

# Olga Bernstein

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Kiev

Ukraine

Interviewer: Oksana Kuntsevskaya

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*Olga Bernstein is a round lady of average height. She looks wonderful. She doesn't look older than 70, while actually she is 85 years old. She is friendly and smiles readily. She has a professional and distinct manner of speaking. One can tell that she used to teach. Olga and her husband live in a small 2-bedroom apartment in a 1970s house in one of new districts of Kiev. It's a cozy apartment with nice furniture bought in the 1980s. There are family photographs on the walls. She has it was one of her sons' doing. Olga is a good housewife. She likes cooking and treats me to delicious homemade cookies.*

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## My family background

My mother's parents lived in Kopachiv village Obukhov district near Kiev [about 60 km from Kiev]. There were few Jews in the village. Its residents were Ukrainian for the most part. Ukrainians and Jews got along well and treated my grandfather with great respect. I don't know when or where my grandfather and grandmother met or any details about their wedding. My grandfather David Bronfein was a tailor. I believe he was born in 1870. I don't know who his parents were. He made sheepskin coats for villagers. I didn't see my grandfather going to the synagogue, but he had a tallit, white and black, and tefillin. Every now and then he had then on to pray, but I don't think he did systematically. Grandmother Fenia was a thin tall woman, born around 1869. I don't know about her parents, either. She gave birth to babies and raised them, this was her job. My grandmother had 14 children, all born in Kopachiv. Many died at birth or in infancy. Seven children survived. The children were growing up and the village was small and there were no distinct prospects for them. In 1913 my mother moved to Kiev and got married there and her parents decided for moving there as well. The family lived in Stalinka [a district in the suburb of Kiev at that time, one of its central districts at present]; this district was like a village where everybody knew everyone else. Many of my relatives resided in the same street.

My mother's older brother Naum Bronfein was born in 1895. There was no cheder in Kopachiv and he didn't go to school, but of course, he could read and write in Yiddish and Russian. Following his sisters and brothers he moved to Kiev in 1914 where he worked as a barber. In 1926 he married

Bertha, a wonderful Jewish girl. She was 13 years his junior. She was so smart! She finished a grammar school and could play the piano. We all loved her dearly. I even shared more thoughts with her than with my mother. My brother also shared his thoughts with her. Many of us went to ask Bertha's advice about life matters, though she was the youngest daughter-in-law in the family. Naum was also a very nice person. In 1927 their son Leonid, my cousin brother, was born. When the Great Patriotic War [1](#) began, Naum was mobilized to the army and he was at the front. I don't know where exactly he was at the front. The main thing was that he survived. His wife Bertha worked at an enterprise in Kiev and got an opportunity to evacuate with her son. My grandmother and grandfather Bronfeins didn't want to evacuate, but we had a wise daughter-in-law in the family. She insisted that grandfather and grandmother left Kiev. We had left Kiev before, and she was there and was persistent and took my grandmother and grandfather out of the town on the last day. They died in Siberia, but they died from old age.

After the war uncle Naum continued to work as a barber in Stalinka in Kiev. He was a veteran of the war and managed to have his apartment back after the war. His wife and son returned to him from evacuation. He died in 1963. Bertha died some time in the 1970s. She was my favorite aunt. Her son Leonid died in Kiev recently, three years ago, but I keep in touch with his wife.

My mother's next brother Itsyk Bronfein was born in 1899, I think. He was the only one in the family who did farming. He kept pigs and had a vegetable garden. Itsyk didn't want to move to Kiev from Kopachiv. He loved farming. He was married to a Ukrainian woman. Her name was Odarka. She called Itsyk Grisha, Grigoriy, in a Ukrainian manner. Odarka was eager to move to Kiev. To make the long story short, the relatives almost pulled him out of the village. In 1936 Itsyk and his wife arrived in Kiev. My grandfather rented a small room for them in Stalinka. Itsyk went to work as a laborer. Odarka went to work in a factory in Kiev. They didn't have children. In June 1941 he was mobilized to the army. I think he perished in 1942. I don't remember any details. His wife stayed in Kiev during occupation. My mother and other relatives kept in touch with her after my brother died. She died some time in the 1960s.

The next child in the family was my mother's sister Vera Obukhovskaya, nee Bronfein, born in 1902. I know little about her childhood and youth. She probably had some kind of primary education. She moved to Kiev in 1914 with her parents, my grandmother and grandfather. In 1922 Vera married Boris Obukhovskiy, a Jewish man. I don't remember when he was born. In 1923 Vera's son Pyotr was born. She was a housewife and Boris was a worker at a plant in Kiev. This family has a tragic history. Boris was mobilized at the beginning of the Great Patriotic War and he perished at the front in 1942. Now about his wife and son. In June 1941 all 18-year boys were taken to Donetsk region [about 800 km from Kiev] to do some work. When they were done they were told to go home. Those whose parents were in evacuation went to them. My aunt Vera was in Kiev. She didn't want to leave home. She said: 'we will be protected, we saw Germans in 1918, they are a civilized nation and we won't go'. Pyotr returned to Kiev. He and his mother perished in Babi Yar [2](#).

My mother's sister Sonia Bronfein, born in 1903, also moved to Kiev with her parents in 1914. I have dim memories of her. She wasn't married. She was ill for a long time and died in the 1930s.

The next child in my mother's family was her brother Hatskel Bronfein, born in 1905. He didn't have any education. He moved to Kiev from Kopachiv with his parents. Hatskel dealt in trade. I remember that when I was small he used to ride a horse arranging his dealings. He dealt in selling

apples, flour and had something to do with horses. When the Great Patriotic War began Hatskel was also mobilized to the army. I don't know where he was. After the war he returned to his apartment in Kiev. He wasn't married. After the war and until he died in 1970 he worked in a store selling household goods.

My mother's youngest brother Yefim Bronfein was born in 1910. In 1914 he moved to Kiev with his parents and other brothers and sisters. He finished seven grades in a school in Kiev. Yefim joined the Communist Party. He was an active, devoted and educated communist. He studied at a Party course and was very competent. In the early 1930s he was recruited to the army. I don't remember his rank for sure, but he was an officer. I remember his photograph where he was wearing a military uniform. He was handsome and stately. Yefim served in Orel [650 km from Kiev] in Russia. After his service in the army he returned to Kiev and worked as logistics manager in a hospital. Grandmother and grandfather Bronfeins lived with us until 1941. I remember my uncles Yefim and Hatskel always arguing about something during family gatherings. One of them was devoted to his ideas and another one thought ideas were nothing and didn't like the Soviet regime in general. Hatskel used to say: 'You are a communist! And I want to trade and I deal in it and provide for my family! And you will be as poor as the rest of them!' Their parents were very upset about their quarrels. But Hatskel turned out to be right! In the late 1930s Yefim married Olia, a Jewish girl. She was a medical nurse in the same hospital where he was working. In 1940 their daughter Sopha was born. When the Great Patriotic War began Yefim stayed to defend Kiev serving in the Territorial Army [3](#). He got in captivity. Later we were told that people saw Germans shooting people in Darnitsa [a suburb of Kiev then] and that Yefim was among them. His wife and daughter perished in Babi Yar.

My mother Slava Bronfein was the oldest in the family. She was born in 1890. She didn't study anywhere and from the age of 10 she used to sit in my grandfather's shop assisting him with hemming skirts, corsets and shirts. She learned from grandfather and became a dressmaker. My mother was tall and beautiful. She was the first one to take a decision to move to Kiev in 1913. She rented an apartment in Stalinka in Kiev and her family followed her. My mother was a very popular dressmaker in Stalinka. In 1914 she married David Bernstein, my father. I don't know how they met or what kind of wedding they had.

My mother's family came from a village, but my father's family was from a town. My father's father Benicion Bernstein was born approximately in 1865. I didn't know my grandmother. My grandfather Benicion worked as chief accountant of a big meat factory in Kiev. When I knew him he didn't work since he was very old. He lived with my father's younger sisters who were single in the same street as my mother's parents. My grandfather was a beautiful old man with a white beard. He read the Torah and was religious. He even had a tallit and tefillin. But he also read Stalin. I saw that he had books by Stalin. My grandfather celebrated Saturday and went to the synagogue on holidays.

Manya, the oldest of my father's sisters, was the same age as my mother. She was born in 1890. Vytola, another sister, was about five years younger. I don't know where they studied or worked. This was an intelligentsia Jewish family. They knew many Jewish songs and I liked listening to them. My grandfather and father sang on birthday parties or other occasions.

When the Great Patriotic War began grandfather Bencion was very ill. His daughters didn't want to leave him alone and stayed in Kiev. Their janitor told us later that Germans ordered them to go to a

certain place and to get grandfather into a wheel chair with them. We don't know where they went. All we know is that all three of them perished.

My father David Bernstein was born in Kiev in 1887. Unfortunately, I remember very little of what my father told me about his childhood and youth. He must have finished cheder since he could read and write and knew Yiddish. He was religious in his heart and went to the synagogue often, but he didn't demonstrate his religiosity otherwise. He probably didn't want to involve his children in religion. This is how it used to be when authorities didn't approve of religiosity [4](#) and my father didn't want to complicate our life. I know that he took part in the Civil War [5](#), when he was on the side of the Red Army. My father told me how hard his life was and how soldiers starved. I didn't remember much since I was too young. My father was shell-shocked and had problems with his spinal column. His diagnosis was inflammation of the spinal column. When I remember him he was small and humpbacked. Due to his health condition he didn't work and was a pensioner.

As far as I can understand he met my mother via matchmakers. My mother had just come from a village, she was the oldest daughter in the family and was single. Although she was beautiful, she had a hearing problem. And my father's problem was that he was short and humpbacked, but they cared about each other and had a good life together.

There were three of us: my brother Matvey whom we called Motl, my sister Fenia, Feiha by her passport and I was the youngest.

My older brother Matvey Bernstein was born in 1915. When he grew older my parents sent him to a Jewish kindergarten across the street from our home. We all went to this Jewish kindergarten. At the age of 8 Matvey went to a Jewish school in Kiev. After finishing the 7th grade Matvey went to study in a school of economics and became an accountant. Matvey made a quick career. He became chief accountant at the age of 19-20. He supported us and I remember that we bought a sofa and a wardrobe before the war. This was thanks to my mother and brother. Many people couldn't afford these at the time. In 1939 my brother went to serve in the army. He went to the army at the age of 24. There was an order issued by Voroshilov [6](#) about privileges to those who didn't have a father and whose mother was their dependent that they could go to the army at the age of 24. He turned 24 in 1939. He went to serve in Strii town [about 600 km from Kiev] in Western Ukraine. In 1941 the Great Patriotic War began. So he went to the front from there.

Matvey corresponded with us during the Great Patriotic War. In 1944 after liberation of Ukraine my brother wrote us to where we were in evacuation that he was sending us a document allowing us to go to Kharkov [500 km from Kiev], where he was chief of the planning department of his regiment. He also gave us money for this trip through a captain. Of course, this captain never showed up and we never got this money and then my brother mailed this letter to us. He met us in Kharkov. In Kharkov my brother received an apartment where my mother, my sister and her daughter and I lived with him. A few years later my mother and I moved out. Matvey was a captain at the end of the war and continued his service as a professional military. He met a Russian girl from Moscow at the front. Her name was Anastasia. He married her after the war. My mother didn't mind. They had three nice kids. My brother served in Kandalaksha Rostov region and his last location was in Slavinsk Donetsk region, 500 km from Kiev. He was chief financial in a military registry office. He would have been eager to move to Kiev upon demobilization, but he didn't have an apartment so he stayed to live where he had been on service. My brother died of ulcer in 1972, when he was 57.

His children moved to Germany in the 1990s. They are wonderful people. It's a pity I've lost contact with them. Matvey's wife Asia died in Slavinsk in the 1980s.

My sister Fenia Matusovskaya, nee Bernstein, was born in 1917. She also went to the Jewish kindergarten and at the age of 8 she went to the same school as my brother. She finished 8 grades at school and went to work as a cashier in a grocery store in Stalinka. She was good at calculations. In 1936 my sister married my brother's schoolmate Yakov Matusovski, born in 1915. This Yakov visited us since he was a small boy. His mother made sugar candy. When she made plenty of them she allowed him to share candy with his friends. Keeping one candy behind a cheek we could have two glasses of tea with it. When Yasha brought this candy he asked my mother: 'Ms. Slava, have you got bread and beimele?' 'Beimele' was sunflower oil. My mother always gave him a slice of bread with beimele. So he was the one who married my sister. Yasha [common nickname for Yakov] was a driver at an enterprise. In 1938 my beloved niece Dina was born.

When the Great Patriotic War began Yakov served in a motorcar unit in the army. Once he came home and said that the plant 'Krasny rezinschik' where my sister used to work at one time was organizing evacuation. Yakov was one of the drivers that were sent to support this evacuation process. There were no suitcases, so packed up and got ready to evacuate. My sister and her daughter were in evacuation with my mother and me. She worked at harvesting and as a worker in a match factory.

Fenia's husband Yakov was at the front. He was in Berlin when the war was over. He continued his service in Potsdam, Germany. In 1945 he came to pick up Fenia and Dina. They went to Potsdam and lived there for two years. In 1947 Yasha's service was over. They returned from Germany and had their room in Stalinka returned to them. They had two rooms before the war, but they only had one returned to them. After the Great Patriotic War and till retirement Yakov worked as a driver in a vehicle company in Kiev and Fenia was a cashier in a grocery store. Dina finished Kiev Medical College, got married and worked in a Polyclinic in Kiev. Yakov died in the late 1960s. My sister died of a heart attack five years later, on 5 December 1977. Dina, her family and grandchildren live in Los Angeles. My sister and her husband were buried in the Jewish section of Baikovoye cemetery in Kiev.

## Growing up

I was born in 1920. Everybody called me a 'little pretty girl Olen'ka' 'myzynka', which means 'little one' and dearest. I went to the Jewish kindergarten and then I went to a Jewish school in 1928. The subject curriculum in this school was no different from Russian or Ukrainian schools, but we studied all subjects in Yiddish. We had a wonderful teacher. He was also a poet. His name was Benion Gutianskiy. He was executed in 1953 during the period of 'doctors' plot' [7](#) like many other Jewish scientists. They were 'spies', you know. So this was what happened to him. Gutianskiy was my brother's teacher, but I knew him very well. When I was in the first grade my brother was in the 7th. I often ran to my brother's class. I liked staying with them a little.

Our school was near the synagogue in Stalinka. My mother and father always went to the synagogue on holiday. My mother wore a kerchief and sat upstairs and my father sat downstairs. An academic year started in September and there were all Jewish holidays at this period and we always dropped by the synagogue when we knew that father and mother were there. We actually always passed by the synagogue going home from school. Then we went home with our parents. I

don't know whether my parents were very religious. Nobody taught us, kids, to pray or get involved in any rituals. However, we liked holidays when there were delicious things to eat. Grandchildren always visited grandmother Feiga on holidays. She always had a basket full of matzah covered with a bed sheet at Pesach. Those were real holidays. There were pancakes with goose fat. My mother and grandmother cooked Jewish food. After the Great Patriotic War it was different. Perhaps, it was because the older generation in our family passed away and there was nobody to keep traditions. Besides, at that time people were afraid of coming close not just a synagogue, but even a church. On religious holidays there were representatives of Party committees watching who entered a synagogue or a church. My mother and father spoke Russian and Yiddish to one another and to us. So did our other relatives.

My mother was a seamstress earning our living. My father was our mother since he didn't work. My father prepared us to school, made us sandwiches and attended parents' meetings at school. I don't remember my mother going to a meeting at school before my father died. Everybody liked him at home and in the yard... Children from all over the street came to our yard screaming: 'Mr. Dudala, Mr. Dudala, tell us a fairy tale!' Dudal is Jewish for David. He told us very interesting stories. They were probably stories from the Torah, I don't remember, but it was interesting to listen to him. My father always told me fairy tales before I went to sleep leaving my room after I was fast asleep. I had a very kind father and my brother and son are like him.

Sometimes my father did some work when there was work for invalids in Sovki, Stalinka. I remember when I was nine I came to see him. All invalids were sitting at long tables in a building. They were sorting our tea. I also sorted out tea with them. Then we also made boxes earning few kopecks and a little tea.

We had a hard life. We were hard up. My father fell ill with wet pleurisy and stayed in hospital. I remember an episode. I liked chocolate waffles called 'mikada'. My grandmother Fenia and I went to take 'mikada' waffles to my father one Sunday. My mother had just bought me boots and my father was very happy about me having them. He loved me dearly. Next day I was sitting with my friend outside when our neighbor came by: 'Olen'ka, you need to go home!' I came home, there were people in the room, in the bedroom. What I remembered was 'mikada' that I liked so much. For some reason those waffles were at home, when we had brought them to my father when he was ill... I was 11, but I understood that my father died. This happened in 1931. My father was buried in Lukianovskoye Jewish cemetery [8](#). After the war we couldn't find the grave.

I remember famine in 1933 [9](#). I remember villagers coming to town, asking for a piece of bread at the porch and then falling dead. Thanks to my grandmother and grandfather Bernsteins and my father and mother's sisters shared their last crumbs with us we survived.

In the 1930s my mother's family was here. We had lots of fun getting together on birthdays, singing songs: they were mostly Soviet songs... We were a poor family since only mother was working. My mother liked all relatives. However little space we had there were always some relatives staying with us. My brother's friends often visited us and there were always lots of people. I went to do my homework with a friend of mine. There was a record player playing and my brother and sister's friends dancing and singing at our home. After doing my homework I came home and counted galoshes to know how many guests we were having. They used to dance with me to master their dancing skills and so I learned to dance with them. They used to say about our



apartment: 'They are poor, but they always have so much fun!' I remember my grandfather's 70th birthday celebration before the Great Patriotic War. The difference in age between his oldest grandson and the youngest granddaughter was 24 years. My 25-year-old brother greeted him holding his one-year-old sister Sopha.

I studied well at school and got along well with my schoolmates. I finished the 8th grade of my Jewish school. There was no 10-year Jewish school, but I wanted to continue my education. I went to a Ukrainian 10-year school. In 1939 I entered the Geography Faculty of Kiev Pedagogical College. I finished two years before the Great Patriotic War. I was the only one in our family who received a higher education.

### **During the war**

We evacuated on 11 July: I, my sister and her daughter and my mother. We knew nothing about the war or Hitler, but we had a feeling that we had to save our life. Probably it was an instinct. We went on coal barges down the Dnieper to Dnepropetrovsk [about 500 km from Kiev]. There we changed for an open platform train and reached Rostov region [about 900 km from Kiev] and got off in a village. There was a line of wagons waiting for evacuated people at the station. One woman, her name was Matryona Titovna, gave us shelter. She liked us. It was like paradise: chickens and geese in the yard. I had never seen such plenty of things. My mother did the housework washing, cleaning, cooking, feeding the poultry and our landlady went to work. Everybody was happy. Our landlady accommodated us in a big room. I went to work as an assistant accountant in the kolkhoz and my sister worked with harvesting. When chairman of the kolkhoz heard that my mother could sew he employed her to sew for the management and members of their families.

However, this pleasant state of things didn't last long. German troops were advancing. We were going to move on. Those who were naïve to think that Germans would not harm them paid a terrible price for their trustfulness.

We stayed three weeks in Rostov trying to get in a train. Our trip lasted for probably a whole month. On our way a bag of flour that our landlady gave us disappeared. We had to exchange whatever little we had for a loaf of bread. My sister had two skirts that she took with her. She had to give them away for food... You know why the trip was so long? When the train stopped everybody got off to cook something on fire, some flat cookies. We didn't have flour so we couldn't make any flat bread. We exchanged things for food. My niece caught a cold on the way. Our co-passengers wanted to force us get off the train, but we begged them to let us stay. We arrived in Sverdlovsk [about 2500 km from Kiev]. Some equipment of the 'Krasny rezinschik' plant where my sister used to work before the war was shipped to Sverdlovsk and workers also came to Sverdlovsk. Other workers and their families and equipment were transported by barges and then by railroad like we went.

We sent Fenia and her child to a hospital. Then we went to the plant. There was no work for us. The plant sent away those who had just arrived. We were sent to Sverdlovsk region, Nizhnesiversk district, Mikhailovskiy plant. It was a military plant. I went to work as a tutor in a kindergarten. I worked there four years.

My sister went to work in the field and then at a match factory. My mother did housework and sewed. Once director of the railway station came to see us. He escorted children to the children's home. When he heard that my mother could sew he invited her to his home for a few days. She made clothes for his family and he gave her some flour and frozen milk for her work. In 1943 we received a plot of land. We grew potatoes and our situation became better.

There were homeless children taken from trains brought to my kindergarten. People were dying on the way and their children were taken to children's homes. They were starved and ragged and we have them food and clothes. I loved them and they were treated well. At some moments they stole things, even potatoes, but we comforted them and spoke to other people from whom they stole and we took every effort to help them stop doing it. We shared everything we had with those children, however little there was to share. Tutors and teachers gave them everything we had, although we were also hungry and cold.

In 1944 my brother took us to Kharkov. There Matvey, my mother and I and Fenia and her daughter received an apartment. In 1945 Yakov took Fenia and Dima to Potsdam. My mother, my brother and I stayed in Kharkov. I went to work as a secretary of a military medical commission. Once I bumped into my friend and she told me that she resumed her studies in college. I didn't even consider this in 1944: there was still a war going on so how could I? Besides, my mother didn't work, so how could I give up work? I talked to my brother and he said: 'Olga, go ahead. You have to study and I will help, of course'. I came to Kharkov University with my record book. They admitted me to the third course. I worked in the evening and studied in university in the morning. I graduated from Kharkov University in 1946 and had a job assignment [10](#) to Kiev school for cultural and educational employees. I was to be a teacher of geography. My mother and I went to Kiev.

Our house was ruined and we lived with aunt Bertha, my mother brother Naum's wife. She had a room for us. She got it back when she returned from evacuation. Everything was robbed. This aunt had close and distant relatives living with her sleeping on the table, and under the table, anywhere you would think about. My mother and I lived through whatever: they didn't want to issue residential permits [11](#) and militia came at night, but it all passed away. First we obtained temporary permits and later we got permanent residential permits. When in 1947 Fenia, Yakov and Dina returned to their room in Kiev my mother went to live with them. A I stayed with Bertha and went to work at the technical school.

## After the war

I got married in 1949. My husband Alexandr Min'kovskiy was born in 1919. When we met he was a student of Medical College. We had a civil registry and then a wedding dinner at his parents' home.

My husband's family spoke Yiddish and Russian at home. My mother-in-law Hanna Minkovskaya came from Narodichi [about 100 km from Kiev] Chernobyl district. Her father whose name I don't know was a teacher of Hebrew in his village. He was a very educated and religious person. My mother-in-law was the oldest in the family. She learned Hebrew herself and became a teacher. She said that she moved to Kiev in 1921 and had her own pupils. Her former pupils visited her. They respected her so much. My mother-in-law parents and some of her brothers and sisters lived in Kiev before the war. They stayed in Kiev and perished in Babi Yar. My husband's father Yefim Minkovskiy was born in Habno in 150 km from Kiev. My father-in-law had a higher education. He



must have been an engineer. When I met him he was chief accountant of Darnitsa railcar repair depot. He was a nice and decent person. During the war he, his wife and son evacuated to Omsk [about 4000 km from Kiev] with his depot. When the war was over, the Minkovskiys returned to Kiev. My father-in-law worked at his job forty years. Besides, he was chief inspector of Southwest railroad. Every December my father-in-law and his wife went to Moscow and representatives from there also came here to submit their reports. Their apartment was furnished Spartan plainly: a plain double bed, cupboard, a wardrobe with a high back up to the fashion of the time and a sofa made by workers of the depot. My son still has this cupboard in his garage. It's a relic now. They had painted floors, always clean, gauze curtains, everything ideally clean. No rugs on the floor. They bought a cheap carpet when I was with them. My husband and I lived in a bedroom very plainly furnished: our relatives bought us a bed, bed sheets and a desk. Uncle Hatskel bought me a wardrobe. He had many nieces and when another one got married he bought her a wardrobe as a gift.

After the wedding my husband and I settled down in his parents' apartment in Darnitsa that became a district in Kiev. My mother couldn't come to live with me since I came to live with my 'in-laws'. After my son Dmitriy was born in 1950 I went to work in an evening school near home. When I was at work my mother-in-law looked after my son. In 1951 my husband finished the Medical College. 1951 was the only year through the history of the Medical College when all men graduates were given the rank of junior lieutenants and sent to the Far East. My husband went to Sakhalin [about 7000 km from Kiev] and sent me invitation documents to join him there.

I went to my husband with my mother and son. In January 1952 my second son Konstantin was born. My mother was very pleased and happy to be living with us. We lived in our own apartment in Sakhalin for five years. I didn't work. I was a housewife and my mother helped me. Those were wonderful years with her!

I remember the day when Stalin died very well. We lived in a military unit. Of course, there was a Party unit and a political officer there. There was a funeral oration and we were kneeling on snow during this meeting held on 5 March 1953. Like everybody else! For me personally it wasn't much of grief, but I was in terrible mood feeling like it was going to be the end of the world.

Five years later, in 1956, my husband's job assignment in the Far East was over and I returned to Kiev with my family. My mother came with us. We lived with my in-laws again. My mother stayed with my sister Feiha's family for some time. She earned her living by sewing again. Dina, her granddaughter was growing older and there was not enough space again. I rented her an apartment from my friend. My mother was always trying to help her children. Though she actually had no education, she raised decent people without anybody's help, and she spent her life with a needle in her hands. She never lost optimism and everybody loved her. My mother said to Bertha, her deceased brother Naum's wife, they were friends and my mother liked her: 'If I die, bury me near Naum'. He died on 21 February 1963 and she died on 20 September same year. She said: 'I love flowers and want many flowers'. They are lying together in the town cemetery in Kiev and we always bring flowers to their graves.

I am very fond of theater. I went to the Ukrainian and Russian Drama Theaters. I liked and knew actors. I was particularly fond of Russian drama. However busy I was with my work I always went to the theater and taught my children to like theater.

My husband went on a spree in the early 1960. When I got to know that he was seeing another woman I said: 'That's it. Get packed and out of here'. I divorced him. His parents were on my side. They said: 'You go where you were fooling around and Olga is staying with us. She belongs to us'. They felt hurt by his conduct. Even many years later, when he came home on some business his mother talked to him from behind the door. Now, when we meet on occasions, happy or sad, I talk to him, of course. We have children, you know.

I was alone for a long time. I retired in 1975. I receive a pension, but I don't know how I would live if it weren't for my children...

My older son Dmitriy Minkovskiy, born in 1950, finished a secondary school, served in the army and finished a medical College. For over 20 years he has worked in Kazakhstan, in Surgut town [about 3000 km from Kiev]. He went there on job assignment after finishing his college and stayed to live there. We didn't know that in 1991 we would be living in different countries [12](#). He is married to a Kazakh woman. They have a good life together and have two daughters, very nice girls. My son deals in insurance medicine. He is very successful. The only sad thing is that we see each other rarely. Traveling is expensive.

My older son Konstantin has an engineering education. He is married to an Armenian woman. They lived in Kiev. Konstantin worked as an engineer. In the 1990s my son and his family moved to Germany. They live in Berlin. My son works in some business related to his profession of an engineer. They have a daughter named Olga after me. She is married and I have a great grandson. It's all right that my sons have non-Jewish wives. It has never been a problem in our family. My uncle was married to a Ukrainian woman and my brother had a Russian wife. Most important is that they love each other.

Since 1978 I've lived with my second husband Grigoriy Levin. He was born in 1916 in Uman [about 200 km from Kiev]. We are some distant relatives. Grigoriy finished a military pilot school. He was a military pilot and served in different locations. I've known him since 1940. He was at the New Year party with his brothers at our home. Then we went different ways. In 1974 we met in hospital by chance. I was visiting my relative and he came to see his wife. In 1975 Grigoriy's wife died. They had no children. By the time we met he was a pensioner. He lived alone for a long time before he began to visit me. We've been together for 25 years. Our children love us and we love them. They help and support us as much as they can. We have a much better life now when we are old. We were always hard up. Our children have grown up and became good specialists. They support us. We are eager to socialize and we like coming to Hesed. Whenever they invite us we are happy to go there to socialize with people. We attend lectures about Jewish traditions, mainly before holidays. We also celebrate Saturday there. We've learned to celebrate it at home. We like it. We didn't know many things before; the regime stole much from us. That we studied in Jewish schools doesn't fill in the gaps, but it was this way at this period of time when they destroyed churches and synagogues.

We have friends. Unfortunately, we don't meet often; they have walking problems and so do Grisha [Grigoriy] and I, but we talk on the phone in the morning and in the evening. We love life and perhaps our long life - I am 83, and he is 87, perhaps this love of life and that other people come to see us and do not forget us, perhaps this has been given to us from above. We do many things about the house. I can lie down to rest and then get up and continue the housework. Grigoriy goes

shopping. We do our cooking and washing, we do everything together. This helps us to live longer.

I was in America in 1994, I lived there three months and my husband and I have visited our son in Germany a few times. My relatives ask me: 'Why are you staying?' I say: 'I want to be buried near Mother, there is place near her!' I want to live here where I was born and studied.

## **GLOSSARY:**

### **1 Great Patriotic War**

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

### **2 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.

### **3 Fighting battalion**

People's volunteer corps during World War II; its soldiers patrolled towns, dug trenches and kept an eye on buildings during night bombing raids. Students often volunteered for these fighting battalions.

### **4 Struggle against religion**

The 1930s was a time of anti-religion struggle in the USSR. In those years it was not safe to go to synagogue or to church. Places of worship, statues of saints, etc. were removed; rabbis, Orthodox and Roman Catholic priests disappeared behind KGB walls.

### **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 Voroshilov, Kliment Yefremovich (1881-1969)**

Soviet military leader and public official. He was an active revolutionary before the Revolution of 1917 and an outstanding Red Army commander in the Russian Civil War. As commissar for military and naval affairs, later defense, Voroshilov helped reorganize the Red Army. He was a member of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party from 1926 and a member of the Supreme Soviet from 1937. He was dropped from the Central Committee in 1961 but reelected to it in 1966.

## **7 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.

## **8 Lukianovka Jewish cemetery**

It was opened on the outskirts of Kiev in the late 1890s and functioned until 1941. Many monuments and tombs were destroyed during the German occupation of the town in 1941-1943. In 1961 the municipal authorities closed the cemetery and Jewish families had to rebury their relatives in the Jewish sections of a new city cemetery within half a year. A TV Center was built on the site of the former Lukianovka cemetery.

## **9 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.

## **10 Mandatory job assignment in the USSR**

Graduates of higher educational institutions had to complete a mandatory 2-year job assignment issued by the institution from which they graduated. After finishing this assignment young people were allowed to get employment at their discretion in any town or organization.

## **11 Residence permit**

The Soviet authorities restricted freedom of travel within the USSR through the residence permit and kept everybody's whereabouts under control. Every individual in the USSR needed residential registration; this was a stamp in the passport giving the permanent address of the individual. It was impossible to find a job, or even to travel within the country, without such a stamp. In order to register at somebody else's apartment one had to be a close relative and if each resident of the apartment had at least 8 square meters to themselves.

12 Breakup of the USSR: Yeltsin in 1991 signed a deal with Russia's neighbours that formalized the break up of the Soviet Union. The USSR was replaced by the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).