Raya Teytelbaumene

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Kaunas

Lithuania

Interviewer: Zhanna Litinskaya

Date of interview: October 2005

Raya Teytelbaumene met me in her apartment located in a three-storied building on Kestucchio Street, in the heart of Kaunas. Raya has a nice and large apartment with furniture from the 1970s. Raya had a dressy outfit on. Her hair was neatly done. Raya was very affable and agreed to the interview right away. Unfortunately, during our conversation I understood that her memory failed her. Raya didn't remember the names of her relatives and certain events. She seemed to be unwilling to speak of the events related to her husband's job in the postwar times. She tried to hide in her shell when I started asking questions regarding her membership in the Communist Party and the struggle against peoples' enemies 1. I have to believe her as we have no right to doubt the sincerity of people we interview. I can understand Raya, as Lithuanian authorities consider the Soviet rule as an occupation and those who worked for the Soviets to be criminals, especially those who were in managing positions in punitive bodies.

I am from the small Lithuanian town of Vilkaviskis, located not far from the border with Russia [about 150 km from Vilnius]. I spent my childhood and adolescence in that town, which stands on the picturesque river Sheshupa. My mother was born here and her parents were most likely from Vilkaviskis. I didn't know my maternal grandfather. He died long before I was born. I don't even remember his name. His last name was Tsiglyarskiy. I remember my maternal grandmother. She lived with my mother's sister Taube in the small town of Pilvishkiai, not far from Vilkaviskis. At that time Grandmother seemed very old to me, though she was only a little over fifty. She was rather slender and tall. She was dressed in dark, but beautiful clothes, becoming to her age. Grandmother didn't cover her head. I assume she wasn't very religious, though she went to the synagogue sometimes, observed Jewish traditions and celebrated all holidays. My first childhood recollections are about my grandmother. She left for the USA when I was four or five, and I didn't see her since that time. Grandmother apparently died after the war, when we didn't keep in touch. I don't even remember her name.

My grandparents raised three daughters. They were brought up traditionally Jewish. They helped Grandmother about the house since adolescence. They were taught how to cook Jewish dishes. Thus, they imbibed Jewish traditions and peculiarities of the Jewish mode of life. Mother's elder sister Chaya was born in 1890. Her husband, a Jewish man, Belostotskiy, owned a small tannery, where pork hide was tanned. Chaya never worked. Her husband was rather prosperous, so Chaya's family did pretty well. They lived in their own house on the central street of Vilkaviskis.

Chaya had four children. The eldest Rysha, born in 1910, left for the USA, when she was single. She married a Jew there. He was also from Vilkaviskis. Her husband was a barber and worked in America as a barber. Rysha didn't have children. In 1950 her husband died and Rysha left for Israel, where her siblings lived. Rysha lived in Israel for many years. She died in the 1970s. Chaya's next daughter, Taube-Basya, married a very wealthy man, with whom she left for Palestine in the early 1930s. I don't remember her husband's name. Basya has children. They are currently living in Israel. Basya died at an advanced age, in 2000.

Chaya's younger daughter Yudita, born in 1920, left for Palestine shortly before the outbreak of the Great Patriotic War 2, with Chaya and her husband. They left in time. If they hadn't left, Chaya's husband definitely would have been deported 3 to Siberia, as he was a well-heeled man, or the whole family would have perished during the German occupation. Yudita was also married. Her husband died a long time ago. Her son Gidon lives in Israel. Yudita is still alive. We are still writing to each other. The youngest in the family, Chaya's only son Tuvia left for Israel with his parents. He was married. He died in 2001. His wife and daughter are living in Israel. Chaya lived until the 1980s and died, when she was over ninety years old.

Mother's second sister Taube was born in 1898. She lived with her family in the small Lithuanian town of Pilvishkiai. Taube married her cousin Meishe, the son of Grandmother's sister. I can't recall her name. Taube and her spouse owned a rather large grocery store, where both of them worked. They had a large house. Taube's family and Grandmother lived there before she left for America. I was friends with Ente, Taube's daughter, who was a couple of years younger than me. We played together when I came over to see my aunt. Taube's family – she, her husband and daughter – perished in 1941 during one of the first Fascist actions in Pilvishkiai.

My mother, Sheina Tsiglyarskaya, was born in 1894. Mother and her sisters got elementary Jewish education. She knew how to read and write in Yiddish, Russian and Lithuanian. She was good at counting. Mother didn't work when she was single. She got married, when she was rather young: 17 years old. She married the person she loved. Father didn't have any relatives or acquaintances in Vilkaviskis. He fell in love with my mother the first time they met.

I know much less about my father's relatives. My father is from Poland. I don't know what town he was from. During his adolescence he came to Lithuania. He stayed in one of the towns in the vicinity of my mother's town. His parents remained in Poland. I never met them. I don't remember their names. I assume they were born in the 1870s. Once in the late 1920s Father went to see his parents, as his dad was ill. In a while Father came back very sad. He said that his father was very feeble. It must have been the last time he saw him. Father never spoke of his parents in my presence and never went to Poland again, so I think Grandfather died after my father's visit to him.

My paternal grandmother, whom I didn't know, most likely died during the German occupation, before the outbreak of the Great Patriotic War. Probably, my paternal grandparents were very poor. If not, why would Father have left them? What I know for sure about my Grandparents Rogozhik is that they were very pious. In my father's words, Grandfather never took his kippah off. He had a long beard and payes. He was a true Hasid 4. He prayed all day long, went to the synagogue, observed traditions, celebrated all Jewish holidays, fasted.

My father, Morduchai Ragozhik, born in 1892, was an only child. At any rate, I never heard anything about siblings. Father went to cheder, which was customary for Jewish families. I don't know if he

continued his education. He most likely finished a couple of grades of elementary school as he was literate. Father was a worker in the Vilkaviskis tannery, which belonged to the husband of Aunt Chaya, Belostotskiy. Father kept working there after getting married.

My parents got married in 1912, when my mother was 17 years old and Father was only twenty. Both were young, gorgeous and infatuated. Young marriages weren't common among Jews, but they were considered desirable. My Tsiglyarskiy grandparents organized a wedding party for my parents. It was a true Jewish wedding. The bride and groom went under a chuppah in the only synagogue in Vilkaviskis. The first-born, Chaim, came into the world in nine month. The next one, Boruch, was born in 1915. I, the long-awaited daughter, was born on 21st July 1918. I was given the Hebrew name Rachel.

Our family lived in a big house, inherited by my mother. The whole family lived in that house, while my maternal grandfather was alive. It was a large two-storied house, located in the central part of the town, on Vilniaus Street. There was a plot of land of two hectares around the house. It was the most precious property we had. My father was a natural born gardener. I don't know who imbued him with the love for trees, where he learnt that art. At any rate, the garden was amazing. Fruit trees were planted there. There were all kinds of wonderful sorts of apple, pear, plum, cherry, sweet-cherry trees. Apart from that, there were wonderful corners of the garden with decorative plants and flowers. There was a pond, where Father bred carps and other fish. There was an arbor on the bank of the pond. We often went there in the evenings to have heart-to-heart conversations. The orchard was created by my father. I'm still wondering, how he could manage to work at the factory and take care of the garden. Especially in spring and fall, when there was a lot of work in the garden. We had to sprinkle the plants, cut the crowns of the trees, fight with the plant pests, bugs, gather harvest, put it in storage or in the basement.

Father hired farm hands: Lithuanians, who worked under his supervision. These were common Lithuanian boys and girls. They respected my parents and treated them kindly. He deserved it since he was very honest, valued other people's work, and Mother always tried to provide hearty meals for the employees. Lithuanians called my mother Sheina. I was affectionately called Rachelka. The orchard was so beautiful that it was famous beyond our town. People from other cities of Lithuania came to see our orchard. Father was especially happy on those days as his labor and merits were recognized. He gladly shared his experience with the visitors and Mother fed the guests right away, which was common in Jewish families.

There was a garden apart from the orchard. Almost all vegetables were planted there: potatoes, beets, carrots, cabbage of different sorts, all kinds of herbs and spices. There was a chicken coop at the back of the yard. We always had chicken and turkeys. There was a time when Mother kept a cow. Then it was sold, as there was nobody to herd it. We also had a dog. We, the children, adored it. The dog had its own kennel, but Father was so kind that he let the dog out and we ran around with it in the garden.

I loved our house very much and remember every corner of it. There were four large rooms and a kitchen. It had a layout typical for Lithuania: one after another along the façade of the house. The largest room was the drawing room, which was used as a dining room at the same time. There were a large carved cupboard, dining table with chairs and a large mirror, reaching from the floor to the ceiling. A radio appeared in the same room in the 1930s. The second room was a bedroom.

There were two wooden beds, a wardrobe with lots of drawers. The other two rooms were used as bedrooms for my brothers and me. Later on, when my brothers finished school and left the town, Mother started leasing their room. A young Lithuanian, Stasis, occupied their room. He studied at the seminary in Vilkaviskis. He became a priest after finishing it, but still he kept living in our house. He loved my parents very much and loved me as a sister. He was a truly religious Catholic, but it didn't stop him from living in a Jewish house and loving its inhabitants.

My mother took care of the house. When I became a little older, five years old, Mother wanted to do something. She bought a small store and started selling things. It was a grocery store. Her main customers were peasants from the adjacent villages. There was flour, cereal, herring stored in special barrels, sugar, matches, soap etc. That store was like any other small store and shop kept by Jews. The stores surrounded the market square. As they say, there was no room to swing a cat on Fridays and Wednesdays, especially in summertime. Vegetables, fruits, milk, meat and other agricultural products were sold straight from the carts. Having sold their goods, the peasants made necessary purchases in Mother's store. Then they went to a small beer bar to celebrate their sales. The bar was also kept by a Jew. On Sundays Lithuanians and Poles – there were a lot of them in Vilkaviskis – dressed up and went to the cathedral with their entire families.

Jews also went to the synagogue. The only synagogue in Vilkaviskis was almost in front of our house, and every Friday and Saturday my father went there. Father always covered his head. In summer he wore a linen cap or kippah and in winter he put a hat on. On Fridays and Saturdays he went to the synagogue in a dressy vest suit, not in casual clothes. He also put on a nice kippah and tallit. Mother also went to the synagogue on Saturday, though she didn't do it with such faith, as she was brought up in a family not as religious as my father's. She put a kerchief on her head when she went to the synagogue. Usually on Saturday I went to the synagogue with my mother. I liked our synagogue very much. It wasn't very big: a wooden, one-storied building with carved ornamentation. Men and women prayed in different rooms. There was a whole praying hall for men, and women had a smaller place to pray. There were black ebony seats in the praying hall. It was very clean and beautiful.

Our family wasn't rich, but due to my parents' prudence and hard work, they had all the necessary things for a worthy life. The furniture in our house was simple, but well-made. The house was sparkling clean as my mother couldn't stand filth and dust. Almost always we laid the table with fruits and vegetables, which were grown in our garden, fish bred in our pond, as well as eggs, chicken and turkeys. We only bought dairy products and butter at the market. As for other products, they were available in my mother's store. All our food was kosher. When needed, Mother bought meat in Jewish stores. My brother or I took the chicken to a shochet, whose shchita was in the yard of the synagogue. I watched the shochet cut the chicken's neck, moving deftly and precisely. Then he hung the poultry on special hooks over the tub, where the blood would trickle, and only after that he returned the poultry to us.

Beginning in 1925, when Mother's business developed, a housekeeper – a Lithuanian lady called Marite – moved into our house. She didn't have a family, so she was sincerely affectionate to us. Marite cooked the food in the kitchen, a large room with the stove in the center. The food was cooked on the stove, bread and pies were baked in it and stew and Sabbath chulent were cooked there also. Dairy and meat products were cut with separate knives. There were separate sets for dairy and meat dishes as well as kitchen utensils.

We strictly observed Sabbath like any other Jewish family. Neither Mother nor Father worked. Father also didn't do any gardening. On Friday we got ready for Sabbath. The house was always rather clean, but on that day it was dazzling. There was a freshly-starched table cloth. Mother baked challot on Thursday. They were placed on a tray covered with a clean napkin. As a rule, for Saturday, mother cooked all kinds of tasty Jewish dishes: chicken broth, liver pate, forshmak, different tsimes – a new one each time, from beans, potatoes or carrots. Gefilte fish was a mandatory dish on the table. We didn't have to buy fish as Father caught carps in our pond. Mother cooked tasty stewed fruit for desert. In summer she used fresh fruit for that and dried fruit in wintertime. On Friday night Mother lit candles, placed in a beautiful silver candlestick. On the way from the synagogue on Saturday, my mother or I dropped by a neighboring bakery, where we and our neighbors kept the chulent: a large pot with stewed meat, potatoes, beans and onion. Chulent was a mandatory Sabbath dish. After lunch Marite cleared away the table, washed the dishes, and we went to our rooms to have a rest. In summer I went to sleep in a hammock, suspended between the trees in our garden.

We prepared thoroughly for Jewish holidays. Usually the holiday was celebrated by the entire, large family. Aunt Chaya and her family came over to us, or sometimes we went to her place. Mother cooked the best dishes for the holidays; usually there was the same menu for the holiday feast: gefilte fish, chicken stew, tsimes, imberlach, teiglach – pieces of dough boiled in sugar syrup.

The year started with the fall holidays. I remember the sound of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah. It seemed to me that the trumpet was right next to us as the synagogue was close by. There were a lot of fruits, including apple honey and homemade honey wine, on the table. My parents obligatorily fasted on Yom Kippur. I started fasting from the age of fourteen. Arbor twined around with ivy and vine was used as a sukkah on Sukkot. Mother set a small round table in the arbor. Father had meals there, and drank a little bit of wine. We ate at home as it was rather cold and rainy in Lithuania at that time. We weren't used to celebrating Simchat Torah, though mother made much richer meals at home than usual. I ran up to the synagogue to watch the singing and dancing Jews carry out the Torah scroll from the synagogue and walk around the synagogue with it.

For some reason I don't remember winter holidays, Chanukkah and Purim, very well. On Chanukkah, Mother cooked a lot of potato dishes, casseroles and doughnuts. There was a large dish with hamantashen on Purim. On that day Jewish kids were running around the city with trays full of shelakhmones – presents. Mother also baked many hamantashen and all kinds of cookies. My brother and I went to Aunt Chaya with our presents, and her kids Yudita and Tuvia came to us. Then all of us had fun, swapped the presents and ate them.

Pesach was the main holiday of the year. Father brought matzah from the synagogue and since that time there was a festive atmosphere in the house. All children were given presents on the occasion of the holiday. While I was small, as a rule I was given a new dress and patent leather boots. All dishes we had been using during the year were placed in a large sack and taken to the garret. We weren't allowed to touch them during the holiday period. Father brought Paschal dishes from the garret, which were used exclusively for Pesach by our family and Aunt Chaya's family. For the first seder usually people got together at our place, as my mother cooked better than Chaya. Father led the seder, reclining on the pillows. He was clad in festive attire. We already knew that the afikoman was under the pillow and found it. We asked the question about the origin of the holiday by turns: I, Yudita and Tuvia.

Apart from the usual dishes there were the following ones on Pesach: bitter herbs, eggs, matzah and others. There was no bread at all, but there were a lot of matzah dishes: kneydlakh, tsimes and casserole. For desert Aunt Chaya brought an unsurpassable matzah cake. It was the best thing she cooked. It was year in, year out the same holiday, the same traditions, but for some reason we were anxious about it, expecting something new and unusual. I started liking Jewish holidays when my brothers Chaim and Boruch left home. My brothers would come home, when all Jews were eager to come home.

My brothers went to the Jewish elementary school. The elder one, Chaim, finished a Lithuanian lyceum – the Jewish one wasn't free, but the Lithuanian one was free of charge. Besides, my brother dreamt of becoming a pharmacist, and he had to have good Lithuanian for that. Upon graduation Chaim entered Kaunas University, the Pharmaceutical Department and moved to Kaunas. Having graduated from it in 1938 he went to Birzhai and was employed as a pharmacist at a private pharmacy. Boruch, having finished lyceum, learnt the profession of a photographer and worked as a photographer in Vilkaviskis.

When I turned seven, I also went to the Jewish elementary school. It was a private school, but the tuition fee was rather affordable for people with medium income. Poor families – there were a lot of them in Vilkaviskis – were exempt from tuition fees for their children. I made many friends at school. They were two girls, Rosa and Manya. We went strolling together after classes or on the weekend. All subjects were taught in Yiddish in our school. We studied Jewish classical literature. We had religion class as well. We had joyful celebrations of Jewish holidays at school, Purim was the special one. On that holiday there was a carnival, the Purimspiel. Almost all kids had traditional Purim costumes of Esther, Haman, Mordecai and Ahasuerus. I learnt about the origins of Jewish holidays at school. We merely celebrated them at home, and we, the kids, weren't told anything about them.

I was a mediocre student. I didn't get straight excellent marks, but I didn't have poor marks either. I studied there for four years. When my parents had to choose where my education would be continued, they decided that I should attend the State Lithuanian lyceum that my brothers had attended.

I successfully passed the entrance exams and became a lyceum student. Lithuanians, Poles, Russians studied in our class. There were two Jews: I and a boy named Yankel. Teachers treated us kindly, without picking on any nationality. When there was a Bible class, Yankel and I didn't have to attend it. We had a free hour. As for the rest of the subjects, we studied them the same as other students. I was good at Lithuanian and had no problems with my studies.

I had Lithuanian friends here. They treated me very kindly. We even treated each other to traditional food. I brought them hamantashen and imberlakh. The girls treated me to an Easter cake. However, there were a couple of girls in our class, who offended Yankel and me. There were cases, when they openly called us kikes. My friends stood up for me at once and punished those who hurt me. When teachers found out about the conflict, they didn't ignore it. They called the culprits into the teaching room and had a very strict conversation with them, saying that all people were equal. They tried to make them feel ashamed and soon there were no more conflicts. When I was studying at the Lithuanian lyceum, I communicated with my Jewish peers less and less. I had no opportunity and willingness to take part in any Jewish youth organizations, but my brother

Boruch was always fond of Zionist ideas and even started talking of departure for Palestine.

I studied at the lyceum for eight years. By the time when I was in the seventh grade, I didn't want to finish lyceum as I had other interests. The matter was that I met a young man and was infatuated with him. Vilkaviskis was a small town, where everybody, especially the Jews knew each other. Once an adult, tall and handsome guy came up to me and said that he liked me a lot. He called my name and said he would wait for me to grow up, for us to get married. Fayvel Teytelbaum, born in 1909 somewhere in Russia – I can't recall where exactly – and moved to Vilkaviskis with his mother, when he was a child. Fayvel's father had died a long time ago, and his mother Riva had a small house, where she lived with her son. Fayvel was the bread-winner of the family. He worked at the soap making factory, owned by some Jews. Fayvel was a very gifted and honest guy. He was respected and valued by the owners. Fayvel made pretty good money. He asked me out to eat ice-cream. We often strolled hand-in-hand.

These were the happiest years of my life. However, parents didn't approve of my infatuation and were against Fayvel as he was much older than me. I was in love, and my parents understood that there was nothing they could do to separate us.

I understood that I would be married soon in spite of my parents' will. I thought that learning some profession would be more important than finishing the lyceum. I left for Kaunas, where I entered the Jewish professional seamstress school and started learning that profession. I rented a room with several girls on Maku Street. I made new friends here as well. They were keen on Communist ideas and all of them were underground Komsomol members 5. I also gave in and the ideas of equality and fraternity were close to me. I also entered the Komsomol. However, I was a poor member. I didn't fulfill the assignments, as I was much more interested in my private life. Fayvel didn't leave me in peace. He came to see me very often. We became close and my chosen one insisted that we should get married. My parents couldn't help agreeing to that. In 1936 Fayvel and I went to Kaunas. Our marriage was registered by a town rabbi. There we went under a chuppah in the synagogue. We celebrated our wedding at home. It was very modest: a dinner for the relatives arranged by my mother.

My parents gave us their large bedroom. They changed their attitude to Fayvel. They saw that my husband loved and took care of me, he literally worshipped me. They also loved him. We had lived in Vilkaviskis for a couple of months. I decided to continue my education, and Fayvel and I left for Kaunas. I recommenced studies at school, worked in the school workshop and got a scholarship. Fayvel found a job at a comparable factory to the one where he had worked in Vilkaviskis –the one that produced soap. We rented a room on Kestucchio Street. The three of us lived there – my husband and I and my brother Chaim, who was studying at Kaunas University.

I was happy. I loved my husband and he adored me. We never parted. I loved Kaunas; we went for walks in the city, and to the cinema, which was a new attraction to me. My husband bought me presents that he could afford. He tried to get fashionable clothes for me. On holidays, we went to see my parents in my hometown. Our room with clean linen was always ready for us as well as a tasty dinner. Now, the time of farewells started. Chaya's family, Yudita and Tuvia, left for Palestine. My brother Boruch followed them. By that time he was a good photographer and made pretty good money, but Zionist ideas, inherent in him, finally broke through and Boruch dreamed of Palestine. Mother cried as if knowing that she was saying good-bye to him for ever. I envied my brother a

little bit, but my husband and I weren't going to leave. I was totally apolitical, stopped thinking of the Komsomol and seeing my mates from the Komsomol unit.

At that time, in the late 1930s pro-Fascist movements were founded and there were a couple of cases when open anti-Semitism was displayed. Neither I nor my husband were affected by that, though. Both of us belonged to the circle of a Lithuanian youth, looking to the East, to the Soviet Union. I should say, not only poor Jews hoped that the Soviet regime would change their lives for the better, the middle class of the Jewish society also preferred Russia. We didn't know anything about the wave of the repressions, arrests 6, how Stalin and his clique exterminated true Communists. Fayvel yearned for Russia as he was born there. His elder sister Chasya lived in Moscow and he hadn't seen her for years.

That is why when the Soviet Army 7 came to Lithuania in 1940 we were happy to be annexed to the USSR 8. Crowds of people threw flowers to them. Since that time our life changed slightly. My husband, who wasn't drafted into the army due to his lame leg, became an activist. He was appointed director of the plant, where he had been a common worker. I finished typing courses and found a job in the regional committee of the trade unions. There were some changes in our Vilkaviskis. Mother's store was nationalized. She didn't work anymore. Father kept working at the factory, which was also nationalized. We were lucky. Our house wasn't touched and nobody else was accommodated in it. Our land wasn't taken over and father kept on working in his favorite garden. Mother was happy that my brother, who became a rather famous Zionist in town, managed to leave for Palestine. Otherwise, the Soviets would have exiled him like many other Zionist activists. The town synagogue was still open and Father went there. I think he did it out of the habit, to stick to the traditions.

We enjoyed our lives. Of course, we understood what Fascist Germany was threatening us with, but we hoped that there would be no war. Though, in 1941 there were military training alarms. We had civil defense classes at work. It was a bad premonition. On 22nd June I worked, though it was a Sunday. I had a lot of things to do. We lived not far from my workplace. I went to work and quietly did what I had to. My husband came to see me two hours later. He was really worried, even at a loss. Fayvel said that the war had broken out: Fascist Germany had treacherously attacked our country. Fayvel told me to stop working and to leave immediately. We went in the yard, where there was a cart. Fayvel made arrangements with some Lithuanian to take us away from the town. We didn't come back home. My husband took money and our documents along. The only clothes I had were the ones on me: a summer dress and sandals. So my husband and I left Kaunas.

It was an escape. We had covered about twenty kilometers. A Lithuanian cabman decided to come back on his cart, as he was worried about his wife and children. We walked on the road along with other lost people, who had left their homes. Defeated units of the Red Army were also with us. Some wounded soldiers were going on trucks. Those who were slightly wounded supported each other. Some cars with military were ahead of us, they didn't take any civilians with them. Bombings started. Military planes bombed us, though they saw that we were ordinary civilians. There was screaming. Children were weeping. Some old people were carried on stretchers. When the bombing was over, some of us remained immobile. We walked almost without any stops, just taking some rest in the woods or on the curb. We munched on some rusks on the road, which my husband had taken with him. We drank water from the wells, which were by the road. We were in a hurry as Fascist armadas were close on our heels. I was constantly thinking of my parents and brother, as

they had stayed in Vilkaviskis, which was occupied in the first hours of the war, being close to the border. We didn't have any information about my brother Chaim either. My husband's mother Riva also most likely remained in the occupation.

We had been walking for a long time. On the border with Latvia we got on some truck and went to a small Latvian town, which was still in the rear. If forgot the name of the town. All of us went to live in the houses of locals. It was calm for a couple of days. There were no bombings and it appeared to me as if the war was very far away. Soon the German army approached the Latvian border. We took the train together with other fugitives and went towards the East. It was a locomotive train, crammed with fugitives. People were sitting in the aisles, on the roof. It was a long trip, no less than two weeks. The train made frequent stops. People scattered during air-raids. What we feared the most was that we could miss the train or lose each other. Death became a natural thing. After every bombing there were less and less people in our car.

We managed to get some boiled water at the stations. Sometimes, special salvation teams fed people with soup or gruel. The train headed in the Eastern direction and the bombings ceased. We reached the Siberian city of Omsk [about 2500 km from Moscow], where my husband's distant relatives were living. I don't remember their names. I just remember that a rather elderly couple was very hospitable to us. I took a bath for the first time in many days and put on clean underwear and clothes. I had a hearty meal and went to sleep in a clean bed.

I liked Omsk. It was a big city, where people could find a job and a place to stay, but we were really scared of the harsh winter. We weren't prepared for it at all, as we didn't have any warm clothes and we hardly had any money left. We were advised to go to some republics of Central Asia. It was much warmer there, and much easier to survive. So about three weeks after our arrival in Omsk my husband and I bought train tickets and left for Kazakhstan. We addressed the evacuation point in the capital of Kazakhstan, Almaty, and we were sent to the small town of Kargaly, about 25 kilometers away from Almaty. My husband received a notice from the military enlistment office, but he wasn't drafted into the army. First, he had an innate physical defect: one of` his legs was shorter than the other. Secondly, at the beginning of the war those who were from the Baltic States weren't involved in military actions as they weren't trusted.

My husband attracted much attention. Firstly, he was born in Russia, secondly, he was a very attractive person. They had a conversation with him in connection with the coming victory of the Soviet Union. He was also told that during peace time the NKVD 9 and the Prosecutor's office would need people. My husband was offered a job in the Prosecutor's office. He took the offer at once. They sent him to attend some special courses in some town. They were short-term, and in three months my husband came back home and got a job with the Prosecutor's office of Kargaly. He worked as an investigator. We were housed with local people. We were given a small room. Besides, we didn't have to pay anything for the rent.

We had a pretty good life. Of course, we knew what it was to starve and be cold. It was the hardest at the beginning. When my husband worked for the prosecution he got a good ration 10 and our life was getting better. From dawn till night my husband was busy at work. I was not used to idle, so I decided to do something as well. I rented a shed from the landlady at a good price and bought a pig. I started feeding it. When it grew big I sold it and earned money. Soon I bought a cow. Now our life was just wonderful. From then on I would work hard all day long. I herded the cow, made

fodder for the pig, and it was worth it. We had milk. I sold most of it and we had a good living. The hosts, a Kazakh family, with whom we were staying, were only surprised at me, as there were rumors that Jews didn't like and didn't know how to work. My hard work won their respect. We were on good terms, though with time I started understanding that they were somehow terrified of my husband.

We spent three years in Kargaly during the war. In summer 1944 my husband was called to Kaunas, as soon as it was liberated. I sold my belongings real quick, left something to the hosts to say thank you for their hospitality and we went to our motherland. Now we were going in an ordinary passenger car. We stopped in Moscow. I was struck by the capital of the Soviet Union. I had never seen such a huge and beautiful city, even in prewar times. I couldn't even imagine anything like that. Then we came back to Kaunas. My husband was given a room in a communal apartment 11 on Botvinsk Street. He started working right away.

Fayvel started looking for our relatives, tried to find the witnesses and soon he learned the bitter truth. During the first days of the occupation my father was taken to the Catholic clergy seminary located in Vilkaviskis. He and a couple more male Jews were made to go upstairs, to the second floor. Lithuanian Polizei 12 were standing on both sides, flogging them with birch rods and hitting them with the butts. My father was beaten to death. We found out that among the murderers there were people who had known my father, worked in our garden, ate and drank in our house. So we found out about their surreptitious permanent hatred towards Jews.

Having learnt about that [what happened to her husband], my poor mother went to her sister Taube in Pilvishkiai. There all of them – my mother, Taube, her husband and daughter Enta and other Jews – were taken to the river Shepusha and drowned. Thus, my mother perished. Chaim, my favorite brother, turned out to be in Kaunas ghetto 13. The action in the first days was aimed at killing the intelligentsia. Hitler taught that a nation couldn't exist without intelligentsia, so its representatives were murdered in the first place. 600 males were killed in the first action. My brother was among them. It happened in the forest, not far from Kaunas. My husband's mother Riva also perished in Vilkaviskis during one of the first actions.

I took that sorrow really hard, but still I had a hope that some of my relatives had survived. I had to go on, to pull myself together. Fayvel worked really hard, though he didn't tell me anything about his job. There were all kinds of talks about the squads of Lithuanians, who didn't abide by the Soviet regime, and committed crimes and murders. When I asked my husband where he came across such people at his work, he just jokingly avoided the subject and calmed me down. Fayvel loved and cherished me as I was much younger than him. He didn't find it necessary to share those things with me. In a while upon my arrival, I finally got pregnant. I gave birth to a son ten years after our wedding. It happened in 1946. The boy was named Simon.

When our son was born, one room wasn't enough for us anymore and our lodging conditions were improved. We moved to a small two-room apartment on Kestucchio Street. I still live there. As soon as my dear son grew up a little bit, I started my husbandry again. I made a garden in the yard of our house, where I planted all kinds of vegetables, including potatoes. It was not our main source of income. I bought a cow, then a pig, then another cow and we started having a very good living. Our boy grew up having fresh cow milk and homemade butter in the years when these products were in demand. I sold milk. It was so nice and fatty that there was a long line of people wishing to buy it

from me. Of course, it was hard for me to work, but I always thanked my parents in my heart, as they had taught me how to work since childhood.

We made friends. In general, those were my husband's colleagues. They knew that I was hospitable and always offered a tasty dinner. I enjoyed having guests around. They were mostly Lithuanians. One of them, my husband's employer, lived in the neighboring room and ate with us almost all the time. Often I heard the conversations at the table, when my husband's comrades rebuked him for not joining the Communist Party. My husband cracked jokes in reply. Even now, I don't know why he wouldn't join the Party. His nationality was also the reason of our unhappiness.

In the early 1950s, when anti-Semitic campaigns were in full swing 14, Jews were dismissed from managing positions, and even arrested. All papers and mass media spoke of doctors-murderers 15; my husband was called by his boss and openly told that all Jews were considered harmful, besides he had not joined the Party and thereby had proved that he disdained Soviet ideology. Fayvel was fired. These were our black days. He took it very hard. He would stay in bed all day long with his face turned to the wall. Soon, in 1953 Stalin died. Neither I nor my husband shed any tears. I think Fayvel was one of the few who understood Stalin's role in arrests and execution of innocent people. I started getting that too. Neither my husband nor I were rehabilitated 16. Anyway, I don't think he would have accepted the offer from the prosecution as he had been offended there.

Soon my husband was offered a job as a butcher on the central market. He had to agree to it. He decided that he would work there temporarily, but it turned out so that Fayvel worked there until his retirement. He was physically strong and it was a peace of cake for him. Well, I should say, it was rather lucrative, even a prestigious job in the Soviet time. We lived comfortably thanks to that. Our son went to school, and I decided that I could also work. I sold my cattle just in time, as soon it was banned to keep cattle in Kaunas, and I found a job as a cashier at the same place where my husband worked: the central market. I worked there for eight years.

My husband and I never broached the subject of his previous work. In general, we didn't speak about politics. Our own interest was the family. That is why we didn't discuss the XX Party Congress 17, where Stalin's cult of personality was dispelled. We worked hard and made good money. By that time we had changed a small apartment on the first floor for a large three-room apartment on the third floor of our house. My husband found the responsible person in the Ispolkom 18, and he helped us get it.

Our son went to a Russian school. There were a lot of Jewish children there. He had many pals, who came over to us very often. Our house was always open for our son's friends. They ate here, had a chat and listened to music. We bought our son a tape-recorder. There was good furniture, and a TV set in our house. All those things were in great demand in the Soviet time, but my husband got it easily, as everybody wanted to have their own butcher. Good meat could be bought only if people had connections. Everybody wanted to eat, and the director of the radio store and chief accountant of the furniture factory were not an exception. All of them came to my husband and he managed to hide a better piece for his clients and they paid him back with favors.

Every year we went on vacation. Usually we were in Palanga and Druskininkai. Usually we got privileged trade union trip vouchers. If we couldn't do that, we went to the resorts and rented a room from local people. We loved holidays, but, we mostly celebrated family ones, like birthdays or memorable days. Soviet holidays – 7th November 19, 1st May – were also celebrated in our house.

Jewish traditions and holidays were rarely observed. I strove to celebrate at least Pesach. There was always matzah for that holiday at home, though everybody ate bread too.

Up to the 1970s we didn't have any communication with Israel, as correspondence with this country was practically banned 20. Then my brother Boruch found us. He and his family had a prosperous life in Israel. He had gotten married a long time ago. He had worked as a photographer all those years. He owned a photo studio. In the late 1940s Boruch's triplets were born: three girls. One of them was called Dvoira. Aunt Chaya and her children lived in Israel as well. Boruch started talking me into leaving for Israel. But my husband thought our life to be good, saying the best was the enemy of the good. Besides, he had heart trouble and he was afraid that he would not be able to stand the heat. In the mid-1970s Fayvel left work as he got unwell. By that time I was retired. We had enough savings and both of us got a pension. In 1977 my husband died suddenly. I was overcome with grief as I loved my husband very much and we had lived together for 41 years in peace and harmony.

Our son did well at school and after finishing it entered the Kaunas institute of land management the same year. Upon graduation my son worked in the design institute. Simon married a Jewish girl, Riva. My husband and I were against that marriage as we didn't like the bride and her parents. But like with my parents earlier, we couldn't prevent it and they got married. We didn't get along with my daughter-in-law from the very beginning, we just tolerated each other.

Our son lived pretty well. We helped him buy an apartment and a car. In 1972 my grandson Solomon was born. My son loved me very much and didn't share his problems with me. It turned out that he had heart pains and did not see a doctor. He didn't take good care of his health. In 1990, when he was only 44, my Simon died suddenly of a heart attack. It was a great grief for me. I kept to bed for the first time. I couldn't do anything at first. I even had to hire a housekeeper, who took care of me and gradually helped me regain my footing.

I have been practically by myself since then. I hardly communicate with my daughter-in-law. My only joy is my grandson Solomon. He finished the art academy and became a rather famous artist. Solomon lives in Vilnius. He often has exhibitions there. He has traveled all over the world. His art is popular and his pictures cost a lot of money.

After my husband died, I went to Israel twice. I loved the people, their mode of life. It is a pity that I couldn't find strength to move to Israel earlier. I visited all my kin and regained communication with my brother. Boruch was a widower when I came to Israel for the second time. He started talking me into moving to Israel and staying with him until the end of his days. I agreed and started processing the documents. When I was busy with all those formalities, I received a telegram from Israel saying that my brother had died. Now, I am totally alone.

I live comfortably. However, I have a minimal pension – 350 litas [about 130$] – and get 35 litas for my husband. The newly-gained independence of Lithuania 21 had a negative impact on the well-being of the people, including me. We pay a lot for utilities. When we have to pay for heating in winter time, it comes to about 100 litas. But I get by, because I lease a room to a student. Besides, the Jewish community helps the remaining Jews a lot. We get food rations, medicines. I have lunches at the canteen of the community. It means a lot to me. Besides, a community worker helps me about the house. I am a very old person and it is hard for me to take care of myself.

Now, as I am old, I adhere to Judaism again. I fast on Yom Kippur, cook Jewish dishes, and celebrate holidays in the community. Soon my friends and I are going to attend the Rosh Hashanah celebrations at the community. My only grandson doesn't forget about me. He often comes to see me. He enjoys my Jewish stew and tsimes. Unfortunately, he isn't married. I don't have any great-grandchildren. I hope I will live to see that joy and look after them.

Glossary:

1 Enemy of the people
Soviet official term; euphemism used for real or assumed political opposition.

2 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.

3 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 bourgeousie and the previously politically active strata. Deportations to remote parts of the Soviet Union were going on countinously 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 Sovet 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, 52,541 people from Latvia, 118,599 from Lithuania and 32,450 people from Estonia were deported on the charges of ‚grossly dodging from labor activity in the agricultural field and lead anti-social and parasitic mode of life'. 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 foreign land. 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.

4 Hasid
The follower of the Hasidic movement, a Jewish mystic movement founded in the 18th century that reacted against Talmudic learning and maintained that God's presence was in all of one's surroundings and that one should serve God in one's every deed and word. The movement

provided spiritual hope and uplifted the common people. There were large branches of Hasidic movements and schools throughout Eastern Europe before World War II, each following the teachings of famous scholars and thinkers. Most had their own customs, rituals and life styles. Today there are substantial Hasidic communities in New York, London, Israel and Antwerp.

5 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 as uninitiated young proletarians, whereas party members had to have at least a minimal political qualification.

6 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.

7 Soviet Army

The armed forces of the Soviet Union, originally called Red Army and renamed Soviet Army in February 1946. After the Bolsheviks came to power, in November 1917, they commenced to organize the squads of worker’s army, called Red Guards, where workers and peasants were recruited on voluntary bases. The commanders were either selected from among the former tsarist officers and soldiers or appointed directly by the Military and Revolutionary Committee of the Communist Party. In early 1918 the Bolshevik government issued a decree on the establishment of the Workers‘ and Peasants‘ Red Army and mandatory drafting was introduced for men between 18 and 40. In 1918 the total number of draftees was 100 thousand officers and 1.2 million soldiers. Military schools and academies training the officers were restored. In 1925 the law on compulsory military service was adopted and annual drafting was established. The term of service was established as follows: for the Red Guards- 2 years, for junior officers of aviation and fleet- 3 years, for medium and senior officers- 25 years. People of exploiter classes (former noblemen, merchants, officers of the tsarist army, priest, factory owner, etc. and their children) as well as kulaks (rich peasants) and cossacks were not drafted in the army. The law as of 1939 cancelled restriction on drafting of men belonging to certain classes, students were not drafted but went through military training in their educational institutions. On the 22nd June 1941 Great Patriotic War was unleashed and the drafting in the army became exclusively compulsory. First, in June-July 1941 general and

complete mobilization of men was carried out as well as partial mobilization of women. Then annual drafting of men, who turned 18, was commenced. When WWII was over, the Red Army amounted to over 11 million people and the demobilization process commenced. By the beginning of 1948 the Soviet Army had been downsized to 2 million 874 thousand people. The youth of drafting age were sent to the restoration works in mines, heavy industrial enterprises, and construction sites. In 1949 a new law on general military duty was adopted, according to which service term in ground troops and aviation was 3 years and in navy- 4 years. Young people with secondary education, both civilian and military, with the age range of 17-23 were admitted in military schools for officers. In 1968 the term of the army service was contracted to 2 years in ground troops and in the navy to 3 years. That system of army recruitment has remained without considerable changes until the breakup of the Soviet Army (1991-93).

8 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.

9 NKVD

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

10 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.

11 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.

12 Lithuanian Polizei

In Russian this term refers to the local Lithuanian collaborators with the Nazi regime. Subordinated to the Germans, they were organized as a police force and were responsible for establishing the Nazi control in the country. They played a major role in carrying out the destruction of the Lithuanian Jewry.

13 Kaunas ghetto

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

14 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'.

15 Doctors' Plot

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

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 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.

18 Ispolkom

After the tsar's abdication (March, 1917), power passed to a Provisional Government appointed by a temporary committee of the Duma, which proposed to share power to some extent with councils of workers and soldiers known as 'Soviets'. Following a brief and chaotic period of fairly democratic procedures, a mixed body of socialist intellectuals known as the Ispolkom secured the right to 'represent' the Soviets. The democratic credentials of the Soviets were highly imperfect to begin with: peasants - the overwhelming majority of the Russian population - had virtually no say, and soldiers were grossly over-represented. The Ispolkom's assumption of power turned this highly imperfect democracy into an intellectuals' oligarchy.

19 October Revolution Day

25th October (according to the old calendar), 1917 went down in history as victory day for the Great October Socialist Revolution in Russia. This day is the most significant date in the history of the USSR. Today the anniversary is celebrated as 'Day of Accord and Reconciliation' on 7th November.

20 Keep in touch with relatives abroad

The Soviet 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.

21 Reestablishment of the Lithuanian Republic

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