

Ranana Malkhanova

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Vilnius

Lithuania

Interviewer: Zhanna Litinskaya

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Ranana Malkhanova is a charming, pretty, and well-dressed lady. We met in her office in Vilnius at the Jewish Community of Lithuania, where she's working as a volunteer. Her fair eyes portray kindness and keen interest. While we were talking, I understood that it wasn't her fashionable garment nor modern hair-cut that made Ranana look so young, it was her spirit: her being outgoing and willing to help anybody in the community or other people. Ranana has a lot of friends in the community and she introduced me to them. I felt the warmth that they shared.

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Family background

I was born in the small Lithuanian town Vilkaviskis [about 150km from Vilnius], 14 kilometers away from the border with Russia and Poland. I was only nine, when World War II [see Great Patriotic War] [1](#) was unleashed. I had to go through such adversities that they practically obliterated almost everything that I had before: my childhood, happiness without alloy, etc. That's why I have vague reminiscences of the pre-war times, but in spite of that I would like to leave a trace of my kin.

I know that my maternal great-grandfather was a rabbi, but I don't know his name, and where he lived. All I know is that he was from Lithuania. My maternal grandfather, Jacob Solomin, was born in Vilkaviskis [renamed Pilviskiai in 1920s] in the 1870s. My grandfather was a merchant of the 2nd Guild [see Guild I] [2](#). He owned a rather large construction materials store in the central square of Vilkaviskis, but my grandparents lived in a very small town, 22 kilometers from Vilkaviskis. As far as I understand, Pilviskiai, where my kin used to live, was a real shtetl. There were only one-storied houses, mostly wooden, and very rarely stone, with yards and household annexes. Most of the population was Jewish [the community numbered 4,417 in 1856 (as against 834 Christians), 3,480 in 1897 (60% of the total population), 3,206 in 1923 (44%), and 3,609 in 1939 (45%)].

The Lithuanian population was in minority and they mostly lived on the outskirts of town and dealt mostly with tillage. I barely remember what my grandparents or their house looked like. I remember that Grandmother Yena wore a wig, dark skirt and blouse like all Jewish women back in that time. My grandfather always wore either a kippah or hat when he was in public. My grandfather owned half of the house in Vilkaviskis. Half of his house was usually closed as he was rather well-off and didn't need to lease his property. He stayed in his part of the house when he went to Vilkaviskis on business. Sometimes my grandmother went with him. In winter Jacob and

Yena stayed in Vilkauskis.

Grandfather Jacob was a very religious man. In Vilkauskis he went to the synagogue every morning clad in a tallit and tefillin. Though Pilviskiai was rather small, I assume that there was a synagogue. My grandfather always started his day with a prayer. He read the Talmud all day long. When he discovered something new, he was so excited that he wanted to share what he had read with those who were willing to listen. I remember once when he tried to explain something to me, but I didn't understand anything. My grandmother was also a devoted Jew. All Jewish traditions were kept in her house, holidays were marked and the kashrut was strictly observed. Jacob and Yena raised their children religiously. They had sons and one daughter, my mother. There's nothing I can say about my mother's brothers' religious status. As for my mother, she wasn't religious and didn't observe the traditions when she was an adult. My grandparents perished in 1941 during the occupation. I think they were killed during one of the actions against Jews in Pilviskiai.

My mother's youngest brother, whose name I don't remember, died when he was an infant. My mother's two elder brothers, Shimon and Lipo, born in the 1890s, went abroad. Lipo settled down in America, and Shimon went to Canada. We had our own business before the Soviet occupation [see Occupation of the Baltic Republics] [3](#). My mother corresponded with them. Then she didn't keep in touch, as it wasn't safe and was fraught with persecution [see Keep in touch with relatives abroad] [4](#). Her brothers were married. I don't know anything about their families. When the war was over, my mother's brothers sent us parcels via some strange people, and we received them in the Vilnius synagogue. There were medicine, products and clothes in them, but in the 1960s we stopped keeping in touch. As far as I know they died in the 1970s. Another one of my mother's brothers, Meishel, lived with his wife and daughter Riva in a village not far from Vilkauskis. Meishel owned a small store. He was surrounded by Lithuanians. He and his family remained in occupation and perished at the very beginning of the war.

My mother, Ester Solomina, was born in 1901 in accordance with the documents, though she always used to say that she was born in 1905. Maybe it was her desire to appear younger. My mother was born in Pilviskiai. I don't know which elementary school she went to. With the outbreak of World War I, my maternal grandparents decided to leave the town temporarily, fearing the status of a frontier town. They went to a Russian city: Voronezh [1300km from Vilnius, and 500km from Moscow]. It was a large cultural Russian city, where the family of Jacob Solomin had lived for several years. There my mother entered and finished a Russian lyceum. Owing to the opportunity of living and studying in Voronezh with Russian girls, my mother was fluent in Russian, and she was fond of classic literature. She was good at foreign languages. When she returned to Vilkauskis, she taught German at the local lyceum for a while.

It was likely that my mother had known my father, Moses Kleinstein, since adolescence. My father's family had also moved to Voronezh from Vilkauskis with the outbreak of World War I. They got married in 1923. I don't think it was a pre-arranged marriage, which was customary with Jews. My mother said that my father had been wooing her for a long time, but she was rather picky. Ester was very beautiful and popular with young men. Despite the fact that both of them weren't religious, the wedding was in accordance with the Jewish traditions. My parents got married under a chuppah in a large synagogue in Vilkauskis.

I didn't know my paternal grandmother. She died in the late 1920s, before I was born. I remember my paternal grandfather Jacob, though. Jacob Kleinstein had his own bakery in Vilkaviskis, where he baked and sold his products. Bread was on offer every day. On Thursdays, special dough was made and Sabbath challot were baked. The store was in the central square of Vilkaviskis, not far from my maternal grandfather's store. Jacob Kleinstein also stuck to Jewish traditions, marked Sabbath, and went to the synagogue on Saturdays. He wasn't as religious as Jacob Solomin, and raised my father in the modern spirit of times. My father was the only son. He had two sisters. I don't remember their names. All I know is that they lived with my grandfather and did work about the house after my grandmother died. Grandfather Solomin and both his daughters perished in Vilkaviskis in 1941 during the first days of the fascist occupation.

My father was born in Vilkaviskis in 1901. I don't know if he went to a cheder. He didn't tell me anything about it. I think that my father got a traditional Jewish education. When his family returned to Vilkaviskis, he decided to go on with his education, having finished the Voronezh lyceum. He entered the Lithuanian State Teachers' Training Seminary, which was located in Marijampole, 28 kilometers from Vilkaviskis [about 150km from Vilnius]. He was admitted without any problem, as at that time Jews were loyally treated in Lithuania. My father did very well, making the teachers happy with his diligence and thirst for knowledge.

I don't know where my father taught after having graduated from the seminary, as he specialized as a Lithuanian teacher. By the time of getting married he was the director of an eight-year Jewish school in Vilkaviskis.

After the wedding, the family moved to Grandfather Solomin's house. Half of his house was demised to my mother as dowry. In 1924 my brother was born. He was given an ancient Jewish name, Zeyev. My father knew Ivrit [Hebrew] and he was fond of ancient names. Even the dog had an ancient Jewish name, Nadhon. When I was born on 6th November 1932, I was also given an ancient Jewish name, Ranana.

Growing up

I had a happy childhood in a rather rich house, with overwhelming love. My father got a pretty good job as a school headmaster. He was a well-known and respectable man. He was a member of the municipal self-government along with other honorable citizens. My father was the only Jew among them. He was a member of the Shaulist organization [see Shaulist Council] [5](#). Judging by the way we lived I can say that my father made pretty good money.

I vaguely remember our house. It was a well-built one-storied wooden house. Of course, there were no conveniences: sewage, running water. We had an outhouse. As for the rest, it was a true European house. There were four large rooms, namely, drawing-room, my parents' bedroom, my father's study, and the children's room. I remember a beautiful tiled furnace in the drawing-room which made the house pleasantly warm. The furniture in the drawing room was grand. It was carved ebony custom-made furniture. There were lovely velvet curtains on the windows. The table cloth was also from the same material as the curtains. I can't say anything about the kitchen. I don't think I went there when I was a child. I'm not sure whether my mother was there very often. There were two maids in the house. One maid took care of the house, making sure it was kept clean, and the other was a governess: she fed, nurtured and took us for a walk. Maybe there was a cook, but I never saw him.

I enjoyed spending time with my mother most of all. My mother was a true lady. She stopped teaching at the lyceum after getting married. Of course, she looked after the house, but she didn't do any manual work, just gave orders to the maids. Her way of life was the same as the other rich ladies. Ester regularly went to the milliner. She probably had the most fashionable dresses in the entire Vilkauskis. She had a number of fur coats from expensive pelt, and beautiful jewelry. But there were no places to wear it in our tiny town. My mother spent most of her time having coffee and cakes with the ladies from her circle. Sometimes she took me for a walk. These were the happiest moments for me. In summer, my parents went to the popular resorts in Europe. My mother went to Königsberg in Germany when she had to be operated on her tonsils.

I remember our little town with its one-storyed mansions, rich in verdure. The streets went down to a small river: Sheshupa, where children used to have fun on a small beach. I wasn't allowed to play with them. I practically had no friends in my early childhood. I spent time with my mother, governess and brother. My brother was eight years older than me but I managed to tease him. I got away with it, as I was the favorite, and pride of my father. I started talking early in Yiddish and Lithuanian, as these were the languages spoken in our house. When my father came home from work, he put me on his neck and took me outside. If he met some of his acquaintances he used to boast around, 'Ranana, say international!' and like a parrot I repeated the words without understanding the meaning.

My mother and I often strolled along the central square. At that time it seemed so big to me, but in fact it was a small square surrounded by one-storyed stores and shops. Sometimes we went to Grandfather Solomin's store, and at times to Grandfather Kleinstein's bakery. I enjoyed plump warm rolls and my mother disapprovingly shook her head when I took the rolls straight from the shelves of the store. The matter is that I was a bad trencherman when I was a child. It was next to impossible to make me eat. Sometimes I would allow to be fed with strawberries and cream, orange or banana, but I would spit out porridge.

I don't remember the market in our town. Of course, there was one, but my mother never went there and neither did I. The maids also took care of the shopping. There were synagogues in the town: a small one and a big one. Maybe there were more, but my parents never attended them and I wasn't taken there either. I think that brit [milah] was performed on the eighth day after my brother was born. I think my grandparents insisted on that the way they did with the Jewish wedding. The bar mitzvah wasn't performed on my brother, which upset both my grandfathers.

My parents didn't observe Jewish traditions. I don't remember my mother lighting candles on Fridays, and my father usually worked on Saturdays. The kashrut wasn't observed either: we ate pork, tasty sausages and ham. There were a lot of Jewish dishes though: gefilte fish, chicken stew and broth, and tsimes [6](#). My mother mostly tried to stick to European cuisine. I tasted Jewish desserts at Grandmother Yena's place, when we went to Pilviskiai, or when she came to our town with my grandfather. My grandmother baked scrumptious cookies with poppy and nuts, strudels with jam and raisins, made tsimes from matzah with honey. I enjoyed all that food. If they were in Vilkauskis on Chanukkah, my brother and I got Chanukkah gelt.

I remember that, during Pesach, we went to my grandfather's for seder. I remember that once the seder was carried out by Grandfather Kleinstein, and another time by Grandfather Solomin. I wasn't deeply impressed by the celebration of Pesach and I took it like an ordinary delicious dinner. There

was matzah and tasty dishes for Pesach, but my parents didn't conduct seder. I also vaguely remember other Jewish holidays, as they weren't celebrated in our house. I think my parents fasted on Yom Kippur, just to pay tribute to the Jewish tradition.

In the period 1935-36 a new Jewish school was built in Vilkaviskis and my father got a spacious apartment from the school, as he was the headmaster. This apartment was even better than the previous one. There were five rooms, instead of four. Now my brother and I had separate bedrooms. Secondly, there was a sewage system and central heating in the house. There was also a large beautiful bathroom and toilet. In this house there were maids as well who took care of us and the house. Our apartment was on the school premises. I liked looking at the schoolchildren. I envied their school uniforms and bags, which they carried with pride. I started running into the classroom to take a seat at the desk and listen to the teachers. My father couldn't punish me. He never raised his voice at me.

It turned out that I became a schoolgirl at the age of five. I made friends with the Jewish schoolgirls and my life became more interesting. I didn't have a lot in common with my brother. He was an adolescent and went to the Lithuanian state lyceum in Vilkaviskis. By summer 1940, I had finished the second grade of the school.

Our life had been calm and happy by summer 1940, which is embossed in my memory. In 1940 many things changed for our family. The Red Army came to Lithuania and our town as well. It's difficult for me to say what my parents' attitude towards the Soviets was, as I was too little. I know that the Jewish people expected the Soviet regime to free them from poverty and oppression. Our family had a great living. I doubt that we welcomed the Soviets. The wave of change took place on the very first day. The Jewish school was converted into a common school where the subjects were taught in Lithuanian. My father was fired and we were evicted from the school apartment. We went back to our house, which hadn't been nationalized yet. Then they were after my father. The book on the municipal self-government of Vilkaviskis, containing the photographs of its members, including my father's, was displayed in the window case of the town book store.

I don't know what happened to the other members, but my father was mildly repressed. He was sent to teach at a Lithuanian school in a small town, Lazdijai [about 110km from Vilnius]. My father came home on Saturday and left on Sunday. Our life changed as well. My mother fired the maids and did work about the house by herself. She didn't want to be blamed for exploitation. A Soviet officer moved into our apartment and he was given the best room. It was harder and harder to do things about the house. Not only did my favorite, bananas and oranges, vanish from the stores, but the primary products as well. There were only two types of bread, compared to about 20 types. The officials who came from the USSR bought everything from the stores. Nothing was left: there were no sausages, butter, food, cakes, and manufactured goods.

There was a deficit of the usual tights, linen, soap, and soda. I remember the officers pulling huge bales and packages to the post-offices. They must have been sending presents to their families. My grandfathers' stores were nationalized. Fortunately, none of us were exiled, though our surnames were in the list of people to be exiled [see [Deportations from the Baltics](#)] [7](#). Though, the word 'fortunately' is irrelevant here. My kin wouldn't have survived, if they hadn't been exiled. Another year had passed. I kept on studying at the same school which was turned into Lithuanian from Jewish. In 1941 my brother Zeyev finished a ten-year school, former lyceum, with honors. My

parents rejoiced and started thinking of his future, but their plans weren't to be carried out.

During the war

On the night of 22nd June 1941 the town had been bombed from 3.30am. Our frontier town was one of the first to be hit by the fascists [German Nazis]. There was a terrible panic. People were trying to escape to wherever they could. It was good that it was Sunday and my father wasn't at work. He managed to get a cart with a horse. All of us got on it taking only a small suitcase and left the town. A large truck passed us. There were young people in it, my brother's coevals. They started talking my brother into leaving with them for Russia, but my mother was strictly against it. She thought that all of us had to stick together and didn't let Zeyev go.

We were only several kilometers away from Vilkaviskis and the Germans on bikes were moving towards us. It was the first time I heard their abrupt phrase, 'Schnell, schnell!' [German for 'Quick, quick']. We and other fugitives were stopped and told to go back to the town. Upon our return the first selection was made: the young men were separated and taken to the basement of the printing house. My father and brother didn't have a chance to say goodbye to us; they were arrested. My mother and I headed to our house, but it was in shambles. My mother found some Jewish people she knew, whose house was miraculously safe. I don't remember what we were living on at that time. My mother must have sold her precious things which she managed to take with her. During the first days of the occupation there was an order saying that Jews were supposed to wear clothes with a yellow star on the sleeve. Those who disobeyed were to be shot at once. It was hard to find yellow cloth, but my mother managed and embroidered Jewish stars on the clothes.

There were a lot of bans. A curfew was introduced for the Jews which was earlier than the other citizens. We weren't allowed to go into the stores and walk on the pavements. The mournful Jewish figures walked along the sidewalk, and the poor Jews were to walk on the road. If any of the rules were violated, Jews would be executed. Every day we took some food, sandwiches and bread to the printing house. The guard was a Lithuanian. He looked away, when we approached the basement. The windows were barred and we saw hands stretching out. We gave them the food and didn't know how it was distributed. We didn't manage to see neither my brother nor father.

Once, when we were coming back from the printing house, my mother and I overlooked the order and walked on the sidewalk. A bigwig fascist, accompanied by his aides, was moving ahead of us. He was an elderly man, corpulent and paunchy. Having seen my mother and me, the fascist started stamping, spitting and crying out some German words. I understood some of the words and was able to understand that he was threatening all the Jews, saying that he would crash and smear us. My mother and I then moved to the road.

In that period of time I saw Grandfather Jacob [Kleinstein] only once. He lived in his house with his sisters. That was the way we lived by 8th July 1941. Some of the neighbors informed us that the men had been told to leave the basement and run towards the barracks. Many ladies followed them, but my mother was petrified. We were told that there were all the young men and lads who hadn't managed to escape. They were told to take off their clothes and leave their precious things in the barracks. Then they were given spades to dig their graves. The area was encircled with barbed wire. Naked men were forced to go under that wire. Then some Lithuanian pal said to my mother that my father refused to do it and he was hit by the spades and then shot dead.

After some time, the remaining Jews in the town were taken to those barracks. [On 28th July 1941, the systematic murder of the Jews in Vilkauskis began. At first about 900 men were murdered. A ghetto was established for the remaining Jews, most of them women and children, in the local barracks, close to the mass graves of the executed men. The Jews in the ghetto were killed on the day after Rosh Hashanah, 24th September 1941. Only a few survived until the liberation.] I didn't see my grandfather and his sisters. They were most likely killed. There was a huge heap of things in the barracks: men suits, shirts, shoes. Some papers and documents were scattered.

I saw how women rushed to that heap screaming. They were hoping to find traces of their husbands, sons, and brothers. My mother stood still. I don't know whether she felt compunction for not having let Zeyev go with the youth. My mother never cried in my presence and made no comments on the events. Though, reminiscences on the pre-war times gave her so much pain that she couldn't even speak. I don't remember how much time we spent in those barracks: a month or a month and a half. It was like a bad dream. The Lithuanians we knew brought us food. I remember the feeling of constant hunger and thirst. We went to the toilet in the same room of the barrack, crammed with wretched and frightened women, children and elderly people. There was a terrible stench. It was summer and we had no chance to take a bath.

Craftsmen were selected among the Jews: seamstress, watch repairers, cobblers. The rest of the Jews: elderly men, women and children, were murdered. My mother turned out to be rather swift, which wasn't unusual for her before the war. In an extreme situation, a person has to be ready to do things beyond his/her capacity. She met the family of the tailors and managed to introduce us as their relatives. Owing to that we remained untouched. In late August all of us had survived. The Jewish craftsmen were aligned and told to walk on foot. We were convoyed by the local polizei [see Lithuanian Polizei] [8](#). Those beasts tried to curry favor and tortured the poor even worse than the fascists: beat them, insulted them, made them run without giving them a break. They even made people do their toilet calls on the spot. Those who were behind were shot on the spot. I stayed close to my mother and she tried to comfort me.

We were taken to Pilviskiai, my mother's hometown, the place where my grandparents lived. Their house was vacant. They were most likely killed during one of the actions in Pilviskiai. There were a lot of vacant houses in the town, as their dwellers had been shot. We were shown where to live. My mother and I settled in one house with the family of the tailor. Thus, Pilviskiai was transformed into a small ghetto. We stayed there for about three months.

Somehow life was gradually getting better, if it could be called 'life.' My mother stayed indoors most of the time. It was difficult for her to walk along her native streets with a yellow star. She helped about the house and learnt how to do rough seaming jobs and assist the host. I don't remember what we were eating. I, who was used to being pampered to eat, was constantly hungry. At that time I wasn't picky. I ate whatever I got, whether it was a slice of stale rye bread, potato or gruel. My mother was really happy if she could get a glass of milk for me. I felt pretty good in Pilviskiai. I had curly and fair hair, blue eyes, and didn't look like a Jew at all. I was fluent in Lithuanian. That's why I ran around the town without the yellow star, as I was taken to be a Lithuanian girl. The reason why I had a chance to move freely in the streets was because I was able to notice a lot.

On the evening of 13th November, I was in a hurry to get home, as it was fall, and it gets dark early. I saw polizei men knocking on the doors of the houses where Jews found temporary lodging and heard them swearing. Some old people, sobbing women and children were ousted to the central square. I wasn't that joyful kid I used to be some months ago. Tribulation made me grow up and become observant. I understood immediately that the most terrible and last action against Jews was underway. The remaining Jews would be murdered. I went home and cried out, 'Mother, let's run!' In a few words I told her what I had seen and my mother packed soap, towel and underwear in the punnet. We put on warm knitted jackets and headed out to nowhere in particular. We tried to convince the family of the tailor to go with us, but they refused, saying that there was no escape from those beasts and didn't believe in the rescue.

It was cold and drizzling. My mother and I were dragging along the soft shoulder and reached an estate. We did take a risk to knock on the door. We saw a barn and went there. We slept there until dawn. I was sleeping, while my mother kept her eyes wide open. In the morning I knocked on the door. A Lithuanian opened it and let us in. There was no need of introducing ourselves, as my mother looked like a typical Jew. The host said that he would gladly give us a hand, but his neighbors weren't very good men and would stooge on all of us. He said that he would let us stay for one day and then we would have to leave.

The host gave us a lot of food to eat until we were full and then we stayed in the barn the whole day. At dawn the host came and told my mother where to go. During the day he had managed to talk to somebody regarding a shelter for us. We went to a tiny hamlet, which didn't even have a name. An elderly Lithuanian peasant couple lived there. Lithuanians were tacit people. Nobody asked us any questions. They silently put a bowl with food on the table and heated the bath. My mother and I enjoyed it very much.

I'm still surprised with human nature under severe conditions, when our life could end at any minute, and we were finding reasons for joy. We slept in the attic on the haystack. We stayed there for about three weeks, and then we started wandering. It's hard, even impossible, to restore those years in my memory. We constantly changed places. At times we stayed in one place for only a couple of days, but sometimes we stayed for a couple of months. Almost nobody refused in giving us a hand. There were cases when people were scared to shelter us because of their neighbors or polizei men, but still they tried to find a place for us and directed us where to go. Now I think back to how we ran for our lives and the horror of the fascist occupation. We didn't stay in the peasants' house for very long, as there wasn't enough room, and besides it was dangerous for us to stay there. Garrets, basements, sheds and barns were the places for us to stay. We were very well fed. People gave us the best they had. I think the hosts didn't let themselves eat an extra piece, but gave us milk, sour cream, a full bowl of thick soup and a piece of pig's fat on a slice of bread.

When we were ready to leave, the hosts gave my mother a parcel wrapped in clean linen. I remember how we hid in a hamlet in the house of the Lithuanians with the surname Marma. Their house burnt down to ashes and all of us slept on hay in the shed. The hostess cooked food on the fire in the yard. She cooked a separate dinner for us, but not worse than for her family, instead better and more substantial. I was given some clothing. I was getting bigger and besides, while roaming the clothes wore out quicker.

Winter was the hardest on us. My boots were torn apart and my feet were bigger. One Lithuanian lady taught my mother how to knit, and gave her needle and threads. My mother knitted thick socks for me and I was walking around in them in the snow. Strange as it may seem, in those wandering years, neither my mother nor I got ill. We didn't even sneeze. Many peasants were impressed by my Lithuanian. They even invited their relatives over to hear me speak and sing Lithuanian songs that I knew. In my early adolescence I truly loved Lithuanian people, and their consideration. It was a shame how their gloominess covered their real kind hearts.

I grew older and didn't care. All I wanted was food and a roof over my head. I wanted to read and learn something new. Peasants usually kept books on the garrets where we often had to sleep. Usually these were the books on the vitae of holy people and other Catholic books. There was nothing more for me to read, so I read each of those books from cover to cover and knew all the holy people and Catholic prayers. In one peasant house they even suggested that I should be adopted, baptized and raised as their own daughter, but my mother objected to that of course and wanted to leave that house as soon as possible. When we left, the peasant woman gave me a rosary, and I said the rosary when I was in the shelters. The best place where we lived was in the hamlet of the Lithuanian family Strimaitis. They were very well-off. They owned 40 hectares of land, which was a lot for a small Lithuanian family.

By that time the Soviets hadn't managed to take away their land. The host was an agronomist. He had a large house, beautiful orchard and I was allowed to take a stroll there and eat fruits from it. I liked to watch the horses in the stables. The Strimaitis had a lot of them. The most important thing for me was that I had a friend now: the daughter of the hosts. Her name was Mildei. She was my age. The host told all the neighbors that I was his distant relative from Kaunas. On Sundays he took his daughter and me to the cathedral and my mother had to stay in the shed. There were interesting books in that house which I read. We stayed with the Strimaitis for about four times on different occasions, and each time we stayed for a few months.

We were lucky. We mostly came across good people. Only once we got into trouble. It happened in summer 1943. As usual, we went from one hamlet to another. We were pointed towards the hamlet where a good elderly couple lived. We went to the hamlet and saw the following: a half-naked young man was taking a bath over a basin by the well. An elderly woman was pouring water on him from the pitcher. We noticed at once that the guy was wearing pants of the polizei uniform and boots. We wanted to leave, but it was too late. 'Hey Yids!' he cried out. All of a sudden he started pointing a pistol and moved towards us threatening us with it. His mother tried to hold her son back, and burst into tears and besought him not to take a sin on his soul and let us go. This lasted for a few minutes, but it seemed like an eternity. 'Fine,' he said, 'I'll take you to the police station!'

He went to put his clothes on while we waited for him for quite some time. We didn't dare to escape. If we had, he would have killed us at once. He let us run in front of him on the road. After some time we met a man on the way. It turned out that he was a district headman. He asked who we were and where he was taking us. He said that he wanted to shoot the Yids, but because of his mother he was taking us to the police station. They had a vivacious talk along the road. We followed them. There was rye-grass on the left side of the road and at that unforgettable moment, the man turned back, pointed at the grass and said, 'Run!' My mother and I dashed off. I don't remember for how long we had been running, panting and falling. When we crossed the field, we saw the orchard of the Strimaitis'. It was the second miracle of the day, and again we were in the

hands of good people. It was hard for them to bring us back from our trauma. Again we stayed with them for some months.

I don't recall any other places where we went. In summer 1944 we happened to stay with the Strimaitis once again. Three years had passed since the fascist occupation. We knew that the Soviet Army had already liberated Vilnius and were looking forward to welcoming it. We spent the last days before the occupation in a small coppice by the yard. Mildei brought us food. When it got dark we went to their house and spent the night there. Once, when we were in the forest, I heard a noise from the road. I rushed to the road and saw a soldier in uniform which wasn't familiar to me. I understood that the Soviet soldiers had arrived. I rushed to the forest and told my mother, 'Russian soldiers have come!' My mother came out with me, first cautiously, and then when she was sure that those were Soviet soldiers, she went out in the open. We cried tears of joy and hugged each other. It was the end of the war for my mother and me.

The leading Soviet squads were ahead of us, and the Soviet field hospital wasn't far from the hamlet of the Strimaitis'. My mother and I often went there to help out the wounded. My mother broached a conversation with one of the employees, he was really astounded to hear my mother's good Russian. My mother told one military man our tragic pre-war story. He advised us to go to Vilnius, as there might be battles. My mother decided that nobody was waiting for us in our native town. There was no house, kin, friends, and the mere streets of our town would make us go back to our previous life and hurt the wounds in our hearts once again. So we had to get to Vilnius and start a new life. We were given a lift by passing cars, to Kaunas [about 90km from Vilnius], wherefrom we reached the small town Kaisiadorys [about 50km from Vilnius]. There was a good train connection there. My mother and I took a goods train and on 24th August 1944, we got off at the Vilnius train station.

Post war

We walked along an empty city. We were surrounded by annihilated houses and apartments, wherein people had lived, planned, hoped, loved and envied. We could take any empty apartment. We inhabited a house on Georgievskiy Avenue, which later became Stalin Avenue, and is currently Gedemin Avenue. There were doors which separated the apartments in the long corridor. We got a three-room apartment. It was well furnished. There were sets of dishes in the cupboards, and some garments in the wardrobes. We felt miserable. It seemed to us that we were illegitimate intruders. Then the employees of the communal organization went to all the apartments and made lists of the things in the house. We were supposed to pay some money for the furniture and dishes, but were totally broke. We were given all that for free. One of the guys turned out to be rather kind. He said, 'Well, use the things earned by your tribesmen. Let them have peace in Heaven.' He gave up on us and left.

My mother found a job as a cashier in a canteen. In September I went to the fifth grade of a Russian school without knowing any Russian words, but by the end of the fifth grade I wrote dictations better than anybody else. We were indigent. It was the time of the food card system [9](#). Once a week we went to get the scarce products with our cards. We were starving now as opposed to during the war. Once we met a Jew and he said, 'Madam Kleinstein, did you get your parcel in the synagogue?' We went to the synagogue and it turned out that twelve parcels had been sent to my mother from her brothers and aunt from Los Angeles. They found out somehow that we were

alive, but they didn't know our address and decided to send the parcels to the address of the Vilnius synagogue. Many people did the same at that time.

The synagogue was a kind of information center. No efforts were made by anyone to find us, though almost all the Vilnius Jews who had survived knew each other. Our parcels were misappropriated and we didn't get them. The lawyer who lived in our house tried to convince us to file a lawsuit in court. But my mother didn't want to wash dirty linen in public so to speak, and decided not to proceed. The synagogue assumed its obligation for the reimbursement of the lost parcels. They gave out size 40 boots while I was a size 35, and some navy-blue coats, out of which my mother fixed me a winter coat. Since that time we started getting regular parcels from our relatives. Usually there were clothes and my mother sold them. She wasn't a saleswoman and didn't know how to do business and sold fashionable foreign things dirt cheap. She had some regular customers. As for our material life, it got a little better in a way. My mother even sewed me a school uniform, which was the only dress I had.

After some months, my mother was stricken with tuberculosis. She was in the hospital and as if ill luck would have it I got sick as well. I had either jaundice or dysentery. It was strange that during our wandering days in the war time, we didn't even catch a cold. Our organisms must have had a protective mechanism in the days of ordeal. My mother's state was very bad. She had the caverns and was between life and death. My mother's brothers assisted us. They sent penicillin, which was in deficit in the USSR at that time and my mother was getting better. People stayed for many months in the hospital because of tuberculosis.

I was sent to an orphanage. It was called Jewish as there were a lot of Jewish children, who had lost their parents. Here I joined the Komsomol [10](#) and became the leader for junior schoolchildren: pioneers [see All-Union pioneer organization] [11](#). I enjoyed studying and absorbed the information like a sponge. I had a thirst for knowledge during my meanderings and I liked to take care of the pioneers, teaching them verses and songs, playing games, helping them with studies. I was fed pretty well. It was warm and cozy. The teachers treated me very well. They sympathized with the orphans. I had spent a whole year at the orphanage while my mother had stayed in the hospital. When she was discharged, I went back home.

I kept on studying right after I went back. I had straight 'fives' [the highest score, which is equivalent to an A in America] and was a very active Komsomol member. I was constantly busy, either organizing a tour or attending the theater, editing the paper, having classes with those who were lacking behind, etc. When I started the tenth grade, I found out that I was one of the candidates for a gold medal. [The gold medal was the highest distinction in the USSR for secondary schools.] But things turned out to be different. I was a serious girl on one hand, and on the other hand I was romantic and prone to be infatuated. I didn't go dancing as it was considered frivolous for a girl of my age and it was disapproved by the social opinion and headmaster of the school. Once, my friend talked me into attending a dance pavilion in the park. It was a disaster. We met two soldiers in the park. One of them was Russian and the other Buryat. One word led to another and one dance to another and Matvey Malkhanov, the Buryat, and I couldn't part.

He was a very interesting person, erudite, polite and well-bred. In short, we fell in love with each other and soon became very close. We actually became husband and wife. When Matvey asked my mother for my hand, she went berserk and didn't want to give her consent. Matvey wasn't a Jew,

and had a rare and unusual appearance. Not only my mother, but the whole Jewish Vilnius was against it. Nobody could do anything. When the two of us went to the state marriage registration office I was pregnant already. I had to transfer to the evening school, and finished it the same year without a gold medal of course. In 1951 I gave birth to my son, Alexander. I lived with my mother. By that time she liked my husband very much and they called a truce. She couldn't help loving him. He was a wonderful and kind person.

Matvey was born in 1928 in Kacha, Novosibirsk oblast, Krasnoyarsk [Russia, 4000km from Moscow]. In 1947 he was drafted into the Soviet army. His unit was in Lithuania. Thus, he turned out to be in Vilnius. Matvey's parents didn't meet me before we got married. He only wrote to them that he had met the woman of his dreams and gotten married. After a few years we went to his motherland. They welcomed me like their own daughter. They always treated me and our children very well.

Less than a year passed and I decided to go on with my education. In 1952 I entered Vilnius University, the faculty of Russian Language and Literature. It was easy for me to pass the entrance exams. I didn't feel any bias towards me as a Jew. I wasn't touched in the years when Jews were fired, tried in court, even in the period of the flagrant state anti-Semitism [see Campaign against 'cosmopolitans'] [12](#), when the Doctors' Plot [13](#) was storming. When Stalin died in 1953 I cried just like most of the people around me. My husband told me that I should rejoice, and not mourn as he knew many exiled in Siberia and saw terrible Gulag [14](#) camps and understood better than anybody who Stalin really was.

Our life was getting better. Having demobilized from the army, Matvey went to work as an engraver at a plant. Before the war, he finished an arts school in Novosibirsk [today Russia]. He had 'golden' hands and refined taste. The plant gave us a room in the remote district of Vilnius. The room was in a communal apartment [15](#). We shared a common kitchen with the neighbors. At first, it was pretty hard. In the morning we took our son to the kindergarten. I had to study. My mother helped me. At night my husband got up to take care of Alexander. Everybody gave me the opportunity to study.

I got severely ill when I was in the third year. I think it was the outcome of the occupation years: cold and hunger. I had pleurisy. Very often the complication of that disease is tuberculosis. I was treated in the hospital for a year and was behind in my studies. When I got well I had to transfer to the extramural department of the university. In 1955 I was hired by the paper 'Soviet Lithuania' ['Sovietskaya Litva', paper of the Soviet Republic of Lithuanian in Russian language] as a proofreader. I worked there for two years. I loathed that job.

Then another paper, 'Komsomol truth' had a job opening for a translator from Lithuanian into Russian. ['Komsomolskaya Pravda' is an all-Union youth paper by the Central Komsomol Committee. It was published six times a week. The first issue came out on 24th May 1925. The paper isn't communist anymore and it's still popular and is published in FSU countries under this title.] I and another candidate did the translation of the texts and both of us were offered the job. I worked for that paper for 23 years starting in 1957. I did a lot of translations. I took up any job. I was translating dissertations, books, and articles. I even supplied for translators who worked for other papers.

In 1980 I was employed by the paper 'Communist' ['Komunist' is a paper published in the Lithuanian Republic in Russian language. It was founded in 1940. It was published in Vilnius six times a week with the circulation of 45,000 copies. It ceased publication in 1991]. I worked there for two years and resigned. Until my retirement I worked for the press agency 'Eta' ['Eta' is an Information and Publishing Agency in Vilnius. It was founded in 1964 and specialized in publishing fiction literature, textbooks and literature of journalistic genre.]

My mother was bonded with my family. She didn't have friends. She didn't go to the synagogue. Before, my mother wasn't religious and after the war she didn't want to hear of God. Even if she had believed in God, she started disbelieving after she had lost her husband, son and relatives. Though, she always fasted on Yom Kippur and bought matzah on Pesach. I think she did it because she was used to it. My mother was getting more and more ill and couldn't help me anymore. In 1964 she died. She had a secular funeral in the city cemetery in Vilnius without any Jewish rites being observed.

In 1966 I gave birth to a girl and named her Ilana. After four years we were given a separate two-room apartment. It was rather small, but it was mere happiness for our family. At last we had our own apartment. We lived comfortably. Both of us earned pretty good money. We didn't own a car or dacha [16](#). Only a few people could afford that. We usually went on vacation with our children to the Baltic coast in Palanga. Once we went to Siberia. We stayed in my husband's motherland for a month. We also went to Yalta [Ukraine, very popular holiday place] in the peak of the vacation season. Having been used to the cold sea, I could barely stand the Crimean heat. My husband and I loved each other very much. What really marred our lives was our vastly different appearance.

When I was young, I was a blue-eyed blonde, and Matvey who wasn't of a common appearance: wide cheekbones, slant eyes, always got a lot of attention. People even pointed fingers at him. He was really worried because of that and I tried to turn it into a joke. Maybe it was one of the reasons why I never broached the subject of immigration to Israel with my husband. I worked among Lithuanians. I was never maltreated by them, and never heard any negative words regarding myself and Jews. Anyhow Israel attracted me like any other Jew, because it was my country. For the first time in many centuries we had gained our motherland. My husband and I had the same opinion of things. It's such a pity that he died so early. In 1988 we got a telegram regarding the death of Matvey's mother and he urgently flew to Siberia. Matvey felt really bad during the funeral of his mother and died on that very day. He was buried in Kacha next to his mother. I managed to go to his funeral. It was so unexpected, horrible and dreadful.

I have lived by myself since that time. My children identify themselves as Jews, though formally they weren't Jews. Almost all their friends are Jews. My son served in the army and afterwards got a technical education. He became a communications worker. Alexander married a Russian-Pole, Anna, at a rather early age. He had two children: Tatiana, born in 1978, and Dmitriy, born in 1984. Recently, my son started his own business. He did well. Three years ago [in 2002] there was a tragedy. He felt unwell and within a month he died of brain cancer. I see my grandchildren, but not very often. I hardly keep in touch with my daughter-in-law Anna. She took to the bottle, but I strongly disapprove of people who want to sink tribulation in liquor.

My daughter Ilana graduated from Vilnius University, from the French Language and Literature department. She's currently working in the French cultural center. Ilana married a Lithuanian. His

name is Subachene. My favorite granddaughter Gabriela, born in 1986, is finishing a lyceum. She would like to become a doctor. She'll probably continue her education abroad. Gabriela is fluent in English and is studying French. She identifies herself as Lithuanian, but treats Jews with great respect. When I came back from Israel, she asked me to talk to the students of her class and tell them about the country.

Since my husband's death I've tried to be active and have a fully-fledged life. In 1972 I became a member of the Council of the Journalists of Lithuania. I took part in all the events of the Council. We received foreign delegations, and held symposiums. I enjoyed the trips throughout the country and overseas. I took the first trip during the Soviet regime. I went to Hungary and Bulgaria. I became a real globe-trotter in 1995.

I always keep in my heart the people who saved my life. I've kept in touch with my rescuers for many years. Now the parents [Strimaitis] and their daughter Mildei, with whom I still keep in touch, were conferred the title 'Righteous among the Nations' [17](#) by the museum Yad Vashem [18](#). The Lithuanian family of Mamra, who had been sheltering us for a long time, was exiled by the Soviet regime. My mother and I exerted every effort to find them, but didn't succeed.

In 1991 [actually in 1990] Lithuania gained its independence [see Reestablishment of the Lithuanian Republic] [19](#). All of us took hard all those events connected with the resistance of Russia against the independence of the Baltic countries. I was never a communist. Being born here and living among Lithuanians, I've always supported their right for independence. Moreover, I remember my wonderful life during my childhood, when Lithuania was independent. I was formally retired, but I worked a lot and even performed simultaneous translations during the first seating of the Lithuanian government.

Unfortunately, all our hopes weren't realized. Many of those whom we elected didn't live up to our expectations, but we think positively. One of the ways the state status of Lithuania was displayed was the revival of Jewish life. There's a wonderful Jewish community in Lithuania. There's also the Jewish state school and Jewish state museum. I became an active member of the community. I'm a volunteer of the social department and member of the [Lithuanian] Council of the Ghetto Prisoners [20](#). I didn't become religious, but I gladly go back to the Jewish traditions. I take part in the Jewish holidays in the community.

My work in the community helped me find new friends in Lithuania and out of its boundaries. Here I met a Dutch man Fritz and his spouse, a Polish photographer. I showed them Vilnius, the Old City. I walked along the former streets of the ghetto. I paid a lot of attention to them. Since that time we have remained friends.

After a year Fritz sent me an invitation and I went to the Netherlands. After that I went there twice. Fritz assists our community considerably. He often comes to Lithuania. Our friendship is cemented. I was in Israel and Germany twice. Recently, in May 2005, I and another activist of the community were sent to the feast in Krakov [today Poland] on the occasion of a sad date: the 60-year anniversary of the liberation from Oswiecim [Auschwitz] camp. It was sad and joyful at the same time: the commemoration of millions of innocent victims. We perceived the tolerance and internationalism of the modern world.

Glossary:

1 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.

2 Guild I

In tsarist Russia merchants belonged to Guild I, II or III. Merchants of Guild I were allowed to trade with foreign merchants, while the others were allowed to trade only within Russia.

3 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.

4 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.

5 Shaulist Council

Nationalistic and militant organization in Lithuania in the 1930s, with about 10,000 members. Later they were fighting both the Soviet and the Nazi occupiers and applied partizan methods: exploded trains, assassinated military leaders and communists. They were eliminated by the Soviet power after World War II.

6 Tsimes

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

7 Deportations from the Baltics (1940-1953)

After the Soviet Union occupied the three Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) in June 1940 as a part of establishing the Soviet system mass deportation of the local population begun. The victims of these were mainly but not exclusively those unwanted by the regime: the local bourgeoisie and the previously politically active strata. Deportations to remote parts of the Soviet

Union were going on continuously up until the death of Stalin. The first major wave of deportation took place between 11th and 14th June 1941, when 36,000, mostly politically active people were deported. Deportations were reintroduced after the Soviet Army recaptured the three countries from Nazi Germany in 1944. Partisan fights against the Soviet occupiers were going on all up to 1956, when the last squad was eliminated. Between June 1948 and January 1950 in accordance with a Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the USSR under the pretext of 'grossly dodged from labor activity in the agricultural field and lead anti-social and parasitic mode of life' from Latvia 52,541, from Lithuania 118,599 and from Estonian 32,450 people were deported. The total number of deportees from the three republics amounted to 203,590. Among them were entire Lithuanian families of different social strata (peasants, workers, intelligentsia), everybody who was able to reject or deemed capable to reject the regime. Most of the exiled died in the foreignland. Besides, about 100,000 people were killed in action and in fusillade for being members of partisan squads and another about 100,000 were sentenced to 25 years in camps.

8 Lithuanian Polizei

In Russian it refers to the local Lithuanian collaborators to the Nazi regime. Subordinated to the Germans they were organized as a police force and were responsible to establish the Nazi control in the country. They took major role in carrying out the destruction of Lithuanian Jewry.

9 Card system

The food card system regulating the distribution of food and industrial products was introduced in the USSR in 1929 due to extreme deficit of consumer goods and food. The system was cancelled in 1931. In 1941, food cards were reintroduced to keep records, distribute and regulate food supplies to the population. The card system covered main food products such as bread, meat, oil, sugar, salt, cereals, etc. The rations varied depending on which social group one belonged to, and what kind of work one did. Workers in the heavy industry and defense enterprises received a daily ration of 800 g (miners - 1 kg) of bread per person; workers in other industries 600 g. Non-manual workers received 400 or 500 g based on the significance of their enterprise, and children 400 g. However, the card system only covered industrial workers and residents of towns while villagers never had any provisions of this kind. The card system was cancelled in 1947.

10 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.

11 All-Union pioneer organization

a communist organization for teenagers between 10 and 15 years old (cf: boy-/ girlscouts in the US). The organization aimed at educating the young generation in accordance with the communist ideals, preparing pioneers to become members of the Komsomol and later the Communist Party. In

the Soviet Union, all teenagers were pioneers.

12 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'

13 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.

14 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.

15 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.

16 Dacha

country house, consisting of small huts and little plots of lands. The Soviet authorities came to the decision to allow this activity to the Soviet people to support themselves. The majority of urban citizens grow vegetables and fruit in their small gardens to make preserves for winter.

17 The Righteous Among the Nations

Non-Jews who rescued Jews during the Holocaust.

18 Yad Vashem

This museum, founded in 1953 in Jerusalem, honors both Holocaust martyrs and ‘the Righteous Among the Nations’, non-Jewish rescuers who have been recognized for their ‘compassion, courage and morality’.

19 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% of the participants (turn out was 84%) voted for independence. The western world finally recognised Lithuanian independence and so too did the USSR on 6 September 1991. On 17 September 1991 Lithuania joined the United Nations.

20 Lithuanian Council of the Ghetto Prisoners

It was founded in 1988 by the Lithuanian municipal Jewish community. The main purpose of the organization is mutual assistance as well as unification of Ghetto Prisoners and Concentration camps Jews, collection and publishing of recollections about the war, and arranging meetings with the public and youth.