

Solomon Epstein

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Saint Petersburg

Russia

Interviewer: Olga Egudina

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Solomon Borissovich Epstein invited me to his apartment-studio situated in one of the most beautiful districts of St. Petersburg.

We had our talk surrounded by his beautiful paintings. Solomon Borissovich is talented for all spheres of life:

he is a worthy party in a conversation, an author of the very interesting memoirs about war, and a brave soldier in the past.

One can be envious of his exact memory. When you listen to Solomon Borissovich, his stories seem to come alive and you become able to hear sounds and smell...

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- **My family background**

I know nothing about my great-grandparents. My paternal and maternal grandfathers were born and lived in Belarus near Vitebsk. My maternal grandfather's name was Ruman. As far as I understand, he was a tzaddik of the local community. He had got several daughters. My paternal grandfather lived about 60 kilometers far from Vitebsk - in Velizh. My grandfather Ruman was short and rather weak, very kind and silent, and my grandfather Hirsh-Leyb-Meir Epstein was a joker, a horse-lover. He was very tall and black-haired (looked like a gypsy), very cheerful. Both grandfathers were very kind.

Grandfather Hirsh had got many children, and not only girls. He was engaged in carrying goods between Velizh and Vitebsk. He got acquainted with grandfather Ruman and his family somehow. Ruman was a tailor and grandfather Hirsh sent his son Boris (Berele) to Ruman as an apprentice. That was the way Berele found his love (my future Mom). I keep his love-letter written in 1916.

The letter was written in Russian, and the first letters of lines spelled my mother's name Ester. By that time Daddy had finished 4 or 5 classes of gymnasium and knew Russian well, though my both grandfather's mother tongue was certainly Yiddish.

My father was a very talented person, a real artist of tailoring. Later in Leningrad he became one of the most famous local tailors. People of high position (now we call them VIP) lined up to get his services. They paid him much money, because everybody knew him to be a magician able to turn an ordinary person into a real picture. He was left-handed to no profession: a furrier, a glover, and even a shoemaker.

I do not remember my grandmothers very well. Grandmother Rachel, Ruman's wife wore a wig and I remember her bald head under the wig. When it became clear that my hair became shockingly red, everybody said that it was passed down from my grandmother (she was red-headed). Haya was Hirsh's wife. She was a person of cast-iron character, completely different from her husband.

But here it is necessary to take into account that she had to take care of a large family, and it was not easy: Hirsh traveled much and his family was not a burden for him. Last year I made portraits of my grandfathers from memory. For the last time I saw them at the age of two and a half (by the way, I have no photos of grandfather Hirsh). At the same time I am absolutely sure that in my picture my grandfather looks real, I felt like giving birth to him by means of my brush. I kept a photo of grandfather Ruman, but strangely enough it distracted me from my work. I put it aside and did not look at it during my work on his portrait.

My parents got married in Vitebsk in 1921. Both my brother and I were born there, too. David was born in 1923, and I was born in 1925. A year later our family moved to Leningrad and we started our life there (I know nothing about the reason). We lived in Zhukovskogo Street, in the city centre, in a communal apartment [1](#). I lived in that house during 50 years. For the first time I left it in March 1942 for evacuation (we moved along the Road of Life [2](#) across the Ladoga Lake).

After the end of the war I returned home to that house and lived there till 1975. By now the house is reconstructed, and some very rich people live there. When we made it our home in 1924, our apartment looked rather strange: the floor of one its part was situated higher than that of the other one. Between these levels there was a stairway of 9 steps. In our apartment there lived 6 families (they had got 9 children (boys) in total). So we used to slide down from that stairway on my father's furriery boards.

When I reached the age of 7 (and David was 9), parents brought us to the House of Art Education for children in Chaykovskogo Street. The House was founded by 2 friends, 2 enthusiasts of art education for children Solomon Davidovich Levin and Konstantin Alexandrovich Kordabovsky. They invited remarkable teachers. There we studied the following subjects: drawing, painting, sculpture, architecture, archeology, history, music, scenic movement. In 1937 Palace of Pioneers was opened and our House moved there. Solomon Davidovich became a manager of the art department, and Konstantin Alexandrovich went on teaching children. I studied in his group till the beginning of the war. Besides I studied at school (certainly). My school was situated near our house. Behind our school there was a small garden, where we played lapta in summer and skated in winter.

Later I changed my school for the school #32 (it was financed by the railway administration). I studied there till 1939. But in 1939 our class was moved to the school near our house for some reason. Therefore I found myself at my first school again. I studied there during blockade, too. We were members of the school fire-fighting squad, but I'll tell you about it later.

At school I turned out to have an inquiring nature, therefore it was difficult for me to concentrate upon certain subject. Everything was interesting for me. I read a lot of popular books, I also was interested in biographies of outstanding physicists: Einstein, Nils Bor, and others. [Albert Einatein (1879-1955) was an outstanding physicist; author of the theory of relativity; a Nobel prize winner; Nils Bor (1885-1962) was one of the founders of the modern physics.] I was also very fond of geometry and stereometry. I liked to draw very much. My teacher of mathematics used to draw carelessly, and it conflicted with my concept of exact science, therefore I did not like her.

My brother and I loved uncle Vladimir, the husband of my father's sister very much. He was a strong and kind Russian man, a naval officer. He was our idol. Uncle also loved us, especially David. David also was a remarkable guy. He also was tall and kind. I painted his portrait many years after his death.

Uncle Vladimir took care of David. He advised him to enter Naval School after 9 classes. That Naval School cadets used to be invited to enter the Military College named after Frunze, and David became its cadet after finishing his Naval School. David was much taller and stronger than me. He had got sports categories in 6 different kinds of sports. My brother was handsome and purposeful. He perished in the battle near Stalingrad during the war.

David was a yachtsman (a steersman of the first class). He often took me with him to his yacht club. I got used to work as a sailor and became very fond of yachts for their beauty. Once David brought home a second-hand album Instruction for Fans of Sailing by a Swedish yachtsman. That album was full of photographs of yachts, and it choked me up. There were also drawings for construction of yachts, and I decided to start making models. I saved money (mother gave me some money for lunch at school), bought wooden rulers and cut details for yachts.

At home I had got 3 small assembly jigs, where I assembled my yachts. Unfortunately all of them were lost during the blockade [3](#). So during my childhood I was crazy about several things: fine arts, models of yachts, sailing sport and contests in physics and mathematics. That was the reason why after the end of the war I handed in applications to 3 colleges: the Academy of Arts, the University and the Shipbuilding College.

Now I understand that our parents brought us up very well, but according to the rules of that time. We were brought up as persons of excellent qualities: ideal people, absolutely impractical. Our parents believed that a person should have heavenly thoughts and be honest-minded. I have been a romanticist since my childhood. But I guess that our parents practiced the only proper method of upbringing. I believe that otherwise all people have to go on their hands and knees and grow dog-teeth.

In our apartment there lived another Jewish family of Rosenfelds. They had got 2 boys, our coevals. During our first years in Leningrad, a rabbi from yeshivah came to teach us Yiddish. But the time came when it was necessary to finish our studies and rabbi disappeared. I do not know Yiddish at all [4](#). Parents spoke Yiddish only when they wanted to keep something from us. We never celebrated Jewish holidays and never attended the synagogue.

Mom and Dad were born in 1890s. Mom finished a gymnasium, and Daddy studied several years in cheder. Mom frequently said as a joke that she had married an uneducated person. In Leningrad Mom entered the College of Foreign Languages, graduated from it and taught German language at

school. At home we had collected works of Schiller in German. [Johann von Schiller (1759-1805) was a German poet and philosopher.] As for me, I read Schiller's works translated by Zhukovsky. [Vassiliy Zhukovsky (1783-1852) was a Russian poet and translator.]

I do not remember any political events discussed by our parents. As far as we were concerned, we were pioneers and Komsomol members [5, 6] and we took it with great enthusiasm. On the whole, our childhood was very happy. The Palace of Pioneers protected us from the nightmare around us (as I understand it now): in fact it was the time of Great Terror [7](#). And we were fine (like inside a cocoon).

Parents had got many friends. I was surprised when I noticed that one of them had suddenly stopped visiting us. Parents used to explain: he had left. Later I understood that those people were arrested. One day I was playing in the street near our house, when my father told me passing by 'Solomon, Kirov [8](#) was killed.' I guess I remember it because father looked very excited: he understood that a great wave of reprisals would follow.

Father earned money by sewing. But when authorities started persecutions of private craftsmen, he had to find job of a worker at the Aluminium factory. There he worked perfectly well, too. He was awarded a copper teapot for his work. Later he found job of a cutter at a workmen's cooperative association, but there it was necessary to fulfill the plan. Father could not stand it and got back to his work at home.

We had good neighbors. They never informed authorities about father's work at home (at that time private enterprises were not encouraged). In general, we called our neighbors our relatives. Of course there was my father's great merit in it: he was a person of unusual charm and was able to get on with different people.

Soon after our arrival to Leningrad, father got acquainted with a GPU [9](#) officer (somewhere) who occupied a large apartment (later we lived in that apartment). His name was Ivan Alexandrovich Yermilov. He was very good. He liked my father so much that invited all of us to his apartment and placed 2 rooms at our disposal. Later authorities started to reduce space per person in living accommodation and his apartment became communal. Yermilov was a drunkard. Under the influence of drink he liked to shoot with a gun and did it right in the apartment (once he broke the window).

Among our blood relatives I remember aunt Sonya (my father's sister and the wife of uncle Vladimir, a naval officer). She was a true Komsomol member of 1920s. She was a cheerful beauty. Daddy had got another sister: aunt Many. Her husband was a German communist. During the Great Terror he was expelled from the Party and took it hard. But when after the end of the war he was suggested to join the Party again, he refused flatly. Father's sisters lived in Leningrad not far from us. Father had got 2 brothers: uncle Lev and uncle Naum.

They also were staunch supporters of the communist ideas. Naum was killed when he was one of the party searching for excess of provisions in villages. Rich peasants did not agree to give their grain to authorities and often tried to prevent those actions. Possibly that people killed Naum: they attached stones to his feet and drowned him.

Now I'd like to tell you about my brother David in detail. I already told you that he was a remarkable person. I saw him for the last time in the window of the Military College named after Frunze. He waved a farewell. It was right before the evacuation of his College to Astrakhan. It was supposed that cadets would finish their studies in Astrakhan and go to the front line as naval officers.

But their studies lasted not long. When Stalingrad battle [10](#) was in its heat, all cadets were sent there into the hell. Most of them were killed. Recently I painted David's portrait. He is about 19 years old there, but I never saw him at the age of 19. Here I'd like to read you his letter he wrote to Aunt Sonya. David wrote it before their departure to the front line.

Dear Aunt Sonya!

I am sorry that it took me so much time to write you back. We have just finished the 2nd course, but the situation requires our departure to the front line. At first they wanted to send us there as privates, but later they changed their mind and gave us the ranks of officers. At present we are near to finish the infantry school and become lieutenants of infantry. So my naval service has terminated, but I survived. It can't be helped, because it is necessary. Soon I'll be at the front line. If I manage to survive in Stalingrad, I'll fight further. We'll see!

I received the last letter from my parents a long time ago. At present I know nothing about them. I guess very soon the front line will get close to their location and it is useless to write them. That's all for today.

Write me please while it is possible.

David,

the former man-of-war's man,
now the infantryman.

• Growing up during the war

Now I'd like to get back to my childhood. Of course Leningrad of my childhood was absolutely different. There were plenty of horses, and the city was very odorous. I remember holidays of melting snow. In winter when the city got covered with snow, people used to arrange pyramids of boards in city yards. They put a stove inside the pyramid and burned wood in it. Snow was brought from all the nearest yards and thrown into the pyramid. The yard was filled with a tasty smoke of birch fire wood and steam. For children it was a presage of spring and a real holiday. People used to store firewood in their yards in piles. It was very interesting to play boyish games between woodpiles.

It was Mom who kept the house. We had no assistants. We were not poor, because my father was doing well. But I do not remember any non-essentials. We were satisfied with food and dressed tidy, no more. We used to spend summer holidays in Velizh. Father often got permits to recreation centers [11](#) or sanatorium (in Essentuki, for instance), because he was ill with gastric ulcer. [Essentuki is a town in Stavropol Krai, located at the base of the Caucasus Mountains.] Together with Mom we went to Essentuki without father on June 21, 1941. So the beginning of the war found us en route.

On June 21, 1941 we left Leningrad for Essentuki by train. We heard the news about the war near Rostov-on-Don. As we reached Essentuki, we rushed to buy return tickets, but managed to get them only for July 18. Our way back was much more difficult: a lot of stops to give way for troops trains. I do not know the reason, but our train was left by the steam locomotive 15 km away from Tula, and we had to walk to Tula. From Tula we went round Moscow (it was already closed) via Kaluga, Vyazma, Rzhev, Likhoslavl having no information about the situation. At last we managed to arrive in Leningrad at the turn of July.

The front line approached quickly, and people started evacuation from Leningrad. My elder brother David was evacuated together with cadets of the Military College named after Frunze by one of the last echelons. I saw him shortly before their departure, he waved me from the College window. For the last time... Mom, Daddy and I remained in the city. Fascists tightened the blockade.

Like all other senior pupils in the besieged city, I was on duty on roofs, put out fire-bombs, later fought fires as a member of fire-brigade (we were happy to get asbestos overalls and sparkling yellow helmets of Roman style). Winter frosts were in.

One frosty night I was on duty on the roof and saw our plane ramming a German bomber. The picture stamped in me: the black sky, the white cross of the German plane in the light of searchlights, our pursuit plane, the wing of the German plane slowly falling down, and tremendous roar. Fortunately the parts of the crashed planes were strewn over the territory of the Tavrichesky garden and citizens did not suffer. Next day people were informed that Sevastyanov, a young pilot had fulfilled a ram attack (one of the first attacks of that kind during the war).

Winter frosts were followed by real famine. In March 1942 our family (we were on the verge of dystrophy) was evacuated from Leningrad. We crossed the Ladoga Lake covered with spongy ice. In Yaroslavl we stayed about a month coming to life. Then we moved to Stavropol, later to Kizlyar, Astrakhan (much later I got to know that the School of my brother had been evacuated there), and farther to Kustanay region. There I managed to finish 10 classes ahead of time

1943 was the year of my draft. Boys who finished 10 classes were directed to Tumen. In Tumen there was the Infantry School evacuated from Tallin. After 10 months of training in October 1943 we were moved to Tula, where the 5th tank corps was formed. I was sent to the 5th separate vehicular brigade.

I remember our commander addressing us 'Soldiers who knows Degtyaryov's machine gun well, come forward!' And I (proud young guy!) stepped forward together with some other guys. Each of us received a machine gun.

The next order 'Disassemble and assemble!' Having appreciated my skill, the commander came up to me. 'Can you shoot straight?' - 'At School I was pointed at as an example.' - 'Well, start fighting!' So I became a machine-gunner of the 5th separate vehicular brigade at the 5th tank corps. Our corps had to enter the breaks made by active forces, carrying forward the advance. Our corps maneuvered from front to front.

Our first experience under fire was unhappy: on our way to the front line we were bombed. My memory keeps feeling of shock and chaos. I remember Lera, my schoolmate dying on my hands. He used to be a cheerful and sociable guy. His last words were the following: will you remember

me, will I remember you...

After that bombardment the corps was reinforced (our losses appeared to be not great) and moved towards Nevel through Gorodok. That offensive I remember in more detail. It was in November, the first dirty sleet was everywhere. Motor-infantry of our corps was thrown into the break which was only 4-kilometer wide and was raked with fire. Our three-ton trucks stuck in the mud. Only we (infantrymen) mudded all over, were able to move and even pull, drag and push our automobiles. After all we managed to move forward and reach Gorodok. In order not to lose contact with our corps we dug in. I remember black-and-white naked trees under the grey sky and black houses on the white snow.

A comical episode which could have become tragic happened there. Our entrenchment was situated near the town outskirts and there was a privy right behind us. During a lull in the fighting I decided to make use of it. The privy door was broken and I could see the sky through it. Suddenly right in front of me I saw some sort of a black flower expanding extensively in all directions without any sound. Another one flower appeared a little bit lower. The fourth one brought awful sound of exploding mortar shell. I immediately realized that Germans noticed me and wanted to kill in the privy. The situation looked both ridiculous and awful. I jumped out falling down into our entrenchment.

Later in winter we took our stand in Belarus, near the Losvida Lake. The Lake was about 3 kilometers long and rather wide. At night we usually went to capture a prisoner for interrogation. In our group there was Yusupov, a soldier from Kazakhstan. He was a real Goliath. My task was to make noise, simulating activity in a certain place. And at that time in another place another group was creeping up to German entrenchments. Yusupov used to burst into it, seize several Germans, stun them, tie hand and foot by means of Kazakh hair lasso and easily drag them all to our position. He managed to bring in a lot of prisoners.

Much later he died ridiculously. Our plane stuck out of the ice on the Lake, its tail-end upward. Both Germans and our soldiers stamped a trail in the snow to the plane. You see, the point was that the pilot's cabin had a special transparent cover, and the control board was set with colored semi-transparent handles made of beautiful plastic. Soldiers used them to make mouthpieces and handles for sheath-knives.

By the way, I still keep a knife made at that time. Both Germans and our soldiers crawled there to get that plastic handles. We had a secret understanding with Germans not to fire at soldiers crawling to that airplane. So Yusupov wanted to get that plastic, too. We tried to dissuade him from it, promised to bring him everything he wanted, but it did not help. He started, but Germans recognized him immediately and brought down fire on him. They remembered how he had troubled them. When we crawled there to take his body away, Germans did not shoot...

In the same place near the Losvida Lake I often waited in ambush together with my friend Genka Sidorov. Most probably we became friends because we both were from Leningrad. I was captivated by his intelligence, though sometimes he behaved like a yoot. He was tall, thin, cheerful, and fearless in fight. He was a true friend who kept vigilant watch on me and protected me (a red-haired Jew!) from bad encroachments of our associates. Waiting in ambush (digging ourselves in snow under a fur-tree), we whispered and bothered each other not to fall asleep (in fact Germans could capture us asleep). We used to spend there about 4 hours wearing short fur coats, valenki,

caps with earlaps. [Valenki - winter boots made of milled wool.]

Later (in spring) field-kitchens were caught in the mud and our food supplies gave out. Genka suggested going to the neighboring village and earning some food drawing portraits of inhabitants. It was me who had to draw. At that time I always had clean sheets of paper (I did my best to find them everywhere I could) and a stub of a pencil with me. So Genka and I started towards the village during a lull in the fighting.

The village appeared to be not far from our position: about 1.5 kilometers. We found there a long earth-house and a bench in front of it. An old man was sitting on that bench. We greeted him and sat down beside him. I asked if it was permissible to draw his portrait. The old man examined us suspiciously 'What for?' I answered that I was an artist and wanted to draw during a lull in the fighting. 'Well, do it, if you wish!' I drew him quickly and the portrait was a good likeness. His wife appeared, sat down next to him, and looked at my drawing. 'Look, it's you! It looks like a photo!' The old man agreed 'You are quick and skillful!' I handed the drawing over to him. He moved away mistrustfully 'How much is it?' - 'It's free. But if you give us something to eat, we would be grateful. You see, our field-kitchens lagged behind and we have nothing to eat.' The old man took the portrait, looked at his wife and nodded his approval.

She jumped up and some minutes later called us to their earth-house. With great pleasure we ate shchi, potatoes and pickled cucumbers. After that I drew a portrait of the old woman. Their neighbors came; they wanted to have their portraits, too. I drew quickly. One hour of my work resulted in a small bag of potatoes, a piece of lard, some hard-boiled eggs and onions, a loaf of bread, some salt. My earned income appeared to be great! We became friends. Genka wanted to carry the bag: 'You worked, and I only chattered!' 'No, you did good public relations for my work!' Nevertheless he took the bag from me and carried it himself.

Our return was triumphal. We made a fire and reheated our meals. We also shared it with soldiers from other platoons... Here I told you about this sort of fighting episodes... Together with Genka we fought till July 1944 years. On July 17, 1944 I was wounded.

Our troops were ordered to advance in near the Baltic Sea. Our corps forced a crossing over the River Drissa. My vehicular brigade moved between tank brigades crawling over the bridge of boats. I was sitting in the bodywork of a high-powered truck. As I was sitting at the very backboard, I was the first to jump down and open protective fire while the others would get down from the truck. My soldier-assistant was sitting beside me holding reserve drum magazines. While approaching the river, I saw the narrow Drissa with the bridge of boats and tanks on it. I also saw explosions over the river: Germans tried to prevent our crossing.

The show was bewitching, like the stare of boa. It was terrible. I collected myself already after crossing, when our trucks caught up our tanks. Everything became absolutely quiet and we entered a small green cozy town Kraslava.

At that moment we were fired by Germans. We quickly jumped down and lay in hiding. I placed my machine gun on the left. Germans did not stop firing, trying to annihilate us. I rushed forward and saw a large residence with a balcony. I understood that it was the firing-point! I crossed the street and shot through the house wall until that German stopped firing.

Later during that very fight I was wounded. At first I understood nothing. I felt a stab in my back and legs. Feeling no pain, I rushed forward. But I managed to make only a few steps and fell down. I passed my hand over my trousers and saw that it was red. After that I lost consciousness.

I regained consciousness and realized that silence enveloped everything around me. I rolled over to the ditch, just in case. Suddenly I saw 2 tall Germans (their sleeves were rolled up) approaching me. My muscles toughened. But a minute later I distinguished our soldier holding a submachine gun. I guessed straight away that he was escorting 2 captives. It took a load off my mind. They came nearer and bubbled over with joy I recognized my friend Genka. I called him and he saw me. 'Senya (they called me Senya for short), what happened?!' - 'I've caught a bullet...' - 'Halt! Diesen mensch nehmen!' he ordered. 'We'll carry you to the medical and sanitary battalion.'

Till now I remember the round face of the red-haired tall German with a clotted wound on his cheek. He bent down to take me out of the ditch. At that moment I felt pain and a wave of nausea. I said to Genka 'Don't! Better send a field ambulance for me.' Later I was picked up by an ambulance, my wound was dressed and I was put on the straw in a truck ready to start. There were several wounded soldiers in that truck. Genka came up and gave me a small notebook in red morocco cover, taken from that German. 'It is for you, keep it as a remembrance. Live!'

I met Genka many years after the war was finished. He was a top-class long distance truck driver on routes of Scandinavia and Baltic countries. He was doing well. When I introduced Genka to somebody, I used to say 'This is a person who saved my life: I was wounded and he carried me away from the battlefield.' It was not a lie, though in fact the situation developed differently.

Some time after Genka's leaving, a field ambulance appeared. Two nurses quickly cut my trousers using scissors. Before that they took off me 2 round bags with reserve drum magazines. The day before I sewed them myself, having recollected my father's profession. I made them with loving care (I attached buttons and small straps). And you see, when those nurses took those bags away from me, I burst into tears... I remember no more tears during the war.

Meanwhile the nurses quickly wrapped my legs in something white and carried me to the ambulance paying no attention to my cries. There were several wounded soldiers in the car. We bobbed up and down in it and groaned with pain. I remember that I had to ask a nurse about help. I had to hold her by her hands burning with shame and relieving myself.

So I found myself in the hospital of a small Latvian town Kretinga. The surgeon, who extracted several splinters from my body said 'You are lucky, red, if these splinters hit you a little bit higher, you'd better be killed. And those very small pieces we left inside your body will not spoil your long life.' (To tell you the truth, they did not!) Soon I managed to walk without crutches. I started drawing portraits of my ward neighbors. They sent my drawings home by mail. According to their requests, I often drew extra medals to them.

They never asked to draw extra orders (they thought it much), but medals were asked frequently. Time was getting on. Soon I was going to leave the hospital and it was necessary for me to get back to my corps. While I was in the hospital, our corps took the city of Dvinsk (Daugavpils) and received the name of Dvinsky. But everything changed when the wife of the commander's assistant of the 4th army (their staff was stationed in Kretinga) noticed me drawing portraits.

She frequently came to the hospital and brought different tasty meals to the injured men. She wished to have her portrait. Soon I found myself among bodyguards of General Andrey Kalachev (her husband).

There my sense of direction appeared to be very useful: I was able to find the way without visible reference points (by intuition). The General always ordered me to sit beside his driver 'Keep your eye on the road!' And he was absolutely sure that we would not lose our way. The General often had to move along unknown front roads. Kalachev appreciated my ability. I liked to serve at him. At night I slept in a bed with real bed sheets (I had already forgotten such luxury!). I also realized that I had more chances to survive beside the General. We finished the war near Königsberg.

Here I'd like to tell you about another lucky hit: I got pennies from heaven shortly before my leaving from the hospital. One day I was appointed to accompany a local peasant mobilized to collect milk from neighboring farms for our hospital. At that time I was already recovering. I had to guard him and took my sub-machine gun with me. Not to frighten people, I hid my sub-machine gun in his telega under the hay and we started moving slowly and talking peacefully about everything. [Telega is a four-wheel carriage.]

He told me that he was a poor man, his farm was situated nearby. So we went from one farm to another. Sometimes people friendly rolled out big cans of milk and helped us to put them into the telega, the others obeyed gloomily. One peasant served us a hefty meal. By the evening we brought about 20 big cans of milk to the hospital. We became friends with that peasant. I was sleepy. I got into bed, but jumped up immediately! My sub-machine gun! That peasant had taken it away in his telega. I knew for sure that a soldier who lost his arms was worth death by shooting.

I decided to find that peasant. I had to go through the wood, and it was extremely dangerous, because the wood was full of wood brothers. [Wood brothers was a cumulative name of anti-soviet armed groups on the territory of Baltic Republics.]

I was sure that I would never get back alive. At last, after a long way I came to his farm more dead than alive. My driver came out of his house carrying my sub-machine gun. I seized it hastily and hung it on my shoulder. The peasant's wife invited me to visit their house, gave me some bacon and apples. See what a prize I found!

• After the war and recent years

I finished war on the Kursh spit near Königsberg. Soon after the Victory our 4th army was moved to Kazakhstan (to Alma-Ata). General Kalachev was appointed the commander of the Kazakh military district. Many years later (when I was already a member of the USSR Union of Artists) I arrived to Crimea (to the Gurzuf recreation house for artists). During my first walk along the beach I met Andrey Kalachev and his wife Nina: they spent their vacation in the central sanatorium of the Ministry of Defense. We embraced. They invited me to their magnificent apartments in the sanatorium, and we spent the whole day together. Later we corresponded.

So, the war was finished. I (a front-line soldier with awards and 10 classes of school education) had to think about demobilization and further study. I returned to Leningrad. My Mom had returned from evacuation a little earlier and waited for me in our apartment. Father survived the war, but did not return home: he married another woman. Father died in Moscow in 1970s.

I have told you already that I was so much eager to study that submitted my documents to 3 higher educational institutions at the same time. I tried to understand myself. But by that time my teacher Konstantin Kardabovsky returned from evacuation and convinced me to enter the Academy of Arts. It seemed to me that I was able to better all entrants, but it appeared that people did not like arrogant men.

They flunked me in my entrance examinations. Then I entered the 3rd course of the high art school. I studied there during a year, and then entered the Academy of Arts (the department of painting) trouble-free. I studied in the workshop of Professor Oreshnikov (a remarkable teacher and a top-class professional artist). After graduation from the Academy, I started working at the USSR Union of Artists. [The USSR Union of Artists was founded in 1957.] There every artist had got an agent (art critics), who used to find orders for the artists. We performed those orders and earned money for living. There was a lot of interesting work.

One of orders came from the state farm where I was in evacuation [12](#). There was a fur farm. I painted a picture for them and sent a letter describing my life there during evacuation. We painted different pictures. For example, one of them was devoted to a working day on a cattle-breeding farm. I remember that I had to go to Kirov to perform that order.

Another one was to paint a working day in the railway depot in Kotlas. I went to Kotlas, met with the local Communist Party committee secretary, and asked about the purpose of the future picture. He answered that it was meant for the House of Culture where workers usually spent their spare time. I asked the secretary whether it was reasonable to show workers their working day when they wanted to relax. He hesitated a minute, but said 'Paint a working day: we would feel great security.' You see, I had got a lot of orders. But usually I managed to find some time to paint for myself, so to say for my private satisfaction.

I lived with my Mom. She was often sick, worked in some workmen's cooperative association and earned just a dab of money. She died in 1956. Being a student of the last course, I met a girl among students at a party. I immediately decided to marry her. So I did it in 1953, a year after my graduation from the Academy. My wife's name is Nina Pavlovna Iossilevich. She was born in Leningrad in 1924. She graduated from the College of Engineers of Railway Transport. All her life long Nina worked as a structural engineer.

In 1954 our son Alexey was born. We gave him his mother's surname (Iossilevich), because his maternal grandfather was in anguish at the fact that his family would come to an end. 6 years later our daughter Nina was born. Our children were very good. They grew up and became remarkable persons. Alexey finished school specialized in mathematics. He used to win the first places in different contests in physics, therefore he had the right to enter any College he wanted without entrance examinations. Alexey decided to become a student of the University (physical faculty).

But unfortunately the same year a daughter of Victor Eskin (a known physics and my friend) was going to enter the same faculty. Two Jews at once were too much for the University; therefore Alexey was given a flunking grade. Then he entered the Polytechnical College. After graduation he started working at ELECTROSSILA plant (they produced electric motors). He worked there at the theoretical department.

During his work at ELECTROSSILA Alexey wrote a paper about a certain physical effect known earlier, but not explained from the theoretical point of view. Alexey managed to explain that effect. He gave a report about it at the scientific conference in Odessa. Academician Khalatnikov from the Moscow Institute of Theoretical Physics was present at that conference. He listened to Alexey's report and invited him to work at his Institute. Three months later Alexey defended his dissertation. It happened that the procedure was fixed for the day when Brezhnev died.

So Alexey was standing in the lobby of the Institute and all Institute employees condoled with him, but not upon the loss of Brezhnev, but upon postponing of the procedure. Later he defended his dissertation brilliantly. Research workers spoke that Alexey's work was the high-water mark of contemporary physics. Alexey was suggested to be given a doctor's degree, but he refused. He explained that he did not want to outstart his coevals (colleagues). My son defended his doctor's dissertation many years later. At present he often works abroad. He has got 2 sons of 20 and 13 years old.

My daughter graduated from the Academy of Arts, too. She is a graphic artist. Unfortunately she has difficulties with her work, because she is not able to scratch her way. She has got a son Eugeny (now Eugeny is 13 years old). They live in St. Petersburg.

When our children were born and rather long time after that we lived in a two-room apartment in Zhukovskogo Street. Both rooms were dim: the wall of the opposite building was 2 meters and 6 centimeters far from our windows. And according to sanitary norms it was necessary to have not more than 2 meters for improvement of living conditions. Members of the Union of Artists put their artists on their own waiting list. I visited the secretary of the regional Communist Party Committee and he helped me. I was suggested to occupy a workshop and an apartment of an artist who had left for Israel. Giving me the voucher, a local official told me with hatred, 'Is this apartment a runway for flying away to Israel?'

While our children were little, we used to spend summer vacations out of the city. Sometimes we rented dacha, sometimes lived at our friends.

I came across anti-Semitism as a state policy, when I presented the rough draft of my degree work for approval. You see, I was in love with Rembrandt's picture Syndics of the Drapers' Guild. [Rembrandt, Harmenz van Rijn (1606-1669) - the greatest artist.] I wanted to paint a group portrait of the members of the Soviet Committee in Defense of Peace.

I wanted to paint it similar to the Rembrandt's picture, of course understanding the status of Rembrandt and my own. [The Soviet Committee in Defense of Peace was created in 1949 in Moscow.] I was going to draw Ilya Erenburg [13](#), the chairman of the Committee in the center.

Ilya Erenburg was a picturesque figure, an idol of many people, especially of the front-line soldiers. So, I submitted my sketch, and received a recommendation not to over-stress Erenburg. I was shocked. I spent a week thinking the situation over and decided to give up my idea of the group portrait. I suggested painting 3 portraits of cultural workers and got permission immediately. After graduation I became a member of the USSR Union of Artists. By the way, when a student, I received the Stalin's increased stipend for excellent students, but in 1952 they stopped paying it without any reasons.

I was the best student and my degree work was the best, too. But our communist party functionaries could not permit a person by the name of Epstein to have everything too easy. A student from our course (a quite good capable guy, a son of some General) was presenting his degree work just before me. His painting was devoted to Mikula Selyaninovich in full-scale. [Mikula Selyaninovich is one of the heroes of Russian epic literature.]

The frame of his picture was covered with bast mats, bast shoes were fixed to the frame. [Bast shoes are Russian country wicker footwear made of bark of young deciduous trees]. In general he presented his work in old Russian style. They decided to make it the highlight of the program. During his presentation the hall was illuminated beautifully. But after that the light was almost switched off and I had to present my work in darkness. It was ridiculous!

In the time of Doctors' Plot [14](#) it was terrible. We could not even imagine the inevitable consequences. When Stalin died, I was in confusion.

During the Hungarian [15](#) and the Prague [16](#) events I was ashamed for my country. I was pleased to hear about Gorbachev's reforms [17, 18]. When people ask me about my attitude to Putin, I answer that for the first time in my life I am not ashamed for the leader of my country. At present I have no connection with the St. Petersburg Hesed Avraham Welfare Center [19](#). A long time ago I received food packages there.

- **Glossary:**

[1](#) 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.

[2](#) Road of Life

It was a passage across Lake Ladoga in winter during the Blockade of Leningrad. It was due to the Road of Life that Leningrad survived in the terrible winter of 1941-42.

[3](#) Blockade of Leningrad

On September 8, 1941 the Germans fully encircled Leningrad and its siege began. It lasted until January 27, 1944. The blockade meant incredible hardships and privations for the population of the town. Hundreds of thousands died from hunger, cold and diseases during the almost 900 days of the blockade.

[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 All-Union pioneer organization

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

6 Komsomol

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

7 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.

8 Kirov, Sergey (born Kostrikov) (1886-1934)

Soviet communist. He joined the Russian Social Democratic Party in 1904. During the Revolution of 1905 he was arrested; after his release he joined the Bolsheviks and was arrested several more times for revolutionary activity. He occupied high positions in the hierarchy of the Communist Party. He was a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, as well as of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee. He was a loyal supporter of Stalin. In 1934 Kirov's popularity had increased and Stalin showed signs of mistrust. In December of that year Kirov was assassinated by a younger party member. It is believed that Stalin ordered the murder, but it has never been proven.

9 GPU

State Political Department, the state security agency of the USSR, that is, its punitive body.

10 Stalingrad Battle

17th July 1942 – 2nd February 1943. The South-Western and Don Fronts stopped the advance of German armies in the vicinity of Stalingrad. On 19th and 20th November 1942 the Soviet troops undertook an offensive and encircled 22 German divisions (330,000 people) and eliminated them. On 31st January 1943 the remains of the 6th German army headed by General Field Marshal Paulus surrendered (91,000 people). The victory in the Stalingrad battle was of huge political, strategic and international significance.

11 Recreation Centers in the USSR

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

12 Sovkhoz

state-run agricultural enterprise. The first sovkhoz yards were created in the USSR in 1918. According to the law the sovkhoz property was owned by the state, but it was assigned to the sovkhoz which handled it based on the right of business maintenance.

13 Erenburg, Ilya Grigorievich (1891-1967)

Famous Russian Jewish novelist, poet and journalist who spent his early years in France. His first important novel, *The Extraordinary Adventures of Julio Jurento* (1922) is a satire on modern European civilization. His other novels include *The Thaw* (1955), a forthright piece about Stalin's régime which gave its name to the period of relaxation of censorship after Stalin's death.

14 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.

15 1956

It designates the Revolution, which started on 23rd October 1956 against Soviet rule and the communists in Hungary. It was started by student and worker demonstrations in Budapest started in which Stalin's gigantic statue was destroyed. Moderate communist leader Imre Nagy was

appointed as prime minister and he promised reform and democratization. The Soviet Union withdrew its troops which had been stationing in Hungary since the end of World War II, but they returned after Nagy's announcement that Hungary would pull out of the Warsaw Pact to pursue a policy of neutrality. The Soviet army put an end to the rising on 4th November and mass repression and arrests started. About 200,000 Hungarians fled from the country. Nagy, and a number of his supporters were executed. Until 1989, the fall of the communist regime, the Revolution of 1956 was officially considered a counter-revolution.

16 Prague Spring

The term Prague Spring designates the liberalization period in communist-ruled Czechoslovakia between 1967-1969. In 1967 Alexander Dubcek became the head of the Czech Communist Party and promoted ideas of 'socialism with a human face', i.e. with more personal freedom and freedom of the press, and the rehabilitation of victims of Stalinism. In August 1968 Soviet troops, along with contingents from Poland, East Germany, Hungary and Bulgaria, occupied Prague and put an end to the reforms.

17 Gorbachev, Mikhail (1931-)

Soviet political leader. Gorbachev joined the Communist Party in 1952 and gradually moved up in the party hierarchy. In 1970 he was elected to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, where he remained until 1990. In 1980 he joined the politburo, and in 1985 he was appointed general secretary of the party. In 1986 he embarked on a comprehensive program of political, economic, and social liberalization under the slogans of glasnost (openness) and perestroika (restructuring). The government released political prisoners, allowed increased emigration, attacked corruption, and encouraged the critical reexamination of Soviet history. The Congress of People's Deputies, founded in 1989, voted to end the Communist Party's control over the government and elected Gorbachev executive president. Gorbachev dissolved the Communist Party and granted the Baltic states independence. Following the establishment of the Commonwealth of Independent States in 1991, he resigned as president. Since 1992, Gorbachev has headed international organizations

18 Perestroika (Russian for restructuring)

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

19 Hesed

Meaning care and mercy in Hebrew, Hesed stands for the charity organization founded by Amos Avgar in the early 20th century. Supported by Claims Conference and Joint Hesed helps for Jews in need to have a decent life despite hard economic conditions and encourages development of their self-identity. Hesed provides a number of services aimed at supporting the needs of all, and particularly elderly members of the society. The major social services include: work in the center

facilities (information, advertisement of the center activities, foreign ties and free lease of medical equipment); services at homes (care and help at home, food products delivery, delivery of hot meals, minor repairs); work in the community (clubs, meals together, day-time polyclinic, medical and legal consultations); service for volunteers (training programs). The Hesed centers have inspired a real revolution in the Jewish life in the FSU countries. People have seen and sensed the rebirth of the Jewish traditions of humanism. Currently over eighty Hesed centers exist in the FSU countries. Their activities cover the Jewish population of over eight hundred settlements.