

# Fania Brantsovskaya

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Vilnius

Lithuania

Interviewer: Zhanna Litinskaya

Date of interview: February 2005



Fania Brantsovskaya is a very sociable person. It's hard to get her at home since she volunteers for the department of former ghetto inmates and prisoners of concentration camps in the local Hesed. She corresponds and talks on the phone with a number of her friends and combatants from the partisan unit and ghetto. Fania gladly agreed to meet with me. She lives in a small cozy apartment in a 1970s apartment building. She met me at a bus stop to make it easier for me to get to the place where she lives. She looks not a day older than 60. She moves fast. Her hair is cut short and her eyes are bright, shiny and full of life. Fania wears a business suit and a blouse. She was dressed in the same way when she visited me in my hotel to complete this interview. Her apartment is furnished nicely and there is a nice bunch of heath in her kitchen. Fania offers me a cup of coffee and starts her story, which is full of humor and accurate descriptions. I enjoy listening to her.

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## **My family background**

My maiden name is Joheles. It's an old Jewish surname and has a local Lithuanian coloring. My paternal grandfather, Velvl Joheles, was born in Vilnius in 1868. At that time Lithuania belonged to the Russian Empire. Jews constituted a big part of the population of Vilnius that consisted of Lithuanian, Russian and Polish people. Before World War II Vilnius was a center of Yiddish culture in Eastern Europe. There were over 100 synagogues in Vilnius, educational and prayer institutions, a charity fund, professional guilds, a Jewish hospital, an elderly people's home, a charity children's fund, a Jewish public school, a Jewish theater and choirs, a health organization, a labor association, a few schools and gymnasiums teaching in Yiddish and Hebrew. There were many Jewish craftsmen. They were hat makers, tailors, bronze workers, leather men, etc.

My grandfather was a painter. He was a very skilled and artistic painter. He made art paintings and exquisite Alfrei works [a technique of interior decoration and renovation]. He was believed to have been one of the best experts in his specialty. Many years after my grandfather perished a friend of mine told me that her father was one of my grandfather's best apprentices. My grandfather also completed the most important tasks during the renovation of the Vilnius University. A few years

later, when he needed an eye surgery, he was taken to the university clinic where he had benefits as an employee of the university. I remember my mother and me visiting my grandfather in hospital where he proudly told other patients and doctors how smart and good I was being his older granddaughter.

Grandfather Velvl had a natural sense of humor. During World War I, when there were no medications available he used to cure children using just a thermometer. They never doubted that when he measured the temperature, they would promptly recover, and they actually did, however strange this might seem. He also cured his children and grandchildren from bruises by putting an old galosh as bandage over their injuries. I once fell and injured myself and when my grandfather wanted to apply an old galosh, I told him this was nonsense, that I had no faith in. My grandfather was stunned and couldn't forget it for a long time repeating, 'How can you like modern young people, these children... they have no faith!'

I have no information about my grandfather's parents, brothers or sisters. His wife, my grandmother, Rohe-Gisia Joheles, was three years younger than my grandfather. Her maiden name was Gilinskaya. She was born in the town of Svencionys, about 70 kilometers from Vilnius. There were actually two towns: Svencionys and Svencioneliai. There was a big Jewish community in Svencionys where my grandmother came from. From what I was told I know that my grandmother had many brothers and sisters. She came from a big family.

I've never been in Svencionys. All I know about my grandmother's relatives is that her brother Dovid Gilinski was a painter and he was the one who introduced my grandmother to Grandfather Velvl. Dovid's son Mordke Gilinski was popular in the Jewish circles. Before the war there was the Meidem recreation home near Warsaw. It was well known in Poland and Lithuania. [see Annexation of Vilnius to Lithuania] [1](#) It was founded by a Bund [2](#) activist named Meidem for poor children in Poland. There were two employees there whose surname was Gilinski: one was the director, who wasn't related to our family. The other one was Mordke Gilinski. Mordke was a teacher. The children liked and respected him and addressed him 'father', 'batka' in Polish. Many Jewish teachers knew Mordke in Poland and Lithuania. Children spent two to three months in the recreation home. There was a puppet theater, a radio station broadcasting in Yiddish and a brass orchestra. The classes were conducted on a high professional level. Mordke and his wife, who was also a teacher, arrived in Svencionys at the beginning of the Great Patriotic War [3](#). Mordke was a member of Judenrat [4](#) in the ghetto in Svencionys. Later he moved to the ghetto in Vilnius. I saw him last before I escaped from the ghetto. Most likely, Mordke Gilinski, a great pedagogue and educator, ended his life in Ponary [5](#). People said his wife survived, but we lost track of her after the war.

Velvl and Rohe-Gisia had many children, which was common for Jewish families then. My father's older brother Dovid Joheles, born in 1895, and his family lived in Kaunas. He was a baker. He owned a bakery and a store where he sold bread, cakes, and pastries that he made. I don't remember his wife's name, but I remember that they had two children: a son named Ariya and daughter, Feigele, named after one of our ancestors, in the same way I was. Dovid's family perished. They were killed in Kaunas in 1941. My uncle's name is not on the list of those who were killed in Kaunas, but some people who knew my uncle told me about it.

My father was the next child in the family, and then came Berl, who moved to Palestine, when he was young. He changed his name to Dov. [Berl is the diminutive of the Yiddish Ber, meaning Bear in English, just like the Hebrew Dov is.] He had two children: Zipora, a daughter, and a son whose name I can't remember. Dov passed away a long time ago; his son died in 1990. His daughter is still alive. My father's brother Girsh, born in 1907, and his wife Esther lived in Vilnius. They had no children. Girsh had a small shop. He was an engraver and made skilful monograms on jewelry, dishes and tableware. Girsh and Esther perished in the Vilnius ghetto [6](#) during its elimination in October 1941.

My father's youngest brother, Meishke Joheles, was born in 1914. He followed into his father's footsteps and made his living by painting. Meishke kept his fondness of poetry a secret from his family. Many years after the Great Patriotic War I learned that Meishke was a member of 'Young Vilnius' [public organization uniting young Jewish people in Vilnius before WWII], the organization of young poets, writers and artists. He wrote beautiful romantic poems. The only living poet from this organization, Sutzkever [7](#), who was a witness at the Nuremberg trials, lives in Israel. I met with him and he spoke warmly about Meishke. In 1938 Meishke got married. His wife Niusia was an agronomist. Meishke and Niusia moved to Lvov in 1939. Niusia continued her education there and Meishke entered the Lvov Teachers' Training University. At the beginning of the Great Patriotic War Meishke disappeared. Niusia evacuated to Uzbekistan. After the war she moved to Moscow, defended a candidate's dissertation [see Soviet/Russian doctorate degrees] [8](#), remarried and gave birth to two children. If my memory doesn't fail me, she died in 1998.

My father's older sister Tyoma, born in 1906, finished the 'Ikh Duh Arbet' school for Jewish girls where they were trained in crafts. [Editor's note: 'Ikh Duh Arbet', lit. Assist by Working, Jewish organization established by the Jewish community in Vilnius in the 1920s. It was an 8-year school for girls who were taught various crafts there. The school only existed before WWII.] Tyoma learned to sew, knit and embroider and worked in a handicrafts store owned by Russian immigrants. The store sold yarn and embroidery accessories. Tyoma wanted me to be good at handicrafts and gave me embroidery sets as birthday gifts. Only once she bought me an umbrella on my birthday. Her husband's surname was Finskiy. Tyoma had a daughter with two names: Genia was her name registered in the documents, but her family called her Bira after the Jewish autonomous region of Birobidjan [9](#). Tyoma, her husband and their child perished in the Vilnius ghetto.

My father's sister Zelda, who was two years younger than Tyoma, finished a teachers' training seminar in Vilnius. This was a workshop for Yiddish teachers. Zelda was single. In 1939 she went to work in a Jewish school in Belarus and disappeared there at the beginning of the Great Patriotic War.

My father's sister Esther, born in 1912, was a beauty. There was even a duel between the son of the brewery owner and another admirer. Esther gave preference to a poor Jewish teacher whose surname was Fink. They moved to Grodno in Poland [Grodno belonged to Poland in the interwar period; in 1939 it was annexed by the Soviet Union and today it is in Belarus, 230 km west of Minsk]. Esther's husband was a convinced communist. The Polish authorities didn't appreciate such convictions and he rarely had a job. Esther supported the family by making clothes. She even had clients from other towns.

Esther had a son, and our family used to tell a funny story related to his coming into this world. Grandfather Velvl went to his daughter in Grodno for the brit milah ceremony. He hired a wagon at the railway station. It took the wagon driver a long time riding him around town till he brought him back to the station. Esther's house was right next to the station. My grandfather kept talking about the Jewish wagon driver's greediness for making him pay three times over the price for the ride.

When the Soviets came to power [see Invasion of Poland] [10](#), Esther's husband started working in the town department for education. On the first day of the war a shell hit their house, but fortunately, nobody was hurt, though at times I think it would have been better for Esther's family if they had perished on that first day. They walked to Vilnius, which was occupied by the Germans. Esther's husband was one of the first Jews whom the Germans killed. Somebody reported that he was a communist. Their son starved to death in the ghetto during the first months and beautiful Esther followed him a short time later.

My father's younger sister Etha, born in 1916, was a shop assistant at the jewelry shop on the main street in town. During the tsarist time this street was named Georgievskiy Prospekt after St. George. During the Polish rule from 1920-1939 this was Adam Mickiewicz [11](#) Street, named after the popular Polish poet. During the Soviet rule the street was called Stalin Prospekt. During the Nazi occupation it became Hitlerstrasse. After the war and until 1956, when Nikita Khrushchev [12](#) denounced the cult of Stalin, the street was named after this great tyrant [Stalin]. Then the avenue was given the name of Lenin, and only in 1991, after the breakup of the Soviet Union and establishment of the independent Lithuanian state the street was given the name of Gediminas [13](#), the founder of Vilnius. I remember my mother and me went to the shiny store where Etha was working. Mama enjoyed looking at the jewelry in the window, but she couldn't afford to buy any. This was a store for wealthy people.

Etha was fond of singing. There were two Jewish choirs singing in Yiddish. One was the choir of the Jewish educational society in Vilnius. Another choir was named after its conductor: Gerstein choir. Etha's music teacher was Vilbikhor, who also gave classes to my grandfather Velvl, who was also fond of singing. Six years ago I traveled to Israel where I visited the kibbutz, founded by the former inmates of the Jewish ghetto in Vilnius. There was a museum of the ghetto in the kibbutz. I saw a photo with the choir and my aunt Etha in the first row. I was truly moved when I saw this picture.

The owner of the jewelry store sold it and the new owner hired new staff. Etha went to sell inexpensive tea. She offered tea in wholesale bundles. She also offered her customers a nice teacup as a gift. Her customers bought tea from her on installments and she collected their payments on a monthly basis.

In the 1920s Grandfather Velvl and Grandmother Roche-Gisia lived in the Antokolis district in Vilnius. They had a small apartment. Their daughter Etha lived with them. My grandfather went to a nearby synagogue. He had his kippah, tallit and tefillin on, when praying. My grandmother wore a wig. However, they were moderately religious. They just followed traditions because they were brought up this way and they couldn't imagine it any different. I never saw them praying at home. They didn't follow the kashrut, nor did they insist that their children or grandchildren observed Jewish traditions.

In my childhood we visited my grandfather and grandmother on Saturday. We hired a wagon and I was looking forward to it with pleasure each time. We arrived on Saturday afternoon. My

grandfather asked my grandmother to turn on the lights and she lit a lamp grumbling. The Sabbath was still on and it wasn't allowed to turn on the lights till the end of Saturday. However, our visit was more important than Jewish traditions for my grandfather. In the late 1920s my grandmother had a stroke and got a problem moving her hand. Though her daughter lived with her she always waited till my mother came to wash her. My grandfather, grandmother and Etha were among the first to fall victim to the fascists. They were killed in one of the first shootings when Jews from Antokolis were taken to Ponary and executed there.

My father, Benjamin Joheles, was born in Vilnius in 1898. I don't know whether he attended cheder, but I think it was mandatory for all boys. I have no information about where my father studied. My father knew Yiddish, Russian, Lithuanian, Polish and German. He was trained to become an electric mechanic at a company in Germany and later stayed to work with this company. He became a highly skilled mechanic. By the time he met my mother at his older brother Grigoriy Golunskiy's place, he lived in Kaunas and worked as an electric mechanic at the railway station.

My mother came from the town of Varena [85 km from Vilnius] at the border of Lithuania and Poland [in 1934, 393 Jews lived in Varena]. My mother's father, Bencion Galunskiy, was born in the 1870s. He worked at the local carton factory. He also dealt in beer wholesales. He owned a warehouse where he had beer stocks. Grandmother Hana-Leya [Galunskaya] was a housewife. The Galunskiy family celebrated Jewish holidays and went to the synagogue. They also raised their children to respect traditions. However, the children were a new generation, growing up during World War I and the Revolution in Russia in 1917 [see Russian Revolution of 1917] [14](#). Almost all of their children became atheists. In 1938 Bencion and Hana-Leya moved to Palestine [today Israel]: their son and daughter had settled down there before them. Therefore, my maternal grandfather and grandmother escaped falling victims to fascists like my father's parents and the majority of Lithuanian Jews. They died in the 1960s and were buried in the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem [the oldest and most holy Jewish place for burial]. Their grandchildren visit their grave each year.

Grigoriy Galunskiy, the oldest of the siblings, was born in 1896. He became a communist. Mama told me he was under arrest frequently and once he was even sentenced to death. Then the rabbi himself spoke for Grigoriy. Though it was Saturday, he signed a petition, which saved Grigoriy's life. [According to the Jewish Law saving life is the single most important command; it overrules all other commands, including the Sabbath restrictions.] After 1919 Grigoriy lived in the USSR and later he moved to Vilnius as Consul of the Soviet Russia in Lithuania [Lithuanian independence] [15](#). The capital of Lithuania at that time was Kaunas [since Vilnius (Wilno) belonged to Poland then] and Grigoriy, his wife Esther Grinblat and their children lived in Kaunas. My mother, who loved her older brother, left Varena to live with them. Mama told me that Grigoriy's children loved her dearly.

Grigoriy's wife was a Jewish woman from Kaunas. She was also a convinced communist. Esther was a dentist by profession. She provided her services to prisoners in the local jail. After finishing his military service in Lithuania, Grigoriy was appointed consul in Trieste, Italy. My mother never saw him again. It was only in the late 1930s when a newspaper published the information that Grigoriy Galunskiy, a famous Bolshevik [16](#), had died in Odessa. My father decided not to mention to my mother that her beloved brother had died hoping that she would never find out, but she did. Her neighbor visited her and together they were looking at old photographs, when the neighbor expressed her regrets about my mother brother's early death. She also mentioned that she had read about it in the newspapers. Her brother's death was a tragedy for my mother. She mourned



for him for seven days sitting on the floor wearing torn clothes [she sat shivah]. I don't know what happened to Grigoriy's wife or children. I failed to find them after the Great Patriotic War however hard I tried.

My mother's sister Sarrah moved to the USA in the early 1920s. From there she sent an invitation to my mother. However, my mother had a double name of Rohlia-Dveire, common for Jews, but it was different from the name given in the documents. While thinking about obtaining new documents my mother met my future father. She fell in love with him and the issue of moving to America became irrelevant. Sarrah got married in America and had two sons. They became military pilots and perished on the Western Front during World War II. My cousin sister found their grave in France. She visited the place several times. I don't remember Sarrah's family name. I don't know when she died either.

My mother's sister Shifra moved to Palestine [today Israel]. She married Avigdor Miller. She had two sons and a daughter. Her older son, whose name I don't remember, was the mayor of Shefar'am for a number of years. Bencion, her second son, was born after my Granny died and he was named after her. He worked as a journalist for the Jerusalem Post [major Israeli English language daily.]. He is a pensioner now. His daughter Dale, a teacher, lives in Vardiya [a neighborhood in Haifa], Israel.

My mother's youngest brothers, Motl and Yitzhok, lived in Kaunas. Motl became an electric mechanic. Yitzhok was a building contractor. Motl and Yitzhok had one daughter each. Motl and his family perished during the Great Patriotic War. Yitzhok's daughter lives in Israel. My mother's brother Shimon lived in Taurage, near Konigsberg [Russia, 1,000 km from Moscow]. He had five children. On the day the war began, Shimon and his daughter Shulamit went to see a doctor. When bombs started falling, his wife and the children left their home. That way, they lost each other. Shimon and his daughter evacuated to Tajikistan. When he returned to Taurage, he heard that his wife and four children had perished. He couldn't bear the thought of staying in his hometown and moved to Israel. Shimon died in the middle of the 1980s. Shulamat still lives in Israel.

My mother Rohl [Joheles, nee Galunskaya] - her family called her Rachil affectionately - was born in 1901. I think she finished two or three grades of elementary school, but I don't know any details. My parents had their wedding in Varena on 22nd July 1921. My parents got married under a chuppah at the synagogue and had a traditional Jewish wedding. It couldn't have been otherwise in Jewish families at the time. My parents rented an apartment in Kaunas.

## Growing up

I was born on 22nd May 1922 in Kaunas. I was named Feige, but since my early childhood everybody called me Fania, which is a Russian name [see common name] [17](#). Mama told me she got severely ill when I was born. She had to send me to my grandfather and grandmother in Varena where I lived the first year of my life. My grandparents often showed me my parents' pictures in a photo album, and when my parents came to pick me, I said 'Mama, papa - album'. I don't remember any details of my life in Kaunas. My father worked a lot at the railway power station [local power plant owned by the railway station, supplied energy to railroad utilities].

In 1927 my sister Riva [Joheles] was born. This was when my father got arrested for being a Polish citizen having received his passport in Vilnius. He was accused of espionage. At this time President

Smetona [18](#) came to power. Grandmother Hana-Leya, who had come to stay with us around the time the baby was due, and I visited mama at the hospital. My grandmother decided to keep silent about my father's arrest. Since my mother didn't like it that I was wearing a different coat than she had expected me to wear, my grandmother told her that my father had gone on a business trip and taken the key to the wardrobe with him. Well, it's always like this: one has good intentions, but they don't usually work. Another woman told mama about my father's arrest. My mother started bleeding and had to stay in hospital for a long time. My grandfather Velvl's apprentice, a rather high official, pulled strings for my father. My father was released from prison, but was to leave the town within three days. I have some vague memories of us moving out. I remember the horses dragging our wagon across a little river.

We crossed the border between Lithuania and Poland and arrived in Vilnius, which belonged to Poland at the time. [The modern Polish nation-state was created after World War I of the ethnic Polish areas of the Russian Empire (Kingdom of Poland and areas East of it), Austria-Hungary (Galicia province) and some Eastern parts of Germany. Vilnius (Wilno at the time) was also a part of Poland up until 1939.] My father's parents and sisters lived there and we found ourselves staying with a big Jewish family all of a sudden. They all shared love and support.

My father went to work as an instructor of an electric mechanic laboratory of the polytechnic school of the organization of the workers' union. My father became a valued teacher at this school. However, he wasn't paid his regular salary in full: they usually paid him about 20 percent and put the rest on credit. Once his credit had accumulated into a big amount, the management paid half of it to my father. My parents believed it to be a huge amount of money and decided to have winter coats made for them for this money. However, my father's salary wasn't enough to cover all family expenses and when my parents managed to get a suitable lodging my father opened his own electric technical shop.

My parents started by renting a room. We had to go through our landlady's room since she lived in the same apartment. Later we moved to a place on Basanavichus Street. Two months later we moved to a bigger room. In 1928 my parents rented a room on Pilimo Street. This big four-storied house behind the synagogue is still there. The synagogue is also there. Madam Trotskaya, our landlady, lived with her daughter in Paris. Her Jewish manager collected the rent, and there was a maid to keep the house clean. The landlady arrived each summer to collect the money.

There was a signboard with the name Joheles, my father's name, on the front door. We had a common apartment for the time. The rooms were located one after another. My father's shop was in the first and biggest room of the apartment. My father made a partition to separate the shop from my parents' bedroom. The next room was also divided to create a dining room and a children's room. Then there was the kitchen with a backdoor leading to the yard. There was a wood-stoked stove in the kitchen. In the yard there was a shed where all tenants kept sawn wood. The winters in the north were severe and one had to be prepared for it. There were men offering their sawing services for a reasonable fee walking from one house to another in fall.

Our apartment was modestly furnished, but my mother's eagerness and skills added charm to it. There was hardly anything my mother couldn't do. She kept altering clothes and dressed my sister and me to the fashion. She could knit and embroider. She made napkins for the furniture and embroidered rugs. When little round tables became fashionable, mama cut the edges of the

kitchen-board, finished it and placed it on our table. She couldn't wait till my father got some time for it and did the wiring herself, however crookedly she managed to do it. Mama whitewashed the walls, moved the furniture and fixed it to make our life more comfortable. Mama was an excellent housewife. However hard the times, she always managed to make dinner somehow.

My mother always had some money prepared for donations: there was an association of the poor in Vilnius. It divided the town into districts and collected donations on certain days. Poor Jews visited us on Wednesday and Mama gave each of them a farthing. My father bought books from his monthly salary. We read a lot: books and Yiddish newspapers. We also often went for walks together and discussed what we had read.

My parents weren't religious. They didn't observe the kosher laws either. We often had sausage and ham at home. Mama was raised in a more traditional Jewish family and tried to observe Jewish traditions at the beginning. She lit candles on Sabbath and prayed, but my father often worked on Saturday and Mama gradually gave up praying, but kept lighting candles. Later she just told me, 'Fania, light the candles'. Mama also fasted on Yom Kippur and tried to involve my father in it. She didn't make dinner on this day and my father and his friend, a shochet's son, used to go to a missioners' cafe where they served nice dinners to all those willing. Later Yom Kippur became just a day off for us; it was a good occasion for the family to get together. Mama cooked a lot and the family had dinner together enjoying themselves; Aunt Tyoma and her husband visited us.

Mama usually cooked Jewish food on Pesach. She made sweet and sour stew, cookies made from the dough boiled in honey, tsimes [19](#) with carrots, beans, potatoes and prunes. She also made tsimes with lentils, grown in Lithuania. She also made imberlach with carrots and ginger, which I still cook every now and then. On Pesach mama made borscht with marinated beetroots. She also made jam with these beetroots and nuts. Mama also made a cake from matzahmuki [matzah flour] on Pesach. She also served medok, both Jewish and Lithuanian beverage with honey and hops. We celebrated Pesach, but didn't have the seder ceremony. We cleaned our house and bought gifts for the family. However, I cannot remember any Jewish traditions related to this holiday being observed in our family. Matzah was bought long before the holiday and kept in a basket. Mama made latkes and little pies from matzah flour stuffed with fried onions and jam. Mama also made boiled buckwheat with fried onions - this was a typical Jewish meal in Vilnius. On Chanukkah mama made potato pancakes. We didn't have a chanukkiyah.

Frankly speaking, all I know about Jewish traditions I learned from my father's parents. We celebrated the first seder with them. We hired a wagon to get there and I loved it. My grandfather wore a kippah and reclined on cushions at the head of the table. Grandmother sat beside him. I looked for the afikoman and got a present for this. I also posed the four questions about the holiday [the mah nishtanah] to my grandfather. We also visited my grandparents on Chanukkah and I got Chanukkah gelt. I kept an old whipping top, a memory of my grandfather, for many years and only recently gave it to an acquaintance of mine who is collecting old Jewish things. She lives in Israel. On Rosh Hashanah it was necessary to take a candle with a little flag placed in a potato to the synagogue. Mama gave me the candle when I went to the synagogue with my grandfather. She bought the candle in advance.

There were only Jewish families living in our house. The only non-Jewish family was our janitor's family. Later a post office was opened in the building and its director received an apartment in the



house as well. The janitor's children were very happy that they'd finally be able to meet non-Jewish children and were greatly surprised to find out that there were no icons in the director's apartment [Orthodox-Christian families traditionally had icons in their homes.]. They happened to be a Karaite [20](#) family.

We used to joke that there were three factories in our yard. One was Nadezha, a confectionary. Its old Jewish owner Vishrut, his son and one worker made chocolates and lollipops and gave them to daily workers to wrap them. At that time bone-shaped chocolate ice cream was very popular. There were no fridges and chocolate in mould forms was taken to the yard to cool down. The children were waiting for them to take the forms outside hoping to get some treats. The Vishrut family had two sons and a daughter. Her name was Anna. Once we were invited to her birthday party. We made fancy carnival costumes from gophered paper. We had lots of fun at the birthday party and laughed so much that we peed and wet our paper skirts. Anna entered university shortly before the war. Her father had an agreement with the housekeeper that he would give shelter to the family and hide their valuables once the Germans came. However this housekeeper happened to be a real fascist and reported on the family. Their older son, a mathematician, was the only survivor. He lives in the USA now.

The second factory packed cotton wool. And the third factory had a special machine to stuff cigarettes. There was also a kitchenware and everyday goods store in the yard. Maximov, our neighbor, was an actor of the local Jewish theater. This was his pseudonym; I've forgot his real name. His son pricked his finger with a pen and died from blood poisoning. We, cruel kids as we were, took advantage of it showing our teacher that we pricked our fingers just to get out of the classroom. Maximov, his wife and children perished in the ghetto.

Our neighbors Sneiderman had two children: Lusya and Noah or Nenia. The father of the family, a tall handsome Jew, owned a warehouse. He purchased bowels, washed and cleaned them and sold them to his clients for making sausages. He was a religious Hasid [21](#), he celebrated all Jewish holidays. On Sukkoth he installed a sukkah and we enjoyed spending time there. He died of a heart attack by the door to their house in the ghetto. His children survived the war. Lusya was in Riga [today Latvia] and was then taken to a camp in Poland. After the war she met with her cousin brothers in Vilnius and they took her to Canada where she married a Jewish man who had been rescued by Schindler [22](#). Noah was in a partisan unit. After the war he stayed a while with my husband and me. Noah finished a teacher's training college. He got married and moved to his sister in Toronto. He became a Russian literature professor at Toronto University.

Our other neighbor Hasia, a Jewish girl, finished Medical Faculty. During the Great Patriotic War she was at the front. She had a child from a Ukrainian guy. After the war he took their child to his first wife. Hasia knew she couldn't manage raising a child during hungry times. Her son grew up and found out who his real mother was. He is a sailor. He lives in the north of Russia and often visits Hasia in Israel.

There was another family in our house. The father of the family, whose name I can't remember, was a thief. He was the leader of a gang. He was nicely and elegantly dressed. Once, Lelka Steiman's father's fur coat disappeared from the ante-room. The neighbors started discussing this incident loudly and two days later the fur coat reappeared as suddenly as it had been gone.

There was also the Gringold family living in our house. They owned a fabric store on Rudnitskaya Street. They had two daughters. The older one was my age, and Ada Gringold, the younger one, was about two years younger. The girls' parents died during the typhoid epidemic shortly before the war. When the war began, the girls' uncle took them to live with him in Kaunas. From the Kaunas ghetto [23](#) they were taken to the concentration camp in Klooga [24](#) in Estonia where they met my father. They told me a lot about his last months. My father stayed strong and supported the girls as much as he could. The girls moved to their relatives in America.

The Minz family, who lived on the fourth floor of our house, had several daughters. Sima, one of them, used to slide down the handrails and ring the Gringolds' doorbell before running away. This was a monkey-trick, but it disturbed the neighbors a bit. When the Soviets came to Lithuania [see Occupation of the Baltic Republics] [25](#), the Minz family moved to Japan. Sukiahara [26](#), a Japanese diplomat, rescued from oppression many Jews, Buddhists and Zionists by issuing Japanese visas to them. Sima lives in the USA. She happened to sit next to Ada Gringolds' at a congress of Vilnius Jews in New York. They started talking and it turned out they had lived in the same house and that Sima had been the very girl ringing the doorbell of Ada's apartment.

So these are the stories of the people living in our house. There were two little huts and a bigger house with two apartments in the yard. One apartment belonged to an old Jewish man. He stored oil products, kerosene in barrels that he sold. The janitor and his family lived in the other apartment. All Jews living in these houses also died in the ghetto. Only one girl survived. After the war she worked as a dancing teacher and taught Jewish children who had survived the ghetto.

There were a number of schools and gymnasiums for Jewish children in Vilnius. They were schools where the teaching was in Hebrew and Yiddish or in Polish. There were 7 and 8-year schools. There were a number of Yiddish schools: Gurewich, Shimon Fruk, Zeire Kuperstein schools. They were named after their sponsors and founders. There was a Tiksin school for retarded children, named after its founder Tiksin. The humanitarian Realschule [27](#) and the Sophia Gurewich gymnasium were the best. I went to the Sophia Gurewich gymnasium. Doctor Shabath's wife was my teacher. This Jewish doctor was a very nice person. There were legends about his professionalism and kindness towards the poor. The teachers were extremely skilled. Our teachers had high goals to educate and teach Jewish children and make them well-cultured people. They taught us real things. I remember our teacher once brought milk to the class. It got sour and after that we knew how sour cream and butter were made. We wrote compositions and in senior grades we discussed literary characters.

We also celebrated Jewish holidays at school. We had a masquerade on Purim. We wore costumes. I remember wearing a Chinese costume once. We also brought shelakhmones to school. We put everything we brought from home into a big basket and everyone could take a treat from it. In this way poor children could also enjoy better shelakhmones. The gymnasium charged fees. My father paid 50 percent of my tuition fees as he was a member of the teachers' association. However, it happened sometimes that I wasn't allowed to come into the classroom when my father didn't pay my fees on time. We particularly liked the event we celebrated on 1st March - the School Day. We had a banner made of all kinds of geometric figures: quadrates, triangles and rhombi that we took outside. There was a meeting and Sophia Gurewich made a speech. In 1933 the gymnasium was closed. I know that Sophia Gurewich starved to death while in evacuation in a town in Russia.

I went to the Realschule. The fee was lower there and they focused on natural sciences. I was good at those subjects: mathematic, physics, etc. We were taught in Yiddish. We also studied Jewish history and literature. Our teachers also lectured at Vilnius University. There was a wonderful library at school where I spent much time. Our teacher Malka Heimson, who was also the tutor at our literature club, perished in the ghetto in 1942.

In those years, young Jewish people in Vilnius followed different political convictions. In opposition to young fascists who propagated racial hatred and also used to break windows of Jewish stores, they formed different unions. There was an underground 'Union of the school youth', fond of antifascist and communist ideas, and there was an underground Komsomol [28](#) organization. There were two Bund organizations: one for younger and the other one for older members. I belonged to the Zionist Jewish scout organization 'Bin'. We spent much time together going on excursions and hiking tours in summer. We often went to the theater. There were two Jewish theaters and a Jewish conservatory in Vilnius. In spring our schools had a meeting at the Maccabi [29](#) stadium. I remember that when we passed by the Jewish Bank its employees threw flowers from the balcony of the building. I can still remember the overwhelming feeling of joy that I had.

Young people argued a lot about the Soviet regime: about the period of terror [see Great Terror] [30](#) in the USSR, trials of the Trotsky [31](#) and Zinoviev [32](#) followers [see Zinoviev-Kamenev triumvirate] [33](#). Once I even had a fight with my father's apprentice who also stayed with us. He was telling me that there was something horrible happening in the USSR and that Lenin's comrades, such as Trotsky, could not be enemies of the people [34](#). Older people also had discussions. Some were for the Soviet regime and were interested in everything happening in the USSR.

In 1939 Vilnius was given to Lithuania and became its capital. That summer I finished Realschule. Four of my friends and I decided to go to study in Grodno in Western Belarus. This was my idea - first of all teaching in Grodno was in Polish, which we all knew. Secondly, my aunt Esther lived there. In Grodno I entered the teachers' training college. Before the Soviet power was established in Western Belarus the pupils had to say a Catholic prayer before classes. The prayer was cancelled and the lyceum switched to Russian [in 1939, when the Soviet Union occupied Eastern Poland]. It was difficult to study. I lived in a hostel with other Polish and Belarus girls. They gave me a warm welcome and even gave me a present according to Catholic traditions. Some of the girls' parents were arrested by Soviet authorities. One such girl was the daughter of a policeman. Once she tore the picture of Stalin grabbing it from the sideboard that belonged to another girl in our room. The girl realized she might get in trouble and came to me to ask advice. I told her to go get another picture to replace the one she had torn and pretend nothing had happened. She did as I told her. Some time later our lyceum was renamed to college and we had to take entrance exams in physics and Russian. I said I could only do it in Yiddish and one Jewish professor agreed to be my examiner.

In early 1940 my friends and I were summoned to the passport agency and ordered to leave Grodno. We didn't belong there and had no right to reside in the areas adjoining the border. [The Soviet regime did not trust those who lived in the areas that were annexed to the USSR. In particular, it restricted their freedom of movement. They were not supposed to be close to the border to prevent them from escaping from the country]. The point of destination indicated in my passport was Navahrudak, a town in Belarus and I went there. Navahrudak was a nice town, the town where Adam Mickiewicz was born. I took a teachers' training course. I was a good student. I joined the Komsomol and was an activist. Here I fell in love with Ezhi Chizhik from Poland. We spent

a lot of time together and dreamt about the future. When we finished our studies we were sent to work in different villages. I went to Zherebkovichi. I taught Belarus, Russian, history and physical education in a small school. My first class was with an army service pre-conscription group. I was to teach them how to put their signatures. My students respected me.

### **During the war**

In spring 1941 I went home to Vilnius on vacation. The Baltic Republics were already occupied by the Soviets. My parents didn't have anything against it. They believed that at least there was no fascist threat to Jews any longer. When I came home, Mama was at the parents' meeting. My sister Riva studied in the former Realschule. Having missed home-made food for so long, I was eating my mother's borscht right from the pot. A week later I returned to Belarus. On 1st June 1941 I went to enter Vilnius University. When I came to submit my documents, I was told to come back in July. I met with my friends whom I hadn't seen in two years. At this time the Soviet authorities began with the deportation of Lithuanian Zionists and wealthier people to the Gulag [35](#) camps. Some of my friends were gone. On 21st June I met a friend, whose father was an outstanding doctor. We were standing near my house discussing whether his parents could possibly be subject to deportation. On the following morning, 22nd June, the [Great Patriotic] war began.

On 22nd June the bombings started. My parents and many other people thought it was another emergency training, common at the time. My parents had bags packed with everything necessary in case of an emergency. We grabbed them and went to the basement. On that day my uncle Finskiy, who was the director of a leather factory, brought a wagon to pick us. We talked and decided that my father and I were going: my father wanted to go to the Soviet army and I was a Komsomol member and was sure I simply had to go. We decided that my mother and sister could stay at home. It never occurred to us that the fascists could do any harm to a woman and a girl. In a hurry I grabbed my hot water bottle: I had had a kidney surgery earlier and never went out without a hot water bottle. We were going on a horse-drawn wagon and this was a horrible exodus. The retreating Red army trucks were passing us. We begged them to take us with them and I even showed my Komsomol membership certificate, but they were just passing by. There were many dead people on the road. I thought there could be nothing worse than what we were going through, but it was all just ahead of us.

We stopped to take a rest in the town of Gorodishche in Western Belarus. The house we stayed in was on a hill. The owner's son, a teacher, showed us the German parachutists landing. I buried my documents in their garden, while the German motorcyclists were riding along the streets. The occupation began. In the morning all men including my father and uncle were taken to the market square. These were the frontline forces and these men just scared the men around a bit before letting them go home. We headed home, but in the first village we passed the villagers took away our horses and we had to walk on. A few days later we returned home.

It's hard to find words to describe our family reunion. We all cried. Mama said that when the town was occupied, our housekeeper, an adamant anti-Semite, came to see her to ask about where we had gone. He told us we had escaped along with the communists. Then the wife of our new janitor came by. She said: 'Fania, why don't you tell him that your husband and daughter went to visit your brother in Kaunas and then the war began and they had to stay'. So she gave Mama a hand.

A few days later pogroms took place in our town. Fascists tortured religious Jews making them shave their beards and forcing them to dance. Every day new orders were issued. The first one was for communists and Komsomol members to get registered. Fortunately, nobody in Vilnius knew I was a Komsomol member. My father was forced to work for the Reich. I was also taken to do odd jobs: we gathered lime blossoms and other herbs. Later we were sent to clean the streets and public toilets. All Jews were to wear a big white quadrate with a yellow circle and the letter 'J' in it on our chest and back. We obeyed and immediately felt ourselves outcasts. Later these were replaced with white armbands with a yellow star and then just a yellow star. Germans shot people if they caught them without the bands. Jews were killed for not following German orders.

Jews weren't allowed to walk on pavements, go to the market or stores or use public transportation. There were two small food stores where we could receive food products for cards. The circulating currency was Marks. The curfew started two yours earlier for Jews than for other citizens. Fascists cane to Jewish houses taking away valuables and making inventory of the furniture. They also took away more expensive pieces of furniture. There were local reporters giving them information about wealthier houses. Jews tried to hide their valuables with their Lithuanian friends. An old Lithuanian woman, who did our laundry, took a few bags of our belongings to hide. I even gave her the yarn that aunt Tyoma had given to me.

Every day men were taken away. At first they explained they were taken to work and men were ordered to take towels and soap with them. But people said they were taken to shooting grounds. On 11th July shootings in Ponary, a dacha [cottage] village 12 kilometers from the town began. It became a death factory. The Soviet authorities had built huge concrete pits to store fuel, but failed to ever get to use them. When those pits were full of dead bodies the victims were forced to dig graves before they were shot themselves. The Jewish population was to pay the contribution of 5 million Marks and we, just like everyone else, gave away all our money and valuables.

We knew there were Soviet prisoners-of-war kept in the open air. On 31st August my friend visited me to collect things for the prisoners. I keep admiring our being brave: we were young and the young have no fear. My friend Pupa Kavergi and her grandmother lived in the district of the old medieval Jewish ghetto [36](#). Her mother died at childbirth and her father, an outstanding Bund member, had passed away some time afterward. She left shortly before the curfew started ignoring my invitation to stay overnight. On 1st September fascists stage an incident to cause provocation: on the corner of Dijoy Street they left two dead Germans and accused the locals of having killed them. At night all residents of this neighborhood were taken to Ponary or the Lukishki prison [the oldest prison built in the center of Vilnius during the tsarist regime in the 1860s. Its prisoners were those who were not loyal to the regime. The prison is still operating today]. Pupa was one of the first to perish. I'm still tortured by the thought that she might have survived had I insisted on her staying.

On 4th-5th September the situation in the town grew tenser. Lithuanian and Polish residents were forced to leave their homes on Strashuno, Rudninku, Mesino and some other streets in the center of Vilnius. On 6th September at 6am Lithuanian policemen knocked on our door rather politely. They gave us 30 minutes to pack and move to the Jewish ghetto. We could take as much luggage as we could carry with us. One Lithuanian, a more decent man than the others, told us not to worry since the ghetto was nearby, just across the street from the house and we could take a lot of things since we didn't have to walk far. We were just to cross the street to get there. We crossed Pilimo



Street and were pushed into a yard across the street from the Jewish hospital on Shpitalnaya Street. Our Jewish neighbors and other Jews were in the yard already. My school friend Hona Tanhu lived in a house in this neighborhood. His mother heard the noise in the yard and came out of her apartment. She invited us to come in. We settled down in her apartment and felt a bit relieved - at least we had a place to stay again.

There were two ghettos created on 6th September: the one where we were was big with a central point on Rudninku Street. The smaller one was on Stikle and Jidu Streets. Many Jews from other streets were taken to Ponary. All Jews from Antokolis, my grandfather Velvl and grandmother Rohe-Gisia, and all Jews from Lidskaya Street were taken to Ponary. We were almost lucky to be living near the ghetto and getting there before it was overcrowded. All sick and older people were taken to the smaller ghetto. People who specialized in some crafts were kept in the bigger ghetto. In late October 1941 the smaller ghetto was eliminated.

The ghetto was fenced. In narrower streets wooden or brick walls were installed. The Judenrat settled down in the building of my former Realschule on 6 Rudninka Street. Jewish police headed by Yacob Gensas also settled down there. There were police offices established in the ghetto. Jewish policemen watched over order in the ghetto and that all fascist directions were followed.

On the first days of our imprisonment various actions began. It seemed the fascists enjoyed changing the ways of selecting Jews for killing. Young people were taken to work in the peat bog and one day they were told to go to the sauna. My acquaintance Dodke Vedutskiy felt ill and didn't go with his comrades on this day. The young people were locked in a shed and burnt. There were a few synagogues in the ghetto. The yard of one synagogue was in the smaller ghetto. On Yom Kippur, 21st September 1941, all Jews that were praying there were taken to Ponary. My friend Motke Gurewich's parents were also there. His father told him to stay at home that day. The ghetto inmates used to make shelters to hide away during various actions. They were called 'malina' shelters [Russian slang for a secret apartment where those who were against the regime had their meetings]. Our schoolteacher's daughter was born in such a shelter and he named her 'Malina'. Unfortunately, I have no information about what happened to her.

There were a few Judenrat offices responsible for various aspects of life in the ghetto. There was a work office, a social service office, a shop maintenance office, an office of culture, a medical office and a funeral office. There was also a hospital primarily keeping patients with infectious diseases, a children's home in the hospital, and a drugstore in the ghetto. The children in the ghetto were taught in schools organized by schoolteachers. There was also a sports ground, though nobody seemed to go there, and a library in the ghetto. There was only a small collection of books in the library, but I borrowed some to read and my name can be found in the library archive.

Our life was more of existence, really. My father was an excellent specialist and was given a yellow certificate. The color of these certificates was often changed and this was another 'monkey trick' the fascists played. Those who failed to obtain new cards were taken to Ponary. Each worker could register his wife and two children under the age of 16 as his dependants. Since I was short and tiny my father wrote I was born in 1926 instead of 1922, and I was registered as his dependant until 1942. This gave me the right to stay at home, obtain a dependant's card, in this way he rescued me from forced labor that I would not have survived. Many workers registered their relatives as their dependants: fathers as husbands, mothers and sisters as wives, and even strangers to rescue

them.

Those who went to work outside the ghetto were supposed to walk in groups. There were policemen on guard at the gate to the ghetto. One of them, the cruelest of all, beat people black and blue for trying to smuggle some miserable food into the ghetto: a glass of sugar or cereal, a few potatoes. Another order was issued ordering the inmates to live according to the work group division and we had to move to another apartment in Strashnogo Street near the location where my father worked. One day all those who had worker's certificates and their families were moved to the smaller ghetto and all inmates in the smaller ghetto who had no jobs were taken to Ponary.

We had hardly any food. One had to show the document confirming the sanitary treatment to obtain a bread card: that was because of the fear of epidemics in the ghetto. These cards were for little rations of gray bread with sawdust. Sometimes we were given black peas, frozen potatoes and cabbage. We were even given horsemeat once. It stunk when boiling. Mama didn't fail to joke: she added some vinegar to the cabbage and called it ground herring. She made 'liver paste' from peas, and 'sweet tsimes' from frozen potatoes. At one time we were given something called 'vobla' fish [salted fish]. They had taken off its skin, drained it in water and made cutlets. Mama managed to go outside the ghetto once. She brought our belongings from the Lithuanian woman. I started knitting for policemen's wives. I remember knitting a sweater for the fiancée of the policeman at the gate torturing people. When searching people at the entrance to the ghetto, the guards stored everything they could find in the former Gleizer's sausage store at the entrance. However, everybody tried to hide whatever food in the inner pockets of their clothes to smuggle it into the ghetto, and many of them managed.

The Judenrat organized a theater in the ghetto, but we didn't go there thinking that there was no cause for 'singing in the cemetery'. There were two choirs in the ghetto. Luba Levitskaya, the soloist in one of them, was captured once at the entrance to the ghetto trying to bring in half a kilo of peas. She was beaten badly and taken to the Gestapo. People said she kept singing at the Gestapo and then she was taken to Ponary. Fortunately for me I had many friends and spending time with them made this horrible existence somewhat better. On my birthday a friend of mine brought me two branches of dandelions. She took a tremendous risk of bringing flowers past the guard. These two tiny branches embodied hope and a message from the outside of the ghetto. My friend Honke, who had given us shelter in his home once, brought me a little bottle of perfume that he had kept from the perfumery they had owned.

I knew there was an underground movement in the ghetto. In January 1942 a partisan organization under the leadership of Yitzhak Vittenburg was established there. I asked my friends to give me a recommendation to join it. They tried to talk me out of it at first, but then they took me to this organization. This organization helped me to get a job: in 1942 I 'sort of' turned 16 [because her father had changed her birth date from 1922 to 1926] and had to go to work. One day Sonia Madeisker, one of the leaders of the underground movement, visited me at home. Sonia lived outside the ghetto. She helped me to get a job in a shop. At the beginning we weaved straw shoes: the fascists used to wear them over their boots. Then we got knitting orders and I worked 12 hours a day. I had my own work coupon while my mother and Riva were still included on my father's work coupon [as dependants].

The underground organization of the ghetto united all parties and trends such as communists, revisionists, Bund etc. Their common goal was to fight against fascists. Vittenberg, a communist, was the leader of the underground movement. His deputy was Aba Kovner, a Bund member. The organization consisted of groups of five members who only knew their comrades in the group. In our group the password was 'Lisa's calling' commemorating Lisa Roft, who had been a member of the underground, but perished. The younger members of the ghetto were instructed on how to survive in the ghetto, how to bring in food without the policemen noticing. We were also supposed to assist our teachers, who weren't used to physical labor. We also gave people information about the situation at the front line and provided homes for people. The enemy was defeated near Moscow and the Soviet army was in offensive. The senior members brought weapons into the ghetto risking their lives. We were instructed in shooting in basements with brick walls. I visited one of these basements recently. We were also trained in making explosives, but it never came to action.

There were discussions about whether it was necessary to start fighting in the ghetto. In July 1943 Yitzhak Vittenberg was arrested. His comrades fought him back using their weapons. I didn't take part in it as I was a junior member. Then Gensas sent a message to the underground organization saying that if they didn't give in Yitzhak all 20,000 inmates of the ghetto would be shot. Yitzhak did a heroic deed coming out to face his executioners. He was severely tortured by the Gestapo and shot. The leadership of the underground organization decided to leave the ghetto and take people to the woods. Their groups, moving in the direction of Belarus, were captured. Their relatives in the ghetto were taken to prison or Ponary.

I had a picture for my Polish passport taken in the ghetto, but I never got one. Our group of five had gatherings in the library. On 23rd September it was decided to send a few girls to contact a partisan unit. They decided against Jewish guys with a common Semitic appearance. Kaplan, Vittenberg's deputy, instructed us on where we had to go and who to talk to. I went home to say 'good by' to my parents. Mama gave me all she had: boiled peas, a piece of chocolate, a lipstick and a nice blue shirt. I was to go with Doba Develtof, who had a common Slavic look. We were waiting for a signal. In the evening our contact person told us that a man would let us out through a small gate on Nemetskaya Street. I said 'good by' to my family. My mother and sister were crying. I stayed strong. It never occurred to me that this could be the last time I saw them. Though it was summer, I put on a winter coat with the fur collar torn off, as fur was supposed to be given to Germans, and we left. Grigoriy Yashunskiy, the cultural manager of the ghetto, went with us. He was going to hide away.

At the gate Grigoriy went to the left and Doba and I went to the right. On Nemetskaya Street a policeman approached us telling us to walk on the opposite side of the street. There were policemen standing at a distance of ten meters from one another and there were trucks with armed Germans heading to the ghetto. We knew there was something terrible to happen in the ghetto.

I don't remember how we left the town and got to the woods. We ate the peas my mother had given me and then we found wild strawberries in the woods. Wasn't that a miracle - strawberries in September! We walked through the woods all night. In the morning we came to a village called Zverinets and realized we had lost our way: the village was not supposed to be on our way. We approached a woman telling her that we were heading to our aunt in the village of Staryie Matseli to help her dig potatoes. The woman gave us some milk and boiled potatoes and we moved on. In

the evening we arrived in the village of Zhagaryay. The village of our destination was the next one. Some Lithuanian women digging potatoes yelled at us: 'Zhidovki!' [Jews]. We saw some armed soldiers in the village, but what else were we to do but continue on our way.

A local guy offered us shelter. He may have understood that we were going to join the partisans. He took us to a shabby forester's hut where we stayed overnight. In the morning he brought us a bottle of milk and half a loaf of bread. There were swamps ahead of us and he made us sticks for walking. We followed him. The guy showed us out of the swamp and left. He showed us the way, though. For no particular reason we got overwhelmed with joy all of a sudden. We started singing Soviet songs aloud, when someone halted us: 'Halt, who's there?' Instead of saying the password, we started laughing and crying. We got hysterical. This was a distant patrol of the partisan unit that we bumped into. One of the guards went to report on us and another one stayed with us.

At this moment Haya Shapiro, another girl from the ghetto, joined us. She said the ghetto had been eliminated the very night we left. My friends, who were with my mother at the time, but survived, told me that the inmates were taken to some place in the open air. It was pouring, and my mother kept saying: 'We are alive, but how is Fania out there?' On that same day a big group of underground members left the ghetto through the sewer. Samuel Kaplinskiy, who had worked for the water maintenance agency, led them out of there. Kaplan, Asia Bik and Hvoynik, who were supposed to get out of the ghetto as well, got lost, were captured by fascists and hanged.

The partisan unit we met was the one named after Adam Mickiewicz. Its commanding officer met with us and asked us a few questions. A beautiful blonde woman, who looked like a Lithuanian woman was sitting beside him during the interrogation. He suggested that we joined his unit, but the woman said: 'I shall not let Jewish girls join your unit!' I was shaking from being hurt: did we escape from the ghetto just to get into the hands of an anti-Semitic woman. Later it turned out that this woman whose last name was Glezer, was Jewish and just felt sorry for us, innocent Jewish girls. There were vague morals in the partisan unit and she was concerned about us. However, the partisans treated us like their sisters.

I was trained in shooting and installing mines. I had no good boots, but was wearing shabby high-heeled sandals. I had small feet. Borovskaya, the commissar of the unit, gave me the boots of her son who had perished. My first task was to saw down the telegraph supports to break the communications. There were three of us: Haim Lazar, Rashka Markovich and I. We got lost and came to a village we didn't know. We slept on Haim's coat at night and he was very unhappy that we destroyed it. In the morning I realized that this was the village where a guy had given shelter to Doba and I. I knew the way from there and I led the group. My comrades thanked me and I was happy.

Some time later we joined the group of Samuel Kaplinskiy, the one that had escaped through the sewer. We formed the big partisan unit 'For Victory!' under the command of Kaplinskiy. Here, in this partisan unit, I met my true love. My future husband, Mikhail Brantsovkiy, came from Vilnius. He was born on 10th November 1921. The name Brantsovskiy was well-known in Vilnius. There was Brantsovskiy, who owned a paper factory before the war. There was wood cut for the factory stored in the forest and our comrades used to joke: 'Misha [affectionate for Mikhail], we've burnt your wood'. Mikhail wasn't related to the rich man. His father Max owned a food store.

Mikhail finished a Hebrew gymnasium. Before the war Mikhail's brother, whose name I don't remember, went to visit his grandfather in Lida [today Belarus] and perished there. Mikhail, his father and mother were in the ghetto, but we had never met there. A Jewish man from the police reported on Mikhail's father one day when he was hiding in a 'malina' shelter. Max was taken to Ponary. Mikhail's mother Dina stayed in the ghetto. Mikhail and I felt close to one another at once. We had a common fate: a happy cloudless childhood interrupted by the war and the ghetto. We were both worried about what happened to our dear ones kind of guessing their tragic end. We had very moving relationships in the partisan unit. When Misha and I started seeing one another, a friend of mine came to tell him not to hurt me.

I became a member of a group. I was given a rifle and then an automatic gun. I dragged it with me and took part in military missions. I rarely saw Doba. Since she looked like a Slavic girl, she joined an intelligence group. We blasted trains and placed explosives in the enemy's equipment. We shot and killed them. Yes, I did, I killed them and did so with ease. I knew that my dear ones were dead and I took my revenge for them and thousands others with each and every shot. Mikhail was at the head of a group. There were cooks and other logistics people in the unit to take care of the routines. We suffered from lack of vitamins. Once, a comrade of mine brought me half a lemon when he came back from a task. I thought that was very nice of him. Mikhail suffered from scurvy and wasn't involved in any missions. Somehow he managed to overcome his illness. I suffered from stomatitis. Our doctor prescribed me an injection of cow milk. They must have infected me with something. I got a huge abscess and fever, but somehow I managed to recover.

We made blouses from parachutes and colored them with onion peels and herbs to prevent them from luminescence in the dark. Mikhail managed to get children's boots for me. At some stage I was secretary of the Komsomol unit. On 24th December 1943 we went on a mission. We were to blast a bridge. There were only Komsomol members in our group and the mission was called a Komsomol one. The chief engineer of the local paper factory, a Polish man, was with us to help us. This took place during Catholic Christmas and his daughters came to visit him. I was invited to the party. There were candles on the table and I cannot describe the feeling I had sitting at a festive table for the first time in many years. However, this was a rare occasion. Our life consisted of severe routines, earth huts, fires and missions. On 13th July 1944 we went on another mission. When we returned, the unit was preparing to march to Vilnius. The Soviet army was in town, when we arrived there. Vilnius was liberated. I was happy and sad walking familiar streets. I knew I would never see my father, mother or sister again. From what the locals said the ghetto had been eliminated on 23rd -24th September 1943.

Later I heard more details about my parents. My father perished in the concentration camp in Klooga in Estonia at the very end of the war. I don't know the exact date, but in fall 1944 he was still on the lists of the prisoners of this camp. The girls, who were with my mother, found me. They were taken to Riga. One day all women over 35 were taken away. My little sister wanted to come with Mama, but a German pushed her away telling her she was too young. According to the information I have the women were taken into the sea on a barge and drowned. My husband's mother Dina Brantsovskaya perished in the same group with my mother. My sister worked at the weaving factory in Riga. Riva wrote poems and the other girls told me a few lines from her poems. She wrote something like 'I'm standing by a machine weaving belts to hang fascists on them'. All I know is that my little sister perished in a death camp, one of those that fascists were destroying



before the Soviet army came.

There were hardly any Jews left in Vilnius. When I saw older Jews, or they looked old to me considering how young I was, I felt like kneeling before them to kiss their hands. I approached them to talk to them and find out where they had been during the war. What happened to our dear ones made my attachment to Mikhail much stronger. On 22nd July 1944 we actually became husband and wife, we started living together, and we got married on 17th August that year. We had no passports. We had our marriage registered in our partisan ID's; the registry office that had just been opened made an entry about our marriage.

The whole unit celebrated our wedding. All partisan groups stayed in cottages in Vilnius together. Our group got a big mansion on Anglu Street. Later we got a big apartment in Pilimo Street. My husband and I had a big room there. We slept on mattresses on the floor. We spent our evenings with the group and also shared the food with them. We were intoxicated by the victory, our youth and love.

The Soviet regime needed specialists to restore the economy. We were invited to the Komsomol central committee where they asked where my husband and I had worked before the war. My husband had been a worker at a shoe factory and they made him director of the factory. He turned down this high level position and became its technical manager. My friend, who was just a first year student of the Faculty of Economics, was appointed manager of the planning department. Since I knew Russian, I was sent to work as secretary of a ministry. At first all ministers sat in one office. Later the minister I worked for got another office. I used to take my rifle to work putting it in the corner. The minister joked: 'One day you'll shoot me!' We didn't care for any material riches. They didn't seem to matter in comparison to victory and freedom. However, we had to get used to peaceful life. Some time later we were ordered to submit our weapons. In summer 1945 Mikhail and I were in the Lithuanian delegation standing on the Red Square [in Moscow] at the Victory Parade. These were unforgettable moments. My husband and five others were awarded the 'Medal for Partisan of the Great Patriotic War' [37](#), Grade I, and they were one of the first awardees.

Life was gradually improving. In 1944 Vilnius was bombed several times, but this wasn't all that scary. I was offered a teacher's job, but I only wanted to teach Jewish children, and there were very few of them in Vilnius. In 1945 I finished the technical school of statistics. In April 1945 I became a statistical analyst in the Central Statistical Department of Lithuania. I worked there till I retired. I was promoted to personnel manager, and then became chief of the registration department.

In 1945 the factory where my husband was working burnt down. We were very concerned that my husband might get in trouble. There were many people taken to jail for sabotage or negligence. Fortunately, my husband's investigation officer from the NKVD [38](#) happened to be a decent man. He knew my husband was not to blame. My husband went to work as chief of department in the Lithuanian Industrial Council and then worked as chief of Department of State Planning of Lithuania for 25 years. He finished Moscow Institute of Engineering and Economics extramurally. We joined the Communist Party following our convictions. We joined it very consciously.

## Post-war

We didn't observe Jewish traditions. We spoke Yiddish to one another. Shortly after the war the synagogue opened in Vilnius. We attended it, but not to pray. There was a sort of Jewish center

there where Jewish survivors searched for information about their families. I found my friend through the synagogue. She lives in Israel, in Haifa. Almost right after Vilnius was liberated I received a letter from aunt Nusia, my uncle Meishke's wife. I was very happy to learn she had survived. I visited her in Moscow several times. Once I met a few girls from Taurag at a Komsomol gathering. I mentioned that my uncle Shimon had lived there before the war, the only one of my mother's brothers who managed to evacuate, and it turned out that Shimon had survived. He visited us with Shulamit, his daughter, the only one of his daughters who also survived. He and his daughter visited us in Vilnius to bid us farewell. Shimon couldn't bear to stay in the town after losing his wife and four daughters and they moved to Israel.

I knew I had relatives in Israel. My mother's parents, her brother and sister had moved there before the war. I wrote to them from Belarus back in 1939 and they replied, but after the war it was no good to try to get in touch with them. The Soviet regime didn't trust people who had relatives abroad [39](#). People could lose their jobs and the party membership. Besides, at this time the prosecution of Jews and campaign against cosmopolitans [40](#) began. It had no impact on us and we truly believed the propaganda.

We were given two rooms in a four-room apartment. The apartment was divided into halves [see communal apartment] [41](#). We got a kitchen and two rooms, and our co-tenants got two rooms and the bathroom, so we had to install a bathtub in the kitchen. The bathroom was in the kitchen; we made a curtain to separate it from the kitchen. This other was a Lithuanian family and we became friends. In 1950 my first daughter, Vita [Safian, nee Brantsovskaya] was born in this apartment. This name means 'life' in Latin. This was what my husband and I valued to the utmost and what we paid a high price for. In 1956 we received a separate apartment on Gorkogo [presently Dijoli] Street. This was one of the first houses with central heating in Vilnius. It was very cold in the first year. In 1958 my second daughter was born. We named her Dina [Baver, nee Bratsovskaya] after my husband's mother. The children went to a nursery school and a kindergarten. They had no grandmothers to help us raise them.

My husband held official posts and earned well, but my salaries were rather low. My husband could have free stays in recreation homes each year. I bought a trip from trade unions and went with him [see Recreation Centers in the USSR] [42](#). We usually traveled to Palanga [resort on the Baltic Sea], and once I went to the Caucasus with him, but the hot climate there was too much for me.

We raised our children to be hardworking and modest. I remember the following incidence. My husband had an office car to take him to work; we never owned a car or a dacha. One day his new driver arrived in the morning to take my husband to work and our daughters to the kindergarten. But my husband said he would walk to work and our daughter was ultimately disappointed considering that it was a cold nasty day. My husband told him to drive back to the office.

In 1947 all former Polish residents could move back to Poland. We also had this opportunity, but we believed in our country [the Soviet Union], in socialism, peace and justice. There was another opportunity in 1957. Our convictions were not so strong any more then. We went through the period of state anti-Semitism, the Doctors' Plot [43](#); these were terrible years. My husband was summoned to the state party committee where we were offered to go to provincial areas and organize a Polish newspaper there. When my husband refused saying that it wasn't quite his specialty, they had a rough talk with him and even mentioned that he must have survived under

some vague circumstances during the war, being a Jew. However, there were no follow-up actions on their part.

The denouncement of the cult of Stalin in 1956, at the Twentieth Party Congress [44](#) was an inspiring moment and gave us hope again. I remember our friend Kovalski, a tailor, staying a whole night with us arguing and trying to convince us that we had to leave this country. We stayed and so did he. We've never considered emigration. We didn't consider it during the mass emigration in the late 1970s. However, we never cared about possible troubles following our acquaintance with those friends who decided to move to other countries. Our friends spent their last days here with us and we accompanied them to the railway station. Vilnius is closer to Europe than Moscow and we didn't have such incidents as expulsion from the Party for this kind of anti-Soviet conduct.

My husband worked till his last days. In 1985, at the medical examination before his trip to a resort, they diagnosed cancer. He was operated on and the doctors told us he was to be all right when in truth cancer struck him all over. On 20th May 1985 he was admitted to hospital for high governmental officials and stayed there for seven months. He died in December 1985. He was buried in the town military cemetery. Our combat friends and his colleagues living in various towns came to his funeral. They made speeches by his casket for a few hours. I lost my beloved husband and my best friend.

My work and children helped me to survive. I retired in 1990. My daughters have had a good life. They finished school with gold medals. Both graduated from the Faculty of Cybernetics of Vilnius University, nine years one after another. There was no oppression on ethnic issues toward them. Vita defended her dissertation in Moscow. She works at the Ministry of Labor and Social Services. Her husband Mikhail Safian, a Jewish man from Minsk, is a mathematician. Vita's daughter Anna, born in 1975, works for a Norwegian/Lithuanian company. She is married to a Lithuanian man. Anna's son Simon is my great-grandson. He'll turn four in July.

Dina, my younger daughter, married Boris Baver, a Jewish man from Vilnius. In 1990 she, her husband and their sons Maxim, born in 1982, and Benjamin, born in 1984, moved to Haifa, Israel. They are doing very well there and have good jobs. In Israel Dina gave birth to two more children: Mikhail, named after my husband, was born in 1994, and Sapi, my granddaughter, in 2001.

I often go to Israel. In 1989 my maternal relatives found me. They invited my older daughter and me to visit them. I met my cousin brothers and sisters. My friends also invited me to Canada and the USA and I visited there. I live a fulfilled life, also since I'm involved in the Jewish life in Lithuania. I'm not religious, but I'm happy that there is a wonderful Jewish community and the Hesed [45](#) taking care of old people in Lithuania. I volunteer for the section of former ghetto inmates. I also conduct public activities as a former inmate of the ghetto. I meet with children in the local Jewish school - there is a state Jewish state school in Vilnius - speak at meetings and on memorial days. I also visit Ponary where Jewish Lithuanians were killed. I always speak in Yiddish, which is my mother tongue, with other survivors of the Holocaust.

I don't regret that my husband and I have lived our life in Lithuania. Though, in the course of time, we had more and more understanding of the hypocrisy of the Soviet power, we were its true servants. However, I'm happy that Lithuania has become independent [46](#). This promotes the development of the Lithuanian and Jewish nations. Every year on 9th May, Victory Day [47](#) I make a speech at the town meeting. At the 45th anniversary of the victory [1990] I spoke in the Jewish

Knesset [Israeli parliament] where I was invited and so were other veterans of World War II, former ghetto inmates and partisans.

## Glossary

### **1 Annexation of Vilnius to Lithuania**

During the interwar period the previously Russian-held multi-ethnic city of Wilno (Vilnius) was a part of Poland and the capital of Lithuania was Kaunas. According to a secret clause in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (Soviet-German agreement on the division of Eastern Europe, August 1939) the Soviet Army occupied both Eastern Poland (September 1939) and the three Baltic states (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, June 1940). While most of the occupied Eastern Polish territories were divided up between Soviet Ukraine and Belarus, Vilnius was attached to Lithuania and was to be its capital. The loss of the independent Lithuanian statehood, therefore, was accompanied with the return of Vilnius, regarded as an integral part of the country by most Lithuanians.

### **2 Bund**

The short name of the General Jewish Union of Working People in Lithuania, Poland and Russia, Bund means Union in Yiddish). The Bund was a social democratic organization representing Jewish craftsmen from the Western areas of the Russian Empire. It was founded in Vilnius in 1897. In 1906 it joined the autonomous fraction of the Russian Social Democratic Working Party and took up a Menshevik position. After the Revolution of 1917 the organization split: one part was anti-Soviet power, while the other remained in the Bolsheviks' Russian Communist Party. In 1921 the Bund dissolved itself in the USSR, but continued to exist in other countries.

### **3 Great Patriotic War**

On 22nd June 1941 at 5 o'clock in the morning Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union without declaring war. This was the beginning of the so-called Great Patriotic War. The German blitzkrieg, known as Operation Barbarossa, nearly succeeded in breaking the Soviet Union in the months that followed. Caught unprepared, the Soviet forces lost whole armies and vast quantities of equipment to the German onslaught in the first weeks of the war. By November 1941 the German army had seized the Ukrainian Republic, besieged Leningrad, the Soviet Union's second largest city, and threatened Moscow itself. The war ended for the Soviet Union on 9th May 1945.

### **4 Judenrat**

Jewish councils appointed by German occupying authorities to carry out Nazi orders in the Jewish communities of occupied Europe. After the establishment of the ghettos they were responsible for everything that happened within them. They controlled all institutions operating in the ghettos, the police, the employment agency, food supplies, housing, health, social work, education, religion, etc. Germans also made them responsible for selecting people for the work camps, and, in the end, choosing those to be sent to camps that were in reality death camps. It is hard to judge their actions due to the abnormal circumstances. Some believe they betrayed Jews by obeying orders, and others think they were trying to gain time and save as many people as possible.

## **5 Ponary**

Forest near Vilnius that became the killing field for the majority of Jews from Vilnius. The victims were shot to death by the SS and the German police assisted by Lithuanian collaborators. In September- October 1941 alone over 12,000 Jews from Vilnius and the vicinity were killed there. In total 70,000 to 100,000 people, the majority of them Jews were killed in Ponary.

## **6 Vilnius Ghetto**

95 percent of the estimated 265,000 Lithuanian Jews (254,000 people) were murdered during the Nazi occupation; no other communities were so comprehensively destroyed during WWII. Vilnius was occupied by the Germans on 26th June 1941 and two ghettos were built in the city afterwards, separated by Niemiecka Street, which lay outside both of them. On 6th September all Jews were taken to the ghettos, at first randomly to either Ghetto 1 or Ghetto 2. During September they were continuously slaughtered by Einsatzkommando units. Later craftsmen were moved to Ghetto 1 with their families and all others to Ghetto 2. During the 'Yom Kippur Action' on 1st October 3,000 Jews were killed. In three additional actions in October the entire Ghetto 2 was liquidated and later another 9,000 of the survivors were killed. In late 1941 the official population of the ghetto was 12,000 people and it rose to 20,000 by 1943 as a result of further transports. In August 1943 over 7,000 people were sent to various labor camps in Lithuania and Estonia. The Vilnius ghetto was liquidated under the supervision of Bruno Kittel on 23rd and 24th September 1943. On Rossa Square a selection took place: those able to work were sent to labor camps in Latvia and Estonia and the rest to different death camps in Poland. By 25th September 1943 only 2,000 Jews officially remained in Vilnius in small labor camps and more than 1,000 were hiding outside and were gradually hunted down. Those permitted to live continued to work at the Kailis and HKP factories until 2nd June 1944 when 1,800 of them were shot and less than 200 remained in hiding until the Red Army liberated Vilnius on 13th July 1944. (Source: <http://www.deathcamps.org/occupation/vilnius%20ghetto.html>)

## **7 Sutzkever, Abraham (1913)**

Poet writing in Yiddish. Born in Vilnius region, he belonged to the artistic Jung Wilne circle and was its most illustrious member. He made his literary debut in 1933. During WWII he was in the Warsaw ghetto, but escaped and joined the underground army. Subsequently moved to the USSR, but in 1946 returned to Poland. Since 1947 he has lived in Israel. He published several volumes of verse, including *Di Festung* (The Fortress), *Yidishe Gas* (Jewish Street) and *In Fayer Vogn* (In the Fiery Wagon).

## **8 Soviet/Russian doctorate degrees**

Graduate school in the Soviet Union (aspirantura, or ordinatura for medical students), which usually took about 3 years and resulted in a dissertation. Students who passed were awarded a 'kandidat nauk' (lit. candidate of sciences) degree. If a person wanted to proceed with his or her research, the next step would be to apply for a doctorate degree (doktarontura). To be awarded a doctorate degree, the person had to be involved in the academia, publish consistently, and write an original dissertation. In the end he/she would be awarded a 'doctor nauk' (lit. doctor of sciences) degree.



## **9 Birobidzhan**

Formed in 1928 to give Soviet Jews a home territory and to increase settlement along the vulnerable borders of the Soviet Far East, the area was raised to the status of an autonomous region in 1934. Influenced by an effective propaganda campaign, and starvation in the east, 41,000 Soviet Jews relocated to the area between the late 1920s and early 1930s. But, by 1938 28,000 of them had fled the regions harsh conditions, There were Jewish schools and synagogues up until the 1940s, when there was a resurgence of religious repression after World War II. The Soviet government wanted the forced deportation of all Jews to Birobidzhan to be completed by the middle of the 1950s. But in 1953 Stalin died and the deportation was cancelled. Despite some remaining Yiddish influences - including a Yiddish newspaper - Jewish cultural activity in the region has declined enormously since Stalin's anti-cosmopolitanism campaigns and since the liberalization of Jewish emigration in the 1970s. Jews now make up less than 2% of the region's population.

## **10 Invasion of Poland**

The German attack of Poland on 1st September 1939 is widely considered the date in the West for the start of World War II. After having gained both Austria and the Bohemian and Moravian parts of Czechoslovakia, Hitler was confident that he could acquire Poland without having to fight Britain and France. (To eliminate the possibility of the Soviet Union fighting if Poland were attacked, Hitler made a pact with the Soviet Union, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.) On the morning of 1st September 1939, German troops entered Poland. The German air attack hit so quickly that most of Poland's air force was destroyed while still on the ground. To hinder Polish mobilization, the Germans bombed bridges and roads. Groups of marching soldiers were machine-gunned from the air, and they also aimed at civilians. On 1st September, the beginning of the attack, Great Britain and France sent Hitler an ultimatum - withdraw German forces from Poland or Great Britain and France would go to war against Germany. On 3rd September, with Germany's forces penetrating deeper into Poland, Great Britain and France both declared war on Germany.

## **11 Mickiewicz, Adam (1798-1855)**

Often regarded as the greatest Polish poet. As a student he was arrested for nationalist activities by the tsarist police in 1823. In 1829 he managed to emigrate to France and worked as professor of literature at different universities. During the 1848 revolution in France and the Crimean War he attempted to organize legions for the Polish cause. Mickiewicz's poetry gave international stature to Polish literature. His powerful verse expressed a romantic view of the soul and the mysteries of life, often employing Polish folk themes.

## **12 Khrushchev, Nikita (1894-1971)**

Soviet communist leader. After Stalin's death in 1953, he became first secretary of the Central Committee, in effect the head of the Communist Party of the USSR. In 1956, during the 20th Party Congress, Khrushchev took an unprecedented step and denounced Stalin and his methods. He was deposed as premier and party head in October 1964. In 1966 he was dropped from the Party's Central Committee.

### **13 Gediminas (ca 1275-1341)**

Grand Prince of Lithuania, founder of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the city of Vilnius (1323).

### **14 Russian Revolution of 1917**

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

### **15 Lithuanian independence**

A part of the Russian Empire since the 18th century, Lithuania gained independence after WWI (1918), as a result of the collapse of its two powerful neighbors, Russia and Germany. Although resisting the attacks of Soviet-Russia successfully, Lithuania lost to Poland the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural city of Vilna (Wilno, Vilnius) in 1920, claimed by both countries, and as a result they remained in war up until 1927. In 1923 Lithuania succeeded in occupying the previously French-administered (since 1919) Memel Territory and port (Klaipeda). The Lithuanian Republic remained independent until its Soviet occupation in 1940.

### **16 Bolsheviks**

Members of the movement led by Lenin. The name 'Bolshevik' was coined in 1903 and denoted the group that emerged in elections to the key bodies in the Social Democratic Party (SDPRR) considering itself in the majority (Rus. bolshynstvo) within the party. It dubbed its opponents the minority (Rus. menshynstvo, the Mensheviks). Until 1906 the two groups formed one party. The Bolsheviks first gained popularity and support in society during the 1905-07 Revolution. During the February Revolution in 1917 the Bolsheviks were initially in the opposition to the Menshevik and SR ('Sotsialrevolyutsionery', Socialist Revolutionaries) delegates who controlled the Soviets (councils). When Lenin returned from emigration (16 April) they proclaimed his program of action (the April theses) and under the slogan 'All power to the Soviets' began to Bolshevize the Soviets and prepare for a proletariat revolution. Agitation proceeded on a vast scale, especially in the army. The Bolsheviks set about creating their own armed forces, the Red Guard. Having overthrown the Provisional Government, they created a government with the support of the II Congress of Soviets (the October Revolution), to which they admitted some left-wing SRs in order to gain the support of the peasantry. In 1952 the Bolshevik party was renamed the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

### **17 Common name**

Russified or Russian first names used by Jews in everyday life and adopted in official documents. The Russification of first names was one of the manifestations of the assimilation of Russian Jews at the turn of the 19th and 20th century. In some cases only the spelling and pronunciation of Jewish names was russified (e.g. Isaac instead of Yitskhak; Boris instead of Borukh), while in other cases

traditional Jewish names were replaced by similarly sounding Russian names (e.g. Eugenia instead of Ghita; Yury instead of Yuda). When state anti-Semitism intensified in the USSR at the end of the 1940s, most Jewish parents stopped giving their children traditional Jewish names to avoid discrimination.

### **18 Smetona, Antanas (1874-1944)**

Lithuanian politician, President of Lithuania. A lawyer by profession he was the leader of the autonomous movement when Lithuania was a part of the Russian Empire. He was provisional President of Lithuania (1919-1920) and elected president after 1926. In 1929 he forced the Prime Minister, Augustin Voldemaras, to resign and established full dictatorship. Following Lithuania's occupation by the Soviet Union (1940), Smetona fled to Germany and then (1941) to the United States.

### **19 Tsimes**

Stew made usually of carrots, parsnips, or plums with potatoes.

### **20 Karaite**

Jewish schismatic sect, founded in Persia in the 8th century. Karaites reject the Oral Law, the Talmud, and accept only the Torah, but have developed their own commentaries. In Russia the Karaites initially enjoyed the same rights and suffered from the same oppression as Jews, however, after the 18th century they were given the right to purchase land. During the Nazi occupation they were not persecuted, as they were not considered a part of the Jewish community.

### **21 Hasid**

The follower of the Hasidic movement, a Jewish mystic movement founded in the 18th century that reacted against Talmudic learning and maintained that God's presence was in all of one's surroundings and that one should serve God in one's every deed and word. The movement provided spiritual hope and uplifted the common people. There were large branches of Hasidic movements and schools throughout Eastern Europe before World War II, each following the teachings of famous scholars and thinkers. Most had their own customs, rituals and life styles. Today there are substantial Hasidic communities in New York, London, Israel and Antwerp.

### **22 Schindler, Oskar (1908-1974)**

one of the 'Righteous Among the Nations' who during the Nazi persecutions saved the lives of more than 1,200 Polish Jews. Schindler was born in Zwittau, Sudetenland, Czechoslovakia, and after the annexation of the Sudetenland by the Germans served as a member of Admiral Canaris' anti-espionage service. He left the service after Germany's conquest of Poland and established a factory in Cracow which was later converted into a munitions plant. Schindler took advantage of this plant to save Jews from the extermination camps. He arranged for his workers and those of three neighboring factories whose Jewish workers were about to be deported to be classified as prisoners doing essential work. He often had to bribe the SS and other functionaries to turn a blind eye. After the war, Schindler emigrated to Argentina where he bought a farm, but in 1956 returned

to Frankfurt. In 1962 Schindler was honored by Israel as one of the 'Righteous Among the Nations' and in 1967 was awarded the peace prize of the International Buber Society in London. The following year the West German Government awarded him its highest civilian order, the 'Verdienstkreuz Ersten Ranges' and a small pension. Schindler, a Roman Catholic, died in Hildesheim and in accordance with his last wish, was buried in Jerusalem in the Latin cemetery on Mt. Zion.

### **23 Kaunas ghetto**

On 24th June 1941 the Germans captured Kaunas. Two ghettos were established in the city, a small and a big one, and 48,000 Jews were taken there. Within two and a half months the small ghetto was eliminated and during the 'Grossaktion' of 28th-29th October, thousands of the survivors were murdered, including children. The remaining 17,412 people in the big ghetto were mobilized to work. On 27th-28th March 1944 another 18,000 were killed and 4,000 were taken to different camps in July before the Soviet Army captured the city. The total number of people who perished in the Kaunas ghetto was 35,000.

### **24 Klooga**

Subcamp of the Vaivara camp in Estonia, set up in 1943 and one of the largest camps in the country. Most of the prisoners came from the Vilnius ghetto; they worked under extreme conditions. There were 3,000 to 5,000 inmates kept in the Klooga camp. It was eliminated together with all of its inmates in spring 1944, before the advance by the Soviet army.

### **25 Occupation of the Baltic Republics (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania)**

Although the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact regarded only Latvia and Estonia as parts of the Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, according to a supplementary protocol (signed in 28th September 1939) most of Lithuania was also transferred under the Soviets. The three states were forced to sign the 'Pact of Defense and Mutual Assistance' with the USSR allowing it to station troops in their territories. In June 1940 Moscow issued an ultimatum demanding the change of governments and the occupation of the Baltic Republics. The three states were incorporated into the Soviet Union as the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republics.

### **26 Sugihara, Sempo (1900-1986)**

Japanese diplomat who saved the lives of more than 3,000 Jews. He started to work as Vice Consul in Lithuania in 1939 and was responsible for handling travel documents and commercial contracts. He helped Dutch yeshivah students leave German occupied Lithuania via the Soviet Union and Japan for Dutch controlled Curacao. Consequently, other Jews approached him and applied for Japanese visas. Disregarding explicit orders of his superiors, Sugihara, following his sense of morality, continued issuing the visas until early September 1940, when he was removed from Lithuania. He issued over 9,000 visas. After returning to Japan in 1947 he was asked to resign from the diplomatic corps for insubordination. In 1984 Yad Vashem awarded Sempo Sugihara the title of 'Righteous Among the Nations'.

## **27 Realschule**

Secondary school for boys. Students studied mathematics, physics, natural history, foreign languages and drawing. After finishing this school they could enter higher industrial and agricultural educational institutions.

## **28 Komsomol**

Communist youth political organization created in 1918. The task of the Komsomol was to spread of the ideas of communism and involve the worker and peasant youth in building the Soviet Union. The Komsomol also aimed at giving a communist upbringing by involving the worker youth in the political struggle, supplemented by theoretical education. The Komsomol was more popular than the Communist Party because with its aim of education people could accept uninitiated young proletarians, whereas party members had to have at least a minimal political qualification.

## **29 Maccabi World Union**

International Jewish sports organization whose origins go back to the end of the 19th century. A growing number of young Eastern European Jews involved in Zionism felt that one essential prerequisite of the establishment of a national home in Palestine was the improvement of the physical condition and training of ghetto youth. In order to achieve this, gymnastics clubs were founded in many Eastern and Central European countries, which later came to be called Maccabi. The movement soon spread to more countries in Europe and to Palestine. The World Maccabi Union was formed in 1921. In less than two decades its membership was estimated at 200,000 with branches located in most countries of Europe and in Palestine, Australia, South America, South Africa, etc.

## **30 Great Terror (1934-1938)**

During the Great Terror, or Great Purges, which included the notorious show trials of Stalin's former Bolshevik opponents in 1936-1938 and reached its peak in 1937 and 1938, millions of innocent Soviet citizens were sent off to labor camps or killed in prison. The major targets of the Great Terror were communists. Over half of the people who were arrested were members of the party at the time of their arrest. The armed forces, the Communist Party, and the government in general were purged of all allegedly dissident persons; the victims were generally sentenced to death or to long terms of hard labor. Much of the purge was carried out in secret, and only a few cases were tried in public 'show trials'. By the time the terror subsided in 1939, Stalin had managed to bring both the Party and the public to a state of complete submission to his rule. Soviet society was so atomized and the people so fearful of reprisals that mass arrests were no longer necessary. Stalin ruled as absolute dictator of the Soviet Union until his death in March 1953.

## **31 Trotsky, Lev Davidovich (born Bronshtein) (1879-1940)**

Russian revolutionary, one of the leaders of the October Revolution of 1917, an outstanding figure of the communist movement and a theorist of Marxism. Trotsky participated in the social-democratic movement from 1894 and supported the idea of the unification of Bolsheviks and



Mensheviks from 1906. In 1905 he developed the idea of the 'permanent revolution'. He was one of the leaders of the October Revolution and a founder of the Red Army. He widely applied repressive measures to support the discipline and 'bring everything into revolutionary order' at the front and the home front. The intense struggle with Stalin for the leadership ended with Trotsky's defeat. In 1924 his views were declared petty-bourgeois deviation. In 1927 he was expelled from the Communist Party, and exiled to Kazakhstan, and in 1929 abroad. He lived in Turkey, Norway and then Mexico. He excoriated Stalin's regime as a bureaucratic degeneration of the proletarian power. He was murdered in Mexico by an agent of Soviet special services on Stalin's order.

### **32 Zinoviev, Grigory Evseyevich (1883-1936)**

Soviet communist leader, head of the Comintern (1919-26) and member of the Communist Party Politburo (1921-26). After Lenin's death in 1924, Zinoviev, Kamenev, and Stalin formed a ruling triumvirate and excluded Trotsky from the Party. In 1925 Stalin, in an effort to consolidate his own power, turned against Zinoviev and Kamenev, who then joined Trotsky's opposition. Zinoviev was removed from his party posts in 1926 and expelled from the Party in 1927. He recanted and was readmitted in 1928 but wielded little influence. In 1936, he, Kamenev, and 13 old Bolsheviks were tried for treason in the first big public purge trial. They confessed and were executed.

### **33 Zinoviev-Kamenev triumvirate**

After Lenin's death in 1924 communist leaders Zinoviev, Kamenev and Stalin formed a ruling triumvirate and excluded Trotsky from the Party. In 1925 Stalin, in an effort to consolidate his own power, turned against Zinoviev and Kamenev, who then joined Trotsky's opposition. Both Zinoviev and Kamenev were expelled from the Party in 1927. They recanted, and were readmitted, but had little influence. In 1936 Zinoviev and Kamenev, along with 13 old Bolsheviks were tried for treason in the first big public purge trial. They confessed and were executed.

### **34 Enemy of the people**

Soviet official term; euphemism used for real or assumed political opposition.

### **35 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.

### **36 Medieval Jewish ghetto of Vilnius**

From the mid-16th century, when Jews settled down in Lithuania, up until 1861 Jews were not

allowed to reside in the central part of the city, only in the area of the ghetto. This was the neighborhood within Jewish, Yatkova and German Streets; this part of the town is still called the 'medieval Jewish ghetto'.

### **37 Medal for Partisan of the Great Patriotic War**

Established on 2nd February 1943, the 1st class was awarded to partisans, commanders of partisan detachments, and partisan movement organizers for personal feats of courage and valor. Approximately 57,000 medals were issued. The 2nd class was awarded to partisans, commanders of partisan detachments, and partisan movement organizers for distinction in carrying out orders and assignments for higher echelons during the Great Patriotic War. Approximately 71,000 medals were issued. The medal was awarded to over 100 foreigners fighting in Soviet partisan units.

### **38 NKVD**

People's Committee of Internal Affairs; it took over from the GPU, the state security agency, in 1934.

### **39 Keep in touch with relatives abroad**

The authorities could arrest an individual corresponding with his/her relatives abroad and charge him/her with espionage, send them to concentration camp or even sentence them to death.

### **40 Campaign against 'cosmopolitans'**

The campaign against 'cosmopolitans', i.e. Jews, was initiated in articles in the central organs of the Communist Party in 1949. The campaign was directed primarily at the Jewish intelligentsia and it was the first public attack on Soviet Jews as Jews. 'Cosmopolitans' writers were accused of hating the Russian people, of supporting Zionism, etc. Many Yiddish writers as well as the leaders of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee were arrested in November 1948 on charges that they maintained ties with Zionism and with American 'imperialism'. They were executed secretly in 1952. The anti-Semitic Doctors' Plot was launched in January 1953. A wave of anti-Semitism spread through the USSR. Jews were removed from their positions, and rumors of an imminent mass deportation of Jews to the eastern part of the USSR began to spread. Stalin's death in March 1953 put an end to the campaign against 'cosmopolitans'.

### **41 Communal apartment**

The Soviet power wanted to improve housing conditions by requisitioning 'excess' living space of wealthy families after the Revolution of 1917. Apartments were shared by several families with each family occupying one room and sharing the kitchen, toilet and bathroom with other tenants. Because of the chronic shortage of dwelling space in towns communal or shared apartments continued to exist for decades. Despite state programs for the construction of more houses and the liquidation of communal apartments, which began in the 1960s, shared apartments still exist today.

### **42 Recreation Centers in the USSR**

trade unions of many enterprises and public organizations in the USSR constructed recreation centers, rest homes, and children's health improvement centers, where employees could take a vacation paying 10 percent of the actual total cost of such stays. In theory each employee could take one such vacation per year, but in reality there were no sufficient numbers of vouchers for such vacations, and they were mostly available only for the management.

### **43 Doctors' Plot**

The Doctors' Plot was an alleged conspiracy of a group of Moscow doctors to murder leading government and party officials. In January 1953, the Soviet press reported that nine doctors, six of whom were Jewish, had been arrested and confessed their guilt. As Stalin died in March 1953, the trial never took place. The official paper of the Party, the Pravda, later announced that the charges against the doctors were false and their confessions obtained by torture. This case was one of the worst anti-Semitic incidents during Stalin's reign. In his secret speech at the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956 Khrushchev stated that Stalin wanted to use the Plot to purge the top Soviet leadership.

### **44 Twentieth Party Congress**

At the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956 Khrushchev publicly debunked the cult of Stalin and lifted the veil of secrecy from what had happened in the USSR during Stalin's leadership.

### **45 Hesed**

Meaning care and mercy in Hebrew, Hesed stands for the charity organization founded by Amos Avgar in the early 20th century. Supported by Claims Conference and Joint Hesed helps for Jews in need to have a decent life despite hard economic conditions and encourages development of their self-identity. Hesed provides a number of services aimed at supporting the needs of all, and particularly elderly members of the society. The major social services include: work in the center facilities (information, advertisement of the center activities, foreign ties and free lease of medical equipment); services at homes (care and help at home, food products delivery, delivery of hot meals, minor repairs); work in the community (clubs, meals together, day-time polyclinic, medical and legal consultations); service for volunteers (training programs). The Hesed centers have inspired a real revolution in the Jewish life in the FSU countries. People have seen and sensed the rebirth of the Jewish traditions of humanism. Currently over eighty Hesed centers exist in the FSU countries. Their activities cover the Jewish population of over eight hundred settlements.

### **46 Reestablishment of the Lithuanian Republic**

On 11th March 1990 the Lithuanian State Assembly declared Lithuania an independent republic. The Soviet leadership in Moscow refused to acknowledge the independence of Lithuania and initiated an economic blockade on the country. At the referendum held in February 1991, over 90 percent of the participants (turn out was 84 percent) voted for independence. The western world finally recognized Lithuanian independence and so did the USSR on 6th September 1991. On 17th September 1991 Lithuania joined the United Nations.

#### **47 Victory Day in Russia (9th May)**

National holiday to commemorate the defeat of Nazi Germany and the end of World War II and honor the Soviets who died in the war.