

Rozalia Akselrod

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Kiev

Ukraine

Interviewer: Ella Levitskaya

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I, Rozalia Yakovlevna Akselrod, was born in the town of Khorol, Poltava region, on 8th July 1919. I will soon turn 83. At that time my parents lived in Khorol from where they also both came. My father was Yakov Davydovich Akselrod, born on 8th April 1885. My mother was Yevgenia Solomonovna Akselrod, nee Weber, born in March 1885. When she was born she was given the Jewish name Genya, but when she received her passport, she was registered as Yevgenia there.



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The life of my relatives

I never knew my grandparents on either side of my parents. My family left Khorol when I was about one year old. That is why I can tell you only a few things that I know about them from the words of my parents.

My grandfather, Solomon Weber, my mother's father, came from Warsaw. He was born in the 1850s. Back in Warsaw he had a family with a wife and two children. He was called up to serve in

the Tsar's Army for 25 years here in Ukraine. His family was left in Warsaw. I don't know how my grandfather found himself in Khorol, but he met my grandmother when he was still a soldier. In Khorol they got married. I think their wedding corresponded to all Jewish laws, with a chuppah and a rabbi. I know practically nothing about my grandmother, not even her name. I only know that she was two or three years younger than my grandfather. We have a medallion with a picture of my grandparents. Grandfather had a large beard, no head covering and long blond hair. In the picture Grandmother is wearing a black scarf on her head. Her face does not look Jewish at all. She looks much younger than Grandfather.

The Weber family had nine children. The oldest was Sonya, who was born in 1876. She moved to America in 1903. In about a year after coming to America, she ranked second at the New York Beauty Contest and soon after that she married a very rich man. After the revolution [1](#) we lost all communications with her and I know nothing more about her.

Then two more sisters were born: Masha in 1877 and Yelya in 1878. Both of them moved to live in Paris in 1907. There, in Paris, in 1909, they married two brothers, Jewish, by the name of Gertsberg. Their husbands were photographers and owned a photo studio. Yelya had a son who died at a very young age from peritonitis. He was a philosopher, a Sorbonne graduate. My mother had a book on philosophy written by him. It was printed in France and sent to us by the author. Masha had a son and a daughter of whom I know nothing. In the 1930s, all communications with the sisters was interrupted, because of the political situation in the USSR [2](#). I can tell you nothing more about them.

In 1879, Aunt Fenya was born. The family of my mother's parents spoke little about her because they believed she committed two great sins. At the age of 17 Aunt Fenya was baptized at a Christian church. At that time she no longer lived in Khorol. I don't know where exactly she lived. After being baptized she studied at a medical college and then worked as a nurse. She was never married but she had a child out of marriage. When the child grew up, when he reached 13 or 14, she sent him to Paris, to her sisters. That's all I know about her; our family had no relations with this aunt. We terminated our relationship after she got baptized. She became a stranger to our family. She herself took no effort to keep in touch with her sisters or parents. She realized that her relatives wouldn't understand any excuse for what she did.

The Uncle Misha was born in 1881. I knew him. Uncle Misha was a teacher of mathematics and music. He played violin very well. He died at a young age, in the 1930s. He was paralyzed for several years before he died. He had a daughter, Betya, and a grandson, Misha. His grandson was deputy director of a research institute for construction in Kharkov. Now he lives in Germany.

There was also Uncle Abram, born in 1882, who spent his whole life in Kharkov working at the factory of artistic products as a molder. He died in 1961. Uncle Abram had two daughters, Lyusya and Rosa. Lyusya now lives in Israel, while Rosa died in 2000. None of his daughters had children.

Then Uncle Lyulya was born in 1884. Uncle Lyulya lived in Moscow. All his life he worked as an accountant at a battery farm. He had one son, who worked at a railway company. Uncle Lyulya died in the late 1960s.

In 1885, my mother was born, and in 1886 – Aunt Tanya, the last child in the family. Aunt Tanya got married at a very young age and did not work. She had a daughter called Lyalya. None of them

is alive today. Aunt Tanya died in the late 1960s.

The family of my grandparents kept Jewish traditions. On holidays they went to the synagogue. At home they celebrated Jewish holidays. Unfortunately, my mother never told me anything about this in detail.

My mother had no education. Grandfather believed a girl should learn to be a good housewife. At that time married women did not work in Jewish families. My mother learned to sew underwear. All her life, whatever she did, she did very well. She became so famous in her profession that she got orders for sewing underwear for the local landowners. Mother worked like this until she got married. After getting married she told herself, 'That's it, I will never work again.' And she never did. My mother had a clear mind and firm character by nature.

I know a little about the family of my father, Yakov Akselrod. Father told me that his mother was a very good woman. Both Jews and Gentiles in Khorol loved her. When in 1916 Grandmother died from tuberculosis, the whole town came to the funeral ceremony. I am not sure but I guess it was a traditional Jewish funeral and they followed all rules and rituals. Grandfather David was a pharmacist in Khorol; later he owned a drug store.

The Akselrod family had five sons and two daughters. The oldest son was David, born in 1880. David got married in the early 1900s and moved to live in Western Ukraine with his wife. Grandfather felt very lonely after the death of Grandmother and a year later, in the summer of 1917, he moved to live with David and his family. David and his father worked in their own pharmacy. David had a young son. But unfortunately, in the 1920s, gangs were raging all over Ukraine ³. I don't remember exactly whether it was Petliura's ⁴ gang or somebody else, but they murdered the whole family: Grandfather, David, his wife and his young son.

After David my father Yakov was born in 1885. After my father, Abram was born in 1887. He left Khorol and lived in Kharkov all his life. He worked at a mill and injured his hand badly. His hand was amputated and Abram, with only one hand left, became a carpenter. He made furniture. He had a lot of orders. Abram died in 1962. He had no family.

Iosif, born in 1888, also left Khorol and lived in Kharkov. All his life he worked as a barber. He had two wives, and the first one was Russian. From her he had a daughter called Dora, who is now living in Israel. Iosif died in the late 1960s.

After Iosif two sisters were born: Fenya in 1889 and Malochka in 1890. After they finished high school, they both moved to Kharkov. Fenya worked as a bookkeeper. She had two sons. In 1951 Fenya died from cancer. One of her sons is now living in Germany and the other in Australia.

Malochka [Malka] was the favorite of the family. She had a very cheerful nature. Soon after moving to Kharkov she married a merchant and became a housewife. They had a son. When their family went into evacuation, her husband fell in love with another woman and stayed with her. From evacuation Malochka returned to Kharkov together with her son and lived with him to the end of her life. She worked as a secretary and then as a bookkeeper. Malochka died in 1975.

The youngest child in the family was Mulya [Mikhail], who was born in 1892. Mulya followed in his father's footsteps and became a pharmacist; after the Revolution he was the chief of the central pharmacy. He lived in Kharkov. Mulya was loved by everyone. He had a lot of friends and

acquaintances; even people he did not know turned to him for help. Mulya never refused to help anyone. His daughter Polina is still living in Kharkov and works as a doctor. Mulya died in the late 1970s.

All children received secular education. All seven finished high school in Khorol and then got professional training. I don't know how religious that family was. According to my father, his parents celebrated Jewish holidays and Sabbath. There was a synagogue in Khorol but I don't know how often my grandparents and their children attended it. I know for sure they attended the synagogue though. My father even kept his tallit from those times. Later my father gave up religion and joined the Communist Party. When I finished school we dyed this tallit in red and sewed a beautiful costume for me. I take it as a sin now, but at that time we were all brought up as atheists; besides, I had nothing else to wear.

Father finished the carriage-making college in Khorol. He was a highly qualified carriage-maker. I think I still have his graduation diploma from that college somewhere. After graduation in 1903 my father left Khorol and spent four years abroad. He went to Argentina, France, Spain, and England to improve his skills and work with famous carriage-makers. In 1907 he returned to Khorol. He often joked that nowhere in the world he could find somebody like my mother, only in Khorol, and that's why he stayed in that town. Father went to the same college again to acquire another profession. This time he acquired the profession of a wheelwright. This profession was considered a more difficult one than carriage-maker.

A lot of Jews lived in Khorol. They spoke a mixture of Yiddish and Ukrainian to each other and to their Gentile neighbors. Until their very old age my parents talked to each other in that mixture.

There was no anti-Semitism in Khorol at that time. There were no pogroms that were raging around Russia. All neighbors were friends. Jews and Gentiles helped each other. My parents never heard the word 'kike' there.

On 20th January 1910, my parents got married. I don't know what kind of wedding they had, they never told me about it. In 1910 my elder sister Maria was born and in 1919 I was born. My parents also had a son, who was born in 1913, but he died as a baby. I don't know where exactly in Khorol my parents lived at that time. In 1918, my sister Maria went to a Ukrainian school.

My parents welcomed the October Revolution. They were ordinary people and believed what they were told about the rule of workers and peasants. They were told that their lives would be better than under the tsar, so they hoped for it. I don't know whether they took any part in the revolution. Father said he distributed leaflets. But there were practically no changes in Khorol after the revolution; people continued to live as they did before and raised their children.

With the beginning of the Civil War [5](#), gangs began to come to Khorol. The gang of Denikin [6](#) came, for instance. Our family ran into them twice. One time we ran directly into them. There was a landowner in Khorol. I don't remember his name now. During pogroms he always gave refuge to Jewish families. So, when Denikin's soldiers came to Khorol again, this landowner threw a great ball at his house and invited all officers of Denikin's gang. On the upper floor music played and guests danced, while in the basement several Jewish families sat as quiet as possible. I was the only baby there. And when I began to cry, somebody pressed a pillow upon my face to suppress my crying so that I wouldn't reveal our whereabouts. Since that time I have had problems with breathing.

Another incident took place after we left Khorol. Denikin's gang entered the town and ordered all the Jews to come to the main square. They said those who would not come would be brought by force. My father's younger brother Iosif went to that square too. By that time he had been married; his wife was a Russian woman, whom we loved very much – Aunt Antonina or Tosya. She was a beautiful woman. So, Aunt Tosya went to that square together with Iosif. A Ukrainian neighbor passed by, saw her and cried, 'Tosya, why did you come here? You are Russian!' An officer of Denikin's gang heard that, approached Aunt Tosya, kissed her hand and wanted to lead her away from the square, but Aunt Tosya told him she wanted to share the destiny of her dear husband: whatever they wanted to do with him, the same they could do with her. When the officer heard that, he bowed to her and led both her and Iosif away from the square. A lot of Jews were shot in that square on that day.

Our dear Aunt Tosya died at a very young age – she only turned 34. She fell ill with tuberculosis and it could not be cured. It was in 1938. Some time later Iosif married for the second time. My family did not welcome his second wife, so we lost communications with him.

Move to Kharkov

In 1920, our family moved to Kharkov. I was one year old. In the beginning we lived in Sadovaya Street, but then we moved to Yaroslavskaya Street, into a good house. This house is still there. Yaroslavskaya Street is in downtown Kharkov. First we lived on the first floor. But I had pneumonia almost every two months. The doctor told my parents that I needed a lot of sunshine, while that apartment was a little dark. So, my parents changed it for a good apartment in the same house. It was a communal apartment [7](#), with neighbors. There were two rooms in it: 27 and 20 meters, and a huge balcony, maybe 25 square meters. In that communal apartment lived our family, my father's sister Malochka and my mother's brother Abram with his daughter Lyusya.

There was also a neighbor living there, a Ukrainian woman by the name of Antonina Sergeyevna Lukashuk. First she lived alone and later she gave birth to a son. I remember her bringing him, newly born, home from the hospital. And now he is a professor at the Moscow Academy of Sciences. Our relations with the neighbor were friendly. We had good neighbors in the yard too. In our house lived Jews, Russians, and Ukrainians. We all were friends and nobody cared who belonged to which nation.

My father made all the furniture in our apartment with his own hands. He was a carpenter/cabinetmaker. I don't remember everything we had in the apartment, but I remember a royal piano, which was very big and good. We often had a lot of guests who had to sleep on it because of lack of space. My father also kept his carpenter's bench in his bedroom because he had no separate workshop. So, some guests also had to sleep on this bench.

I did not go to kindergarten. I stayed home with my mother. I had no babysitter but my mother spent a lot of time with me because she had a housemaid to help her around the house. We had large rooms, and she cleaned them, cooked and washed. My mother's character was strict. I don't remember her hugging or kissing me. But she cared. She did her best to provide for us.

The material life of our family was hard in the beginning. Mother sewed nightgowns and bed sheets for us. After getting married, she did not work outside the house. She took good care of herself.

She was really smart. She believed nobody outside the family should know about the family's affairs. No neighbor ever heard from her about our difficulties. 'Everything is fine, thank you,' she would always say. My mother liked theater. When father was a member of the Kharkov city council, they had a box in the Opera Theater and my parents went to see every play. They also spent vacations together.

She was a very good mother because she never humiliated us, nor yelled at us. When I think of her, I may not feel the love of a daughter, but I sense great respect to her. My sister and I had freedom but under her control. My mother had a rule – not to buy anything bad. She said it was better to buy a little bit of something, but this something should be good. When I went to the market she told me, 'Don't buy anything cheap!' I would buy the best apples, even if I could afford only two of them.

My father's character was softer than that of my mother. If one of us got sick, it was father who gave us medicine, pet us on the head or told us fairytales. I can say that our father and mother traded their family roles. But their relationship was very good. At that time my father worked in the economy. He realized that he lacked serious education and so he entered the Kharkov Construction Institute. But when they began to study higher mathematics, Father saw that he could not understand a thing – and he quit. He did not regret it. After that, he was the director of the School of Factory and Plant Training for Hairdressers.

My school days

After we moved to Kharkov, my sister went to the third grade of a Russian school, and I went to the first grade of a Ukrainian school in 1927. At our school boys and girls studied together – a rare case at that time. When I was in the second grade, I went to a music school, which was not far from our house. I did not let my parents know I went there. I passed exams and began to study there. However, I did not study there for too long, only for three years, and then I quit music.

My favorite subject at school was mathematics. I was good at it. I did not have any bright talents, neither was I one of the best students. But I was a good one, and I was loved at school. We had a singing club at school, which later turned almost into an opera studio. We staged operas. I remember singing several roles in different operas.

I remember the ceremony of joining the pioneers [8](#). It took place at a printing house where we were taken from school. There we repeated the oath of a young pioneer, 'I, a pioneer of the USSR, in front of my comrades promise that I will firmly fulfill the commandments of Lenin...' I remember it as if it was yesterday. I was an active pioneer, the chairman of our pioneer unit. I was also an active Komsomol member [9](#). In those years Komsomol meetings were usually held at somebody's houses. As a rule, our Komsomol meetings took place at our house.

At school we always celebrated all revolutionary holidays. At home we celebrated them too. But the holiest day for our family was 20th January – the anniversary of my parents' wedding. It was celebrated 59 times. And my father died before celebrating the 60th anniversary of their wedding. It was in 1970, while father died in 1969. It was our main holiday every year. We invited many guests to celebrate it with us. We did not celebrate any Jewish holidays, but Passover. On Passover, we bought matzah and cooked traditional food: fried eggs with matzah and chicken. It was just a

family dinner with traditional Jewish food. Nobody said a prayer, or lit a candle and there was no traditional seder.

Great Famine and Great Terror

I remember the famine of 1932–1933 [10](#). I remember not only the feeling of hunger but also dead bodies in the streets. The bread store was not far from our house. There were constantly long lines for bread. When we went out of our house we always saw several dead people in the street. I remember it very well. I cannot say that our family suffered much from hunger. But there was great famine in Ukraine, and it was horrible. I will never forget those dead bodies.

I also remember stray children in 1929. They were orphans, whose parents had died. These children were always hungry with very poor clothing. In some places of the city the authorities wanted to pave the streets with asphalt, so there were big pots with tar in the streets, and this tar was being heated all day long. And at night, these homeless children climbed into the pots with leftovers of hot tar and slept there, in warmth.

The well-known commune of Makarenko [11](#) was located in Kharkov. Makarenko was a teacher who organized a school for homeless children. It was called a commune. When I later worked in the 'Knowledge' society, I organized a cycle of lectures entitled 'Heroes of Makarenko's Books.' I invited former homeless children who finished Makarenko's school and they shared stories about their life in the commune and after it. Many of them said the commune was their salvation. Among these people there were judges, doctors, directors of plants etc.

When I was still a student, repressions started [12](#). A Jewish man, Professor Pletskis taught Russian literature at our school. He was a bright teacher. He was arrested when we were still students. Later we learned that he was shot. I don't know what kind of charges against him led to his execution. But at that time even an innocent joke or a word might have had most severe consequences. Perhaps he dared to read a story by one of the repressed writers to his students. People were arrested every day and every day they were removing books by writers that might have been popular and favored by the authorities a day before. One couldn't even whisper the name of such an author after he was repressed.

In 1937 I finished school and entered the Foreign Languages Institute. Now I believe it was my mistake. I should have become a lawyer or a doctor according to my abilities. When I was already working I often spoke in court as a public advocate. It was a custom at the time. And I did very well. But languages, they are not my field of interest. Anyway, I passed exams easily and entered the French department. Just like at school, I joined the Komsomol committee of the Institute and sang at the institute's club.

We did not have many Jews at my department. Besides me, there was only one more girl, a very gifted student, Mira Kaplan. But at other departments there were many Jews. I don't know the reason. I guess it was a mere flow of things and coincidences and no ethnic tensions.

Repressions continued. They did not touch upon my family. At the institute Komsomol meetings became very frequent. We often condemned 'the enemies of people' [13](#), that is, our co-students. It was scary. Sometimes such meetings lasted up to 2 or 3am. The best students were expelled from the Komsomol and from the institute. Then the KGB [14](#) arrested them. We did not even suspect

that what we heard about their fault was lies. We believed everything we were told and voted unanimously for their expulsion. This is the greatest tragedy in life. Today, when I begin to sum up my whole life, I realize that every time I raised a hand at such a meeting I committed my heaviest sins.

At the institute I met my future husband, Alexander Serikov. I met him during a dance. Sasha was a student of the English department. He was four years older than me – he was born in 1915 – but he studied only one year ahead of me. In 1940 we got married. We had no wedding. We simply went to his relatives to Yeisk. His mother was a Hungarian Gypsy, and his father – a Cossack [15](#). His father was arrested and shot in 1938. Both Sasha and I could have suffered from that as well, but Sasha chose to keep it a secret. Thus, nobody in the institute knew that his father had been arrested. After his death he was rehabilitated [16](#).

My parents received Sasha very well. They had no problem that he was not Jewish. By that time, my sister had been married for the second time and her husband was also Russian. Her first husband was Jewish, a guy from Khorol by the name of Yosya. My parents knew him and his family very well. My sister lived with him in Balakleya, Kharkov region. Then she met Nikolay Drogichinsky, fell in love with him, divorced Yosya and married Nikolay. It was in 1933, and in 1934 their daughter Valya was born. My parents loved Nikolay very much, and he loved them too. Even when he and my sister also divorced and Nikolay lived in Moscow, every time he would come to Kharkov, he always visited my parents and brought flowers and candies.

In 1941, I graduated from the Institute. On 20th June, I was given my diploma, and on 22nd June, the Second World War [cf. Great Patriotic War] [17](#) began. We learned about it on the radio, from Molotov's [18](#) and then from Stalin's speeches, at noon on 22nd June. Kharkov was not bombed yet; our lives were quite peaceful. But I remember the day when we learned about the war – it was the most horrible day of my life.

We had a big backyard with good cellars for keeping foods. So, we used these cellars for bomb shelters. I was the chief there. I directed people where and when they should go to hide from bombs. I remember the first bombing raids. I think bombing raids on Kharkov began on 3rd August.

Leaving Kharkov after the outbreak of the Great Patriotic War

Evacuation from Kharkov began in the middle of August. My sister, her husband and daughter lived in the military town of Dongus, Russia. It was Chkalov region and now it's Orenburg region. Nikolay worked there. They had a two-room apartment. My father decided we should go to live with them. At the end of August we left. It was unexpected for me, especially because my husband, Sasha, went to say goodbye to his mother and sisters before his call-up to the war. So, I had to go without him. We took a lot of things with us, even Mother's sewing machine. The most interesting thing is that we sent it all with the luggage train, and it arrived safely about three months later.

My parents and I went together on a freight train. It was hard. We bought some foods and went to the toilet at the stations where the train stopped. Everyone understood that it was not a time for complaining. We were simply rescuing our lives. It took us two or three weeks to get to Dongus. The train was not to stop at that train station because Dongus was a military town and civilian trains never stopped there. But the machinist, on father's request, slowed the speed of the train

and we could get off.

We settled with my sister's family. First only the six of us lived in their two-room apartment, then Mother's young sister Tanya and her daughter joined us. At that time people's attitude to the living conditions was simpler than today's.

About a month later I began to work as a bookkeeper at a plant. Then I began to work at a local school, teaching the French language. I also gave private lessons of French to the military. My lessons took place in the evenings. My father was also working, so we had food cards and we were not too hungry. But I was pregnant at the time and I was hungry all the time. Most of all I wanted to eat something sweet. So, Aunt Tanya and I would run to the Officers' House, buy some tea with a piece of sugar, drink the tea there and take the sugar home with us. Aunt Tanya also exchanged our clothes for food. She also exchanged Mother's sewing machine for so much food that it 'fed' us for a whole month.

We kept corresponding with my parents' relatives. Almost all of them evacuated safely. Only Aunt Fenya, mother's sister, was killed. She lived at the old people's home. Its inhabitants were evacuated on a ship, which was bombed by the Germans. My husband Sasha could not find me through the official service of search for the evacuated. Since Dongus was a military town none of its residents was on the list of the evacuated. But at that time I was also writing to my friend from the institute who was evacuated to Khasavyurt. Sasha was a military translator who by luck was sent to Khasavyurt to work. There he met that friend of mine who gave him my address. Thus, he began to write to me too.

On 7th May 1942, I gave birth to a son, Sasha. Nikolay was given a cart at his work, on which he brought me to the hospital at three o'clock at night. There was no light, only a wick-lamp. The delivery was difficult, but my son was born healthy, weighing 4.2 kg. At the hospital I was nursing one more baby, whose mother had no milk. And on 18th August, my sister gave birth to her son Igor.

Settling in Kiev after its liberation

After the liberation of Kiev, at the end of 1943, Nikolay was transferred to work in Kiev. My sister and their children went with him. In April 1944, Nikolay sent a special invitation for us to come to Kiev. This time, the four of us went on the train, including my two-year-old son. There were rare bombing raids on our way.

Nikolay got a three-room apartment in Malozhitomirska Street, in downtown Kiev. We settled with them. My sister, Nikolay, Valya, Igor, my mother, father, my son and I lived there. Then Nikolay's mother joined us.

Sasha returned to Kharkov. We no longer lived together but remained friends until his death. In Kharkov Sasha was soon appointed the chief of the foreign languages chair of the Medical Institute. By the way, the famous surgeon Alexander Shalimov was his student. Later, when Sasha was diagnosed with stomach cancer, Shalimov – the best-known and talented surgeon in Ukraine – did the surgery on him. Sasha died on 23rd October 1982 in Kharkov.

In Kiev I worked as the Komsomol chief of the 'Arsenal' plant, then as the Komsomol chief of the Kiev conservatoire. But we did not stay in Kiev for long. The owners of our apartment came back.

Nikolay and Manya got another apartment. We were left in our previous one, in an eight-square-meter room. We decided to move to Kharkov. It was in 1945. But our Kharkov apartment was not returned to us because nobody of our family fought at the front. There was such an order. So, we changed our room in Kiev for a 14-square-meter room in a communal apartment in Kharkov. In this room we lived up to 1961: Sasha, I and my second husband Semen of whom I will tell you later. From the middle of the 1950s, Igor, Manya's son, lived with us in that room too.

Back in evacuation, in 1944, I became a candidate for the Communist Party. I wanted to join the Party very much; I believed every honest person should do that. But when we moved, my documents got lost. I received the copies only in 1948. Then I joined the Party in Kharkov. By the way, I got recommendation to the Party from Semen Naumovich, the director of the school I was working at and my future husband.

Upon arrival in Kiev we learned about the Babi Yar [19](#) tragedy. We learned about it from newspapers, but it was nowhere mentioned that Jews were shot in Babi Yar. Every newspaper wrote about the shooting of Soviet civilians. None of our relatives was killed in Babi Yar. We added this event to the list of the fascists' atrocities.

Returning to Kharkov

My favorite city, Kharkov, suffered much from the war. The center of this city was totally destroyed. Captive Germans worked with construction garbage and bricks. The city began to revive step by step, together with our lives. We were hungry; there were not enough food products or clothes. But after the victory we were full of optimism and lived with the hope for a better life. My father was appointed director of the factory for sterilization of hairdresser tools. Father worked there until retirement on pension. He also invented several new ways of sterilization of tools and received certificates for his inventions.

I went to work at school, teaching French. There, at school, I met my future husband. Semen Naumovich Litmanovich was the director of that school and a teacher of mathematics. He was its director even before the war. He was the youngest school director in Ukraine. Semen was born in 1913. He did not remember his parents. Very early he became an orphan and he grew up in the Jewish orphanage outside Nikolayev. Semen told me that in childhood he could speak only Yiddish. During the war Semen fought at the front and then returned to school.

We lived together for several years and officially registered our marriage only in 1974 before moving to Kiev. Semen easily entered our family. He had very good relationships with my parents and my son. Although, my parents loved my first husband more. Semen's character was not very simple, but his main characteristics were decency and the feeling of duty. Semen loved my son Sasha very much and took care of him even after Sasha got married and had his own family.

In 1949, my son Sasha went to the Ukrainian school where I was working. But he found it boring to study there because he was ahead of his peers in development. In 1951, I was transferred to work at the Institute of Doctors' Advanced Training. After his fourth grade I transferred Sasha to another school, a school for gifted children, which he finished successfully. He was never the best student in every subject. He liked physics and mathematics and paid absolutely no attention to humanities. However, he loved poetry very much. While in school, Sasha also studied at the theatrical studio at

the Pioneers' House. Its leader tried to persuade him to enter the Theatrical Institute. Sasha also liked painting. He was very good at painting and as strange as it may sound, this skill helped him a lot in his studies in the Aviation Institute. I tried to support Sasha in everything and let him choose his way independently.

Anti-Semitic campaigns and life after Stalin's death

From the events of those years I remember the Doctors' Plot [20](#) and fight against cosmopolitanism [21](#). All the victims in this fight were innocent. But I realized it only later, in 1956, after the 20th congress of the Communist Party [22](#). Before that, we continued to believe that our country just had so many enemies.

In 1953, Stalin died. We cried very sincerely. I worked at the Institute of Doctors' Advanced Training. I heard the news of Stalin's death on the radio and my first thought was, 'What is going to happen to us?' Not to us as Jews, but to us all, the Soviet nation? We cried a lot. Later, when Khrushchev [23](#) unmasked Stalin's cult, when we learned about the crimes of our authorities, my worldview began to change. But it was only the beginning of this comprehension. Much more about those times we learned during perestroika [24](#). I remained a member of the Communist Party, but I felt very ashamed of letting people deceive me for so many years. In 1990, I quit my Communist Party membership with no regret.

The creation of the State of Israel [25](#) did not influence us at all. I can't say that we even thought about it. It was simply outside of our lives.

My family and my son's life

In 1959, Sasha finished school and entered the Kharkov Aviation Institute. There was a very good physics teacher there, and Sasha got fond of theoretical physics. After his third year of studies at the Aviation Institute, he passed exams to University, the theoretical physics department, and was accepted to the third year there. For one year Sasha studied in both universities, and then he decided he would like to study at the Moscow Institute of Theoretic Physics, whose diplomas are highly regarded worldwide. Sasha entered that institute too.

There, he met Irina, who studied at the same institute. When they got married, Sasha was a sixth-year student and Irina – a fifth-year student. Irina came from the town of Izhevsk, Udmurtia. When Sasha graduated from the institute and Irina was a sixth-year student, in 1967, she gave birth to their son Igor. She went to her hometown for delivery, stayed there for two months and then returned to Moscow to finish her studies. She did not take any vacation from the university.

In 1961, we received a two-room apartment. But Sasha soon moved to Moscow, so only the four of us lived there. I worked as a lecturer at the 'Knowledge' society and as a consultant in universities and research institutes. Soon, my parents began to get ill with different diseases. My husband and I were working, so we hired a woman who cooked for us and took care of my parents. My father died in 1969. My mother died in 1972. Both of them died in full consciousness, without any sclerotic phenomena.

Many people say that after the war anti-Semitism grew stronger, even at the official level. Neither I nor other members of my family experienced it. I worked at an ideological job, my father occupied a very high administrative position, my husband was a school director. My son was registered as Russian in his birth certificate, but in every form he wrote that his mother was Rozalia Yakovlevna Akselrod – a typical Jewish name, which clearly showed my nationality. None of this hindered him in life. Sasha graduated from the institute and entered a post-graduate course in Kiev, in the Theoretical Physics Institute under the Academy of Sciences. His scientific leader was Academician Davydov. At the age of 38 Sasha was awarded the title of Ph. D. People said he was very gifted. I guess he was.

My grandson, Igor, lived in Izhevsk till the age of three. Then, in 1970, he was brought to Kiev. Sasha immediately received a two-room apartment. But he and Irina both worked and it was hard for them to take care of the child. My husband and I lived in Kharkov until Igor had to go to school. By that time we both had retired on pension. Semen decided that we had to help raise Igor. So, in 1974 we moved to Kiev.

Igor was a difficult, unbalanced child. But he was very independent. For instance, without telling anyone, he passed exams to enter a mathematical school, the eighth grade. But he was not accepted there because he was registered with the nervous diseases clinic. However, without any help, he entered the physics and mathematics department of the University. Igor did not really like to study because he liked working independently. This boy just could not do something he was not fond of. He wanted to do only what he believed was necessary. He always saw the purposefulness of his parents and followed their example. Igor transferred from this department to the department of cybernetics. He and his three friends accomplished a project for an American company. Upon completion of this project, this company sent an invitation to work to all four of them. So now, Igor lives in California. Recently he got married – his wife is a Chinese girl from Hong Kong. May they be happy.

In the 1970s, Jews began to move to Israel. I never condemned those who were leaving but I could never understand why they were leaving. I think, every person should determine for his or her life what he or she needs. I have lived all my life in this country; both good and bad times in my life are linked with Ukraine. Here are the graves of the people who were dear to me – my parents, my husband, and my son. Here is where I want to die too.

In 1986, a great grief befell our family. My husband Semen died. Sasha and I buried him in the common, not the Jewish, graveyard. Irina could not come to the funeral because she was in Izhevsk. And in 1998 another grief came into our family. Sasha was diagnosed with stomach cancer, just like his father. The operation was made by Shalimov, the same surgeon who had operated his father. But the operation did not help, and in 1998, Sasha died. He was only 56 years old.

In 1999, a two-day symposium was organized on the subject of his works. Many scientists from other cities attended it. One academician told me, 'I understand how hard it is for you now. But you are a happy mother. Thank you very much for giving us such a wonderful scientist as your son. Thank you.' I can't say that my loss became lighter after that, but I am glad that the memory of my son lives on in his works.

Sasha is gone for four years now. I continue to live with Irina. She does not want to get married again. She says, 'There will be no one like Sasha. Why should I get something less?' For me, Irina is everything now. I certainly cook for her and look forward to her coming home every day. And while I give her something to eat or do the dishes, she shares with me what projects she is working on. She is now the chief of the Department of the State Committee for Information and Communications. I know this subject well, and she shares with me because she sees that it is the main thing to me. We eat and watch TV together and then go to the kitchen and talk until one o'clock in the morning. It is very important to me. Because it is easier to get irritated with each other than to understand each other. I don't see myself as being her dependent. We simply live together as close people do.

Life in independent Ukraine

Since the beginning of Ukraine's independence I believe life in Ukraine has become better. The attitude toward Jews has been radically changed, not only at the official level, but also at the household level. I am very grateful to the Jewish community and Hesed [26](#) for the help they constantly provide to me in every field of life. Unfortunately, I don't go out of the house too much for health reasons and I can't attend lectures or concerts. It is becoming harder for me to read too. I only watch TV sometimes. But I know from people's stories that they organize some very interesting events. In general, I like the way Hesed has it organized. This organization helps us survive. I get free food, eye drops, glasses. I am very grateful to the people who are doing this good thing.

I would not have repeated much of what I have done in life. But I would like many things repeated in my life: I had good parents, good husbands, good children and a very good daughter-in-law. I believe this is the main thing for me. I have never believed in God. I've never observed Jewish traditions or holidays. Regretfully, I don't know them and I've never felt like following them anyway. This may be wrong, but I can hardly change anything now. This is the way our generation is in this country. We've lived a normal decent life. My grandson is also very good. And now I am expecting a great-grandson. When I look back at my life, I say to the God in whom I don't believe, 'Thank you, God, for everything you have given me!'

Glossary

[1](#) 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.

[2](#) 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.

3 Gangs

During the Russian Civil War there were all kinds of gangs in the Ukraine. Their members came from all the classes of former Russia, but most of them were peasants. Their leaders used political slogans to dress their criminal acts. These gangs were anti-Soviet and anti-Semitic. They killed Jews and burnt their houses, they robbed their houses, raped women and killed children.

4 Petliura, Simon (1879-1926)

Ukrainian politician, member of the Ukrainian Social Democratic Working Party, one of the leaders of Centralnaya Rada (Central Council), the national government of Ukraine (1917-1918). Military units under his command killed Jews during the Civil War in Ukraine. In the Soviet-Polish war he was on the side of Poland; in 1920 he emigrated. He was killed in Paris by the Jewish nationalist Schwarzbard in revenge for the pogroms against Jews in Ukraine.

5 Civil War (1918-1920)

The Civil War between the Reds (the Bolsheviks) and the Whites (the anti-Bolsheviks), which broke out in early 1918, ravaged Russia until 1920. The Whites represented all shades of anti-communist groups - Russian army units from World War I, led by anti-Bolshevik officers, by anti-Bolshevik volunteers and some Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries. Several of their leaders favored setting up a military dictatorship, but few were outspoken tsarists. Atrocities were committed throughout the Civil War by both sides. The Civil War ended with Bolshevik military victory, thanks to the lack of cooperation among the various White commanders and to the reorganization of the Red forces after Trotsky became commissar for war. It was won, however, only at the price of immense sacrifice; by 1920 Russia was ruined and devastated. In 1920 industrial production was reduced to 14% and agriculture to 50% as compared to 1913.

6 Denikin, Anton Ivanovich (1872-1947)

White Army general. During the Russian Civil War he fought against the Red Army in the South of Ukraine.

7 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.

8 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.

9 Komsomol

Communist youth political organization created in 1918. The task of the Komsomol was to spread 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.

10 Famine in Ukraine

In 1920 a deliberate famine was introduced in the Ukraine causing the death of millions of people. It was arranged in order to suppress those protesting peasants who did not want to join the collective farms. There was another dreadful deliberate famine in 1930-1934 in the Ukraine. The authorities took away the last food products from the peasants. People were dying in the streets, whole villages became deserted. The authorities arranged this specifically to suppress the rebellious peasants who did not want to accept Soviet power and join collective farms.

11 Makarenko, Anton (1888-1939)

Soviet pedagogue and writer, in 1920-35 organizer and director of care institutions for homeless young people (the Maxim Gorky Work Colony near Poltava, and the Felix Dzierzhinsky Commune in Charkov). From 1935 he devoted himself largely to writing and popularizing his ideas. He was the creator of a method of collective education by involving the individual in the life of an organized, self-governing community of carers and their charges subject to a defined system of standards and cooperating to achieve targets (particular emphasis was placed on productive work), and guided by a communist ideology. He employed the principle of linking challenges with respect for the individual. He described his pedagogical research in works including *An Epic in Education* (1933-35), *Lecture for Parents* (1937), and *Pennants on Towers* (1938). The Makarenko system, applied in the USSR and other communist countries (in particular in the 1950s and 60s) has been an object of great interest and study in many countries, and has often been a subject of fierce debate.

12 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.

13 Enemy of the people

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

14 KGB

The KGB or Committee for State Security was the main Soviet external security and intelligence agency, as well as the main secret police agency from 1954 to 1991.

15 Cossacks

An ethnic group that constituted something of a free estate in the 15th-17th centuries in the Polish Republic and in the 16th-18th centuries in the Muscovite state (and then Russia). The Cossacks in the Polish Republic consisted of peasants, townspeople and nobles settled along the banks of the Lower Dnieper, where they organized armed detachments initially to defend themselves against the Tatar invasions and later themselves making forays against the Tatars and the Turks. As part of the armed forces, the Cossacks played an important role in Russia's imperial wars in the 17th-20th centuries. From the 19th century onwards, Cossack troops were also used to suppress uprisings and independence movements. During the February and October Revolutions in 1917 and the Russian Civil War, some of the Cossacks (under Kaledin, Dutov and Semyonov) supported the Provisional Government, and as the core of the Volunteer Army bore the brunt of the fighting with the Red Army, while others went over to the Bolshevik side (Budenny). In 1920 the Soviet authorities disbanded all Cossack formations, and from 1925 onwards set about liquidating the Cossack identity. In 1936 Cossacks were permitted to join the Red Army, and some Cossack divisions fought under its banner in World War II. Some Cossacks served in formations collaborating with the Germans and in 1945 were handed over to the authorities of the USSR by the Western Allies.

16 Rehabilitation in the Soviet Union

Many people who had been arrested, disappeared or killed during the Stalinist era were rehabilitated after the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956, where Khrushchev publicly debunked the cult of Stalin and lifted the veil of secrecy from what had happened in the USSR during Stalin's leadership. It was only after the official rehabilitation that people learnt for the first time what had happened to their relatives as information on arrested people had not been disclosed before.

17 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.

18 Molotov, V

P. (1890-1986): Statesman and member of the Communist Party leadership. From 1939, Minister of Foreign Affairs. On June 22, 1941 he announced the German attack on the USSR on the radio. He and Eden also worked out the percentages agreement after the war, about Soviet and western spheres of influence in the new Europe.

19 Babi Yar

Babi Yar is the site of the first mass shooting of Jews that was carried out openly by fascists. On 29th and 30th September 1941 33,771 Jews were shot there by a special SS unit and Ukrainian militia men. During the Nazi occupation of Kiev between 1941 and 1943 over a 100,000 people were killed in Babi Yar, most of whom were Jewish. The Germans tried in vain to efface the traces of the mass grave in August 1943 and the Soviet public learnt about mass murder after World War II.

20 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.

21 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.'

22 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.

23 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.

24 Perestroika (Russian for restructuring)

Soviet economic and social policy of the late 1980s, associated with the name of Soviet politician Mikhail Gorbachev. The term designated the attempts to transform the stagnant, inefficient command economy of the Soviet Union into a decentralized, market-oriented economy. Industrial managers and local government and party officials were granted greater autonomy, and open elections were introduced in an attempt to democratize the Communist Party organization. By 1991, perestroika was declining and was soon eclipsed by the dissolution of the USSR.

25 Creation of the State of Israel

From 1917 Palestine was a British mandate. Also in 1917 the Balfour Declaration was published, which supported the idea of the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Throughout the interwar period, Jews were migrating to Palestine, which caused the conflict with the local Arabs to escalate. On the other hand, British restrictions on immigration sparked increasing opposition to the mandate powers. Immediately after World War II there were increasing numbers of terrorist attacks designed to force Britain to recognize the right of the Jews to their own state. These aspirations provoked the hostile reaction of the Palestinian Arabs and the Arab states. In February 1947 the British foreign minister Ernest Bevin ceded the Palestinian mandate to the UN, which took the decision to divide Palestine into a Jewish section and an Arab section and to create an independent Jewish state. On 14th May 1948 David Ben Gurion proclaimed the creation of the State of Israel. It was recognized immediately by the US and the USSR. On the following day the armies of Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon attacked Israel, starting a war that continued, with intermissions, until the beginning of 1949 and ended in a truce.

26 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.