

# Dimitri Kamyshan

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Lvov

Ukraine

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Date of Interview: July 2002

Dimitri Kamyshan is a nice and cheerful man. He lives in a clean two- bedroom apartment in Lvov. His wife died, but his children and grandchildren take care of him. His daughter-in-law cooks for him, and his grandson discusses all kinds of issues with his grandfather.

[Family background](#)

[Growing up](#)

[During the War](#)

[After the War](#)

[Glossary](#)

## Family background

My father, Anatoliy Zilberberg, was born in 1902 in Kharkov. His grandfather, Mosey Zilberberg, owned a printing house in Rybnaya Street in Kharkov. Later he got some loans and built a huge printing house in Donets-Zakharzhevskaya Street. It's still located there today. During the Soviet period the printing house was named after Frunze [1](#). It's a big six-storied building, and the company publishes the majority of all Ukrainian literature.

The Zilberbergs were one of those Jewish families that took an active part in the economic development of Russia in the middle of the 19th century. They were assimilated families. They considered themselves the elite of society and people of the world free from any prejudices related to their nationality or religion. There were no christened Jews among them but quite a few Jews of their status converted to Christianity to demonstrate their loyalty and belonging to these circles. There were many such families in England, Germany and France. They were wealthy merchants and financial barons that had a solid standing in life. My great-grandfather traveled abroad and knew foreign languages. Kharkov was located outside the Jewish Pale of Settlement [2](#) and Jews weren't allowed to live there, but this didn't apply to our family. My great-grandfather and my grandfather, Albert Zilberberg, were merchants of Guild I [3](#). They had expensive mansions in the center of the city, they were invited to all parties in the governor's house and attended all meetings of the merchants' assembly.

My grandfather was born in Kharkov in 1860. He went to grammar school and had a special technical education, but I don't know where he studied. There were no signs of religiosity in the interior of the house - it was the standard home of a rich European man not a Jew. What I mean by that is that they didn't have special dishes for Pesach, silver chanukkiyah, religious literature, mezuzah on the door or any other general accessories of the Jewish way of life. I remember my grandfather well: he was a tall, stately, bold-headed man. When he lay down to rest I used to sneak from behind pulling him by the down on his head. He liked to play with me, probably because my

father was his favorite son. He used to walk with a carved stick. There was a long stiletto fastened inside. I found it after his death. After he died it also turned out that he had had several lovers. He was a handsome man and my grandmother was a beautiful woman, but he probably needed some variety in his love life.

My grandfather was a professional and his printing house was very profitable. In 1918 it was nationalized by the Soviet power. My grandmother told me that its employees went on strike when the printing house was expropriated by the Soviet authorities. They wanted their master back. And so the authorities appointed my grandfather director and then executive manager of the factory. My grandfather died in a road accident - he was hit by a bus - in 1933 when I was 7 years old. He didn't have a religious funeral. He was carried to the cemetery in a coffin on a black horse-driven cart. The horses had black horsecloths on their backs.

People still remember my grandfather. When I went to Kharkov twelve years ago tenants from one of my grandfather's mansions in the city center saw me and exclaimed, 'Look! This is the owner of the house'.

My grandmother, Raissa Zilberberg [nee Umanskaya], was born in Nikolaev, a regional town, in 1865. She came from a rich assimilated family. Their family also had the right to live in Nikolaev [outside the Pale of Settlement]. Her father must have been a merchant of Guild I or a doctor. Many talented people that contributed to the Russian Empire - and later to the Soviet Union - came from such families. Her nephews Konstantin and Dimitri, the sons of her brother Alexandr Umanskiy, had higher education and knew several foreign languages. Dimitri worked at the Sovinformbureau. Konstantin wrote a book on artists called 'New Russian Art' in 1920. It was issued by a big publishing house in Germany. During the Great Patriotic War [4](#) he was Soviet Ambassador to the US and made an important contribution to the development of Soviet-American relationships - he made great efforts to arrange for US military assistance in the struggle against the Germans during World War II. The US assisted the Soviet Union with tanks and planes, clothing and food. In January 1945 Konstantin was killed in a plane explosion in Mexico. It may have been arranged by Stalin, because as ambassador he had much authority. The book 'History of Diplomacy' contained quite a few pages about him. Erenburg [5](#) and Mikhoels [6](#) were his friends. He was also a member of the Jewish anti-fascist committee.

The Umanskiys and the Zilberbergs identified themselves as Jews and were proud of it. I believe my grandmother and grandfather had a Jewish wedding - otherwise their marriage wouldn't have become valid - but later didn't observe any traditions. They were in those circles of society where nationality didn't matter. They named their children to their liking and didn't care about naming them in honor of their deceased relatives or giving them traditional Jewish names.

My grandparents had six children. All my grandmother's children lived with her, and she was the mistress of the house. Their oldest daughter, Lilia, was born in Kharkov in 1892. She finished Russian grammar school in Kharkov and she worked as a planning manager at a plant. The second child, Victor, born in 1894, also finished grammar school in Kharkov. He was an actor. He was a very handsome man and always dressed very neatly. He lived alone - his wife left him when he fell ill with asthma. He loved cats and dogs, and many of them came to his house, and he gave them food. He was called 'cat man'. Boys often teased him about his love for cats, but he didn't get angry - he just smiled at them. He was a very kind man.

The third child, Ida, born in 1898, also finished grammar school and worked as deputy chief accountant at a plant. She was single and had no children. Then there were twins: Ludmila and Valentina, born in 1900. Valentina died of measles when she was 2 years old. Ludmila was my father's only sister that got married. Her husband, Arkadiy Zbar, was a Jew from Western Ukraine. They were engineers at a plant and had a daughter called Valentina, who was born in 1937.

My father, Anatoliy Zilberberg, the fifth child in the family, was born in 1902. The youngest girl, Tamara, followed in 1910. She was an accountant at a plant in Kharkov. All Zilberbergs died at the same time, but I will talk about that later.

My father was my grandparents' favorite son. He studied at the classical grammar school for boys in Kharkov. He was supposed to get a higher education later. They had classes in religion where they were divided into three groups, according to their religion. The classes were conducted by an Orthodox priest, a Catholic priest and a rabbi. Being a Jew, my father studied religion in the Judaism group, but his family paid little attention to religion, and he was growing up an atheist. My father studied well. He was easy-going, cheerful and popular. Nationality didn't matter to them at all. My father was fond of Russian literature and was very good at mathematics. He finished grammar school during the Civil War [7](#), so he couldn't enter a higher educational institution, according to new Soviet laws. He came from a bourgeois family and their children had no right to get a higher education. My father finished a course in accounting and became an accountant.

My father met my mother, Olga Kamyshan, in 1923 when he was 21 and working as an accountant. My mother was 18 years old at the time. She was Russian and born in 1905. Her father, Peter Kamyshan, staff-captain in the tsarist army, was commander of a battalion. He was a brave Russian officer. He perished in August 1914 during World War I. He ordered his battalion to attack, stood up as he did so and was shot. He was buried in Kharkov with all military honors. My mother kept his photograph and always had sweet memories of him. That's all I know about my grandfather.

My grandmother, Lidia Kamyshan [nee Zhelezko], born in 1878, came from a Russian aristocratic family. After her husband perished she remarried in 1918. My mother used to say that her stepfather, a Russian, was of lower class. He came from a peasant family. My mother didn't get along with her mother and was telling her off, 'How could you forget my father, an officer and a noble man. Who did you marry?'

When my mother met my father in 1923 her family told her to leave, because they weren't going to accept a Jew as a member of their family. My father's family gave her shelter. The Zilberberg family had no national prejudices and they accepted their Russian daughter-in-law. My mother was a very pretty and nice girl, and my father's parents liked her a lot.

## Growing up

I was born in 1927. I was the only nephew of my aunts, and they doted on me. My mother didn't communicate with her mother. When I turned 4 or 5 years old my mother got a message from her mother saying that she wished to meet me. My mother said that she would take me to the meeting place and wait outside. We came to the building where I was expected. An old woman took me by my hand and we went into a room where a big old woman sat in an arm-chair. She looked at me and said, 'Take this zhydyonok away'. [Zhydyonok is rude for 'little Jew'.] This was the only time in

my life that I saw my grandmother Lidia. In 1940 my mother was notified that her mother had died. We went to the funeral. My mother used to say that if her father had been alive he wouldn't have chased her away from home regardless of her marrying a Jew, a Greek or a Tartar.

I remember the two-storied mansion in the center of Kharkov, where we lived, and our cozy shady yard. Each member of the family had a room of his own. Later the house was turned into a shared apartment block [8](#). The family of the chief of the town police lived on the first floor, and my grandmother and her daughters occupied the second floor, an area of about 100 square meters. Their apartment was richly furnished, and there were very expensive dishes and table sets in the cupboards. My grandmother cooked a dinner of three or four courses every day. At weekends we had little pies stuffed with rice. They were supposed to be cut in order to be able to put a slice of sturgeon inside before eating them. She also cooked meat with white sauce at weekends - this was traditional Jewish food. She didn't share her recipes with anybody. The whole family sat at the table together. Everybody had a silver ring with the initials of the owner on it and a snow-white starched napkin pulled through it. There was always a clean tablecloth on the table, and soup was served in a soup bowl. My grandmother was trying to keep the pre-revolutionary traditions of the family intact.

So, she was a housewife at home. But when she heard about a first night at the theater, or a theater group on tour in town, she ordered tickets to be brought home. A cab driver came to the house; she left the house with a lorgnette, in a heel-long gown, and waved at us. Grandmother often went to the theater. And I always saw her with a book. She was complaining that she had read all books in the house. She didn't like the latest publications [from 1920], in which some old letters of the Russian alphabet were replaced with new ones. They were creating a new life and a new society and found it necessary to introduce new things. It was a distorted language to her. She didn't acknowledge the Soviet power. She said it was illegal power of usurpers. She was sarcastic about Lenin. She once said, 'Did it ever occur to him where his ideas would lead?'

There was a big collection of books at home. There were books in Russian and French. Most of them had been published before the Revolution of 1917. We didn't starve in the post-revolutionary years. My grandfather or, maybe my grandmother, managed to buy jewelry for the money they had. I was everyone's darling, and if I asked for something delicious my grandmother took out a ring and went to the Torgsin [9](#) to sell it and get me what I wanted. We often went there. It was the only shop where it was possible to buy food and clothes. Many people used to buy things there in exchange for their golden valuables.

My father's sisters were spinsters, and they all loved me. I called them by their first names: Ida, Lilia and Tamara, and I was allowed to do anything I wished. My aunts spoke fluent French. They taught me French and raised me. On certain days I was only allowed to talk French with them. They had rather attractive appearances, by the way, and why they were single - I don't know. They were all different. Only now, after so many years have passed, do I realize how much I loved them. Tamara, the youngest one, finished music school and was forcing me to learn to play the piano, although I had no ear for music. I learned to read notes a little. She used to hit me on my fingers when I made mistakes. She was very unbalanced. I guess she wanted a man next to her. In 1941 she was 31. She kept the house and everything in it very clean. Ida was very sickly. We had to take her to Sevastopol to get treatment for a very severe form of radiculitis. I remember that she was taken there on a stretcher and came back even without crutches.

My parents and I lived in a separate apartment in the same building, but I stayed with my grandmother most of the time. My parents went to work and didn't have time to look after me. I spent a lot of time walking and playing in the yard. There were German, Jewish, Lithuanian, Polish, Russian and Ukrainian families in the surrounding buildings. All neighbors got along well and spoke Russian. Nationality was of no significance at that time. My friends were Ira Chapanskaya and Bronia Chapanskaya, Valei Ledler, a German girl called Bella Bart and her brother Boris, among the Jews, the Yakshlis, who were Lithuanians, the Askovskis, a Polish family, and Vera and Lyonchik Kirilenko, Ukrainians. We played hide-and-seek, football, and so on.

I wasn't affected by the famine of 1933 [famine in Ukraine] [10](#). My family fed me well, but I remember starved and begging people in the streets. They often knocked on the door of our apartment begging for a piece of bread. My grandmother always gave them something. A farmer, whom we called 'You-are-welcome', delivered food to our house. He knocked on the door and when asked, 'Who's there?' he replied, 'You-are- welcome'. He brought us products in 1933, too. I was only 6 years old and have no other memories of this horrible time.

I began to study at a Russian secondary school when I was 7. My aunts dressed me up and took me to school on the first day. There were children of different nationalities at school. When I was asked about my nationality I said, 'I'm a Ukrainian Jew' or 'I'm a Jewish Ukrainian'. My class tutor used to laugh at this and said, 'Your name is Zilberberg, and this means you are a Jew'. 'But my mother is Ukrainian', I said. 'Yes, but you have your father's last name. This means you are a Jew, and that's the nationality I'll put down in my register', he replied. I said, 'I don't care what nationality you put down in your register'. My classmates were: Benia Goldwasser and Izia Belenkiy, who were Jews, Gleb Kashyrin, a Russian, Lena Sidorenko and Galia Shkolnik, Ukrainians, and many more. Almost all of our teachers were Jews. Noah, our history teacher, Rebecca, our biology teacher, Esther, our geography teacher, Abram, the director of the school, and so on. We had Ukrainian teachers in mathematics and Ukrainian language. There was a Jewish Technical College near our school, and its name was written in Yiddish. Nobody in our family spoke, wrote or read in Yiddish.

We became a Young Octobrists [11](#) in the 1st grade. In 1937, when I was in the 3rd grade, we became pioneers. I was very proud of it and had my coat unbuttoned on my way home for people to see my red necktie. The six best pupils in the class were admitted to the Pioneer League first, the rest of the class was to join it later. We were very happy and sang on our way home, 'We are pioneers, the children of working people; the happy future is on its way, and the motto of pioneers is to be ready'. My grandmother made delicacies for me and laid my small table saying, 'It's your holiday today!', although she herself felt rather skeptical about the pioneer thing.

I remember 1937, because quite a few of our acquaintances were arrested. [The interviewee is referring to the so-called Great Terror.] [12](#) I remember an overwhelming fear in the air. We came to school in the morning and heard that somebody's father had been arrested for being an 'enemy of the people'. Such children were expelled from the Pioneer League. There were many such cases.

We believed that everything we were told about 'enemies of the people' was true. We believed that our country was the best. Our favorite book was Gaidar's [13](#) Timur and his Team. Like the main character of this book we went to help older people about the house and were very proud of it.

My parents took me on vacation to the Crimea every year. Now I understand that my father and mother didn't earn enough to afford such trips, and that they were probably using my

grandmother's savings. [Editor's note: Salaries and wages were very low at the time, and even state officials couldn't afford much for the payment they received.]

## During the War

In 1941 I was to go to a pioneer camp for the first time. I was to depart on 23rd June, and on 22nd June my friends and I were planning to go into the wood. I was a little bit afraid of the camp, because my friends told me about the strict discipline there etc. At about 12 o'clock in the afternoon there was an announcement on the radio. 'Listen to an important governmental announcement,' it began. And then we heard the speech of Molotov [14](#). My father was in a bar at the time - he was very fond of beer.

I heard about the war and was very glad that we would be soldiers and defeat the enemy. After two or three days we began to patrol the yards and streets. We, younger boys and girls, wanted to be on duty during night hours. There was a power plant about 500-600 meters from where we lived, and the Germans were trying to hit it with bombs. We noticed once that somebody was signaling with a flashlight. I called our defense headquarters and they caught a man signaling to the enemy. The first real bombing was on 3rd September 1941. The bombings continued from then on, and we were hiding in all kinds of basements. My aunt Lilia perished at the beginning of September during the first air raid in Kharkov. Evacuation began in the town. People were arguing about evacuation. My grandmother was convinced that the Germans would not hurt people, that they were cultured and educated people. My grandmother was very authoritative in the family and so it was decided that we would stay. Our friends advised my parents to change my last name to my mother's if we were going to stay. On 1st October 1941, two weeks before the Germans reached Kharkov, my mother had my last name changed to Kamyshan in a local registry office.

I remember the Soviet troops retreating. Exhausted soldiers in shabby clothes, carts and horses, women asking, 'Who are you leaving us with?', and soldiers replying, 'Why are you staying?'. Then there was nobody around for some time, and then the Germans came. We stayed at home for two days. Then our neighbor Marfusha told us that the Germans had issued their first orders for Jews and children from mixed families to move to a village with a tractor factory. It was forbidden to go out after 4pm, and those that violated this rule were to be shot immediately.

Victor was the next one in our family who perished. He had asthma, had an attack one day and was gasping for air. He went out to get some medication. At that time Soviet forces blasted the Kossior [15](#) mansion, which was housing the German Headquarters, with a radio- controlled mine. It killed three German generals as we found out later. The Germans issued an order to arrest 1,500 hostages, all men. Victor was among these hostages. One day he and a few others were hung. The Germans hanged these men from a balcony. They tied their hands and feet, put on a loop and threw them from the balcony. If somebody from the crowd cried out, policemen killed them immediately. The policemen were from Western Ukraine and spoke their own dialect that we didn't understand. They were wearing yellow and blue bands, the (symbol of the Ukrainian liberation army, which cooperated with the Germans).

We were very scared. The ghetto was established at the end of November 1941, and when we were on the way there we didn't know what our point of destination was. We were to move to the ghetto, but my grandmother was hoping that we would be able to ransom ourselves, so she took all her gold with her. All Jews of Kharkov were walking along the main street of the town. People were



joining the march on the way. My mother was seeing us off walking on the pavement. She couldn't get me out of the crowd, because nobody dared to violate the order for all Jews and half-Jews to get on the way. She was Russian and was not supposed to be with us. Arkadiy, Ludmila's husband, was carrying little Valentina, and my mother begged him to leave the little girl with her. But he refused saying, 'She was born a Jew and she will die a Jew'. Valentina was crying. She was freezing.

We walked and walked leaving the houses behind and entering the industrial zone in Kharkov. We were escorted by policemen and German soldiers, and they shot everyone who tried to escape. We came to some barracks with no heating or any other comforts. The Germans were just beginning to work on the fencing and took no notice of our discomforts. My father and other younger men were taken away. We came inside a barrack with broken windows and doors, no stove, nothing. Ludmila, Arkadiy and Valentina went to the corner and Ida and Mara burst into tears. I said, 'Don't cry, it'll be fine'. After about an hour and a half a German soldier was passing by, and my grandmother said to him, 'These are people, you know, and it's impossible to live here'. Without saying a word he took out his gun and shot my grandmother. My family buried her near the barracks. Ida said to me, 'Dimitri, this is death here. You need to escape from here in the dark'. My father came to see us later, and I told him that Ida had told me to escape. He said he agreed. I asked him about himself, and he said he would try to find me later. I went to the fence and crawled underneath it.

I headed home to my mother. My mother loved her mother-in-law dearly and we mourned my grandmother's death. In the morning our neighbor Marfusha came to tell us that our neighbors wrote a report on us saying that my real name was Zilberberg and that my mother was a communist. She said we had to leave. We didn't take any luggage and left for Zhuravlyovka in the suburbs of Kharkov, where Marfusha's relatives lived. Marfusha was a housemaid and worked for our neighbor one floor below. She was a very decent and honest woman. She didn't only save my life - she also saved all our family valuables and photographs and documents and returned them to my mother.

A few days later Marfusha brought a note from Ida. Ida wrote, 'Olga, save Dimitri. We are dead. Valentina was shot'. Marfusha helped us to get in touch with my father when he escaped from the ghetto two or three days before the mass shootings began. My mother obtained a new passport for my father, and he had to leave us. He couldn't stay, because it was too risky for the old woman that kept us in her house. My father said he was going in the direction of Poltava. Later people, who went to the villages around to exchange clothes for bread and pork fat, said that he was shot in the village of Reshetilovka [12 km from Poltava], but I don't know if that was true. I know for sure though that my father didn't survive.

The front-line was about 25-30 kilometers from Kharkov, and the Germans didn't allow people to leave the city. They didn't have enough food in the stores, and in December 1941 a famine broke out. Over 100,000 people died in Kharkov in the first three months of the occupation. It was impossible to get any food in January, February and March and we ate potato peels that my mother picked from the garbage pan, washed and fried.

Our old landlady didn't want to keep us in her house any more. She told my mother that she was afraid that the Germans would kill her for keeping a 'zhydyonok' as she called me. She believed that my mother was a Jew as well. My mother told her that she came from a noble Russian family and showed her a picture of her father from an all-Russian magazine called Ogonyok. My mother

and I were hiding in a small room from January till March. When policemen came I was hiding in the attic, and sometimes my mother had to bribe them with gold to stop their search.

My mother wasn't very enthusiastic about the Soviet power before the war, but the war turned her into a patriot. Once we got a copy of the Pravda newspaper. Before the war its slogan was 'Proletariat all over the world, unite!' but that time it said, 'Death to the German occupants!' and further, 'Read this and give the newspaper to your friend'. We read this newspaper from beginning to end.

One has to live through occupation to know what it's really like. On the third day of occupation my mother and I were walking across a bridge in Kharkov. My mother had put on some lipstick. There was an old man walking in our direction and a German walking on the pavement. The old man was supposed to give way to the German. But the German shot him before he even managed to step aside. My mother and I froze. He cursed and smeared my mother's lipstick all over her face. He slapped my mother on her cheek with the back of his palm. We knew then that we were not human beings to them. The Germans sealed our apartment because there were many valuables in it. But when I visited Kharkov twelve years ago I saw some unique floor vases that had belonged to my grandmother in one of the companies. This means that the Germans had probably not taken all our belongings to Germany, but I can't prove that the vases belonged to our family.

My mother got to know that her stepfather was chief of the address agency. She went to him asking him to save my life. He said, 'The life of this zhydyonok?'. My mother said, 'Yes, that's what my mother called him, but in the memory of her, who you loved, please help me to save her grandson'. He removed a card with my name and the names of my parents from his desk and destroyed it. We moved into an abandoned apartment. Kharkov was liberated in February 1942. A colonel from a rifle division stayed in our apartment, and I was very happy about it. He gave me his rifle and I began to shoot at German planes flying in the sky. I went to the district Komsomol committee to become a Komsomol member [16](#).

In March 1942 the Germans began a counterattack. The regional Komsomol committee formed a Komsomol team for the defense of the city. We were ordered to come to the regional Komsomol committee with a plate, mug and spoon on 9th March. There were 300 to 400 of us. My mother couldn't convince me to stay at home. She gave me a hug and I left. We stayed at the regional committee overnight. In the morning several German tanks came to town. We had to leave, and we actually had to cross the front line. We didn't have any food, but we ate the meat of a wounded horse that we came across on the way. It took us two weeks to get there. My mother didn't know where I was and she walked around town looking for me among the dead.

About 15 of us came to the Komsomol committee in Kupiansk at the end of March 1942. Nobody waited for us there. They sent us to Grecheno village [30 km from Kupiansk]. We all stayed in one room, but at least we were given a bowl of pea soup once a day. I became a shoemaker's apprentice. I went to the military registration office asking them to send me to the army. But I was under 16 years old and the chief refused me every time. Once I went there in June 1942 and the chief I knew wasn't there any longer. His replacement was a Jewish man, one of my father's acquaintances, from Kharkov. He asked me how I was, and I burst into tears telling him that my whole family had perished. He told me to come back the following day, and on that day I joined a reserve tank regiment in the village of Grecheno.



I had no idea what discipline in the army was like. I was ordered to do something, but in response I asked, 'Why?'. For this I was punished with another task to do. I asked, 'Why?' again, and again was given an additional task as punishment for my undisciplined conduct. Well, I do admit, I've always had a problem with discipline.

I also faced anti-Semitism in the army. I looked like a typical Jew. On my 16th birthday on 23rd September a soldier said to me, 'You zhyd [kike] with payes!'. He was referring to the first traces of a beard on my face. I jumped onto him hitting him with my fists. We were both punished for fighting. We had to dig a pit and were both put into it and stayed there for four hours. Then our commanding officer asked us whether we would continue fighting. That soldier replied that he wasn't going to stop calling me names. That was the first time I faced such anti-Semitism, and I found it ugly and couldn't understand where it came from.

It was a very hard year during which we lost almost all our tanks. I was in the gunmen unit. We were losing large numbers of people. I remember an incendiary shell hitting our artillery storage facility starting a fire. The three of us were pulling boxes with shells from the facility that was on fire. I was awarded a medal for 'Service in the Battle'. I took part in the liberation of the towns of Artyomovsk and Krasnoarmeysk in Donbass. People in those towns, that were almost completely destroyed, rejoiced seeing us. We saw heaps of dead children's bodies. The Germans and the policemen had grabbed them by their legs and swung them against the edge of a well. We were told to follow the murderers and kill them. We shot their truck and drove over the ones that jumped off the truck in an effort to run away.

The most memorable and unforgettable event was the liberation of Zaporozhiye in October 1943, because it was the first time in the history of the Great Patriotic War when tanks were involved in a night attack. The tanks had floodlights on them, and the attack started at 11 pm. The Germans were so lost that they began to climb out of their trenches. Later they pulled themselves together and began to shoot at the tanks. We were sitting on the tanks and many soldiers were falling under the tracks of the tanks they were sitting on. There were ten to twelve soldiers on each tank. There was a handrail around the tank tower on some tanks. We were holding onto the rail with our left hand while holding a gun in our right hand. There were some tanks without such handrails and there was nothing soldiers on top of them could hold on to. Only three of 86 gunmen in the unit survived the battle of Zaporozhiye. Twenty years later I was awarded a medal 'For Bravery' in this battle.

On 23rd August 1943 Kharkov was liberated, and I wrote to my mother. My mother responded to all my letters and even sent me a picture of herself that I always kept with me in my chest pocket. I was wounded during a battle near the village of Poltavka, Nikolaev region. I was wounded on my left hand first, and then something hit me on my chest. I didn't understand at first what it was, but in the hospital the doctors found out that it was a bullet that hit my mother's photograph leaving a bruise on my chest. It would have killed me if it hadn't been for my mother's picture. I stayed in hospital in Dnepropetrovsk and then in Kharkov. I had a contraction of my left hand and had to return home.

## After the War

The Zilberberg's apartment was occupied by some people, and my mother and I were afraid of going back there. We still remembered so clearly the tragedy of our family. We got a small room in

a shared apartment. My mother went to work at the same book agency where she had worked before the war. She was an accountant.

I had finished 6 years at a secondary school before the war and needed to complete my studies. There was a technical college not far from our house. It used to be a Jewish technical college before the war, but later it was converted into a machine building college. I went to see the director of this college and explained my family situation to him. I told him that I was probably too old for the 7th grade, and he agreed to take me on at the college for a probation period. I studied very well and was even appointed Komsomol unit leader. We celebrated Victory Day in the college on 9th May 1945. We had a dancing party. Our Komsomol unit was responsible for order at the party. A group of drunk people came to the party. They started a fight and killed one of the students. There was a trial, and I pointed on the one that had stabbed that student. He hissed at me, 'I'll be out soon, and you'll be a dead man'. He was released within a year's time. Nothing happened because I had decided to move to another place before then.

It was dangerous to stay in Kharkov. It was full of sad memories about my family; and besides, we didn't have a decent place to live. My mother went to Lvov - she had pleasant memories about visiting Lvov on business trips before the war. I quit college and finished an evening secondary school in Kharkov to obtain a certificate saying that I had completed secondary education. I went to Moscow to enter the Institute of Oriental Studies. The competition was high - 14 applicants per admission unit - but I was successful and stayed in Moscow. But this Institute didn't have a hostel for students and my Uncle Dimitri, who I was staying with, had problems at work during the campaign against cosmopolitans [17](#). My uncle, who was deputy director of the Sovinformbureau before the war, was about to lose his job, and I couldn't stay with him much longer. I had to move to Lvov.

I entered the Pedagogical Institute there without exams, but I was very upset believing that my life was lost, as my dream was the career of a diplomat, and I was to become a teacher instead. I thought so until I had practice in my 3rd year of studies. I conducted my first lesson and earned applause for it, and I liked it. I never regretted becoming a teacher. I like children and teaching.

My mother lived in a dark and dull room on the first floor of an old building in Lvov. There were some other tenants in this same apartment, but I don't remember any of them. There was anti-Semitism in Lvov after the war, but nobody asked me questions about my nationality, and I didn't tell anybody about my father. Sometimes fellow students that came to visit us said, 'Hey, you look so very much like your mother, and your mother looks like a typical Jew'. 'Yes, she does', I said, 'only she's not a Jew'.

There were quite a few Jewish students at the Russian Philology Faculty of Lvov Pedagogical Institute. I studied at the Faculty of History and there were only two Jews in my group: Fania Idnevskaya and Gregory Ivoyev. My co-students called Fania 'zhydovka' [kike]. I was deputy chief of the Komsomol unit of the Pedagogical Institute and said to such students that calling someone names like this was a violation of the law. Then I heard someone say, 'Look, the boy protects his own people'. I studied well and received the highest grades, but when there was the issue of a Lenin scholarship - it was awarded to the best students - it was decided to give it to a local guy that had lower grades than I did. But he came from Western Ukraine and 'student Kamyshan' came from Eastern Ukraine, so the latter could do very well without a Lenin scholarship. Western

Ukrainians were awful anti- Semites. They hated Jews, but they also hated Russians and everything Russian.

I graduated from the Pedagogical Institute in 1951 and was supposed to receive a job assignment in the girl's school in the center of Lvov, where all best students were sent to work. But this vacancy was given to the daughter of the first secretary of the town party committee. I got an assignment as inspector of the district education committee in a town in Lvov region instead. I worked there for a month and a half until I was appointed deputy director in the village of Dobrotvor. It was a big lower secondary school with some 430 pupils. It was housed in a long barrack. This barrack was a shabby facility. I was young and full of energy and kept writing letters to the district management saying that it was necessary to build a new school in Dobrotvor.

The director of the school didn't like it. He called me once and said, 'Kamyshan, you'll pay for writing these letters. If the Germans didn't do with you, we shall'. I replied that I wasn't going to stop writing letters until the children got a new school. The situation in the villages caused much concern. There were quite a few armed Ukrainian national patriots in the woods. They often came to villages threatening people that cooperated with the Soviet authorities. There was an 80- year-old priest in our village. He said, 'Every power comes from God. You may not like the Soviet power, but as it comes from God you have to obey'. The bandits hung him in 1952 with a sign on his chest reading, 'He spoke for the Soviet power'.

Children at our school were afraid to wear their pioneer's red neckties. The local citizens didn't hide their joy on the day of Stalin's death on 5th March 1953. I thought his death was a loss for the country. I thought things were not going to be right afterwards. His role in the war was great. It was only due to his cruelty that we won, due to his orders of 'Not a step backwards', and to shoot anybody retreating without a commander's order.

Well, the next event in my life was that I was put into prison. Here is what happened. The local children weren't willing to become pioneers. They were against the Soviet power. Many families were arriving from Eastern Ukraine. Their children came to school and they were pioneers. Once a local boy hit a boy from Eastern Ukraine demanding that he took off his pioneer's necktie. That pupil was a big boy and he began to smother that boy with his red necktie. I came to his rescue and hit that boy on his face several times. The other children were watching the scene. An investigation officer came and opened a case against me. The trial was scheduled for 17th June 1953 during final exams. My pupils came to school early in the morning to take their exams in history, and later we all went to the court sitting in the district town.

I was sentenced to three years imprisonment for exceeding my office commission and was deprived of the right to be a teacher in the future. I was put into jail in Lvov. What saved me was my good memory and the possibility to read. There was a thief in this jail that held a higher hierarchal position among inmates. He liked to listen to stories I told him. I told him a lot from the historical novels and other books that I had read. He took me under his guardianship: The others didn't touch me, nobody opened the parcels that my mother brought me, and I had the best spot in the cell.

There were usually several inmates in one prison cell. The attitude towards newcomers was cruel. They were beaten and punished for everything they did and weren't allowed any freedom. They got a place to sleep near the toilet. Once the thief asked me why I was sentenced and advised me to

submit a request to transfer me to a camp. I submitted quite a few such requests. There was no anti-Semitism in jail. I stayed in this prison in Lvov for over a year. My mother brought me parcels and supported me in every possible way. Later I was sent to a camp to cut wood in the Belye Sady, near Moscow. I worked in the library and club of the camp.

In 1955, at the solicitation of Ukraine's Minister of Education, I was released from prison and cleared of all the accusations, and the judge that had heard my case was fired. But it was impossible to find a job in Lvov. I got a job assignment to work as a teacher in a village. I met my future wife there. Her name was Lubov Goroshko. She was Ukrainian. She came from Galychyna, a district in Western Ukraine. She was born in the town of Gorodok, Lvov region, in 1932.

I can illustrate the attitude of Western Ukrainians towards Eastern Ukrainians with the following episode: When I entered the Ukrainian school in this village with all my awards on my jacket I heard someone say, 'Oh, another moscal [nickname for a Russian] has come'. I pretended that I hadn't heard it. After two months I asked that boy, 'Why did you say that?'. 'Well, because I am a Westerner,' he replied. 'Are people from Eastern Ukraine not human?' I wanted to know. 'People from Galychyna are still the best people', he said. I replied, 'Who told you that?' His answer was: 'My mother.'

My wife's relatives thought about those that came from Eastern Ukraine in the same way. When we got married her parents said to her, 'Get out of here and go to the moscals, both of you'. If they had known that I was half Jewish they would have probably killed us both. I told Lubov about my history, and we decided to keep silent about my father. She promised to speak only Russian in the family, not a word in Ukrainian, because Russian was my mother tongue, and my Ukrainian was very poor. Although she was a teacher of Ukrainian she followed our agreement. We had a civil wedding ceremony in the local registry office and rented a room in the village where I worked. We seldom met her relatives.

In 1957 we moved to Lvov. I worked at the Russian school and my wife at the Ukrainian one. We lived with my mother although it was a very small room with no comforts whatsoever, but there was no alternative. My mother was a proud woman and didn't want to ask her management for living improvements. Later she had to quit her job due to her hypertension disease. My mother died of a stroke in 1984.

Our daughter, Larissa, was born in this small room in 1957. Later my wife and I received a small two-bedroom apartment, and in 1962 our son, Pavel, was born. I kept my word, and my children didn't know who their grandfather was or what kind of family I came from. My wife and I were very fond of our work. We used to take our pupils on trips to various towns. The Jewish topic was gradually vanishing from my life. I worked in various schools, both Russian and Ukrainian. There was no anti-Semitism in the Ukrainian schools in Lvov, because Ukrainians were the only nationality there. Western Ukrainians did not acknowledge any other nationalities. In Russian schools there were teachers and children of various nationalities, and there were different relationships. There were no abusive demonstrations of anti-Semitism. Jews didn't feel much different from other nationalities. It was an environment in which the world consisted of Ukrainians and everybody else.

Neither my wife nor I were members of the Communist Party. I was not interested, and my wife's relatives had struggled for the independence of Ukraine. She would have betrayed their ideals if

she had become a party member.

Larissa finished a Russian school and graduated from the Pedagogical Institute, but she didn't want to become a teacher. She said that she saw us working so hard, and until late at night, and wanted a different life. She became an interpreter. She has worked with companies and tour agencies ever since. Every now and then she can earn good money, but sometimes she can have no work at all. Her daughter Polina was born in 1980. She finished Medical School and works as a masseuse. She is single.

Pavel had encephalitis in his infancy, and his left hand and leg were partially paralyzed. Doctors recommended to send him in for sports, and he began to attend a self-defense club. He was a success and took part in contests. He became so fond of sports that he entered the Institute of Physical Culture and became a trainer in self-defense. Pavel is married and has two children: Anton, born in 1984 and Anna, born in 1988.

My wife and I spoke Russian in the family and our children knew nothing about their Jewish origin. In 1990 I fell ill. I had several hypertension strokes. I thought that if I died there would be no memories left about my close ones, my family. I wrote a letter to Yad Vashem [18](#). They sent me questionnaires and I filled them out. When my wife saw them she said, 'You do whatever you want to do, but our agreement is still valid'. In 1995 Lubov died of cancer.

In 1996 my son Pavel went to work in Israel. He had friends there. They invited him to come to the country as a tourist, and later they arranged for him to get a job as a masseur. He liked it in Israel. He worked there over three years until he came back here speaking about this state with great enthusiasm. It was only after my son returned from Israel, that I told him and my grandchildren the story of my family. They cried with me and showed much understanding.

My grandchildren, Anton and Anna, showed much interest in Israel and the history and traditions of the Jewish people. Anton, a student at a Computer College, has enrolled in the Jewish organization of Hillel. He attends their workshops and has become an expert on Judaism. Anna goes to school. She is very good at drawing. She made illustrations on subjects in the Old Testament, which were exhibited by the Sholem Aleichem [19](#) Jewish Cultural Society<sup>1</sup>.

My son decided to take his grandfather's last name and is now called Pavel Zilberberg. As for me, I still feel that the last name Kamyshan saved my life, and the name Zilberberg has too many fearful associations to me.

I have two dreams: I would like to go to Kharkov, to this dreadful death site, and I want to visit Israel - just visit and come back, because old trees cannot be replanted.

Jewish life in Ukraine has revived within the last ten years. I don't observe any Jewish traditions - simply because I don't know them. But I am interested in the history and traditions of my people. Sometimes I go to celebrate holidays at Hesed. Hesed assists people and helps them to communicate. We have many new friends. They are all very nice people. We feel very well in Hesed. It's very important for older people to feel support and communicate with one another.

## Glossary

### **1 Frunze, Mikhail (1885-1925)**

Soviet political and military leader.

### **2 Jewish Pale of Settlement**

Certain provinces in the Russian Empire were designated for permanent Jewish residence and the Jewish population (apart from certain privileged families) was only allowed to live in these areas.

### **3 Guild I**

In tsarist Russia merchants belonged to Guild I, II or III. Merchants of Guild I were allowed to trade with foreign merchants, while the others were allowed to trade only within Russia.

### **4 Great Patriotic War**

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

### **5 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.

### **6 Mikhoels, Solomon (1890-1948) (born Vovsi)**

Great Soviet actor, producer, pedagogue. He worked in the Moscow State Jewish Theater (and was its art director from 1929). He directed philosophical, vivid and monumental works. Mikhoels was murdered by order of the State Security Ministry

### **7 Civil War (1918-1920)**

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



immense sacrifice; by 1920 Russia was ruined and devastated. In 1920 industrial production was reduced to 14% and agriculture to 50% as compared to 1913.

## **8 Shared 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 shared apartments continued to exist for decades. Despite state programs for the construction of more houses and the liquidation of shared apartments, which began in the 1960s, shared apartments still exist today.

## **9 Torgsin stores**

Special retail stores, which were established in larger Russian cities in the 1920s with the purpose of selling goods to foreigners. Torgsins sold commodities that were in short supply for hard currency or exchanged them for gold and jewelry, accepting old coins as well. The real aim of this economic experiment that lasted for two years was to swindle out all gold and valuables from the population for the industrial development of the country.

## **10 Famine in Ukraine**

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

## **11 Young Octobrist**

In Russian Oktyabrenok, or 'pre-pioneer', designates Soviet children of seven years or over preparing for entry into the pioneer organization.

## **12 Great Terror (1934-1938)**

During the Great Terror, or Great Purges, which included the notorious show trials of Stalin's former Bolshevik opponents in 1936-1938 and reached its peak in 1937 and 1938, millions of innocent Soviet citizens were sent off to labor camps or killed in prison. The major targets of the Great Terror were communists. Over half of the people who were arrested were members of the party at the time of their arrest. The armed forces, the Communist Party, and the government in general were purged of all allegedly dissident persons; the victims were generally sentenced to death or to long terms of hard labor. Much of the purge was carried out in secret, and only a few cases were tried in public 'show trials'. By the time the terror subsided in 1939, Stalin had managed to bring both the party and the public to a state of complete submission to his rule. Soviet society was so atomized and the people so fearful of reprisals that mass arrests were no longer necessary. Stalin ruled as absolute dictator of the Soviet Union until his death in March 1953.

### **13 Gaidar, Arkadiy (born Golikov) (1904-1941)**

Russian writer who wrote about the revolutionary struggle and the construction of a new life.

### **14 Molotov, V**

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

### **15 Kossior, Stanislav (1889-1938)**

One of the founders of the Communist party in Ukraine and General Secretary of the Communist Party from 1928-1938. He was arrested in the course of The Great Purges of 1936-38, known popularly as the Yezhovshchina (after NKVD chief Nikolai Yezhov who conducted them), and executed.

### **16 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.

### **17 Campaign against 'cosmopolitans'**

The campaign against 'cosmopolitans', i.e. Jews, was initiated in articles in the central organs of the Communist Party in 1949. The campaign was directed primarily at the Jewish intelligentsia and it was the first public attack on Soviet Jews as Jews. 'Cosmopolitans' writers were accused of hating the Russian people, of supporting Zionism, etc. Many Yiddish writers as well as the leaders of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee were arrested in November 1948 on charges that they maintained ties with Zionism and with American 'imperialism'. They were executed secretly in 1952. The antisemitic Doctors' Plot was launched in January 1953. A wave of anti-Semitism spread through the USSR. Jews were removed from their positions, and rumors of an imminent mass deportation of Jews to the eastern part of the USSR began to spread. Stalin's death in March 1953 put an end to the campaign against 'cosmopolitans'.

### **18 Yad Vashem**

This museum, founded in 1953 in Jerusalem, honors both Holocaust martyrs and 'the Righteous Among the Nations', non-Jewish rescuers who have been recognized for their 'compassion, courage and morality'.

### **19 Sholem Aleichem (born Shalom Nohumovich Rabinovich (1859-1916))**

Jewish writer. He lived in Russia and moved to the US in 1914. He wrote about the life of Jews in Russia in Yiddish, Hebrew and Russian. -----