Natalia (Bronislava) Chepur

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My family background

My name is Natalia Chepur. My mother Buzia Aloets was born in Mankovka village, Cherkassy region in 1909. She was born in the family of a mill worker Mendel Aloets. From time to time Mendel went to Great Britain to earn some money when there was no work in his village. He had his sister and her family and some other relatives living in London. When it came to the hard times at home he went there to earn some money and came back home. The name of Aloets probably comes from the German Alois. This is a frequently heard name in the Austrian lands and Bavaria (nearer to Austria). There were 4 children in Mendel's family. He had two boys from his first marriage and (his 1st wife must have died - I don't know anything about it), and two girls from his second marriage. My grandmother's name was Inga. Their family was well to do. My mother told me that her mother put on a wig, a very beautiful black velvet mantel and a heavy gold chain to go to the synagogue. She was a woman of a striking beauty. And this was the only memory of their peaceful pre-revolution life that my mother had. In 1919 a gang on horses rode across Mankovka. I don't know exactly whether they were a cavalry or just bandits. Their neighbors managed to grab Inga and the girls and hide them (the boys were older and were apprentices in the neighboring villages) and hide them in the shed. Inga was watching what was going on in their yard through a chink in the wall of this shed. She saw her husband killed - he was my grandfather Mendel. Inga went crazy. She was sent to a mental hospital where she got better. She was living in Birobidjan 1 when I was born and visited us in Kiev. There happened to be some argument at home - perhaps, my father said something to her, but she left and never came back. She never wrote a letter to my mother. That's all we know about her.

The year of 1919. The house was robbed and Mendel murdered. Inga went crazy. The compassionate neighbors took my mother and the girl to the road, turned them in the direction of Uman and told them to go straight on and to make no turns until they reached Uman. They were to find the town's Komsomol committee to seek help there. My 10-year-old mother took Fania, her 7-year-old sister's hand and they headed to Uman. They got to the town committee. They could

provide shelter during the day only and they told them to find a place to stay at night by themselves. The girls were living with a drunkard woman in some basement with brick floors. It was cold and damp. They lived so for some time until they were sent to different Jewish children's homes. Children's homes often moved and children were sent from one home to another and the sisters lost each other. They met 29 years later, in 1949. My mother didn't say anything about her life in the children's home. She only mentioned once that the children had music classes. When we got a piano at home she recalled a piece and played it. Her fingers recalled it. When she grew old she recalled that they had had knitting classes and she took to knitting. Her fingers remembered. I have no information about their everyday life or system of education, just one terrible detail. After the war two other former inmates of the children's home visited my mother. They were Shura Lieber and his wife Mania. Mania always wore a shawl. I asked her why. It turned out that the inmates had been told that it was possible to get rid of fleas by irradiation with X-ray equipment. As a result, all girls lost their hair that never grew back. They were actually bald. My mother had gorgeous curly hair. She was lucky to have been at the medical ward with some disease during this campaign.

Gitia Wurgart was my mother's instructor and mentor in children's homes in Uman. She moved to Kiev and in 1925 sent my mother a special invitation request (such official paper served as a permit to come to Kiev). My mother was 16 years old, when she has arrived to Kiev. She was helping my mother to find a place to stay overnight. My mother had to wash the floors or take care of a baby, etc. to pay these people back for letting stay with them. Gitia was one of the provincial young people inspired by the revolution of 1917. They were full of energy and ready to work day and night, giving no thought to how things would work out. Gitia found my mother a job as a courier at the Stalin District party Committee. It was big luck for my mother. At this time it was next to impossible to find a job. Unemployment rates were high, the economy was paralyzed and everything was very difficult. My mother told me that there was a canteen for cabmen at Bessarabka (Kiev's central market) where one could get a meal (1st and 2nd course: some cereal and meat with gravy) for 2 kopecks... But one couldn't always get even 2 kopecks and the job of a courier was a real happy deal. This wasn't an easy job. She was a young girl and she had to run across the city all day long (she couldn't afford public transportation). She was paid 14 rubles per month. This was a lot of money. She could afford to buy some clothes gradually - the most needed clothes at first and then warm clothes for a cold season. Later the District Party Committee gave my mother a recommendation to study at the trade school for working young people 2. The majority of the students there were young people from provinces. Again, this was good luck for my mother. She met my father at this school. In this time she was not yet a communist party member, but believed in ideals communist revolutions.

My father Dmitriy Yurievich Chepur was a Ukrainian. He came from Dimitrovka village Znamenka district, Kirovograd region. His mother Theodosia Tikhonovna Chepur was a cook for the priest. The family legend says that either the priest himself or his son became the father of her children. My grandmother had 3 sons. They all had her last name and were illegitimate. Their father (the priest) lived in the village and saw how difficult it was for her to manage but he didn't support or marry her. I don't know where the truth was, as I got to know the details from other sources. My grandmother never told any stories in this regard. My father Dmitriy Chepur, born in 1906 was a shoemaker's apprentice at first and then, when he turned 14, he went to Alexandria to work at the coal mines. Later he moved to Kiev and went to the trade school. We had a photograph: my

grandmother sitting with her wide hands crushed by hard work on her knees and 3 young men standing behind her. They were wearing high boots and shirts with high collars in the fashion of that time. One of them was my father - I recognized him. My grandmother told me that another one was her son Fedia that died from galloping consumption in the late 1920s and the third man was just a neighbor. But my aunt told me later that it was her third son that disappeared during the civil war. People said he went away with a gang. My grandmother was keeping it such a big secret that I never knew that I had another uncle. He joined either the Mahno gang or the whites, or any of a number of gangs.

My grandmother got married in the long run. In the 1920s-30s many intelligent people were moving to villages. Anton Ivanovich Bakaliar, a very nice man, happened to be one of them. He rented a room at my grandmother's house and worked as chief accountant at the collective farm named after Stalin. He was a very good specialist and a nice and educated man. He moved to the province to hide from proletariat anger. He noticed that my grandmother was a nice woman (she was an ordinary peasant woman, but very honest and decent) and he married her. Therefore, my grandmother entered the category of "respectful" women and her "not quite decent" past in the opinion of the villagers was forgotten. During the war collective farms kept functioning and my grandfather continued working as an accountant. At night partisans came from the woods on sleighs and my grandfather secretly gave out food to them, making notes in his accounting books. Somebody reported on him and the Gestapo captured him. They beat him unmercifully, but they probably had no evidence against him. My grandfather was a very highly qualified accountant and all his records were very accurate. They had to let him go. He died in 1947 as a result postwar hunger and poverty in the country. My father took my grandmother to Kiev. Grandmother has raised my father by orthodox Christian, he did not go to church and was not religious. My mother-Jewish she has taken much well, grandmother considered that for the God all people alike and always much liked our family. She died in 1964.

My parents got married in Kiev, but I was born in Uman on 25.09.1931. They had no wedding party, just a civil registration ceremony. My mother was an orphan. There was nobody to support the young couple. My mother's stepbrother Shlyoma, his wife Hanne and their children lived in Uman. His wife Hanna didn't work. She was raising 6 children. Shlyoma was a shoemaker. My mother wrote him a letter and went to Uman to give birth to her baby. Uncle Shlyoma visited us before the war. I remember his hands. He had one finger deformed, probably, by a hammer. His hands always smelled of leather. He liked me very much and often played with me putting me on his lap. Later my mother showed me the house where I was born. It was a two-storied lopsided building on the corner of Lenin Street and a lane. I would know it if I saw it today. It is probably not there any more... After my mother learned to handle the baby (me) she returned to Kiev.

My father was very capable and always wanted to learn. He has finished in the village 7 classes of the secondary school, and when him was 14 years old has arrived in the Kiev. First it has entered on rabfak (there took all, who wanted to learn, formation was free), has got room in dormitory, afterwards has entered to the Department of Physics and Mathematics, Kiev State University.

A year latter was sent on a business trip to the famous Ioffe Chemical Institute in Leningrad. They were beginning to work with semi-conductors then. My father got poisoned with mercury vapors (they hardly had any safety equ ipment to do their tests) and was sent to restore his strength in Ukraine. He terminated his post-graduate studies. He had to earn money to support his family. He

worked as Deputy Director at Russian secondary school for some time. In 1939 when Bukovina and Western Ukraine united with the Soviet Union he was sent to Chernovitz to become director of the biggest secondary school in town. My father worked there until the Great Patriotic War [the section of WWII between 1941-1945 called like this in the Soviet Union]. By the late 1920s my mother finished her trade school and then studied and finished the Institute of Social Sciences. She got a diploma as German and Mathematics teacher in [secondary] school. In the 1930s she worked in a Kiev secondary school . She was Komsomol leader of the school - there were three such in Kiev. She conducted komsomol meeting, published school newspaper, organized a celebration of communist holidays in the school, in general have charge of communist upbringing of the pupils. They reported directly to the Komsomol district committee. She worked at the school until 1940. Actually all her schoolboys went to the front. Gitia Wurgoft worked in a library in Kiev. They were continuously receiving checklists with the names of the authors that were already considered to be enemies of the people. Their books were to be extracted from the libraries. Aunt Gitia missed some lousy booklet about the development of agriculture written by Bukharin, the ardent revolutionary that had been charged of espionage and shot by that time. The authorities found this booklet and aunt Gitia was sent to prison in Kolyma for 15 years. She returned after the war, gray haired and with swollen legs. She had poor sight and was wearing glasses that made her eyes seem so small. She went to Berdichev where she had a niece. She got a small room there with the water and toilet in the yard. But she often wrote letters to my mother and her letters were always optimistic.

Growing up

We lived in Kruglouniversitetsksaya Street in a shared apartment . This was the house where lawyers and doctors had lived before the war. We had 4 rooms in our apartment and there was a room for servants near the kitchen. Each room was occupied by a different family. They were all very interesting people. One was Alexandr Ivanovich Wangeigeim, Deputy Minister of Farming. He was of German or Dutch origin. He was a beautiful man with nibble manners. He was very patient and polite. During the war he was in evacuation in Alma-Ata. His sister lived there. She was a geologist and worked in Middle Asia her whole life. Another room was occupied by a Polish family. I believe their name was Nemirovskiye. Their grandmother Maria Lvovna was a comely lady. They had portraits in oval frames in their room and very nice old things from their earlier life. Maria had 2 children. She called her son George and often spoke French to him. If I have any good manners I learned them from Maria Lvovna. I learned from her that one mustn't eat in the street or that pointing one's finger is not good. However, I asked her the question "Maria Lvovna, you have various cards on the table. One of them shows Lenin on the armored car pointing his finger ahead of him. Does this mean that Lenin had bad manners?" I didn't get an answer to this question. During the war they moved to Moscow (they had some relatives there). Another room was occupied by Dennis Slobodinyuk (Dynia). He was Ukrainian. He expressly didn't want to work for the Soviet power and obtained a certificate that he was sick. Perhaps, he was out of his mind. He received a miserable pension with his son Igor. His wife left him for some red commander and left their son in his care. They were literally starving. They boy looked very thin. My mother gave him some food every now and then. When the Germans came to Kiev Dynia put on high boots (like a merchant), grew a beard, opened a store and marauded. He cooperated with the occupiers. Igor was in the Komsomol underground unit. His father informed on him. The Germans captured and executed him. When the Germans left Kiev Dynia went with them. But he didn't go far. We were told that he was hung in the central square in Malyn as traitor of his people. We were living in the

fourth room. I don't have many memories of my childhood. The most important events in the house were when we bought a new checkered sofa and when my father brought an iron. My father was fond of doing technical things. He made a detector radio and then a valve receiver following the drawings from the "Technical Youth" magazine. Once he brought his detector radio to the Dimitrovka village, where father was born, put it on the window sill and turned it on. All neighbors came to listen to the sounds of it - it was like a miracle for them. They had never heard anything like that before. I was raised by housemaids and yard janitors. The housemaids were young girls that managed to escape from their villages during the famine and move to Kiev. They came and went. There was a "club of atheists" in the Lutheran church. I remember well that my nannies used to get together at this spot, taking the children they were taking care of with them. I remember a gypsy choir performance in the club and that their bright silk costumes did not quite match with the plain walls and highback chairs. At home my father played the "flying caps" game with me. There was a box with round holes with numbers in them and one gained points when the cap got into a hole). In this way I was learning my numbers. Once my father brought me a puzzle alphabet. I couldn't read but I cut out and put the letters together. Once my father made a cigarette using one of my paper letters that resulted in my bursting into tears. I felt so sorry to have lost one of my letters. Perhaps, I had a feeling then that I would have to deal with letters for the rest of my life. My mother and father tried to bring good books into the house. We had a whole bookcase full of good books. I red books by Gorkiy when I was a child. We had classical and modern Soviet literature books. I loved books. Not litter was beside us then making the Jewish writers, expect that were. Certainly I knew that my ma and I a Jewish, but then did not yet realize this, then for me all people were alike, and in general before the war nobody did not speak of the anti-Semitism, its simply was not.

I can't say that my parents and I had particularly close relationships. But my obedience was implicit. My parents didn't grow up in families. And they didn't know much about raising children although they were working in a school. They got along well with other children. My mother was the children's favorite. But my parents did not get involved with my reading, my studies or my time. You know, I come from a common family. And in a common family children are some sort of a burden. Children grow up by themselves. Their parents give them food and provide for them and then they think their task is done. Besides, you need to keep in mind that those were Soviet families. They were all busy with social activities: meetings, sittings, emergency training, subbotniks, voskresniks 3 etc. An individual could not stay in the family. And family life was a burden rather than a joy. They had meals at the factory canteen, they washed themselves in the saunas and did their laundry at Laundromats. That was why I loved to spend time at my neighbors' family. It was cozy there. Maria Lvovna was sitting in an old chair, wearing her glasses and reading to Dizia. She was explaining to us what he didn't understand. I just loved it. It was a totally different story. We celebrated 7 November, 1 May and birthdays, of course.

My parents sometimes visited their own friend Klara and Yasha Segal. Yasha Segal was Director of Kiev telephone network. He looked like a typical Jew. They had a record player. They adults used to have dancing parties. In 1941 Yakov stayed for underground party work in Kiev. -Some people saw him walking barefooted, exhausted and undressed in the first days of the occupation. This was even before the Babiy Yar 4... Aunt Klara evacuated to the Urals where she met Sasha (I don't remember his last name). He was a Jew living in South America. He had his business there and was a prosperous man. Later he was influenced by the Soviet propaganda and he returned to the Soviet

Union. He went to fight in the war as a common soldier, got married after the war and lived in Kislovodsk with Aunt Klara.

During the War

1941, war. Posters everywhere in Kiev "We won't give up Kiev", or "Kiev has been and will be a Soviet town". My father was in Chernovitz at this time and went to the front as a volunteer. Their first battle was in the vicinity of the town of Bar. After the battle they were ordered to board the trains. My father was sitting at the door, taking off his boots. At this moment somebody called him, he raised his head and this saved his life. The loose bullet wounded his leg above his knee and exploded in his arm. His arm was hanging on the skin. In the hospital the doctors suggested to amputate his arm and his leg but my father yelled at them with all his temper (he was a hot-tempered man). Somehow they rescued his arm and leg. He was sent to hospital.

Misha Aloets, my cousin and the son of Shlyoma, my mother's stepbrother, came to say "farewell to us". Uncle Shlyoma was not young any more but he was mobilized nevertheless. I heard that he perished somewhere in Donbass. Misha was a miserable student and was sent to a school at the factory. He came there before the evacuation of the school and the class. It was end of June. Misha said they were to be sent to the Urals. It was a hot day, but he was wearing a uniform. He was a thin boy and looked a typical Jew. My mother wanted to give something to him. The only thing we knew about the Urals was that it was very cold there. My mother gave him a white furry hat with long narrow ribbons, starting from the ears. This hat rescued Misha. Their equipment was in the open air and later on they installed some roof and walls but it was unbearably cold. Misha always wore this hat under his regular hat. He told me this story when I came to study in Moscow and he was living there. He became a highly qualified locksmith and worked in Moscow, Tushyno, at the aircraft factory and was a worker of the 8th 5 grade - they were "kings" and the elite of the workers. He lived all right from the material standpoint, too. He had 2 children and was well-off. His mother Hanna and 4 other children went to the Uman Babiy Yar - there, either as in many cities of Soviet Union, was place of mass destruction of Jews, there perished family of my uncle Shlyoma. There were many Jews living there, majority from they perished. Misha was the one of our family, that survived all other have killed fascists.

In 1941 my mother worked in the Palace of Pioneers. They were involved in many activities there. There were pavilions with rabbits in the park (young lovers of nature were working there). There was a shooting gallery there (a young handsome Jew Garik Krichevskiy was chief of this facility). There also was a studio where they staged children's operas. Elena Nikolaevna Blagodelskaya was Director of the Palace of Pioneers. There were mainly Jewish women working there. I remember this well. We were all in the evacuation later. Employees of the Palace of Pioneers from Lvov came to Kiev on the first days -of the war. They left Lvov literally in their nightgowns when the town was occupied by the Germans. They were accommodated in other people's apartments and told us what was happening in Lvov. Women knew that they had to leave Kiev, too. The authorities had no plans for the evacuation of the people. They were busy with the evacuation of factories, archives, etc. Nobody thought about taking care of the people. My mother had a plan to reach Kremenchug and then Dimitrovka. My father's mother lived there. My mother wanted to leave me to my grandmother and returned to Kiev that was supposed to belong to the Soviets still and remain such until the victory over the Germans. There was such an aura about those that were leaving it that they were cowards and traitors and didn't want to contribute to the defense of the city. Elena

Nikolaevna took a brave decision to move to the Trukhanov Island (this in Kiev on the Dnepr River). We were staying in the wooden huts that belonged to the Palace of Pioneers. There was a horrific bombing of the city. We couldn't sleep. We got up early in the morning and boarded two big boats. I believe there were 25 - 30 of us. Elena Nikolaevna was a very smart woman and she managed to pay salaries and vacation money to the employees. It helped us to survive later. We left at dawn and later hid in some bushes. We could keep moving in the dark. During the daytime there were planes flying bombing the areas. We reached Kremenchug. My mother said "Good bye" to the colleagues, took her suitcase with my clothes for the summer and we went to the railway station. There we heard that Dimitrovka was already occupied by the Germans. We ran back to the pier. The boats were still there and we sailed to Dnepropetrovsk. Again a horrific bombing began in the vicinity of the Kiev. We got into a pit. I remember the earth shaking and the fear. Later we kept moving. I remember sailing under the bridge. A bomb hit it but it didn't explode. We reached the railway station at the dusk. We boarded some platform for coal transportation. The crowd of people was in panic. I remember somebody calling "Dovid! Dovid! Somebody must have lost his child in this crowd. The train left at night. We were crossing the Salskiye steppe, moving across the fields with wheat and elevators in the fields. The heat was oppressive. We got off the train when it stopped to get some water. We were black from the coal dust. We finally reached Stalingrad. We were all taken to the stadium. Women and children from Kiev got settled on and under the benches. The sun burnt us during the day and the nights were very cold. There was no toilet. The women were smart. They went to the town party committee to request accommodation in the town. They said they were teachers and asked to send their families to the country. We were all sent to the country, Pogromnoye village of Sredneaktyubinsk district. This was a distant village and they probably never heard even such a word: Jew. We were cordially welcome. We were all accommodated in the villagers' homes. The people gave us some kerosene for lamps, bread and some heating fuel. They had lack of fuel for heating the houses. They dried sheep manure to heat their houses. The house we stayed in was clean. The icons were shining. They were very beautifully decorated. The family of our landlord lived in the sheds to preserve the floors [This particularity national consciousness. These people grew accustomed to live bad and much poorly. Painted floors was considered By the big luxury and they were afraid its spoil. They always lives in sheds, and only in holidays came to house. Us they have let in, therefore that obliged were afford us on laws of wartime a home, and other places for us beside them was not]. But still it was impossible to live in the house because of the fleas. Later we learned from the local people to pick absinthe (plants with bitter taste) and scatter it everywhere in the house. Such was our everyday life among the unknown people and with an unknown language. The local people watched us with great interest. Our landlady told my mother (she could, either as majority of inhabitants to village, speak in Russian, between itself they spoke on Tatar language) to stop paying so much attention to her child. She said she had 18 of them herself and she never watched them as closely as my mother watched hers. My mother asked her how many of them survived and she answered "four". My mother told her then that she only had one child and she wanted her daughter to be all right. They didn't have any toilets and when I asked the landlady where their toilet was she told me that I could sit at any place. I couldn't handle it. I found some bushes to go to the toilet there, but I felt so awkward! There were boys living in the neighboring houses and I was so afraid that Alik Geller would see me - this would have been disastrous! But the local people didn't even give it a thought. My mother worked in the school in the village. She wrote a letter to our acquaintances asking them to check her mailbox and send us Mitia's letter if there was one. And we received a letter from our

father that he had written when he was on the way. Their train was heading for Artyomovsk. My mother wrote the party secretary of this town asking to find her husband. And they did! My mother received their response telling her that her husband was on the way to Stalingrad and that she would see him soon. It was such a big event for the whole village. The chairman of the collective farm got all people together and made a speech. He said "You, women, are all crying and look at Markovna - her man has been found!" Then we received a card from Stalingrad. My father gave us his address and we went to visit him. The whole village came to see us off. The chairman gave us cream, cottage cheese, honey from the village food store and our landlady made some rolls to take with us. And so we left. (The rest of people working in the Palace of Pioneers stayed in the village and I never saw them). We went on our landlord's horse-driven cart. It was cold and he gave me a coat. But it was full of fleas. We came to the Volga River where we had to cross it. But we finally reached the hospital where my father was (he was wounded). The gate was still closed - it was too early. Finally it opened and we were shown in by the commissar of the hospital, a very handsome man. He was either Armenian or Georgian. He instructed my mother to be calm and reserved. We entered the ward. It was all white. There were 8 beds in it. My father's body was all in plaster cast. Next to him was a blind young man. There were also people with suspended arms and legs. It was all terrible to look at. We came back to the village. The hospital was to be evacuated to Astrakhan. My father got permission from the commissar to take us in the evacuation along with them. We got a letter from him and my mother started getting things together. My mother realized that we didn't have winter clothes and winter was close. They were growing sheep in the village and made boots and coats from sheepskin. They also made gloves with unfinished finger parts for the soldiers to be able to pull the trigger. My mother ordered winter boots and a blanket and huge head shawls - we could wrap ourselves 3 times in them. The chairman gave us coats from his storage facilities. We received a ration of half a loaf of bread each day. My mother dried it up in the sun. These crackers saved us during the cold winter of 1941/42 in Astrakhan when there was nothing to eat at all. We left on a sledge. We came to the Volga in the evening. It was covered with ice that was broken - they needed the Volga for transportation. We spent the night on the bank of the Volga. There were many other people. It was brutally cold and we got into a stack of hay during the night like many other people. We crossed the river in the morning. We reached the hospital and stayed in its director's office several days. During these days we were helping the wounded to write letters, giving them some water, reading their letters to them or calling the doctor if they needed one. We were kept busy on these days. The hospital boarded the train at night. I don't remember how long we traveled. There were bombings, explosions, it was cold and frightening. I was together with my father, but my mother spent this entire trip sitting on some suitcases between the beds with the wounded military. Ice-breakers were breaking ice all the time, as the Volga was the only remaining route.

We arrived at Astrakhan and the wounded were taken to a school. Again a different life began. My mother rented a bed from a local landlady. Her name was Manka. She was a small exhausted woman. She invited the military from a neighboring hospital. They were drinking beer and singing. My mother always tried to leave the place during such parties. She went to the neighbors' houses. The landlady had a miserable son Adolf. His father was of German origin from the Volga whereabouts. The boy was afraid to go out into the street due to his name. People almost threw stones onto him. One can easily understand what this name meant during the war. Only one that had lost his mind could live with such name. We shared the same room with him. This house had served as an inn in the past. There were some storage facilities on the 1st floor and the 2nd floor

was for people to live. There was a steel ladder leading to the 2nd floor. There was no sewerage and toilet pits were shallow, as there was water from the depth of one meter below ground. It was all so anti-sanitary. In winter people threw their excrements from buckets out into the streets. Such haps accumulated up to the height of the 2nd floor. Its melting with the coming of the spring resulted in the epidemic of cholera in the town. There was some cleaning up but it wasn't quite effective. I remember myself going around looking for a toilet, but janitors chased outsiders away unmercifully.

My father was still in hospital in the winter of 1941/42. Once they showed the film "Great waltz" in this hospital. This was the first time we saw a movie since we left Kiev. I can never forget this. It was shown on a sheet in the gym. There were beds and crutches all around. The patients were smoking and the smoke was everywhere. And beautiful Melitsa Korvius on the screen and the sound of the Viennese forest fairy tales music - what a miracle! Another film that we watched was "Chasing Germans away from Moscow". The whole town came to see it! The tickets were distributed by the party town committee. We went to see it once and then the 2nd time when my father received tickets from the party activists. People were so happy to see the victory of our army. This film gave us hope and belief in our victory.

My mother was the party unit leader in a shoemaker's shop. They were making foot wear for military units and hospitals. The employees were handicapped people. It was so good for us to get this job! My mother received a food ration card. Besides, they brought extra food products to the store like sauerkraut and marinated carrots - such delicacies! Sometimes they got draught beer. It was possible to get some food for it at the market. Alcohol stood for gold currency. They also received cheap tobacco at the shop. It was possible to get a piece of soap (precious!) in exchange for it. I was responsible for getting rationed food for the cards. I carried them in my glove to be on the safe side. Loosing a card could mean death from starvation. They woke me up at 7am and I went to stand in line. The store opened at 8am. It was freezing cold. I received bread in this store and then went to the canteen to get some soup (made of water with some flour). I ate one plate of soup and brought the other two servings home for my mother and father. This soup made my parents' dinner. I was 10 years old then. There was no school to go to, but we had some textbooks. After I came back from the stores I went down to the basement, took some wood and a bucket of coal. There was no gas, and the wood was strictly rationed. I learned to make a fire, got warm and opened my textbooks. I studied history, mathematics and Russian. Nobody watched me. I learned much until the spring arrived. I suffered much from the lack of books. I was looking for every opportunity to get a book. Children in the yard sometimes teased me calling me "zhydovka" [little Jew]. I even had fights with them. But I excused any rudeness if they approached me with a book. Later we managed to rent a separate room in an inn in the same neighborhood. People were starving. Our neighbors, an old man and a woman, were swollen from starvation. They were complaining that their daughter didn't share any food with them. But their daughter had two sons and she was trying to rescue them and let them survive. A Polish woman lived in one of the rooms. She was a beautiful woman. Once she brought two potatoes from the kitchen in the hospital and forced me to eat them right in her room. These were the only potatoes that I saw during the entire period of our life in Astrakhan. In the spring people went fishing. My mother bought a piece of sturgeon and boiled it. We ate this clear soup and almost died from it because our stomach was not quite used to it. We were so sick. The local people were giving us some herbs to help us survive. They were blaming my parents for being so unreasonable. But they cured us. Later I went fishing

with the neighbors' children. We dried the fish on a rope hanging between the window frames. The whole town smelled of this fish oil.

My parents sent me to a pioneer camp in the Tatar village of Bashmakovka. The village was located on the bank of the Volga. There were no trees, only bushes in this village. We were hiding from the sun in the bushes and our tutors were reading something to us. Later in the evenings, during the camp lines, every unit had to march and sing a song. We sang the famous artillery march "Artillery, you've got an order from Stalin". I got sick with malaria there. I had fever and felt very ill, but I didn't tell anybody about it. When our term was over we went to the town by car. My parents and I (my father could walk with crutches then) went for a walk along the Volga River. I could hardly walk. My mother touched my forehead and said "My God, she has a fever!" They gave me medication that evening. I stopped having fever every night. But I still knew when the next attack of fever was to come. I felt cold before the attack of malaria and this lasted for several years. In August bombings came to Astrakhan. My parents decided to leave. My father found out that the Department of Physics and Mathematics of the Kiev University was in Kzyl-Orda [Northern Kazakhstan, it is called Baikonur now]. He wanted to finish his post-graduate studies that he hadn't finished in Leningrad. The only way to leave was across the Caspian Sea. We boarded some terrible boat. I got on the boat and my parents were loading our luggage. I was so scared that they wouldn't be able to get on this boat. This fear was with me throughout the war. I was always afraid of either being left behind or missing my parents. It was all so horrible. One man fell in convulsions. Somebody said it was cholera...

Sailing along the river was quiet. We crossed the Caspian Sea, and then went up the Ural River until we reached the town of Guriev. From there we went to Kandagach station by train. There was a checkpoint there - they were checking our documents and tickets. We also got washed, and our clothes were boiled in some containers. Measures were to be taken to control spotted fever. Kandagach is in the steppe, on the salt lands. There was no village or anything there. We stayed outside overnight. We received our ration of bread for the trip and I was carrying 4 loaves. At night we boarded the train. Again there were screams, cursing, all confusion and disorder. My parents pushed me through the window and were giving our luggage to me. Somebody wanted to take me out of the compartment and my father shouted to him that he would kill him when he got in there. Terrible scenes. This was a railcar for transportation of prisoners. I spent my time on the 4th berth. When the 3rd and 2nd berths were down there was no space left between them, and if somebody was standing he had to bend down.

We got to Kzyl-Orda. We rented a room from a Ukrainian woman that was in exile there. There was the museum of the famous Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko across the street from her house. It was cool there and I spent all my time in the museum. It was a small museum (Taras Shevchenko was in exile in Kos-Aral, 70 km from Kzyl-Orda).

Later we got some accommodation in the center of the town. I saw duvals for the first time in my life. They were high clay fences with pieces of glass on top. Such duvals were hiding the houses from outsiders. There were channels along the fences. When there was no water supply, grass with big leaves grew in those channels. The local people called this grass "frog leaves". There were snakes, scorpions, tarantulas and frogs living underneath. I went to school. I passed all tests and went to the 4th form at school. Khasia Yakovlevna, our teacher, was evacuated from Kharkov. She rather liked me and I never let her down. I was an excellent pupil. My father becamedirector of the

biggest school - secondary or primary? . My father was teacher of mathematics in the same school. We rented a room from Vasia and Natasha Funaev. They had been deported from the Northern regions, probably, Pskov region. An old woman Fekla also lived there. She was handicapped - she was lame since her childhood. She had lived as a nun in a nunnery. After the monastery was destroyed she moved in with Natasha. They lived in a two-storied house that they had bought from a local family. They didn't want to have other tenants, but it was the wartime and who was asking them anyway. They agreed to give us accommodation. Their only condition was that they didn't want a Jewish family. When they asked who we were my father stepped on my mother's foot and answered that he was Ukrainian and my mother's mother was Moldavian and her father was a soldier. Somehow this explanation was enough for them. Later, when they took our passports to the registration office they found out the truth, but it was already too late. They got to like us very much and when we were leaving we were saying good-bye to one another like close people would. I wrote them letters for a long time afterwards.

Natasha and Vasia had a son Vania. He was a member of a tank crew in Stalingrad and his daughter Shurochka was in service on the Far East. Once the postman gave me a letter addressed to this family. Natasha had been looking forward to receiving a letter and I ran happily to the house screaming "Natasha, there's a letter for you from Vanechka". I set on the threshold and heard a scream all of a sudden. Natasha fainted. This turned out to be death notification. Vanechka was burnt in his tank. Vasia couldn't stop crying for several days and nights. And Natasha kept fainting all the time.

Later Fekla asked me to accompany her to the church at the cemetery. Fekla put on her old Russian outfit (a coat with bright glass buttons, suede on the outside with fur lining). And she had a beautiful old shawl, all hand painted). Fekla got ready for her mourning trip. She boiled some rice and was giving it to beggars saying prayers. Fekla and I were friends. She gave me thick big books to read. They were books with solid bindings with beautiful copper locks. They were her only treasure. I loved to look them through. We read Old Testament and psalms with her. We had discussions with her. Once she said something against Jews. I said to her that Jesus Christ was a Jew and this was written in her books. And she tried to think it over. In the summer of 1943 I went to the pioneer camp located 7 km-s from the town. We, kids, were spending all our time in the Chulak stream (it was 40 degrees above zero in the shadow). The sides and the bottom of this stream were of clay and we made small steps to sit on them or swam in the stream. It was difficult to climb onto the bank - a few children drowned. There was one single well and a bucket in the camp. We drank water from it. It was dirty and had pieces of clay in it. We also gave water to our nice donkey. He was used for transportation of food from the town. We slept in the tarpaulin tents that got so hot. Two of us slept on each bed. Before going to bed we had to check it for the ugly yellow spiders with a yellow stomach. They were disgusting and could jump and bite. Later an epidemic of typhoid began. I would have not survived there. The girl that I was sharing the bed with died from typhoid. I was rescued by the visit of Samuil Marshak [a famous Soviet children's writer]. He was to be met in a most festive manner. We marched to Kzyl-Orda with flags, a drum to beat the march. We were walking barefooted. Those few that had shoes were carrying them. We came to the station and Marshak arrived. The meeting with the orchestra and speeches lasted 40 minutes or maybe about an hour. My mother was working in a pioneer camp in town. She found me in the crowd and I begged her to take me home. It saved my life. I had fever, and I in the night has lost consciousness. As for the camp, over 50% children died from typhoid due to the antisanitary

conditions. The parents of the girl (the one I slept in one bed with) never returned to Kharkov, their town. They wanted to be close to the daughter's grave . The sirector of the camp was sentenced by the court. The authorities came to take me to hospital. They were escorted by militia. But my father told them he wasn't going to allow them take me away even if he had to kill them. My mother was taking care of me. She treated me with sulfidin. This was new medication and one could only buy it at the black market and it cost a lot of money. My food was water from boiled rice. But Fekla and my landlords were giving me some extra food secretly. This was either sauerkraut soup or goat milk. I didn't mention it to my parents. I was starved and ate what they gave me.

After the War

In 1943 Ukraine was gradually being liberated. My father received an invitation to go back home, but my mother didn't. They were trying to obtain some information but there was nothing to find out. Then my mother said openly that Ukrainians received invitations to go back but the Jews didn't. My parents talked about it and my father went to the party district committee. He was insistent especially after he had been wounded. Some time passed and my mother received an invitation, too. We left on the eve of 7 November 1943. And then we heard that Kiev was liberated. How happy we were! We had books as luggage and our neighbors gave us their donkey to take our luggage to the station. I gave this donkey a hug. Our landlords were also seeing us off and stayed there until the train left.

It was a long trip through Northern Kazakhstan and Southern Urals in a dirty train. It was cold and we were passing just the ruins of towns. We arrived in Kharkov. I remember black and gray colors - burnt ruins of the town. We stayed at the hotel with no heating, water or light, although there were lots of fleas. It was impossible to stay there and we moved to a school. There was a lot of snow and before my parents returned home I melted some snow and made some tea for them. Ad then finally I heard "Let us get ready". We got on the train at night and went to Kiev. I remember the bombing in Kiev. Military trains were on 24 rail tracks and they were continuously bombed. Everything around was burning and exploding.

We arrived at the station and rented a cart for our luggage. We went to Saksaganskogo Street where Vera Pavlovna Podlesnaya, my father's cousin, had lived before the war. There was no house. But our house was there. We went to the third floor and opened the door with our key. A woman with 2 children was living in our apartment. I don't know how they got there. The room was so dirty and stinking that my parents refused to enter it. We stayed in our neighbors' room. The town was empty. Everything was closed. I went out to get water to make some tea or wash ourselves. I took it from a leaking valve in the manhole in front of the Ukrainian Drama Theater. My father got a job as Deputy Chairman of the Pechersk District Committee. We moved to Kirov street. There was no water or electric power or any other utilities. I studied alone from my textbooks and brought books from out former apartment on the sledge. I brought our and our neighbors' books. I saved many excellent books. I wanted our neighbors to have their books after they were back in Kiev. We celebrated the New Year of 1944 in our new apartment. We felt so lucky when we got water and power in the house! There were always guests in the house. People were looking for their families and stayed at our place meanwhile. Many people had to obtain certificates from the authorities about where they had worked before the war. Such certificates were issued by the court. To confirm their place of work an individual had to bring two witnesses to the court that could confirm that this or that person had worked here or there. People had to wait

for some time. There were many such cases in court. Communication was democratic. A military could knock on the door and ask to stay overnight. We didn't have any furniture and they slept on the floor. They were strangers but they could talk with my parents all night through. People seeking for their relatives left notes on the walls of buildings. There were many of those. Vera Pavlovna, my father's sister, was found in this way.

I went to school and was a very hardworking student. Every Saturday all schoolchildren went to clear out heaps of ruins in Kreschatik. Once we were taken to watch the execution of Germans. There was a huge crowd of people there. When they brought the German captives on the truck I turned away my head. I couldn't leave but I couldn't watch it either! They shouldn't have brought in children to watch this execution. They had had enough of sorrow in their lives. Cruel times.

There were many Jewish girls in our school. My friend was Rosa Yakovlevna. We didn't keep in touch after we finished school. But I met my classmate Larissa and Rosa and they told me bitterly how difficult it was for them - Jewish to enter the any. Larissa Kotovskaya tried several times but failed. Rosa entered Kiev Polytechnic Institutes after several tries. She was an extramural student. She studied in the evenings and went to work during the daytime. My friends felt themselves 2nd rate people. Things were difficult for Jewish children. I had a schoolmate Alla Levengard. She came from a very intelligent family. She was smart and intelligent herself. She finished school with a gold medal and she was a very gifted girl. Her family had good connections, but still she gave several tries to enter the Kiev Polytechnic Institute. 1949 was a difficult year. Even the word "Jew" was never pronounced at that time. No discussions on this subject. The subjects of Jews or Babiy Yar were forbidden.

In 1949 Stalin turned 70. It was such a fuss! They opened museums with presents to comrade Stalin from everywhere in the Soviet Union. There was also much fuss about the construction of Moscow University. I said to my parents "I finished school with a gold medal, I study at the university - when shall we go to Moscow at last?" Moscow, our Motherland, was like a pilgrimage place then. In the summer of 1950 we went to Moscow. My mother saw her sister Fania for the first time in 29 years. (I can't remember how exactly they found each other after the war. Probably via their common acquaintances or friends, but I remember that my mother wrote letters to Fania since 1949). My mother's brother Naum and his family lived in the same neighborhood. Naum was very religious. He put on his thales, went to the synagogue and strictly observed all traditions. I watched a religious Jew praying for the first time in Moscow. We were welcomed cordially. They all lived in the workers' barracks in Tushino. Fania's husband was working at the Tushino aircraft plant. Her nephew Misha Aloets worked there, too (Fania arranged for Misha to stay in Moscow after the war). Fania and her husband had 2 children: Misha and Vera. Verochka finished the technical school for communications and Misha Kogan was a laborer. He moved to Israel later.

My mother kept in touch with a former inmate from the children's home. He was a wonderful man. His name was Shura Lieber. He was a truck driver during the war. He was a terrific person. He had a very specific Semitic appearance and was smart and considerate. During the war he got a month's vacation and went to the Urals to look for his acquaintances. He found Mania and went back to the front. Mania got pregnant from him and had a son. After the war Shura and his family returned to Kiev and asked my father to help him find an apartment. My father did help him and Shura received a 6 meter room on the top floor of a building in Kiev. Only their bed, Grisha's bed and a side chest of drawers fit in there. But they were all so happy! We were all friends and people

often came to visit us. Once in 1948 or 49 we had guests: Shura and Mania, Vera, my father's cousin with her husband Grigoriy Pavlovich Rudkovskiy, Klara Sigal and Sasha and Gitia Woodgorft. My father drank a lot and all of a sudden he said that Jews attacked Tashkent. I remember this moment. They didn't leave immediately only because they were sorry for my mother. It became quiet in the room. Vera was saying something to smooth down this awkwardness. But then nobody ever visited us until my father was living in this apartment. My father worked in the Soviet offices after the war and he must have got this anti-Semitic mood there. Other members of the family didn't understand this. Perhaps, this was one of the reasons leading to the breakdown. My father left his job at the executive committee for work at the Ministry for Higher Educational Institutions. But he wasn't very happy with his work. It was bureaucratic work requiring a lot of patience. He went to teach Physics at the Kiev military engineering college. In 1953 he fell in love with somebody and left his family. My father died in 1985 in the hospital for the invalids of the Great Patriotic War. He got there after he got sclerotic. I was told about it when I was looking for my grandmother's grave. My mother suffered a lot - so many years together and my father always came first in our family. This was a tragedy for her. Besides, my mother had been ill for some time and she had had an operation. She wasn't working. And in 1953 it was difficult for her to find a job, being a Jew. Nobody spoke openly of the reasons but she couldn't get a job nevertheless. [This was the period of struggle against cosmopolitism, many Jews were loosing their jobs or arrested]. She was desperate about having no opportunity to provide for her family and went to the party committee. She explained the situation to them and said that she didn't have anything to live on. And they sent her to work at the school for young technicians.

In 1955 I graduated from the university and then finished my post-graduate studies. I worked as editor in academic publications. I also did translations from Russian to Ukrainian. My husband is a Jew. His name is Lev Yakovlevich Kuperman. I met him through my mother's friend Klara. She sent him to our house with a parcel. Lyova was born in Uman in 1932. Lyova's mother Sarah Markovna Eigel was a teacher in Uman. She came from a rabbi's family. She was a Soviet person. She did not think that Soviet power good, but lives on this laws and was afraid punishments from this authorities for her faith. She was very unhappy about her mother Lisa (Leys) giving a part of her pension to the Jewish community. (I guess it was an underground community). Sarah Markovna couldn't celebrate Jewish holidays as a Soviet teacher, but she went to shochet to slaughter a chicken for the communist holiday - 1st of May. Their life was an intricate mixture of t Jewish traditions and Soviet laws.

Lyova's father moved to Kiev before the war. He worked as an engineer at the power substation. He lived on the ground floor in the center of Kiev. From there he went to the front. Sarah Markovna, her mother and 3 sisters were in the evacuation in the Urals. Lyova studied at the Institute of Irrigation and Drainage in Rovno that was a real good place for young Jews to go to, therefore that then in Kiev of Jews in institutes nearly did not take - this was state policy. Others went to higher educational institutions in Leningrad, Moscow or on the Volga. After finishing the Institute Lyova went to work at draining swamps in Western Siberia. From there he went to serve in the army for two years, returned to Kiev afterwards and found a job. We got married in 1957. We had a wedding in Kiev in 1957 and many of Lyova's relatives were there at the wedding. It was an ordinary wedding. After the wedding I plunged into the Jewish everyday life that was described in the works of Sholem Aleichem [6]. We visited my mother-in-law each holiday. I was taken to different homes and introduced to their relatives and acquaintances. They commented "You are so

thin" and then behind my back "She's so thin that she has no looks whatsoever!"

Early in the morning we would go to the market. Sarah Markovna is wearing a silk dress. I, stupid girl, say to her "Sarah Markovna, there's your undergown looking out of your dress". "So what! It's beautiful" she would reply. People would recognize and bow to her "Sarah Markovna, you have visitors?" "Yes, they do not forget me". Now we are at the market. Sarah Markovna picks up a chicken with 2 fingers and the scene begins. "How much is this chicken?" "Chicken!? This hen has laid eggs for two years already!" Sarah Markovna takes the chicken and blows into its butt "What an old chicken!" "It cannot be a chicken if you are trying to tell me that it is as old as you think it is". We were standing behind and almost fainting. She was buying the chicken in the long run. Lyova is carrying it holding it by its legs. Every passer-by can't help commenting "Madam Eigel, you've bought the best chicken at the market!" She "Of course I did. It cannot be otherwise!" We head to the ravine where a shochet is living. He has to slaughter the chicken. We stand in the line of colorful Jewish women. The Jewish conversation is on. It's a pity we didn't put down the conversations then. The cutter was a short Jew with a small beard and thick hair. His hair covers him all. Sabbath and the 1st of May. He can hardly cope. The hens are hanging with their heads down. Some of them are running around already. The cutter calls Tsylia. Tsylia is a girl in a nightgown and something on top of it. Her gorgeous black hair is full of feathers and down. The shochet asks her to help. The girl plucks the chicken; the feathers are flying around making everybody sneeze. This was the 1st time when I saw a shochet. We go back. The chicken is big, yellow and fat. The people who we meet ask "Madam Wigel, did you pay much for this chicken?" Soon all Uman knows that Sarah Markovna will be cooking chicken clear soup today…

Lyova took me to the ravine to show me the "Babiy Yar" in Uman. The family of my mother's brother Shlyoma perished there. My husband is rendered Jew accidentally, we simply have liked each other. I never distinguished people upon their national accessories, for me person can be either good, or bad. I never felt an anti-Semitism with respect to itself, to me always everywhere well pertained. Family of husband me much well has taken and I with the pleasure beginning to participate in their Jewish life's, me was of interest learn of Jewish traditions that, what I was poured the whole life.

In 1958 our daughter Alyona was born. Her full name was Elena Lvovna Chepur. Her nationality in the passport is written "Ukrainian". She faced some anti-Semitism in her childhood. She always communicated with many Jews. She finished the department of Physics and Mathematics at the Pedagogical University. She is a teacher of Mathematics at school #77. This is the same school where my mother worked as a leader of the Komsomol unit. In 1971 Lyova and I got divorced. My family is not religious, but I have always felt that I belonged to the Jewish environment. If I were among Ukrainians they always began to ask questions about who I was. I have felt very comfortable among the Jews. My daughter identifies herself as a Jew. Her husband A. Karpovskiy is a Jew. He is a teacher of Mathematics in a Jewish school. He sometimes introduces some traditions to us like celebration Pesach, and Purim.

Presently I work at the magazine "Economy of Ukraine". I am editor-translator. I also help my granddaughter Anna Sergeevna Grischenko (born in 1980) to write her thesis for the university. She is finishing the Department of Roman and German languages at Kiev University.

I haven't been in Israel, but I would like to go there. As for emigration, I am the follower of Konrad and Stevenson ideas. I do not deserve to be supported by this country. I can earn money here and I can find a job. I won't be able to find a job there. I do not visit Hesed. I shall work as long as I can. But my heart goes out for Israel, of course.

Glossary

1 In 1930s Stalin's government established a Jewish autonomous region in Birobidjan, , in the desert with terrible climate in the Far East of Russia. Conditionswere unlivable there. There was no water, power supply, houses or transportation. The Soviet government hoped that educated people would populate this area and make it a civilized republic. People were in no hurry to leave their jobs and homes and the comforts of living in towns and move to the middle of nowhere. The Soviet government set the term of forced deportation of all Jews to Birobidjan in the middle of the 1950s. But in 1953 Stalin died and the deportation was cancelled.

2 Trade schools (rabfak) - Soviet educational institutions for young people having no secondary school education

3 Obligatory forced and not paid work in output (saturday and sunday) days

People with pleasure came to work "on good of Native land"

4 Babiy Yar is the site of the first mass shooting of the Jewish population that was done in the open by the fascists on September 29-30, 1941, in Kiev

5 This the most high working qualification

6 Sholem Aleichem (1859-1916) - a great Yiddish writer, who described everyday Jewish life with warmth and humor

He called Uman "Kasrilovka" in his stories.