

# Igor Lerner

**City:** St. Petersburg **Country:** Russia **Interviewer:** Olga Egudina **Date of interview:** April, 2007



*Igor (Israel) Efimovich Lerner is a short person with kind eyes and still voice. The WWII burst out when he was a schoolboy. He was its participant from the very first till the very last day.*

*After the end of the war he received a good education and became a person in high position. Igor Efimovich shares his memoirs willingly: he is often invited to deliver lectures at schools.*

*Mr Lerner is a person of settled convictions, and though we are not always able to agree with him, his adherence to principles commands respect.*

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## My family background

Unfortunately I remember absolutely nothing about my great-grandparents. And all my grandparents came from Ukraine. My both grandfathers perished during the WWI and I never saw them. But I remember my grandmothers well. Both families of my parents lived in Krivoe Ozero village of Odessa region. My grandmothers lived in their own houses and managed a household. Their houses were typical Ukrainian huts. [Ukrainian hut is a house made from clay or wood covered with clay, it is usually thatched with straw.] Grandmothers kept cows, a lot of hens, had large vegetable gardens. So they worked without a break since morning till late at night, because they had to produce foodstuff for themselves and also to help our family with food. Leye, my maternal grandmother was very religious and brought her daughter (my Mom) up on the same lines. Grandmother always visited synagogue in Pervomaisk and in Uman. My paternal grandmother Haya was thriftier and much less religious. Leye was more kind than Haya: her relations with grandchildren were much better than Haya's. Some time Haya lived at our place, and they not always reached mutual understanding with my Mom. You know that a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law are seldom in tune with each other. But Daddy was very wise: he always managed to smooth away conflicts.

Both my grandmothers died in Ukraine during starvation of 1932. [In 1932 the authorities in many instances exacted such high levels of procurements that starvation was widespread. In some places, famine was allowed to run its course; and millions of peasants in Ukraine starved to death in a famine, called the Holodomor in Ukrainian. An estimated 3-6 million people died in this horrible manmade famine.] In the heat of famine we lived already in Leningrad, we got to know about events in Ukraine from rumors. We sent grandmothers food packages, but later we found out that they had not received any.

Our village in Ukraine was large. There was a beautiful small river (I do not remember its name). For the most part my memoirs refer to 1939 when we arrived there already from Leningrad. It was then when I saw straight streets with ruinous huts: almost all population of the village died out during famine of 1932.

My parents lived in the former priest's house. It was the only house in the village with iron roof. My parents had got a large vegetable garden. It was necessary for the family: vegetables helped to survive all the year round.

Now I'll tell you about my parents.

My father Haim Davidovich Lerner was born in Krivoe Ozero in 1896. In his childhood he attended cheder, and that was all regarding his education. Father participated in the World War I and got into the phosgene area. [Phosgene is the highly toxic gas gained infamy as a chemical weapon during the World War I.] After that he got asthma and coughed all the time. Having returned from the front, Daddy at first worked in the field, but later became a shop manager. The shop was situated in our house (I told you that the house was very large). I guess that parents paid some rent for it. At the shop they sold mainly fabric, which was in short supply at that time. I had a photo showing my father with a folding rule in his hands, he was standing in front of the shop (unfortunately I lost the photograph). At that time our financial situation was not bad.

Here I'll tell you about my father's life. By the beginning of the Great Patriotic War 1 he was already 40 years old, therefore he was not drafted. But he served as a hospital attendant in a hospital in Leningrad. He left for the hospital and we never saw him any more. We sent numerous inquiries and they answered that father was registered neither among victims, nor among reported missing. Many years later I got ill with dermatitis and went to the nearest polyclinic to visit a dermatologist. She looked at me attentively and asked 'Are you a son of Haim Davidovich?' It turned out that during the war she worked in the hospital together with my father. From her I got to know that one day all men who worked in the hospital were sent to the front line, presumably to Tikhvin region. Most likely he perished there.

My Mom's name was Hayka Borissovna (nee Fleymboym). She was born in 1896 in Krivoe Ozero, in the same place where my father was born. I do not know for sure, but I guess that my parents knew each other since their childhood. I do not remember when they got married, but I know for sure that they were married under chuppah.

Mom also studied only in cheder, but she was much more educated than father. She knew Hebrew very well and was interested in Jewish history. Many interesting facts from the history of our people I got to know from her in my childhood. Yiddish was my mother tongue, mother tongue of my parents, and of my grandparents, too. Before the war we spoke only Yiddish at home.

Father was not very religious, but till the very beginning of the war he kept tefillin and tallit in the special trunk. Mom kept 2 thick prayer books (in Hebrew) till her death. She also did her best to observe kashrut. Even in Leningrad she managed to buy kosher meat somewhere. When she was about 70 years old, she decided to live separately from my family. I guess that one her reasons was her wish to eat according Tradition. All her life long she celebrated Sabbath, made matzot herself (when it was not possible to be bought). I remember that we moved to Leningrad on Saturday, and not all her belongings had been transported: Mom's candlesticks were absent. She cut a potato in two and attached candles to the halves. Mom died in Leningrad in 1983. She was never sick; she even never visited a doctor.

Here I'll tell you about brothers and sisters of my parents. My Mom had got 4 brothers and a sister. Brothers' names were Abram, Moyshe, Haim, Benye. The sister's name was Buya. They lived in different cities: Tashkent, Kuybyshev, Leningrad, Kiev, and Odessa. Mom corresponded with all of them. According to Jewish Tradition all elder boys in their families were named in honor of my Mom's father who was lost during the World War I. His name was Boris, therefore I had got 5 cousins named Boris each. All of them (except my elder brother) were killed at the WWII front line.

Father had got a sister, her name was Hinye. She lived in Ukraine. She had got a husband and a daughter Rivva. Rivva was married to a Ukrainian guy. After the end of the war she worked as a school director. During the war relatives of Rivva's husband hid her from Germans. Unfortunately Germans executed Hinye and her husband by shooting.

## Growing up

I am the youngest son in our family. I had got 2 elder brothers: Boris (born in 1921) and Jacob (born in 1923). I was born in 1925 and my parents called me Israel. Later I changed it for Igor (I'll tell you about it a little bit later).

It was Mom who kept the house. Besides the vegetable garden, we had an orchard with big plum and apricot trees. I remember the sound of ripe apricots falling down upon the roof of our house...

We kept a cow, a calf, a lot of hens. We also kept pigs, but only for sale. Mom managed not only to keep the house, but also to help father at the shop. Regarding assistants, we had only a nurse: she was invited when the 3rd child (me) was born. That nurse sewed a toy dog for me (using a sheepskin) and called it Bobik. It was the only toy I had at that time; therefore I remember it till now (80 years passed!).

We did no electricity supply and used kerosene lamps. In the house there was a large stove of Russian style [2](#). There was no water supply, too. But in the yard there was a deep well with cold and tasty water. The cellar under the house seemed to me very deep. Each time I got there I considered a real adventure. We cellared food there (it must last us the winter). I remember huge bright pumpkins (they remained fresh very long). Mom cooked very well and taught me to cook. She also taught my wife to cook traditional Jewish courses.

At home we celebrated all Jewish holidays. We observed strict kashrut.

In our village there was a school, and a teacher of the primary school rented a room in our house. When I was 6 years old, she noticed that I read very well and suggested to send me to school. That

was the way I became a schoolboy a year earlier than it was necessary. At school they taught us in Ukrainian language (at that time I did not know that there were other languages except Yiddish and Ukrainian). Later at Leningrad school children laughed at me when I spoke Ukrainian. So in our village I finished the first grade and my brothers finished primary school.

In the beginning of 1930s authorities started struggle against homebrewing. [Brewing relies on the conversion of sugars into ethyl alcohol and carbon dioxide by yeast through fermentation. In the USSR it was considered an administrative offence.] It was the beginning of struggle against kulaks [3](#). Soviet representatives used to say 'The citizens starve, and you spend grain for brewing.' I remember well that from the city there came sailors girt about with cartridge belts. They used to come to our house and say to my father 'Munchik (they called him Munchik for some reason), show us who is engaged in homebrewing here? Who has got a lot of bread?' You see, my father was one of the activists, therefore all hooch stills deforced from its owners were stored in our yard. In the hooch stills the sailors found some raw stuff, managed to finish the process, bottled the brew and forced my Mom to butcher and grill a ram. You understand that those sailors spent their time very well.

Later struggle against homebrewing gradually transformed to subtraction of peasants' grain. Peasants tried to hide grain underground, but in vain. Sailors came again and again. Father invented the following trick: he put me (a child) upon a bag of wheat and instructed me the following way: 'When they start taking the bag away, cry loudly and don't give it away!' Sailors tried to pull the bag out from under me, I cried and held on to it. The sailors said to father 'We know you to be a conscientious person, you understand that we cannot fight against the child, give us your grain in an amicable way.' Father gave them MY bag, and they left very pleased (they did not search any more). In 1932-1933 authorities took away ALL grain they found: they did left grain neither for eating, nor for the following sowing. Therefore I am sure that that terrible starvation in Ukraine was caused not by natural phenomena (i.e. bad harvest), but by the communist party line.

So, we understood that starvation was beginning. It became difficult to find food. Father went to Caucasus. There he changed carpets from our house for corn meal, butter, and millet. It gave us possibility to hold out for some time. But it became clear that our family had no chance to survive. Old and weak people died. Mom cried and begged father to leave. At last he made his decision: Mom together with children went to Tashkent (to her sister), and father together with his brothers moved to Olgino (a settlement near Leningrad) to mother's brother Abram. About 2 months later we also arrived in Olgino. First winter we lived at the place of my uncle. I went to the 1st grade (I had to study in the 1st grade twice, because I did not know Russian). In Olgino I had to live very long: till 1963. My uncle was engaged in bookselling. I remember well that at home he had a grand piano, and there were a lot of children's books on it. I drenched myself in them to my heart's content.

Here I'll get back to our trip to Tashkent. It was then when I traveled by train for the first time in my life. For some reason I remembered Kharkov railway station very well. There I saw a big overhead road and it impressed me much: I guessed how it was possible to build such a construction. We spent a lot of time moving to Tashkent with changes. After our arrival in Tashkent I was so tired that felt tinnitus and my legs trembled. I also remember a huge bridge across Volga. And my 1st trip by automobile happened in Olgino: our neighbor took us to the river by a small lorry.

I attended a school in Olgino. Elementary school was situated in the red wooden house, and the secondary one - in the white house. People used to say that in Olgino there were 2 schools: red and white. I studied very well. But it happened that I had to study twice not only in the 1st, but also in the 10th class. I'll tell you about it later.

So, we (my brothers also) studied at school. Daddy worked as a worker at a factory. Later he met a friend who helped him to get a job of a seller at the market. 2 years later my father was appointed a deputy director at a grocery store. Very soon he became its director and worked there till the beginning of the war. At first Mom did not work, but soon authorities introduced food cards into practice [4](#). They gave more food for worker's food card, therefore Mom went to work at a knitting factory Krasnoe Znamya ['Red Banner' in Russian] in Leningrad. She worked there 2 years, and then began sewing at home. Mom was a very good milliner and a seamstress: in Ukraine she made clothes for all village inhabitants. When I came to my College wearing a jacket made by Mom, students joined the queue wishing to have jackets similar to mine. Mom needed neither fashion-magazines, nor patterns. She fearlessly brought in new styles.

We could not live together with my uncle's family very long. We handed in an application about separate place of residence. As a result we got a small room and a very large kitchen (the most part of it was occupied by a huge stove). It was impossible to live five together in that small room, and my elder brother wrote a letter to Stalin (so resolute he was!). As a result, a local official came to us and ordered to replan our kitchen and change the stove. After it there appeared 1 room more. The situation changed for the better, though still we were cramped.

We were not rich and not poor. At first we bought food in the shops. We did not starve, but later there appeared a card system (I already told you about it). You see, even before introduction of that system, our life was getting worse and worse: in shops there was nothing except pickles, sauerkraut, kvass and black bread. After introduction of food cards there appeared long lines near the shops. Sometimes Mom worked late in the evening and came to Olgino by last train. We waited for her, because at her factory mothers with many children received meals. Therefore sometimes we waited for her till 1 o'clock in the morning. Beginning from 1935 (when father became a deputy director at the grocery store), we lived better.

We never left such a good place as Olgino for vacation.

In Leningrad region Olgino was a very prestigious place for vacation. In summer a lot of Leningrad citizens came to Olgino with their children to spend summer holidays. I had many friends among those children, but we met only in summer. I swam perfectly (mastered all styles). In winter I skied much. At school I attended a historical circle. I was fond of history, and our teacher entrusted me with making lectures for my schoolmates. I also attended a photographic circle. Behind the staircase in the small lumber-room I used to process my films.

I liked to go to different parties arranged at school. In Olgino there was a good library. In the former times there lived many Finns, Poles and Germans. During the Great Terror [5](#) all of them were arrested, and their books were collected into library. Therefore the library was very rich in books. I read much, I always liked reading very much. At home we subscribed to newspapers. We were great friends with my brothers all our lives long. We gave no troubles to our parents. Only Jacob liked to fight sometimes. Several times Mom was invited to school because of it. It seems to me that our parents brought us up properly. They never beat us, but achieved much using words,

suggestions, and serious talks. They served as an example to us: father never smoked or drank vodka. When he got ill, doctors recommended him to smoke special cigarettes for asthma. Till now I remember my sincere surprise: Daddy smoking a cigarette!

Political life of the country did not avoid us. At school we (schoolchildren of the 4th grade) voted for execution of Nikolaev, the murderer of Kirov [6](#). Parents never talked about politics in our presence.

Steam locomotive connected Olgino with Leningrad. We used to go to Leningrad to a bath-house (there was no bath-house in Olgino).

## **During the war**

War burst out when I finished the 9th grade.

My elder brother was a professional soldier and served in the Far East. Jacob was drafted in 1942. I joined a volunteers battalion. Those battalions were created for struggle against saboteurs, spies, and gunlayers which launched signal rockets near the military objects, etc. They gave each of us a rifle, 120 live cartridges, a gas-mask. We kept it at home. We lived at home and studied at school, but at any time on a signal we had to run fast to the alarm post. Officers from NKVD [7](#) waited for us there. Usually we searched the district. 2 or 3 times paratroopers touched down nearby and we managed to neutralize them. Sometimes we were on duty near important objects (it was called to stay in secret). After a while we were lodged in barracks in Pargolovo, near Olgino. There we stayed till January of 1942. We were very hungry. I realized that it became useless to study at school and handed in an application of an army volunteer. They sent me to a military camp. So I became a real soldier.

But they had no right to send me to the front line: I was under 17. Therefore I served in the horsed antitank regiment. I took care of the mare. By the way they gave me a sabre, I teetered after belting it on: I was very thin. The mare needed care like a child. Each morning before washing myself, I started cleaning my mare. In the afternoon they usually carried out mock battle: 4 mares did their best to pull an antitank gun. One day we came back a mock battle, but were not allowed to get into barracks: they read out surnames of soldiers with secondary education. My name was in that list, too. The commander told us that Germans racked Leningrad with fire using long-range artillery. At that time we had no opportunities to stop it, but it was necessary to do something. Reconnaissance units went searching those guns, but did not come back. Therefore they created a special unit (top secret) for detection of those guns. Members of that unit had not to search those guns in the woods and ravines, but to find its location by means of certain calculations (basing upon sound-waves of the guns). They moved us to a separate barrack with real beds: it was good to stop sleeping on plank beds. [Plank bed is a primitive construction for sleeping: some sort of duck-boards fixed perpendicular to the wall.] They fed us well, but we had to study 8 hours a day. Leningrad was already in blockade [8](#). My ration saved both my and my Mom's life.

Every third day she came to me and I gave her my bread and that of my 3 comrades. The next 3 days I had to give my bread to my friends. Soon I managed to persuade Mom to evacuate, and she left for Altai region. 2 years later my brother Jacob was wounded, and after hospital treatment he went to Mom's place.

We studied rather difficult subjects: besides knowledge it required intuition.



Three months later our skill was checked up near Kolpino. I managed to find two big guns and was awarded a medal For Military Merits [9](#). I understood that I had the only chance to survive in this war: to continue my service in that unit. We studied three months more and were sent to the Finnish front. Soon we were taken back to the Leningrad front. At the end of December 1943 they alarmed us and sent to the Oranienbaum Pyatachok (across the Gulf of Finland). [Oranienbaum Pyatachok was a small sector of the front near the Gulf of Finland. It became an impassable obstacle to fascists and did not permit them capture Leningrad.]

One day in the morning we were told that a great offensive would happen soon. We had to find location of all guns around us. It was not so easily because (for example) tanks changed their place after a shot, so it made it impossible for us to define their location. Fascists hunted for us, therefore we were specially guarded and always took up position in the most safe dugouts. But on the other hand we were rather defenseless, because it was impossible to place any guns near our dugouts: fascists could try to destroy them by bombing and the bomb could accidentally find us. One day connection with one of our receivers was broken and I (together with 2 submachine gunners) went to search for the break. We found it: the wire got fouled up in the big bush. We came closer to unhook the wire and suddenly saw Germans sitting under the bush. They saw us and rushed away, but we managed to seize one of them. Those Germans attached explosive to the wire, hoping to blow up us in case we pulled the wire.

In the morning of January 13, 1944 artillery preparation fire was started. I never saw such number of military weapons and equipment. They roared so loudly that I could not hear my voice. During 3 hours everything around us was booming and burning. Pandemonium! We went forward and found out with great surprise that we met with no resistance. We stopped trying to understand the reason. And we saw only bodies of German soldiers torn to ribbons - and that was all. The first armed conflict happened about 10 kilometers farther (near the Koporye village). There was an ancient castle occupied by Germans. Our commanders ordered not to shoot at the castle in order to keep it undamaged. Certainly we managed to dislodge the enemy, but suffered heavy losses. I was also impressed much by the cemetery of German military equipment. By the way, I often deliver lectures at schools. I like to tell schoolchildren about the war I participated in. I noticed that boys and girls frequently consider our allies to be the winners (not us!). Therefore I told them how often I saw twisted wreckage of English and American tanks we received according to lend-lease. [Lend-lease was a system of loaning or renting arms, ammunition, strategic raw material, foodstuffs, goods and services to countries - allies.]

Those tanks were very bad: bulky and slow. When I saw our tank T-34 for the first time I felt pride in it. [The T-34 was a Soviet medium tank considered to be the best one on the front lines of the WWII.] Airplanes of our allies were so-so, too. In general, I think that by the end of the war our army was armed and organized so well that we could reach Gibraltar if they did not stop us on Elba.

Here I am back to my narration. From Koporye we advanced with fights through Pskov, Gdov and Slantsy. Up to Narva we were not bad, but later everything became hard. Narva River had got a slight and a slope banks. Germans occupied the slope one. We had to force a crossing over the Narva River suffering heavy losses, but after that we chased Germans up to Tallin. There Germans fortified their position again and again we had to start heavy fights.

Here I'll tell you about one incident which happened to me near the Narva River. You see I had several photographs of my relatives (the dearest ones) with me and kept them in the breast pocket

of my soldier's blouse. The equipment I worked with required accumulators, so we always held them in stock. One day we came short of accumulators and I (together with a group of support) went to the charging station. I made our way along the Narva River. A member of our group suggested to move on the ice, because the road was occupied by moving armies. Well, we started, but the front part of the lorry fell into the scour (fortunately only the bumper went down). We managed to jump out, but certainly got wet through. By the way, it was very cold: 20 degrees centigrade below zero. We started shooting in the air. Soldiers ran up and brought us to the hospital, where nurses (young girls) stripped us naked, took methyl alcohol, worked it in and gave us some spirit to drink. In the morning we felt having no cold, but a part of my photos got slightly wet. Later I got to know that all photos of our family burned down together with our house in Olgino.

Near Narva we had got a small territory (about 20 square kilometers) under our control. We were surrounded by Germans, and received foodstuffs parachuted from airplanes. About a month we ate millet and American slab bacon. I remember myself going to my unit, watching girls in soldiers' blouses dancing and listening to accordion. Sometimes I danced too, and then did not sleep at night: I tried to imagine my future peace life.

Later we chased Germans to East Prussia. Therefrom we moved to the Oder River by train. Near Oder a lot fell to our share. Oder was a very wide river, it was very difficult to force a crossing. Our group was up to the mark: according to our information all German weapon emplacements were neutralized. Soldiers made new bridge of boats instead of the old one fired by Germans. After that we turned to Berlin. There I saw a superhighway for the first time in my life: it differed sharply from our roads! Suddenly we received another order: move to Prague! There Czechs excited rebellion against invaders and we had to help them. It happened on May 2. Our next point was Silesia where fascists still showed resistance. Therefrom we moved to Vienna. In Vienna we welcomed the Victory Day.

## **After the war**

Now I'd like to tell you about the life of my family after the end of the war. Mom wanted to return from evacuation to our place immediately after the war, but our house was burned to the ground. Both Mom and my brother wrote letters to different higher echelons asking to help them with lodging. And she asked me to interpose in the matter. I wrote an official report to the chief of our political department. Later I got his answer from Leningrad: everything was all right and Mom had already returned to Olgino. During my leave I visited Leningrad and found out that Mom lived on the ground floor in a very cold and uncomfortable room. I had to take up this case again and at last Mom got decent warm room on the second floor. Jacob lived together with Mom, but soon he married a girl from Olgino and left for her place. Jacob was a disabled soldier: he had a bad limp because of the wound and shell-shock. It was difficult for him to get used to the new life. But soon authorities arranged special courses for disabled soldiers. Jacob finished courses for rate-setters and worked at a factory. He died in 1989.

Boris, my elder brother also lived at Mom's place. Before the war he finished a military school and became a specialist in radio communication. He worked much, raised the level of his skill and became a well-known person in the sphere of electronics. He worked in Leningrad, and got an apartment there. Boris traveled much all over the country and equipped new television centers



together with a group of coworkers. He even reached the Novaya Zemlya. [Novaya Zemlya (New Land) is an archipelago in the Arctic Ocean in the north of Russia.] Besides he took part in electronic reequipping of the largest ships of our fleet. Boris died in 1998.

Now about me after the end of the war. Headquarters started the process of disbandment of military units. Our regiment became a reconnaissance battalion. A part of our battalion moved to Germany, and I remained in Vienna (at the army staff). I became a chief secretary responsible for confidential documents. I worked there till 1950. I recollect my service with pleasure. At first our command aimed us at rapprochement with population: they waited what political party of Austria would gain advantage. And while there was a hope that local people would follow the leaders of the Communist Party of Austria, we arranged parties for them. Courting the local girls and even marriages were encouraged. But soon it became clear that People's Party of Austria gained the upper hand and everything changed: we were closed inside our military units and could watch the local life only through the window. Even dismissals were forbidden. As for me, I was striving home eagerly: I wanted to receive good education. Besides I was responsible for maintenance of new strict rules. To tell the truth, it was not pleasant. In our team there was Kostuchenko, a scout (chestful of decorations). He ran away. We had to set out in search and found him in Czechoslovakia. He was given a trial and sentenced to 25 years of forced labor camps for parricide [10](#).

In fact I studied in the 10th class not long (before the beginning of the war) and received a paper about finishing school. But it was not a school-leaving certificate of official standard. And I had a dream to receive higher education. After 5 years in Austria I came back to Leningrad. I managed to retire only with assistance of the chief of our political department.

My family members were friends with Natalya Sergeevna Michurina, my former teacher of history. My father was a shop director and helped her with food. She worked as a teacher at the Pedagogical College. I told her that I would like to become a student of her College. She answered that it was impossible without a school-leaving certificate and I had to go to Moscow and change my paper for the certificate. I did not want to go there (I realized that I forgot everything during 8 years of my military service). Therefore I decided to enter the 10th class of an evening school. [Evening schools in the USSR were institutions of general educational for working people.] I became a schoolboy again, but they made it imperative that I should be employed.

Here my tortures started. About 2 months I ate nothing and could not sleep: I tried to find job, but they looked into my passport, saw the item 5 [11](#) and used to say the following: 'No vacancy'. They did not permit me to become even a pupil of metalworker at a factory. But I was a very good rifleman: during the war they used to invite me to adjust captured weapon. At last I got fixed up in a job of shooting club instructor. I finished my school with a medal, i.e. I had the right to enter a college without entrance examinations (it was necessary only to pass an entrance interview [12](#).) I decided to enter the College for film-engineers.

I called them and asked if they took in medal winners. They said yes, I came and showed my documents. They said 'You know, we have no vacancies'. The same happened in many other colleges. One day I called a college entrance examination from telephone box situated close to the College door. They said 'Come to us please!' I appeared 5 minutes later and heard the following: 'Sorry, we have no vacancies'. At last I decided to make no more telephone calls and went to the

Technological College. [The Technological College prepared specialists in the chemical sphere]. I showed them my documents 'You won't take me in, will you?' - 'Why? Leave your documents here and come tomorrow morning'. I came next morning, and they said 'You are accepted, but it is provisional. Tomorrow come to take part in the entrance interview'. Having come for the interview, I found out that all medal-winners were Jews.

So I became a student of the Technological College. I graduated from it with excellent marks. Besides I was an editor of the College newspaper, a former front-line soldier, a communist party member. Therefore notwithstanding the generally accepted mandatory job assignment, they suggested me to choose a place where I would like to work [13](#). There were 2 good places to work at and one of them was GIPH (the State Institute of Applied Chemistry). Everyone knew that at GIPH they never employed Jews, therefore I chose the 2nd one (not to receive refusal!). And what a surprise: I got to know that they invited me to GIPH! 2 weeks later I started working there. My first chief was a Jew, too. There I worked 42 years (from 1956 till 1998). I liked my work and was one of the top experts of my profession. My first position was a mechanic of experimental workshop. Later I became its chief and worked till I retired on pension. Nobody forced me to retire, on the contrary: they tried to persuade me to go on working.

Till now I keep in touch with my former coworkers: I am a member of the local veterans council. I share my memoirs about war with schoolchildren. I aim at putting new heart at their patriotic spirit, because in my opinion at present patriotic education at school needs to be up to higher standard. When I talk to children, I understand that they lack it, too. They usually ask many questions and listen very attentively. Boys are interested in military questions, while girls ask about love during the war. I had a look at school textbooks of history and it seemed to me, that war is covered there insufficiently. In particular well-known 10 Stalin Blows are described badly. [10 Stalin Blows or 10 blows Soviet Army gave to fascist troops in 1944. They were strategically important for the military campaign of 1944.]

During my work in GIPH I came across no manifestations of anti-Semitism. I had got an access permit and held high positions. To tell the truth, in the beginning of my work there were several very elderly women (Communist Party members since pre-revolutionary times). My nationality gave them no rest. They considered me to be responsible (for example) for Israeli wars of 1967 and 1973 [14, 15]. They asked me every minute 'What do you want to achieve there in your Israel?' But GIPH administration put no pressure upon me. When I came to GIPH, there were many Jews. Later their number decreased and during the period of state anti-Semitism GIPH was one of the most closed for Jews institutions. We worked upon very important projects connected with defense industry (till now I can tell you nothing about them). I keep good relations with my coworkers till now. I am allowed to keep my let-pass and can enter the Institute whenever I want. I receive medical treatment at the Institute polyclinic. My former coworkers invite me to all holiday parties and ceremonial meetings. By the way, some day soon I am going to take part in the preparatory meeting for the Victory Day celebrations [16](#).

In 1963 being a workshop mechanic, I made my mark during assembling of a very important equipment. I was offered to become a shop superintendent. And I wanted to remain a mechanic. You see, mechanics had the right to retire on pension at the age of 50 (before the appointed age of 60), while a shop superintendent had no privilege of that kind. But my coworkers asked me persistently, therefore I specified that they would give my family an apartment in Leningrad. And

we moved from Olgino to Leningrad.

## **Marriage life and children**

I got married in 1954. My wife's name was Etella Yosefovna Lipina. She was born in Leningrad in 1928. She graduated from the Conservatory and worked as a teacher at a musical school. We got acquainted the following way. Once I felt severe pain in my coccyx. Doctors told me that an operation was necessary. I was in a hospital and my girlfriend visited me. One day my girlfriend could not come and sent her friend instead. We liked each other, started to keep company with each other and got married later. In 1955 our son Alexander was born. First time after our marriage we lived at her parents' place in the city center. It was very convenient for me, because at that time I was a student of the Technological College and my way to the College took not much time.

The family of my wife had relatives in Germany. In 1972 my wife's uncle, who lived in Germany died. He bestowed a fortune upon the family of my wife and she went to Germany to come into the inheritance. But the uncle's German relatives managed to evict the most part of property, therefore my wife received only a one-room apartment. During all these events my wife suddenly died and was buried there in Germany.

My son Alexander graduated from the Shipbuilding College in 1977. [The Leningrad Shipbuilding College was founded in 1902.] He worked at the design office of the factory producing escalators for underground. I wanted him to work in GIPH, but he refused flatly. At that time I did not understand him, but later I realized that he planned to emigrate to Israel, and his possible work in GIPH could become an insuperable obstacle. He knew that GIPH employees had a let-pass and were permitted neither to go abroad, nor to communicate with foreigners. Alexander took it into account.

But there was another difficulty. I had to grant him an exit authorization. Alexander brought a paper for me to sign. I realized that the next day after signing the document, I should be fired. Therefore I refused. Then my son sent me an official certified document by mail. It read the following: I was obliged to list (in written form) my claims to my son. If I failed within 2 months, it meant my consent automatically. I addressed some people in GIPH (experts in such affairs). They confirmed my fears saying that if my son left, I would be fired immediately. OK, I listed my claims. Several years later (already under Gorbachev [17](#)) the same people said 'Now let him go'. I signed all the papers, and my son left. At present he lives in Chicago. He has got a daughter.

After my first wife's death I thought I would never marry once more. But I was carried along by my destiny. My second wife also worked in GIPH, she also held a high position. We got married in 1965, and in 1967 our son Oleg was born. We did our best to give Oleg everything possible: when he was a boy, I went with him to hockey and figure skating training groups; he studied at a musical school and finished it successfully. We visited puppet theaters, and usually bought season tickets to the Kirov Opera and Ballet theatre. I think we put our souls into him and he grew up a very good person. He does not smoke, does not drink, he has got a good family: 3 children. All his children are girls, therefore I think they will give birth to more and more children, waiting for a boy. Oleg graduated from the Technological College (like me). At present he is a businessman.

Here I'll get back a little. When Oleg was 16 years old, he had to receive his passport. His patronymic was Izraelevich. I went to the local civilian registry office and asked to change my name Israel for Igor (on account of disharmony). They examined my application very long, but after all they complied with my request. I changed all my documents. Oleg got patronymic Igorevich, but Alexander did not want to. My old friends call me Israel (of course), but I introduce myself to new ones as Igor. I already got accustomed [18](#).

My both sons studied at school very well, and gave us no troubles.

We lived OK and had many friends, but unfortunately most of them are already not with us.

After my second wife's death in 2000, I consumed away with grief. And now it is very difficult for me to speak about her. Don't hold it as a grievance against me, but I still cannot speak about her, it still hurts me.

Almost every year we together with children went to the Black Sea to spend summer vacations. We used to rent a room at the same owners. They said that we became more than their relatives.

I always worked much. Besides during my life I had to go through 2 periods of great starvation (I guess the worst ones in the history of mankind): starvation in Ukraine and blockade of Leningrad. Of course they had an effect on my health: I had problems with my gastrointestinal tract. I started treatment in sanatoria [19](#). At first I went there alone. When I became older, I asked for 2 permits: for me and for my wife. After sanatorium I always felt much better. In addition to it we had got a dacha near Leningrad. Now I sold it: without my wife it was unbearable for me to stay there. I also sold my car: at present I want to go nowhere.

I'd like to tell you about my granddaughters separately. I think that they saved my life. After my second wife's death I was completely confused, I did not know how to go on living. My son took me to his place, not listening to my objections. When the girls were born, my life gained sense. My heart went out to these children, and they loved me too. During celebration of my 80th anniversary I said that Oleg and his wife took care of me, and my beloved granddaughters made me happy. It's true!

Here I'd like to tell you about my attitude to events in Hungary in 1956 [20](#) and Czechoslovakia in 1968 [21](#). In fact during the war I was in both countries, and in Czechoslovakia I left a very close friend. We gave up so many lives for liberating of those countries from fascists and I agree with reaction of the USSR to events in those countries. I was often asked about my attitude towards fall of the Berlin Wall. [Berlin wall was erected in 1961 to divide Western part of Berlin from the Eastern one. It was demolished in 1989. It was symbolical that its concrete was used to construct highways of the united Germany.] I'll tell you the truth though it will sound indecently: I have no respect for the Germans. I think that fascism in Germany is ineradicable. If I were in charge, I would have not pull out our armies from Germany.

As far as Perestroika [22](#) is concerned, I guess it was not necessary to break communistic system abruptly. I think that we would have come to democracy anyway, but it would help us keep moral, intellectual and other values. I always remember that by the end of the war there was no country in the world stronger than the USSR. We could have occupied the whole Europe easily.

I attend Hesed Center [23](#) and take part in events they arrange.

## **Glossary:**

### **1 Great Patriotic War**

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

### **2 Russian stove**

Big stone stove stoked with wood. They were usually built in a corner of the kitchen and served to heat the house and cook food. It had a bench that made a comfortable bed for children and adults in wintertime.

### **3 Kulaks**

In the Soviet Union the majority of wealthy peasants that refused to join collective farms and give their grain and property to Soviet power were called kulaks, declared enemies of the people and exterminated in the 1930s.

### **4 Card system**

The food card system regulating the distribution of food and industrial products was introduced in the USSR in 1929 due to extreme deficit of consumer goods and food. The system was cancelled in 1931. In 1941, food cards were reintroduced to keep records, distribute and regulate food supplies to the population. The card system covered main food products such as bread, meat, oil, sugar, salt, cereals, etc. The rations varied depending on which social group one belonged to, and what kind of work one did. Workers in the heavy industry and defense enterprises received a daily ration of 800 g (miners - 1 kg) of bread per person; workers in other industries 600 g. Non-manual workers received 400 or 500 g based on the significance of their enterprise, and children 400 g. However, the card system only covered industrial workers and residents of towns while villagers never had any provisions of this kind. The card system was cancelled in 1947.

### **5 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.

## **6 Kirov, Sergey (born Kostrikov) (1886-1934)**

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

## **7 NKVD**

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

## **8 Blockade of Leningrad**

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

## **9 Medal for Military Merits**

awarded after 17th October 1938 to soldiers of the Soviet army, navy and frontier guard for their 'bravery in battles with the enemies of the Soviet Union' and 'defense of the immunity of the state borders' and 'struggle with diversionists, spies and other enemies of the people'.

## **10 Gulag**

The Soviet system of forced labor camps in the remote regions of Siberia and the Far North, which was first established in 1919. However, it was not until the early 1930s that there was a significant number of inmates in the camps. By 1934 the Gulag, or the Main Directorate for Corrective Labor Camps, then under the Cheka's successor organization the NKVD, had several million inmates. The prisoners included murderers, thieves, and other common criminals, along with political and religious dissenters. The Gulag camps made significant contributions to the Soviet economy during the rule of Stalin. Conditions in the camps were extremely harsh. After Stalin died in 1953, the population of the camps was reduced significantly, and conditions for the inmates improved somewhat.



## **11 Item 5**

This was the nationality factor, which was included on all job application forms, Jews, who were considered a separate nationality in the Soviet Union, were not favored in this respect from the end of World War II until the late 1980s.

## **12 Entrance interview**

graduates of secondary schools awarded silver or gold medals (cf: graduates with honors in the U.S.) were released from standard oral or written entrance exams to the university and could be admitted on the basis of a semi-formal interview with the admission committee. This system exists in state universities in Russia and most of the successor states up to this day.

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

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

**14 Six-Day-War:** The first strikes of the Six-Day-War happened on 5th June 1967 by the Israeli Air Force. The entire war only lasted 132 hours and 30 minutes. The fighting on the Egyptian side only lasted four days, while fighting on the Jordanian side lasted three. Despite the short length of the war, this was one of the most dramatic and devastating wars ever fought between Israel and all of the Arab nations. This war resulted in a depression that lasted for many years after it ended. The Six-Day-War increased tension between the Arab nations and the Western World because of the change in mentalities and political orientations of the Arab nations.

**15 Yom Kippur War:** The Arab-Israeli War of 1973, also known as the Yom Kippur War or the Ramadan War, was a war between Israel on one side and Egypt and Syria on the other side. It was the fourth major military confrontation between Israel and the Arab states. The war lasted for three weeks: it started on 6th October 1973 and ended on 22nd October on the Syrian front and on 26th October on the Egyptian front.

## **16 Victory Day in Russia (9th May)**

National holiday to commemorate the defeat of Nazi Germany and the end of World War II and honor the Soviets who died in the war.

## **17 Gorbachev, Mikhail (1931- )**

Soviet political leader. Gorbachev joined the Communist Party in 1952 and gradually moved up in the party hierarchy. In 1970 he was elected to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, where he remained until 1990. In 1980 he joined the politburo, and in 1985 he was appointed general secretary of the party. In 1986 he embarked on a comprehensive program of political, economic, and social liberalization under the slogans of glasnost (openness) and perestroika (restructuring). The government released political prisoners, allowed increased emigration, attacked corruption, and encouraged the critical reexamination of Soviet history. The Congress of People's Deputies, founded in 1989, voted to end the Communist Party's control over the government and elected

Gorbachev executive president. Gorbachev dissolved the Communist Party and granted the Baltic states independence. Following the establishment of the Commonwealth of Independent States in 1991, he resigned as president. Since 1992, Gorbachev has headed international organizations.

## **18 Common name**

Russified or Russian first names used by Jews in everyday life and adopted in official documents. The Russification of first names was one of the manifestations of the assimilation of Russian Jews at the turn of the 19th and 20th century. In some cases only the spelling and pronunciation of Jewish names was russified (e.g. Isaac instead of Yitskhak; Boris instead of Borukh), while in other cases traditional Jewish names were replaced by similarly sounding Russian names (e.g. Eugenia instead of Ghita; Yury instead of Yuda). When state anti-Semitism intensified in the USSR at the end of the 1940s, most Jewish parents stopped giving their children traditional Jewish names to avoid discrimination.

## **19 Recreation Centers in the USSR**

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

## **20 1956**

It designates the Revolution, which started on 23rd October 1956 against Soviet rule and the communists in Hungary. It was started by student and worker demonstrations in Budapest started in which Stalin's gigantic statue was destroyed. Moderate communist leader Imre Nagy was appointed as prime minister and he promised reform and democratization. The Soviet Union withdrew its troops which had been stationing in Hungary since the end of World War II, but they returned after Nagy's announcement that Hungary would pull out of the Warsaw Pact to pursue a policy of neutrality. The Soviet army put an end to the rising on 4th November and mass repression and arrests started. About 200,000 Hungarians fled from the country. Nagy, and a number of his supporters were executed. Until 1989, the fall of the communist regime, the Revolution of 1956 was officially considered a counter-revolution.

## **21 Prague Spring**

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

## **22 Perestroika (Russian for restructuring)**

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

### **23 Hesed**

Meaning care and mercy in Hebrew, Hesed stands for the charity organization founded by Amos Avgar in the early 20th century. Supported by Claims Conference and Joint Hesed helps for Jews in need to have a decent life despite hard economic conditions and encourages development of their self-identity. Hesed provides a number of services aimed at supporting the needs of all, and particularly elderly members of the society. The major social services include: work in the center facilities (information, advertisement of the center activities, foreign ties and free lease of medical equipment); services at homes (care and help at home, food products delivery, delivery of hot meals, minor repairs); work in the community (clubs, meals together, day-time polyclinic, medical and legal consultations); service for volunteers (training programs). The Hesed centers have inspired a real revolution in the Jewish life in the FSU countries. People have seen and sensed the rebirth of the Jewish traditions of humanism. Currently over eighty Hesed centers exist in the FSU countries. Their activities cover the Jewish population of over eight hundred settlements.