [Jewish] girls used to work as housemaids. If their work conditions permitted, they could also learn the language of the family.

My mother's parents – grandfather Joseph and grandmother Bluma – had a big house in Rafalovka. It had five rooms and a kitchen with a stove in it. All [toilets] were outside, of course. There was an orchard around the house and there was also a vegetable garden where my grandmother grew all kinds of things. They had a cow, and there was a cowshed next to the house, which was also used as a storage room.

My grandparents had three children. My mother, Toba-Rivka, was the oldest. She was born in1882 in Rafalovka. Their oldest son Haim was born in 1884. He was killed during the civil war, some time in 1921. Their middle son Usher was born in 1892. He was killed during a pogrom in 1921. He had four children, but I don't know where they are or what happened to them. Haim and his wife didn't have any children and lived in my grandparents' house.

My grandparents spoke Yiddish at home. My grandfather was a plumpish man with a beard, but my grandmother was very thin. She was called Liebe and my grandfather was called Iosia. They worked non-stop – it was their way of life. Their biggest happiness in the world was when their grandchildren visited them. My grandmother loved us children. She used to make a strudel with apples and nuts when we came, and also kihlah (ground matzo with raisins, nuts and poppy seeds formed into small balls and fried).

My grandmother made butter and sour cream. Her day started at three in the morning. She had to milk the cow and cook, prepare "tsyber" (which was the Yiddish term for fodder for the cow), etc. Each Monday she baked bread for the following week.

My grandfather was also a boot maker. He was a masterful boot maker. He used to make boots even for landlords, their wives and children. He hired some young men, who worked and lived in his shop, sleeping on the floor and having their meals there. They also wanted to learn the boot making business. Their work day started at sunrise and ended when it got dark.

There was no money circulation then, people bartered food for goods at the fair. And when they bought food in stores, it was logged in a register. Then, when they got some money, they paid their debts.

On Sunday, farmers from the village visited my grandfather after the market was closed to have lunch and discuss business and life. Those discussions were in Ukrainian. My grandmother did all the cooking, and the farmers used to say “zhydivska [Jewish] fish, it’s so delicious, how do they cook it?” Zhyd was what they called Jews, and it didn’t sound abusive to us - this was the only word we knew. My grandfather didn’t smoke, but he drank vodka, and the farmers respected him for that. It was their tradition to have a good drink while talking and Jewish people were basically no drinkers. So my grandfather showed that he was one of them by sharing a drink with them. Quite a few farmers used to get together at my grandparents’ place. Some were in the house and others were outside. And they would ask each other “why do you think ‘zhydy’ are so smart? They just listen to what we talk about and smarten up.” Fairs were held every Sunday. Crowds of people used to come there and the church bells would toll for half a day. Jewish families were close with Ukrainians. The farmers bought the goods that Jewish people produced, and Jewish people bought the farmers’ products. And everybody was content with this way of life.

My grandmother was religious and didn’t do any work on Friday evening and Saturday – she didn’t even strike a match. They used an oil lamp for lighting the house. On the Sabbath they poured in just enough kerosene so that it would burn out on its own, so that they didn’t have to put it out. On Saturday a Ukrainian girl, Pruska, used to come to check whether there was [enough] fresh water. My grandmother used to bake a special roll for Pruska.

The population in this town was half Jewish. It was quite a big town. There was a church in the center and two synagogues: one for the poor and one – for rich people. We were craftsmen, tinsmiths. We didn’t have servants and big buildings , we weren’t merchants and we didn’t make a lot of money, so our family attended the synagogue for the poor. We never went to the synagogue for the rich; the people who went there were mainly merchants. There was a big difference between the rich and the poor. The rich and the poor Jews never interrelated, and marriages between members of these different castes were not possible. One couldn’t enter the house of a rich Jew, they communicated via their servants. This was the period of the “Beilis trial,” when Jewish people were accused of drinking the blood of Christian children. This resulted in the pogroms in Kiev. But there were no pogroms in Rafalovka.

When I was a child, we lived with my parents in a basement in the main street in Rovno. There was a book store on the upper floor, and there was a staircase downstairs (18 steps). Our living space was not divided into rooms. There was some hay on planks that served as a bed for my mother and her children. The remaining area served as my father’s shop. He made whatever he had orders for, like tins, cups, buckets, cans, etc. They cooked on a small primus stove and used a bucket for a toilet.

There were five of us kids in the family. My mother used to go to her parents' home in Rafalovka each time she give birth, then she and the baby returned to my father in Rovno by train. My oldest brother Yankel, Yakov Abramovich Glaston, was born in 1902. He was a tinsmith, like all of us. He lost his eye on the front during the WWII. His daughter Musia lives in Israel now. He died in 1958 in Kiev. I was the second child. My mother called me Senechka. Then came my sister Genia born in 1906. She was a laborer all her life. My sister Polia was born in 1908. She was a nurse. She had a son Lyonechgka -- I live with him now. Polia died in 1975. The youngest – Izia (Isaak) Abramovich Kotkov was born in 1910. He lives in Canada.

Life was not much fun in Rovno. We lived in a basement, it was cold, and we didn't have enough to eat. My father was a typical failure. He was a rough and wild man. He was always dirty. Mommy used to cry a lot in that basement. Father beat us. My mother told him off and cursed him for beating us so hard. She told him one couldn't beat children on the head and face with wire. He offended the girls, too. He would say he didn't want his children. We had a terrible relationship with him, and when we grew up none of us wanted to stay with him.

We kids didn't respect him, but we loved our mother. She always stood up for us and cared for us. We lived a very poor life. We had to alter and repair our old clothes. My father used to go and ask some rich Jewish family whether they had anything they wanted to give away. He used to bring back a huge bag and we were so happy that there were so many clothes for us. We went to school. There was a primary school for Jewish children. Yankel (Yasha) was the first one to go to school. Then it was my turn. We boys studied separately from the girls. I sat in the first row due to my poor eyesight. There were about forty children in the class. We studied Russian, arithmetic and grammar. We didn't study Yiddish at school, but in summer, when I went to visit my mother's parents in Rafalovka, I had a teacher who taught me to write and read in Yiddish. Everything had to be af Yiddish (in Yiddish). My grandfather paid for these classes. There were 3 to 5 pupils that came to this teacher to study. My friends were Jewish children, of course. I studied Yiddish, my teacher was a rabbi, and I had to learn to read the prayer book. My grandfather took me to the synagogue with him and we used to pray together.

My mother began her preparations for a Saturday on Friday. She used to prepare the candles and she cleaned and washed everything. My father also observed the Sabbath. He wouldn't have worked on Saturday or on a holiday even for gold. My father always wore a cap on his head instead of yermolka [yarmulke]. The Jew must have his head covered – God forbid to not wear anything. Later, when we lived in Kiev, my father attended the synagogue in the Podol district. He used to cover himself with a dirty tallith and stand near the door.

Once, when I was six years old, my father was fixing the roof of the synagogue. It was a two-storied building. My mother sent me to take my father's lunch to him. She told me to be careful., as I was a lively boy. My father ate his lunch and asked me to help him a little. He told me to sit in the spout while he hit a nail. While he was hammering I swayed and when he looked for me I wasn't there any longer -- I had fallen off. It was my good luck that I didn't fall on the bricks – this would have been the end of me. Everybody around started yelling and crying. They called a doctor. They listened to my breathing. My father whispered to me to pee. I did and he said "He'll be O.K." He was afraid that I injured my bladder. They took me home. My mother was already grieving for me. I asked her to turn me on the stretcher to show her that I was alive. When I was seven I was scared

of train conductors. I used to hide under a bench saying ‘Mommy, here comes the conductor!”. The ticket cost 7 kopecks. My mother didn’t buy me a ticket, although children over 7 years of age needed to have a ticket. When getting off the train my mother always asked the people around to help her with the children. And they always did.

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At the age of nine I went to work. My job was to clean the bookstore in the building where we lived. I took to reading books in this store, and I always loved reading.

When the Imperialistic war [World War I] began in 1914, the front got closer every day to Rovno and Rafalovka, and we had to flee. My father and mother, five children and my mother’s mother all moved to Kiev. My grandfather joined us later, and once again began to sew and repair footwear for everyone. But my grandparents didn’t live long in Kiev. My grandmother died in 1916, and my grandfather followed her in 1920.

At first we lived in Bessarabka, 6, Basseynaya street. It was a noisy neighborhood near the market. Somebody had advised us to contact someone known as the “countess” to find a place to live. The “countess” was the owner of building #6. She allowed us to move into an old janitor’s quarters in the basement. But there was a problem - before the revolution ordinary Jews didn’t have the right to live in Kiev. They needed a special permit for it. Kiev was open for rich Jews, merchants of guild 1 & 2, and educated Jews. Soon somebody knocked on our door -- an inspector. He asked us to present our documents or get out of there and never show up again. At that time, however, the left bank of the Dnipro belonged to Chernigov province (now it is a part of Kiev – modern and beautiful). That district was called Slobodka, and Jewish people were allowed to live there. We rented a place there, but we only went there to sleep at night. In the morning we crossed the bridge back into Kiev. We could have taken a tram, but the ticket cost 10 kopecks and we couldn’t afford to spend this amount, so we traveled 7-10 km on foot each day to get to the town to earn something to live on. I didn’t go to school in Kiev. I was my father’s assistant and sold little pies at the market to earn a little. We were very happy when I could bring my mother 5 kopecks or so.

After the Tsar was forced to abdicate in March 1917, residence permits were cancelled, and we returned to Basseinaya street in the center of the city. We were all for the revolution and freedom. Then we heard about Lenin and Trotsky. Everybody around was talking about the “power of workers and peasants.” They were forming into the workers’ units. They were called “Workers’ Guards” at the beginning. The authorities in power changed rapidly. They changed 11 times -- the town was occupied by different units. I remember that the Denikin Army (led by General Denikin – Commander of the White Guard Army) occupied Kiev; then it was the Petlura army, then the Germans with guns and cannons and then Poles. This was in 1920. I was 16 years old, and I wanted to join the Red Army, so I went to their recruitment office. They asked me how old I was and who my parents were. I told them that my father was a craftsman. They also asked whether I knew Kiev well. They told me to go the railroad freight yard where I would see a train marked with red

crosses. I found that yard, and the train. A woman in a leather jacket came out to meet me. She was the Commissar of the train. She had a Mauser gun. She took me as a corpsman. In 1921, after the Peace Agreement with Poland, she told me that she was going to send me to study in Moscow. But I said I wanted to stay home. She gave me hug. I remember many Jewish people came to Kiev then. They were all shouting “Freedom! Freedom!” Many of them had to buy, sell and barter to survive. My brother Yasha and another woman from our town were buying clothes in Kiev and selling them in the country, or exchanged for cereals and other food.

There was a high rate of unemployment in Kiev. The employment office sent me to a private tinsmith shop. I worked as tinsmith my whole life. At first there were 5 of us, but the shop later grew to have 30 employees. I bought myself a bicycle and gave rides to girls to the stadium. I had many friends and many girlfriends. I loved them and our feelings were mutual. There was a dancing club on the second floor of a building on the corner of Bessarabka. I didn’t miss one single night. I was very popular with the girls. I was a handsome young man, always clean and neatly dressed . It was at that time that I changed my last name. It didn’t sound very nice to say my last name Kot (Kot in Russian is “cat”). It was easy to change one’s name at that time. There were no passports. I went to an office and asked them to add 3 letters to my last name – and it became Kotkov. My brothers also changed their names. Yakov took his wife’s last name – Glastun, and the youngest – Izia – changed his last name to Katkov.

The NEP, the New Economic Policy introduced by Lenin to support small business and entrepreneurs, was eliminated in 1928, and private shops were closed. They were building big factories. I went to work at a big aircraft plant. I met a lovely Jewish girl Dorochka at this plant. She was carrying bricks at the construction site – they were building shops for this plant. She looked poor and dark. I asked her “Darkie, darkie, what is your name?” “Dora”. “You Yiddish?” “Yiddish”. “Will you marry me?” Her parents had been killed during a pogrom in 1920s when she was sixteen. She was born in 1906 in a little Jewish borough near Kiev. She understood, but did not speak Yiddish, and didn’t know anything about Jewish traditions. She was living with an aunt of hers whom she didn’t like. We didn’t have a wedding ceremony. We just registered our marriage at the Registry Office. We didn’t have a place to live, either. I couldn’t take her to that janitor’s place where my family lived -- it didn’t even have separate rooms, so I made arrangements with a Russian woman and she let us stay in her room for 50 rubles. We lived there until the beginning of the Great Patriotic War (World War II) in 1941.

We didn’t celebrate any Jewish holidays. We couldn’t, as Saturday was a workday then. Yom Kippur was a workday, too, and we couldn’t miss work, as doing so was considered sabotage. I became an atheist. Dorochka and I used to go to the cinema , we didn’t miss one single movie. We went to work together and came home together. We were so poor, but so very happy. We didn’t have children. Dora had to have surgery for an abdominal pregnancy and couldn’t have children.

At this time workers had to make speeches at meetings so they could be considered socially active and recommended to become members of the Party. I liked to speak at meetings. I liked it when they said “And now the floor is given to comrade Kotkov” and there was applause. I soon became a member of the Party and was sent on an assignment to a village. This happened in 1933 during the famine. People were dying every day. At one point I went to the district committee and said “26 people have died.” The official responded, “Don’t tell me how many people died. I know better than

you do. I'm responsible for 36 collective farms. I don't want to hear this any more!"

The life of an individual has never had any value in this country. Nobody cared about all those miserable people dying from starvation. It was not permitted to ever mention to anybody what I saw there. People dying. Children, people were dying leaving empty houses. Millions of people were in this situation. I lived with a farmer's family. My position was called "representative," and I was responsible for the order and establishment of the Soviet power in this village. For better or worse, I was bound to do what I was expected to do. If I hadn't done what they required, they could have sent me to the cellars where they were executing people. So I fulfilled all the requirements. It was a terrifying situation. People opposed to the Soviet power could kill me at any moment, but if I stepped out of line, those I was working for could also execute me at any moment for treason, without trial or investigation. Dorochka was very concerned for me. She came to the village and convinced me to move back to Kiev. This I did and resumed working at the plant.

We rarely visited my parents. There was nothing to do there. My sisters and brothers had left them to have their own life, and my parents were constantly arguing. We always argued with my father. He always swore about the Soviet power and we defended it. He hated the Soviet regime, he called people ragamuffins.

With the outbreak of World War II, my mother was evacuated along with her cousin Polia to Chimkent in Central Asia. My father refused to be evacuated. He said that the Germans were cultured people and wouldn't do anything bad to him. He always had this spirit of contradiction, he always did the opposite from what he was expected to do. Well, the Germans, these "cultural people" shot him at Babi Yar1, in September 1941, along with thousands of other Jews.

The aircraft plant where Dorochka and I worked was fulfilling military orders, and when the war began on 22 June 1941, it came under bombing from the start. The plant was urgently evacuated to Chuguev (near Kharkov). There was a flying school there and big aircraft repair facilities.

We worked in the spare parts repair shop. I wasn't drafted. Besides having poor eyesight, I was working at a military plant, and this was basis for exemption from the army service. I had a special exemption stamp in my passport. I was considered to be of more importance in the rear. When the Germans approached Kharkov, we were evacuated to Chimkent (Kazakhstan). We rented an apartment and worked in a shop of the plant which was also evacuated to this town. Dora was made a guard for the chief of workshops Manager at the Chuguev flying school, but I worked in the shop.

After the war, we remained in Chuguev for a year. Dora became ill (with a woman's disease) and I went to my manager to ask him let us return to Kiev. He signed my request form and we moved back to Kiev in summer of 1946. The room we had lived in was occupied by someone else, and there was no furniture or anything else left. I went to the district executive office and they told me that all they could do was put us on the lists of people who were in need of an apartment. We realized that waiting for our turn might take years and years. Everything was destroyed after the war; Kiev was also destroyed. We decided to resolve this problem by ourselves. We rented an apartment in an old house in Podol, a district in Kiev on the right bank of the Dnipro. It was a damp room, and Dorochka was often ill. All I had was my profession as a tinsmith, but I found a job in Podol. People were very poor after the war and couldn't afford to buy new things, so they brought

us lots of their old utensils for repair -- old buckets, bowls, tins. We also made ovens. We had a lot of work. We were Jewish and Russian workers, but we got along very well and there was no anti-Semitism. We had nothing to argue about – we were all poor people.

After the war my mother lived with Polia in Kiev, where she died in 1958. My brothers also returned to Kiev and worked as tinsmiths. Many people in Kiev knew them. After the war I wasn't a member of the Party any longer. I wasn't interested. The attitude towards Jewish people changed considerably. One could hear "zhyd, zhydy" everywhere. We could hear it in the streets, and later at the building materials factory where I went to work. Anti-Semitism exists and will exist. We are aware of this. It was so during the old regime, and in the period of the Soviet power, too.

In 1952 Dorochka, my dear friend and my love, died from breast cancer. It was a big loss for me. I didn't know what to do. My distant relative Clara told me to marry Fiera. I knew Fiera already. She was distant relative of my father and earlier, before WWII , had visited us in Kiev. She lived in Bahchisarai in the Crimea and worked as an accountant. She came to Kiev with some lout she was planning to marry. Dorochka told her to leave him because he wasn't a nice person. So now, Fiera was living alone. Clara wrote her that Dorochka had died and told her to come. Firochka arrived – she turned out to be such a striking beauty; I couldn't even dream about such beauty. She told me she would make a good wife for me. She went to work as a cashier at the October Palace of Culture. She had a good salary. But we still lived in that same small nine square meter room. At one point, the director of the factory where I was working came to visit us. He looked around and said that his bathroom was bigger than this room. Later it was possible to invest money into the construction of cooperative apartment. I invested 1000 rubles and we received a separate one-room apartment, and could pay off the remaining amount over 20 years. In 1973 Fiera also died from cancer. She was 52 years old -- she was born in 1921. Regretfully, I don't remember my first or my second wife's maiden name. And so I was left in this apartment alone.

I couldn't live alone, though. My Jewish neighbor said that she had an acquaintance whose husband had been killed during the war. She said she was a nice and honest woman. I told her to introduce this woman to me. Raya came from a small town (I can't remember what town it was) and I liked her from first sight. I offered her to stay with me and she agreed. We got married in 1975. But soon Raya got diabetes, and she died in 1989. I was alone again. I moved in with Lyonia, the son of my sister Polia, and now we live together: Lyonechka, his wife, his son Romochka (he studies at the Solomon University to become a lawyer) and I.

I retired when I was 60. I couldn't stay there any longer. There were young people in my crew. Once I came to my machine and saw the word "zhyd" written in huge letters. I covered it with a tin sheet and said nothing about it. After work I called my supervisor. I expected some action from him, but there was none. I felt disgusted.

We have forgotten all Jewish holidays; I never celebrated any of them with any of my wives. But if somebody offered us matzo, we ate it. Now I feel very sorry that my life is nearing its end. Izia from Canada calls every now and then and I'm glad to hear him. My niece from Israel calls and asks me to visit them, but I can't go. I'm so old, I'm almost one hundred years old. People from the Jewish organization bring me lunch or some food. This wheel chair is also from them. I listen to the news on the radio. I'm very concerned about the situation in Israel. I wish the war there was over. If I were young I would go there…