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The Jewish soldier's red star

Jewish war veterans in Ukraine recall The Great Patriotic War
Excerpts from the Centropa interviews

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Asia Matveyuk
Kherson
Ukraine
Interviewer: Zhanna Litinskaya
Date of interview: September 2003

Asia Matveyuk lives in a standard one-bedroom apartment in a big 9-storied apartment building of the late 1970s in a residential district of Kherson. This apartment is clean and full of light. There are many handmade articles in the apartment: made from bird feathers, ivory, embroidered articles and dolls – all of them Asia's works. She says she inherited this talent for handcrafts from her mother. Asia is slim for her age. She wears a jeans dress, has colored and nicely done hair, manicured nails, and she looks young for her age. Before the interview Asia shows me a number of albums with greeting cards from her frontline friends from different towns and countries. She tells me that in the article dedicated to her military past she was called a 'girl from a legend'. When telling her story she changes and I can really see a young girl in her.

I. PRE WAR LIFE

My family came from the south of Russia where in the Azov region, in Kherson and Nikolaev steppes [present southeastern Ukraine, about 500 km from Kiev] during the rule of Catherine the Great settlements of the minorities, so-called colonies were established on rich fertile lands. In the middle of the 18th century the tsarist government of Russia sent Polish, Greek and German minority groups to populate the areas that previously belonged to the cossacks, who were actually exterminated. Later, in the middle of the 19th century, they deported Jews to this area. They took to farming. My paternal and maternal relatives lived in one of such colonies in Novopoltavka Nikolaev region where the Jewish population prevailed, but there were also Ukrainian and German residents. Jews mostly dealt in farming, but they didn't forget about traditional Jewish occupation in crafts. There were tailors, shoemakers, glasscutters and carpenters in our colony providing their services to the population of the town. This colony was actually a big village consisting of Germans, and the largest being Jewish and Ukrainian parts. The Jewish sector was in the central part of the village. There was a synagogue in the Jewish neighborhood and there were churches in the German and Ukrainian parts. Jewish colonists tried to educate their children. Boys attended cheder until they turned 13. They received traditional Jewish education. There was also a Ukrainian school in the colony. During the Soviet period Jewish children moved to bigger towns where they could get a higher education.


UKAMA105

I remember my paternal great grandfather. He was not tall, stout and had strong heavy fists. I knew him when he was a 100-year old man. He used to visit us on his way to or from the synagogue. He had a glass of wine, groaning with pleasure. My great grandfather always wore a cap, even sitting at table, and had his religious accessories in his bag: tallit, tefillin and books of prayers. My great grandfather was never ill and lived to the age of 105. He would have lived longer if it hadn't

been for the famine in Ukraine in the early 1930s that destroyed his really athletic health.

My grandmother cooked and kept food for Sabbath in it. The food was kept warm until Saturday. I spent my childhood years in my grandmother's home. The family was poor, but they always baked fresh challah bread and made delicious dinner for Sabbath. Grandmother lit candles and the family celebrated Saturday. Unfortunately, I have fragmentary memories about Jewish traditions in my grandmother's home since later my father, who was a village activist and communist, forbade me to attend religious holidays.

My father Shoilik Leikind, born in 1898, studied in cheder. Then he finished three or four grades of a Jewish school. Like many other residents of Novopoltavka he took to farming and winemaking. They said my father was very strong and so was Arkadiy. They used to haul a wagon full of grain to the mill. In 1915 my father and his friend Solomon Levi were taken to the czarist army. They were to serve in cavalry and my father's horse was also assigned to the army.

My father was also thinking of marriage. He knew my mother since childhood and before going to the czarist army he got her acceptance of his proposal to get married. However, their parents didn't give their consent to this marriage. My mother was not the oldest daughter in the family and had to wait until her older sister got married.

My mother Ethel Levit was born in 1898. She was raised religious and studied at home with a melamed. She also finished three years in a Jewish school. My mother's family was wealthier than my father's. Her father bought her a Singer sewing machine, and my mother learned to sew well. She was born a beauty and had a talent of modeling and making beautiful outfits. She was a success with her clients. In due time my mother began to make clothes for Nikolaev actors. She made special and unique clothes. She went to Nikolaev for a few weeks to do her job once in three-four months.

My parents got married in 1918. Although my father wasn't religious any longer and spoke against any religious traditions, to be able to marry his beloved girl he had to observe all Jewish religious wedding traditions. They had a chuppah at the synagogue according to the rules. However, there was no big wedding party since it was a hard period of life shortly after the revolution, the power shuffled from one group to another resulting in destitution, pogroms and hunger.

I was born in March 1919. In 1924 my mother got pregnant again, but she had an abortion made in the Red Cross hospital in Nikolaev. The abortion didn't go well and my mother got some infection. She was brought home severely ill and having a brain inflammation. I remember her crying of pain, and everybody around crying of sympathy and sorrow. This happened in January 1924. I remember somebody baking a few apples for my mother. Our neighbor brought them. I remember how I burst into tears because they gave those apples to my mother and I didn't quite understand what was going on around. My mother was taken to a hospital in Nikolaev where she died. My father gave some money to an attendant in the morgue to take my mother away from there without autopsy that was not allowed by Jewish laws. Our relatives blamed my father that he allowed my mother to have this abortion forbidden by the Jewish religion. Grandfather Solomon didn't even want to talk to my father for many years. My brother and I stayed with my paternal grandfather and grandmother during the funeral. All I know is that my mother died approximately at the same time as Lenin, and there were no funerals allowed due to the mourning period after Lenin. My family had to wait a few days to bury my mother's body.

UKAMA106

My brother and I lived with my grandparents for a whole year. They were very kind people and loved us a lot. I liked Friday most of all, when my grandmother prepared the house for Sabbath washing and polishing the floors, covering the tables with clean tablecloths, and we were washed and dressed up. On Saturday my grandmother and grandfather went to the synagogue and took me with them. The synagogue was big and beautiful and seemed like a palace to me. I was sitting with my grandmother on the gallery of the second floor with all other women and watching around. My father didn't like it that my grandmother took me to the synagogue and often argued with her. A year later my father married my grandmother's niece Freida. The big stone house had five rooms and a big kitchen. Later they leased a part of the house and we stayed in two rooms. There was no electricity and food was cooked in a Russian stove.

UKAMA109

Freida was a kind and nice woman and never distinguished between her own children and her stepchildren and I began to call her 'mama.' Freida was raised in a religious family, but my father forbade her to observe Jewish traditions or celebrate holidays. He became particularly strict about it after he became a communist in 1927. There was no celebration of Sabbath in our family, and I used to run to grandmother secretly to meet Saturday. If my father got to know about it, there was sure to be a scandal with me, Freida and grandmother. Once my father was almost expelled from the party because my grandmother and grandfather attended the synagogue. He ordered them to stop doing that, but my grandmother continued lighting candles on Friday and praying. In the early 1930s this issue was resolved. The synagogue was closed and the building housed a 10-year school.

I went to the Jewish 7-year school in 1926. Actually, it was a merger of the Jewish and Ukrainian 7-year schools: we had many common classes since there were not so many children in the town and Ukrainian and Jewish children spoke two languages fluently. We spoke Yiddish at home and Ukrainian and Yiddish to our friends. We liked strolling in the Jewish, Ukrainian and German parts of our village. I had Jewish, Ukrainian and German friends.

My father became chairman of the village council. People liked my father and called him with the Russian name of Sasha converted from his Jewish name of Shoilik. My father was a charming, handsome and very strong man. There were strolling circus wrestlers at the time traveling from one town to another and when they came to Novopoltavka, the villagers asked my father to wrestle with them. I remember a famous wrestler, huge, with his boots unpicked in the seams on his fat legs, came to the village. My father looked thin and short compared to him. My father grabbed him by his belt and threw him to the ground. The wrestler rose to his feet and shook my

father's hand acknowledging his victory. Then some circus representatives came trying to convince my father to become a professional wrestler, but Freida was whining begging my father to refuse and never again take part in wrestling.

In 1932 authorities were taking away grains from farmers and denouncing the kulaks. My father was kind to people and couldn't take away what they had earned working so hard. One summer night NKVD officer came for him. They turned the house upside down: there was a search and they found a bag of grain that they had put there themselves. My father was arrested and taken to prison in Nikolaev. My father was charged of sabotage and wreckage of the plan of state grain procurement plan and he was to be sentenced to a long-term imprisonment.

In autumn the famine broke out. People were swollen from hunger and were dying in the streets. We were picking herbs and spikes in the field and my mother made some kind of flat cookies from them. My father got some bread in prison. He dried it and sent us a bag of dried bread from prison. My father was imprisoned for almost a year and a half. Mother Freida, a common Jewish woman, realized that she had to rescue him. She took whatever miserable savings she had and went to Kharkov that was the capital of Ukraine at the time. She was away for almost a month. She told us that she had an appointment in the Party Central Committee. I don't know whether it was for this reason or because Yezhov was appointed Minister of the state security, my father's case was reviewed and he was released. He resumed all his rights and his Party membership. He became chairman of the village council again.

In summer 1934 I finished school. I was drawn to medicine since childhood and I could watch pharmacists making medications in the pharmacy across the street from our house for hours. I entered a Medical School in Lugansk. I lived in a hostel. Regardless of my relatives' help I was starving and got very thin by the summer of 1935 and fell ill. At that time I was having training in Debaltsevo, a miners' town. There was an accident in a mine and seeing many dead bodies and blood I had a nervous breakdown. My father came there and took me back to Novopoltavka.

The famine was over and life was improving in our village. The people were joyful and the village looked revived. There was a new club building constructed in the center of the village where young people from the whole colony got together in the evening to dance and socialize. Many young people from our colony were studying in colleges in Odessa, Nikolaev and Kherson. They came to the village on vacation that summer. We danced, listened to the radio and watched movies. I spent in Novopoltavka almost a whole year till my health condition improved. When I returned to Lugansk, I went to study at the Pharmaceutical Faculty remembering my hobby when a child.

After finishing my school I got a job assignment to Nikolaev. I went to work as a pharmacist and also worked part-as an attendant in the hospital to earn more money. I dwelled behind a curtain in the kitchen and was dreaming of getting a room of my own. To stay away from this corner I often worked night shifts in the pharmacy and studied. In 1939 I entered the extramural department of Pharmaceutical College and became subject to military service like all other medical employees. I had exams twice a year and received all excellent marks for my studies.

Here in Nikolaev I met my first love Mikhail Kantor, a Jew. He studied in the Shipbuilding College. We met, went for walks in the town and visited my family in Novopoltavka dreaming about our future. In 1939 I was appointed director of the pharmacy in Peresadovka village of Nikolaev region. I rented a room from a local Jewish family. In summer 1940 Mikhail finished his college and got a job assignment to a military shipbuilding plant in the Far East in Vladivostok, in 7000 km

from home. He proposed to me. When I told my father about it he forbade me to get married. He said I had to finish my college first. I couldn't argue with my father. Mikhail left for his work and wrote letters full of love to me.

In 1940 I was mobilized to the army during the Finnish War. We received uniforms: sheepskin jackets and valenki [warm Russian felt boots] and went to Leningrad by train. When we arrived it was announced that the war was over. It lasted 6 months. We gave back our uniforms and returned home.

III. ASIA'S MEMORIES ON THE WAR

In April 1941 Mikhail came on vacation. He brought me a luxurious wedding gown and we began to prepare to the wedding. Peresadovka was not far from Novopoltavka. I often went home and Mikhail came to see me there. Our wedding was appointed for 22 June 1941. We were to have a civil ceremony and go to my family in Novopoltavka where everything was ready for the wedding. On 22 June we heard that the Great Patriotic War began. My Dad again forbade me to get married. He thought that this war was going to be no longer than the Finnish campaign and said it was not convenient time for getting married and that I had to wait until the war was over. And I missed my love for the second time. I packed my wedding gown into a box and returned to Peresadovka.

I went on working. I received lots of medications in the pharmacy department. My father volunteered to the army in early July 1941. On 7 August retreating Red army troops were moving through Peresadovka. I was enlisted into a field engineering brigade. I came to Nikolaev with this brigade. I submitted the poisons and cash, about three thousand rubles that I had to the pharmacy department. They accepted the cash and disposed of the poisons in the toilet. From this day of 7 August 1941 my army service began. I didn't have time to say goodbye to my grandmother, mother Freida and sister Braina.

In this engineering brigade I was chief of the so-called sanitary unit consisting of me, a sanitary bag, a gas mask, a small-caliber rifle, and a sanitary cart. I also acted as a pharmacy supervisor. We were retreating and somewhere near Krivoy Rog Germans actually exterminated our field engineering brigade. The remaining part of the brigade with slightly and severely wounded soldiers was retreating across the burning steppe. We covered about 70 km from Pervomaysk to Dnepropetrovsk hiding from the enemy's aircraft in the fields of wheat. We often found burnt bodies after air raids. Where did this fear that I felt at the mine disappear? I dragged the wounded, applied bandages and helped them as much as I could. So we reached Dnepropetrovsk where the sanitary department of the 4th Ukrainian Front was located. I was burnt when I came to Dnepropetrovsk: even my skin was peeling off my face. We were sent to take the wounded into a sanitary train heading to Pavlograd. As soon as we loaded them in the train it was bombed down. We went to make rafts for the wounded on the Dnieper and the enemy's aircraft were firing at us. God was just guarding me. I was sent to Lugansk from Dnepropetrovsk. My aunts were still in Lugansk. They were to evacuate. I helped them to board a train taking advantage of my officer's status. I was appointed chief of the chemical department of the pharmacy headquarters. It evacuated to Kuibyshev [present Samara, Russia, 1400 km from Kiev]. Sanitary headquarters of the Red Army was in Kuibyshev.

Some time in late September 1941 we arrived in Kuibyshev. Chief of the sanitary headquarters offered me to enter the Medical Academy in Kuibyshev, but, being raised as a patriot, I was eager to go to the front. I knew that my division was in the process of re-manning in Novosibirsk and I

managed to obtain permission to go there. This process of re-manning of our Red Banner Division #235 lasted from November 1941 till March 1942. On my birthday on 20 March 1942 we moved on to the Northwestern front by train. Our division deployed near Kulotino village holding defense from an SS division. We were there about 10 months and there was combat action through this whole period. I served in the sanitary unit and was chief of the pharmacy of the regiment. I slept in an earth hut, under one overcoat with another. I was young, slim and even pretty. Few times I received unequivocal proposals from officers to share their bed and become their combat girlfriend, as it was called then, but I took an oath to preserve my virginity and youth for Mikhail. They backed off gradually, but they treated me with respect and care and called me a 'fiancée.' Only one sergeant said with an ironical smile once: 'Don't touch Asia, she is keeping herself safe for Abram' and I slapped him on the face instantly. This was the only demonstration of anti-Semitism that I faced. I need to mention here that this guy got a good telling off from other officers and never offended me again.

UKAMA107

I corresponded with my father. He was a commanding officer of a my firing company and was severely wounded in combat action near Stalingrad. My father spent six month in hospital and then he left for Begovat town in Tashkent region where many residents of Novopoltavka were in evacuation. Mikhail found me via my father and we began to correspond. He wrote me about his love and our wonderful future and begged me to take care of myself. Mikhail was a military representative at his shipyard. He was a very good specialist and they didn't let him go to the front.

We shared duties at the front: I went with assistant doctors and sanitary attendants to pick the wounded at the front line. Our regiment got an important task to capture a prisoner for interrogation. The regiment often went to get combat intelligence and my task was to prepare everything necessary for 400 wounded. I loaded everything necessary on a horseback and rode the horse to haul the load to its destination. I mobilized a field hospital and received the wounded, cleaned their wounds and applied bandages and sometimes I closed their eyes and heard their final sighs.

I was elected secretary of the Komsomol unit of the company. I was preparing to join the Party and got a Party task: I became an agitator for German troops. Here I could make a good use of those German lessons that my friend Martha once gave me. I was in a vehicle with a loudspeaker where I was reading my announcements in German calling soldiers to drop their weapons and voluntarily come to our side. I spoke about their wives and children waiting for them in Germany. However, I did not usually manage to pronounce this part of my speech: there was a squall of firing falling onto the vehicle and I had to retreat. Once I was too late to retreat and a stray bullet wounded my leg. I had this bullet removed and my wound bandaged and continued my performance on my combat post.

UKAMA112

The conditions in our area of the frontline were very bad. It happened so that soldiers didn't get washed through a whole winter

being in trenches all the time. One of our routine tasks was fighting lice. We took soldiers' overcoats and underwear, throwing them into the snow: it became black with lice. We treated soldiers with special soap. Once in late November 1942 we were busy with our inspection. At that time General Gorokhov, member of the Military Council arrived to do inspection and saw us shaking out the overcoats. I reported to him according to the procedure: how many patients we had and how many were sent to hospital. I told him my name and military rank. He asked me more questions and when he heard that I had been taken to the front from the second year of Pharmaceutical College, he got angry: 'We need specialists, and she is fighting lice here.' He said this in a joking manner, but he was angry. A month later I was sent to the 28th Guard Division that had recently escaped from encirclement. Chief of medical logistics of the division had perished and I replaced him. This was a major's position and I was promoted to senior lieutenant.

I went across Ukraine with this division. We liberated a number of towns in the south and east, Moldavia, Poland, Romania and Bulgaria. Our unit was a rear unit of the frontline following the regiment. I might have perished many times, and I remained safe just by chance. I remember one incident. I was going to the medical unit to get medications and, as usual, there were a few wounded put into my cart. Once I was riding holding the head of a severely wounded soldier, when another air raid began. Somebody screamed calling for me and I rushed from where I heard the call. When I returned, there was no cart or my wounded patient: a bomb had hit my cart.

In early March 1943 our division liberated Krivoy Rog. There was to be a big concert on 8 March, International Women's Day, and I, being a member of the Party, was to speak in front of our women to raise their spirits telling them about our victories and the nearing victory over fascism.

In spring 1944 our division was moving across the south of Ukraine, near the area where I lived. I asked the commander of the division to let me go to Novopoltavka. Of course, I knew about thousands of Jews who perished on the occupied territory, but I still had hoped that my dear ones managed to survive. It was pouring with rain and the ground roads were muddy. I had a motorbike with a soldier to drive it and an officer to accompany me. The Ukrainian residents of our colony, who witnessed this horrific tragedy, told me the terrible news: all of my dear ones, 16 of them, had perished and their death was terrible. My family failed to evacuate. They departed on a cart, but it was too late. Fascists ordered them to go back home. Mother Freida broke her leg getting under a wheel. When fascists came to the village somebody spread a rumor that they had seen my father. Fascists captured 356 hostages telling people to find my father. Grandmother came to tell them that her son, my father, was in the army. She begged fascists to let go of the hostages. They released the hostages, but they buried my grandmother alive right there. Fascists raped all young girls who came to the village on vacation. They taunted them and made them walk across the village. They raped my sister Braina who had just finished the 8th form in 1941 before mother Freida's eyes. They beat the girls to death. My stepmother lost her mind. Fascists locked her in the basement of the village shop where she died. They tied ropes around her dead body and dragged her across the village. The rest of the Jews were taken to the outskirt of the village where they were ordered to dig two pits. They shot and threw children into one pit and adults – into another. The other villagers took spades and rakes and went to these graves. There were still hands or heads exposed sticking out of the pits. They backfilled the graves under the command of an officer.

When I returned to my unit, they understood that something terrible had happened. They told me later that I looked black from grief. Later my father wrote me that he had known about what happened, but kept it a secret from me.

The war was over, when I was in the Bulgarian town of Yambol near Sophia. We came there in the end of 1944. We were accommodated in the houses and I must say that Bulgarians greeted us happily and sincerely. I made friends with my landlady. I even have a photo where I was photographed wearing her suit that I borrowed. I was so tired of wearing my boots and soldier's shirt, but I had to wear them for a year after the victory. Our division stayed in Bulgaria until January 1946. I was responsible for medical supplies, and they didn't demobilize me.

UKAMA113

At that time Vasiliy Matveyuk, a military doctor, began to court me. Vasiliy is Ukrainian, but nationality didn't matter to me. Before the war he finished a Medical College and became a military doctor in the army. Vasiliy was single and was very kind and nice to me. He was telling me to marry him, but I was going to marry Mikhail. I liked Vasiliy, too, but I made no promises to him. I had to choose between Mikhail and Vasiliy. Vasiliy insisted on marrying me and Mikhail kept writing that he was dreaming about our wedding. I don't know what affected my choice: whether it was a saying 'A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush,' or my subconscious desire to rid my children from what the Jewish people and my family had to live through, but I married Vasiliy. I wrote Mikhail that his friend told me that he had an affair in Vladivostok. Of course, it was mere lying, but it was easier for me to refuse in this manner.

III. POST WAR LIFE

I introduced my father to Vasiliy and he liked him instantly. On 21 January we went to the district registry office in Odessa, but they didn't register us since it was a day of the mourning: an anniversary of Lenin's death. We had a civil ceremony on 23 January and arranged a small wedding party at my landlady's apartment. Vasiliy was a very kind and caring man. He loved me dearly and called 'mummy, my little sun and kitten.' My husband's mother and his sister Yevdokia treated me like their own kind, and Vasiliy's father, a farmer, found much in common with my father.

I demobilized and Vasiliy continued his service. We didn't have a place of our own, we didn't even have a kettle, everything we had was military property with inventory numbers. In 1947 our first daughter Galina was born in Odessa. In 1948 Vasiliy went on service to Germany and I stayed in the USSR with my baby. Vasiliy served there for two years and I rented a room in Nikolaev. I was the director of a pharmacy. Vasiliy came on vacation every 6 months and two years later after he returned he entered the Military Medical Academy in Leningrad. We lived there for few years and Vasiliy got a rare and sensitive profession, being a microbiologist. This period was one of the very sad periods in the Jewish history: struggle against cosmopolitism, anti-Semitic campaigns, the 'doctors' plot.' I must say, we hardly ever discussed this subject in our family and I didn't face any prejudiced attitudes at work. Only when we mentioned doctors as poisoners, my husband said he thought it was anti-Semitic propaganda and he didn't believe what newspapers wrote. The death of Stalin in 1953 was for us like for many other Soviet people. We were crying and thinking what was going to be ahead of us!

UKAMA114

In 1957 my husband got an assignment to Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy in the Far East, in 7500 km from Kiev and we arrived in Vladivostok where we were supposed to stay a few days to obtain documents. I knew that Mikhail was still working there and remembered his address. I went to see Mikhail who had been married for three years. Mikhail lost his breath when he saw me. Lydia, his wife, understood instantly who I was. She kissed me and invited me to come with Vasiliy and the children. She began cooking a dinner and Mikhail and I sat in his car to go pick my husband and children. He told me to sit beside him, kissing me and crying. And I was sobbing in his arms. I calmed down and Vasiliy, the children and I moved to Mikhail's home to stay a few days with them. Once I overheard their discussion when Mikhail was telling Vasiliy how much he loved me and how good I was and asked him to care for me. My husband told him about his love for me and they became friends. We left for Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy and corresponded with Mikhail and Lydia for several years. Then our correspondence gradually ended: I decided for it since I still loved Mikhail, but I couldn't leave Vasiliy or destroy Mikhail's family. I never saw Mikhail again. He died in 1965.

Shortly after we moved to Kherson, my father sold his house in Novopoltavka and we helped him to buy half a house in Kherson near where we lived. I worked as director of a pharmacy in Kherson for many years. I was secretary of the pharmacy department Party organization. We were rather well off, but we couldn't afford any luxuries: a car or a dacha. My husband, my girls and I spent vacations on resorts in the Crimea and Caucasus and traveled to Moscow, Kiev and Leningrad. In bigger towns we liked going to theaters, exhibitions and concerts. We had a mixed marriage and never celebrated Jewish or Christian holidays. Besides, we were both sincere communists. We raised our children to be internationalists. My daughters decided to choose their father's nationality. They are Ukrainian.

UKAMA117

Perestroika was a strong blow for my family, and it is not a deficit of material character that I mean, but it is of moral value. I have a rather good pension as a veteran of the war. My husband Vasiliy died in 1995, so little before our 'golden wedding.' It was so very hard for me.

I continue to be a Soviet person. During the Soviet regime I felt that people needed me: I was secretary of the Party organization of pensioners and often met with veterans of the Great Patriotic War. Now I don't think anybody needs me. My activities and ideals don't mean anything and I've lost a lot. Most importantly, I've

lost my idea and faith. I always attended meetings of veterans of our division in Odessa and also went to a meeting in Leningrad, but now I am hard up and cannot afford it. Besides, nobody wants this to happen. I am a client of Hesed and attend the Day Center, but I do not observe Jewish traditions or celebrate holidays at home. Victory Day has always been the biggest and most important holiday for me. On these days I feel a young and fearless girl again.

Mirrah Kogan
Odessa
Ukraine
Interviewer: Natalia Fomina
Date of interview: February 2003

Mirrah Lvovna Kogan is a little woman with short hair and shining blue eyes. She is full of optimism and kind attitude towards people. Mirrah lives with her older daughter and her family in her parents' apartment. Mirra's daughter is an invalid and the main part of the household is hers. The younger daughter lives in Israel and therefore Mirra cares for international politics very much. During our conversation, Mirrah's 10-year old great-grandson Mark came in to the room, listening to the story of his great-grandmother and looking at old pictures.

I. PRE WAR LIFE

My mother Edis Kogan was born in Rotmistrovka town, in Kiev province in 1883. A wealthy family of Grutskiye took my mother to their house. She helped them with the housework. They treated my mother very well. She learned to read and write in Russian from their son Shulim and she also learned to sew from his mother. When my mother was 15 or 16 Hanna Itzkovich, the wife of her cousin Semyon, invited her to move to Odessa. Hanna was a seamstress. Seamstresses at that time made shirts and decorated the women's underwear with lace. My mother learned all this from aunt Hanna. She became very professional seamstress and made high quality shirts. She got a job offer from a well-known garment factory in Odessa owned by Ptashnikov. My mother's shirts were sent to an international exhibition in Paris in 1900s where it was awarded a diploma. Next year the owner of the factory was planning to send my mother and her products again to another exhibition in Paris. Ptashnikov's son was supposed to go with her to represent the company. My mother already knew my father – since she was so pretty her fiancé didn't allow her to take the trip to Paris and my mother didn't go.


UKMKO004

My father Leib Kogan was born in Zinkovtsy town in Podolsk province, in 1873. My father studied at cheder for 3 years. After my grandmother died he went to work as a servant for a wealthy Jew in the town. In the late 1880s, when he was 15 he moved to some relatives in Odessa. He became an apprentice of a typesetter at the printing house of Kozman publisher. This publishing house was famous for publishing German and French textbooks and dictionaries for self-education. We had one such German textbook before the war – my father showed it to me. My father was eager to study somewhere, but he was too poor. However, by self-education he learned Russian, German and some French besides Yiddish and Hebrew. In a few years he managed to get a job of typesetter at the same printing house. He met my mother in early 1900s.

My parents got married around 1905. I am sure that they had a traditional Jewish wedding since both of them came from religious families and were raised religious. When my father got married his relatives helped him to get a job of a clerk in a fabric store, since working in printing house was hazardous because of the lead dust. My mother continued to work at the Ptashnikov factory.

I was born in 1919. I had been registered as Miriam in honor of mother's mother, but all my life they called me at work and at home Mirrah. On that day my mother's friend's daughter had a wedding party in our apartment. This idea occurred to my mother since her friend was not very wealthy. She started childbirth while she was helping in the kitchen. I was born at the moment when the bride and bridegroom were standing under the huppah.

I've lived my life in this apartment. One room here was my mother's shop, Munia and I had a children's room, another room was my parents' bedroom and we also had a dining room. There were two beds with metal balls in my parents' bedroom. Munia and I liked to play with them since we learned to unscrew them. There were also two mahogany wardrobes and a chest of drawers. There was a beautiful tiled stove in the dining room with a border of brown tiles and stucco of a girl's figure in the middle. There was a big table too, a floor mirror, a marble board and a beautiful clock with incrustation on it. There was a low table in the corner – we called it a samovar-table since there was a samovar on it. A big portrait of Leo Tolstoy was hanged above it. There were two rubber plants and a piano, on which I was taught to play.

My mother worked at home. My mother had a hemstitch machine and a sewing machine. At first my mother worked as a small entrepreneur and in 1936 she began to work for a central department store, only she did her work at home. She had many orders since she was a very skilled seamstress. She had so many orders that she even had to refuse sometimes.

My parents observed all Jewish traditions and rituals. I was very happy when Friday came since I knew that our mother wasn't going to do her work on that day. On Friday she wore a dark shawl and lit candles. Sabbath was a holy day, when our parents went to the synagogue. My mother made rolls with poppy-seeds and prepared a delicious dinner. My parents didn't work on this day, my mother didn't do any work at home. We, children were not required to observe Saturday since we were not raised religious.

We only had kosher food. I used to take chickens to the shochet who lived across the street. If we bought fresh meat we sprinkled it with salt. Salt absorbed blood and we washed the meat several times before it could be cooked. My mother made chicken broth and soups, chicken neck stuffed with eggs, flour, fat and onions, and made delicious gefilte fish. She made pies with jam and poppy seeds and honey cakes and white leikes – sponge cake. My mother also made marinated eggplants.

My parents spoke Yiddish to one another and Russian to us. I could understand Yiddish well. Our parents were moderately religious, since they didn't make me or my brother pray or go to synagogue. We were growing up like all other Soviet children in that time. We grew up as atheists. My brother Munia and I were Komsomol members and had up-to-date outlooks. The morale that we were inspired with at school was in no conflict with the moral principles that we learned at home.

When I was 11, I was very happy to become a pioneer. There were certain requirements to become a pioneer: one should be a good person and an industrious pupil. We had a school pioneer leader Zoya, and we became tutors in junior classes. We helped pupils with their studies, arranged parties and concerts, and arranged sport contests. We also had a joiner shop at school where we enjoyed working. We also got hot lunch or breakfast at the school canteen.

During the famine of 1933 we received buns at school. It was a hard period for our family. My mother took any job she could find. Repainting of shoes was in fashion and my mother learned to

UKMKO007

paint shoes. When pleated skirts came in fashion my mother learned to make them. We earned our living in this way and didn't starve. There were Torgsin stores opened at that time. One could buy food products in exchange for gold in those stores. My mother took all her golden jewelry: earrings, chain and rings to the Torgsin store. She baked bread from the flour that she got. She also added some sunflower seed wastes. All our relatives were trying to stick together in those hard years and my mother was supporting them. She was very responsive and kind. I remember an old Jewish man who joined us for lunch once a week after 1933. It was customary for Jewish families that once a week (not Sabbath) old Jews who couldn't provide food for themselves came to have lunch with a family they had an arrangement.

In 1936 I entered the Sanitary and Hygiene Faculty of Medical Institute. I had to study a lot there; it was a very challenging institute. I became a Komsomol member at the Institute. I took an active part in public life and had many friends among students. We enjoyed attending parties at the Institute. We didn't have any problems associated with the issues of nationality.

II. MIRRAH'S MEMORIES ON THE WAR

In May 1941 we had our graduation exams at the Institute. We were photographed for our graduation albums and had an arrangement at a restaurant for our prom – when the war began, on 22 June. My parents were in despair: in 1941 Munia went to Belostok with a construction team to build fortifications. Belostok was in Western Byelorussia. The radio said there were Germans there already. I ran to the post office to send a cable to my brother. Fortunately my brother and some others escaped from there. He returned to Moscow.

The Institute rescheduled our last exams in surgery for 25 June and we were to be examined for 'field surgery.' We passed our last exam and immediately 120 of our boys were sent to the front. I was assigned to a railroad clinic as physician. But we were raised by whole our life in such spirit of Soviet patriotism so that the only thought I had was to join the rows of defenders of the Motherland. I ran to the military registry office. In a few days I received a subpoena from them. I was to come to a gathering place with all necessary belongings. My mother didn't cry – she just helped me to get packed. My parents were concerned about my life, of course, but they did understand what motives I was driven by. I put on my new dress of crepe de Chine made by my mother, took my suitcase and my father and I went to the port. I boarded a boat to Kherson. I stood on the stern and my father was on the pier. The boat was full of recruits. We were singing a popular song 'Farewell, our dear town – tomorrow we are sailing off into the sea.' I met Zhenia Lerner on the ship, who also graduated from our Institute. We became friends.

From Kherson we were taken to Melitopol [360 km to the East from Odessa] where a division was formed. Zhenia Lerner and I were sent to the 973 rifle battalion in Konstantinovka village near Melitopol. In my company there were two doctors: my friend and I, two assistant doctors, two sanitary instructors and 24 sanitary carts and drivers. We also had boxes of bandage materials. I was the head of 3 sanitary platoons of the battalion. Commanders of the platoons were graduated from a military medical school. They had excellent knowledge of the contents of bandage packages.

They trained Zhenia and me, the assistant doctors and the attendants who were civilians and didn't have any knowledge of military procedures. We received uniforms 3 weeks later, before that I wore my dress of crepe de Chine and high-heeled shoes.

At the beginning of August 1941 Germans were near Kherson and Odessa was holding its defense. The commander of the battalion and I were sent to inspect the site for our deployment. Our truck drove into a village where a battle was on. This was the first time I saw Germans. We turned around and left the village. I knew how serious the situation was at the front and sent cables home every day telling my family to leave immediately. My parents obtained tickets from the military registry office. They had this right since I was at the front. In August they boarded a boat and on the way my mother convinced my father to go to see me in Melitopol. They believed it was so far away from the frontline. They got off the boat in Kerch and came to Melitopol. From there they were sent to Konstantinovka where I was. They saw me wearing my uniform and a gun holster. By that time they already knew that our army was retreating and that the situation was very serious. My parents stayed with me overnight and in the morning the commander of our regiment issued a certificate confirming that they were parents of a military heading for Kuibyshev. He ordered to take them to Melitopol. I shall never forget how my mother was crying when they were set on a cart and I heard her crying until I lost the sight of the cart.

We were soon moved to the vicinity of Zaporozhiye where we were actively involved in combat action. Our troops incurred big losses retreating. 1941-1942 were very hard years. In January our rifle regiment began to push Germans. In April 1942 we took hold of the railroad station of Lozovaya. This was quite a victory and even central newspapers wrote about this event. At the beginning of May 1942 we were involved in a big attack on Kharkov. I remember how we took hold of Sakhnovschina town and then lost it and then entered it again. In few hours the Germans, who held the town, burned it down and shot almost all the population. I cannot forget a girl – the Germans tied her by her legs to two birch trees bending them to the ground. When the trees unbent they tore the girl in half.

We were moving towards Kharkov. Near Barvenkovo our troops were encircled. This encirclement is known as Izyum-Barvenkovo one. It's hard to find words to express what it was like. Dozens of thousands of people were in the encirclement. Germans continuously bombed us. During one such bombardment a splinter hit my leg. The leg got swollen and we had to cut the boots to pull it off. Zhenia and I were in a ravine with bunches of people around. German soldiers were descending in rows firing the area. I got wounded by a bullet through my buttocks. Germans chased us out of the ravine and separated those that could move from those that were not able to walk. Zhenia took me aside and sat beside me. In order to stay with me she injured her leg with a medical scissors. Zhenia and I took off our military shirts – we had blouses underneath and were going to pretend that we were civilians involved in evacuating the trenches. Germans brought trucks and Zhenia pulled me to a truck where two tall Germans were watching the boarding process. One of them asked another pointing at me 'Jude?' and the other replied 'Nicht Jude.' This saved my life. We were driven to Barvinkovo and accommodated in the building of a school fenced with barbed wire. There was a hospital for prisoners-of-war deployed at school.

Zhenia got very scared when I lost consciousness because in my delirium I was giving orders and that might disclose our identity. Zhenia covered me with her body. My wound was healing very slowly. It was impossible to remove the splinter from my leg and I could only wait until it got out by itself or the wound would heal with the splinter inside.

Three weeks later we were told to come outside to go to the railway station. Zhenia and I tried to hide in a classroom, but the Germans found us and pushed us outside. Other prisoners were walking to the railway station. There were people on both sides of the street looking at the prisoners. The Germans ordered us to follow the others. There was a big truck at the entrance of the school building. We went behind the truck and plunged into the crowd. The crowd closed down and began to move backwards. A woman took us to her house. When the mistress of the house went to the kitchen to fetch us some milk I grabbed her pass from a chest of drawers. All I could think about was how to escape.

At night we left Barvenkovo and started moving to the direction of the frontline. I knew the area very well – this was where our battalion was located. We also walked during the day since we pretended we were civilians. This was at the beginning of July – it was very hot and the sand was overheated. My leg was still swollen and I had to go barefoot. In few days we reached a village from where the Soviet troops left few hours before we came. There were Germans in the village, but our troops were in a forest across the nearby river. We came to the road leading to a bridge across the river. There were women walking on the road. We went to the bridge and when we came close to the women they turned out to be German soldiers patrolling this section of the road. Zhenia and I were captured and taken to the commandant's office. We told them our story and I showed the pass that I stole from that kind woman. Germans ordered us to polish a few pairs of boots and buttons on their uniforms. At noon 3 men came and we were taken to a field by the Germans. We were given spades and ordered to dig a pit. Then we were ordered to stand with our back to the pits. Germans fired their guns. The men fell into the pit and Zhenia and I were told 'Veg!' [Go!] and we ran away at breakneck pace.

In the evening we reached a distant farm and ran into the house. An old woman came out saying 'What do you want? I don't have anything.' We were telling her our story, when we heard screaming from the village. So she let us go to the attic. The old woman removed the ladder to the attic and we hid in straw. It turned out that a Romanian division came to replace the German troops. Romanians began to rape women of every age. After they left in the morning the village woman let us out.

So we moved on from the occupied territory from one village to another. We met another group of our disguised military. We didn't tell each other our names for the reasons of safety. However, we all agreed to move in the direction of the frontline. We kept walking at night. I continued to apply bandage on my leg. During the day Zhenia and I came to villages to do any work we could find: in kitchen, gardens and farms. We received bread or potatoes for our work. We shared food with our fellow travelers.

We were trying to avoid Germans on our way. We found out what settlements were on our way so that we can tell the people we met while we were heading there. Winter began. We didn't have any warm clothes. We wrapped our legs with old rags that we got in a village. We had boots on, some old jackets and sack cloth on the head. At the end of 1942 a village woman gave us shelter. We were helping her about the house. At the end of January 1943 the Soviet troops got hold of Stalingrad and were advancing to the west. The frontline moved to the village where we were staying. At night we heard the roar of the front. Zhenia and I ran out of the house and hid in the snow. We saw Germans running followed by our troops. It was a tank unit. We shouted 'Guys! Guys!' I cannot tell you what we felt. The soldiers took us to the house and gave us hot tea to get warm.

Zhenia and I had to go through investigation. It was a war and we had been in the rear of the enemy for 8 months. We were at a few holding centers and got stuck in Yelets due to typhoid. In April 1943 we came to a big holding camp in Podolsk near Moscow. We stayed in a barrack. We were interrogated by an investigation officer. We told him about our adventures. They were checking every part of our story thoroughly. After some time I received a certificate confirming that I went through the investigation successfully. After this investigation was over Zhenia and I got a short leave. We went to my parents in Kuibyshev where they were in evacuation since August 1941. I didn't recognize my father and mother at the railway station in Kuibyshev; they had grown so old. They spent eight months without any information about me.

In October 1943 Zhenia and I got an assignment to the NKVD authorities. I was sent to Kizil, in Perm region, to a camp for German, Romanian, Italian, Czech and Hungarian prisoners-of-war. I was appointed as chief of the sanitary unit. Zhenia was with me. We were responsible for their health condition, meals. It was so very hard to communicate with former enemies after all we saw at the front and in encirclement. We submitted reports that we were in encirclement and captivity and just couldn't work with prisoners-of-war. It lasted half a year. At the beginning of April 1944 we were sent to the Crimea: our sanitary unit and all management of the camp. We were to arrange camps for prisoners-of-war. Zhenia and I kept submitting our requests to be transferred to the frontline forces. In August 1944 we received an order from Moscow dismissing us from NKVD. We were sent to the evacuation hospital in Odessa.


UKMKO008

I called my parents when Zhenia and I received an assignment in the Crimea. We went from Simferopol to Odessa together with my parents. On the way my mother got typhoid all of a sudden. She was in a very poor condition when we arrived in Odessa. She was taken to the hospital and my father and I were settled at our acquaintances', since our apartment was occupied by someone else. This happened at Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. I was staying with mother every moment. My father kept praying. My mother died at night on the 3rd day of Sukkoth. We buried Mother at a common cemetery since there were no burials allowed on the Jewish cemetery in 1944. Seven days after my mother died my father sat shiva on the floor. He was desolate and never overcame this despair. He passed away in June 1945. My parents lived together for over forty years.


UKMKO009

My brother Munia was at the front all through the war. He was an artilleryman. He was in Bulgaria when the war was over. He demobilized in the rank of captain in 1946 and returned to Odessa. My brother changed his name from Haim to Michael for his son to have a more common patronymic. My brother died in 1993.

III. POST WAR LIFE

I met my future husband David Teplitskiy in the hospital. We got married in December 1945, and had our marriage registered at a

civilian registry office. David was born in Kharkov in 1913. He was Jewish. David was a member of the Communist Party and in 1933 he was appointed to be the chairman of the collective farm in Kolomna near Moscow. In 1936 he was recruited to the army. He finished a school of communications operators at the army and served in a communications unit. He went to the front from Batumi. He served at a rifle regiment and was the deputy political chief of the regiment. He was shell-shocked in Bulgaria in 1945. David demobilized from the army in the rank of major in 1946. He was awarded orders and medals. David became the chief power engineer at a wine trust in Odessa. He was the heart of any company and a very nice and smart man.

My friend Zhenia married a Jewish man from Riga in 1950s. They lived in Latvia. Zhenia gave birth to a daughter. In 1970s their family moved to Israel. Regretfully, our correspondence faded out gradually.

My brother Munia was at the front all through the war. He was an artilleryman. He was in Bulgaria when the war was over. He demobilized in the rank of captain in 1946 and returned to Odessa.

In 1946 the hospital where I worked was closed and I stayed to work at the Lermontov recreation center at the orthopedic and trauma department as a surgeon. I studied therapy at a short-term course at the Institute of Resort Science. I worked at the Russia Health Center from 1950 until the end of 1992, that is 42 years, except for few months during the period of the Doctors' Plot in 1952. There were few very skilled Jewish doctors at the department of health of Odessa. Authorities decided to remove them from their high official position and appointed them to work at our Health Center. Since there were no vacancies, our Chief doctor, a Jew, decided to transfer me to the tuberculosis clinic. The reason was that I came to work later than any other employees. According to the law they were supposed to offer me a job that was my specialization. However, I never worked with tuberculosis and I claimed this at court. But I had to go to work before the court made a decision. I took up my new job, but in a few months I returned to my previous work. The Doctors' Case stopped after Stalin died in 1953. I was grieving after Stalin. It was a tragedy for our family. Our country won the victory over the Nazi Germany in WWII under the rule of Stalin. We didn't know what the future would bring.


UKMKO110

My daughter Reeda was born in 1947. My second daughter Lora was born in 1954. The girls were much loved. I did my best to make our home cozy and warm, like it was when my mother was alive. We celebrated all birthdays and holidays. We mainly celebrated the Soviet holidays. Our mostly cherished holiday was 9 May, the Victory Day. On this occasion, for several years I went to Lozovaya station [Kharkov region] were veterans of our division, who liberated Lozovaya station in April 1942, got together. Pioneers of the local school found us, and the authorities invited us to visit them.

Our children knew they were Jewish. We were teaching them to be honest, kind and hardworking. Our daughters studied in a Soviet school and had Jewish and Russian friends. There was no anti-

Semitism in our surroundings and my daughters didn't face any at school: Odessa has always been an international town. Our family was well to do by Soviet standards: we had a 4-room apartment in the center of the town, a TV set, a fridge and other electrical appliances.

UKMKO111

In 1970 my husband had a severe stroke, he was paralyzed. He lost his speaking ability and memory. He didn't speak and couldn't remember one word. But God saved him. I did all I could to return him to life. I taught him to speak and walk. Gradually he became to come back to normal life. He lived 11 years from then. In 1981 he needed to be operated on prostate adenoma. He passed away on the 3rd day after the surgery. This happened on 14 February 1981. We buried David at a common cemetery near my parents.

The Jewish organizations, Sokhnut and Joint, started restoration of Jewish life in Odessa. Jewish Charity Center Gmilus Hesed, established in 1992 has supported our family a lot – they care about people and always offer assistance. They provided a wheel chair and a special mattress to my daughter Reeda. Employees of Gmilus Hesed treat me with great respect and invite me to their events. I received a hearing device from them. I am invalid (grade II) of the Great Patriotic War; I have orders and medals: a medal for combat accomplishments, for encirclement and wounds and Order of grade II of the Great Patriotic War.

Now once a year I go to the synagogue. I've never believed in God, but I've always lived according to Jewish traditions. I have wonderful daughters, sons-in-law and three beloved grandchildren. They remember that they are Jews and they know the history and traditions of their people.

Susanna Sirota
Kiev
Ukraine
Interviewer: Ella Orlikova
Date of interview: August 2003

Susanna Sirota is a very pleasant energetic old lady, though it's hard to call her an 'old' lady. She lives with her husband in the Pechersk district in Kiev, one of the oldest and most beautiful districts in Kiev. Her spacious two-bedroom apartment of the 1950s design is very clean. She has preserved furniture, carpets and crockery, bought in the 1960s, in very good condition. The white furry cat, the hostess' favorite, is 'master' of the house, undoubtedly. There are many books in the house: Russian and Ukrainian classics, and modern and historical literature. She is fond of new publications about Kiev and Jewish residents of Kiev published recently. Susanna and her husband are very hospitable. They have freshly made pies to treat their guests. Susanna has a very educated manner of speaking. She used to work as a guide and she is always eager to tell more details about things.

I. PRE WAR LIFE

I come from Priluki, a quiet town in Poltava province [200 km from Kiev] on the bank of the Uday River flowing into the Sulah River that flows into the Dnieper. Once it used to be a navigable river while now it is a clean, picturesque river buried in sedge and cane plants. The town was buried in verdure. The water was of the best quality and even now fruit a vegetables growing in the town taste different. There was a big synagogue with a huge dome, a very interesting building. In the 1930s Soviet authorities closed it down like all other religious establishments [struggle against religion]. After the Great Patriotic War it housed a cinema theater and in 1989 it began to operate as a synagogue again. There was no specifically Jewish neighborhood in the town. The Russian, Ukrainian and Jewish population were good neighbors and got along well. Jews were tradesmen and craftsmen. The only pharmacy in the town was Jewish and there were Jewish doctors and teachers in the town.

My grandfather came to Priluki from Zhitomir. My grandfather was religious. He prayed with his tallit on and he had a mezuzah at the entrance to his house. He touched it every time before entering his home. My grandfather had a seat of his own at the synagogue where he went on Saturday and all holidays. There were many religious books in his house. He cherished them, kept them on a special shelf and didn't allow anybody to touch them. There were Russian classic books in the house. Everybody could take and read them, but not grandfather's books. He was well read and understood that the main wisdom was to let other people live their life. My grandfather spoke Yiddish to my grandmother at home, but my grandfather also had fluent Ukrainian, the main language of communication in Priluki. Grandfather died in 1930, when I was 7. He had spent almost a year in a 'yellow house' – this was how we called a mental hospital in our town, before he died.

My grandmother and grandfather had a house, if this is a proper word to call it, with a thatched roof that always leaked when it rained and they had to place washtubs to collect the leaking water. There was a hallway and a big room. All members of the family slept in this room and in the kitchen. There were ground floors in the house. There was a backyard and few fruit trees, a dog and a cat.

My father Avraam Sirota, the fourth child in the family, was born in 1895. My father finished cheder like other boys in the family. This is all the education he got. My father was a painter. My father wasn't religious and he wasn't an atheist. He just didn't talk on this subject. My father read many contemporary books. He considered himself an advanced Soviet man. He was grateful to the Soviet regime for having equal rights and so were many others in his circle.

In 1921 my father went to order some medication in a pharmacy. He met Anna Ghivetz, a pharmacist. They got married shortly afterward. They registered their marriage in a registry office. They didn't have a wedding party. After they got married my parents moved to Lubny, 95 km from Priluki, probably looking for a job.

UKSSI002

My mother Anna Ghivertz, born in 1892, was an orphan and had no dowry, although her father Nathan Ghivertz lived in Priluki. I remember him. He was a fine looking old man with a long beard, very handsome. They say that at that time in the 1900s Nathan was wealthy and respectable, in the 1910s, probably trying to escape from pogroms my grandfather and his family moved to Priluki. His first wife, my grandmother, died at childbirth giving birth to her third baby, who was my mother.

My mother had to live on her own at the age of 14. She studied in a Jewish school for girls in Priluki living with her aunt. My mother was not religious. At the age of 17 my mother became an apprentice of a pharmacist. This was a good profession, but it didn't bring much money. My mother was poor and lived in a room in the pharmacy.

UKSSI006

I was born in Lubny in 1923. After a short while we returned to Priluki. My first memory of the childhood is my brother's birth. He was born in another room in our home. Everybody was excited and I contracted this excitement. I liked my brother a lot when he was small. When he grew older we used to fight, but in general we got along very well. My mother worked as a cashier in a store and my father picked up any job he could find: he worked as a loader or laborer.

In 1933 there was famine. I remember my classmates fainting from hunger. People were like this: they were eager to help others as much as they could even when they were on the edge of death. They shared the little that they had. It was the period of survival. My father worked at the grain supply company. He loaded grain with a spade and brought home whatever got into his boots. When mulberries and elderberries grew my brother and I used to climb trees eating these berries and then having a stomachache. During the period of famine villagers from surrounding villages were coming to Priluki. They told their

stories: 'Communists came and took away everything. There was no food left, people were dying and buried in the yard where they lived.'

However, we all strongly believed that those were temporary hardships and that life would improve. We believed we were the happiest children in the world living in the USSR, the country of equality and justice.

I remember the first radio transmission in Priluki. It was such event! I remember the first bulb in the street and then power lines were installed in houses. We used to have kerosene lamps with wicks and made ink from soot.

Since my parents were not religious we didn't celebrate any religious holidays. We only celebrated Soviet holidays and birthdays. My grandmother made matzah. We visited her to pay tribute to traditions. She told us about holidays, but we didn't listen. We were atheists and learned at school that 'religion was opium for the people.' We thought my grandmother was so hopelessly obsolete, but we loved her, of course, and she loved her grandchildren.

In 1938 I joined Komsomol believing that young people with advanced ideas had to be in Komsomol. We were young, optimistic and enthusiastic. And, if there was a war to happen tomorrow we were ready to win a victory, this was what our favorite song said.

I had a fiancé named Kolia Makarov. We had been friends for 5 years. He was one year above me at school. He was Ukrainian. This was my first love; I was 14. It was beautiful. We went to the cinema and to the park, did homework together, dreamed about long and happy life together and kissed, but nothing else, God forbid. I still have a strong feeling about this wonderful sensation. In 1941 he was an infantry lieutenant. That we were of different national origin was of no importance to our parents. I corresponded with him and in May 1941 his parents went to visit him in Belarus and took me with them. This was the last time I saw him. Kolia perished at the front in 1942.

II. SUSANNA'S MEMORIES ON WAR

I finished school on 20th June 1941. I took my championship certificate and went to enter the College of Physical Culture in Moscow. I arrived in Moscow on the morning of 22 June 1941. Moscow was crowded at this time of the day. We got off the train and heard the word 'War.' It was clear that I had to go back home where my mother, my father and my brother were waiting for me.

It was hard to get back. Priluki was in encirclement and the railroad was under continuous bombing. I didn't have any money left and I showed my Komsomol membership card to get a drive on military trains and then I had to walk. I came to Priluki at night. Our window was open and I got inside through the window. My mother said 'Why did you return? We cannot get out of Priluki.' I don't remember how we got this information, but we knew that Jews had to escape Germans. Our trip lasted a month and a half before we arrived in Kazakhstan, 2400 km from home. It was a big village on the Ural River. There was a Russian and Kazakh population and Ukrainians who either arrived there during the czarist time or escaped from collectivization. There were many people in evacuation, many Jews among them. There were no jobs and many people wanted to go to other places looking for a job.

I went to work at school as a physical culture [education] teacher having my championship certificate. I was also a senior pioneer tutor. My mother also took any work she could get selling

things or working as a cashier. My father was in Sverdlovsk in the Ural. We corresponded with him. He worked as a rigger at the Ural machine building plant. Since he was a worker he was not allowed to take his family with him.

On the eve of 1942 instructors from a military unit visited our school. There were radio operators showing us how radio equipment operated. I got very interested in it and they taught me Morse code. I was so eager to get to the front to defend my Motherland that it took me no time to learn it. I was dreaming of meeting my fiancé Kolia. By spring I finished my tractor driving training. I and another girl decided to walk to the district committee in the nearest town of Uralsk to request to send us to the front. They accepted us immediately.

Since I had school education and knew Morse code, and being a sports girl, they sent me to a school of radio operators in Moscow. It was a school for girls and there were many Jewish girls in it. I was a head girl in physical culture classes and was an active student. We were hungry and ate heartily only when we were on duty in the kitchen once a month, but we were cheerful and joyful.

After finishing this school I was taken to a partisan school. We were accommodated in a hostel. It was like paradise: first, we were given enough food and then there were boys and girls of over 100 nationalities. There were Jewish students as well. It was a big school for radio operators, field engineers, intelligence and other partisan experts.

UKSSI011

We were taught to act in the German rear. We studied German very thoroughly. We were to learn to not get lost in a strange town, escape from shadowing, establish radio operations unnoticed and come to our apartment and leave unnoticed. It was as enthralling as a game, but when they began to teach us how to have a smoke or spend a night with an officer we got scared. I said 'I shall not go to the rear. I shall work in a partisan unit, but not in the rear.' We cried all night through and in the morning we went to refuse. We were sent to partisan units to establish communications or replace a radio operator. I went only once. They protected me fearing that fascists would recognize me as a Jew.

This was summer 1943 when we had to do a landing task. I had some previous experience. When you are twenty you do not have fear. The air current catches you and you lose your breath watching the ground coming closer. Many landed in wrong places: on high trees when it is impossible to cut of parachute slings, or in the wrong location, but the most awful was to get onto the enemy's ground. However, I got lucky.

We were to transfer documents to a radio station, power supply for the radio and instructions. I stayed in a partisan unit for about a week. I lived in a dugout with other girls. They didn't know my name or surname or anything at all. Oksana Sizova was my conspiratorial name. Everybody else had conspiratorial names. There were individuals who had to get to the town to establish communications and stay with an underground unit.

I was a radio operator of the highest category. By that time I became a candidate to the Party. This was the only way we knew we had to go: become pioneers, then Komsomol and finally Party members.

In summer 1943 young guys came to our school. One of them was Lev Markelov, two years younger than I, born in Nizhni Novgorod in 1925. He was Russian. He told me later that he didn't know the word 'Jew' before he met me. When they said 'zhyd' [kike] he thought that it was about a greedy and evil person, but it never associated with national origin. Lev was very talented and in no time he grasped specifics of our profession. He had sensitive hands and excelled in transmissions. We became friends.

I was in the rank of lieutenant at the beginning and Lev was promoted to a captain. I liked him and then I thought that I was to get married some time anyway. I was 21 and he was 19. I knew from my mother's letter that Kolia was gone and I also knew that I would never meet anyone like Kolia. Our radio station arranged a great wedding party for me and Lev. We got trophy food products and trophy cognac left by Germans. We had an official civil registration on 11 May 1945 after Victory day. I remember that happy day of 9 May 1945. It was a bright sunny day and lilac bushes were in blossom. We were feeling happy and then we saw that there was a registry office where we were walking and we went in there and had our marriage registered.

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III. POST WAR LIFE

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In 1945 my son Valentin was born and at that time Lev got a job offer to work in the embassy in Bucharest in Romania. My husband had a sensitive job receiving and transmitting messages. We had many impressions of our life abroad. It was a different world. We had everything we needed living in an embassy apartment. Our boy had nice food, clothes and toys.

This trip ended in 1948 and we returned to Kiev. Our neighbors were KGB employees. Each family regardless of their number occupied one room. There were about five families residing in this apartment. There were 3 gas stoves in the kitchen, one bathroom and one toilet. There was a line to get to the toilet in the morning. Our parents moved in with us and we partitioned the room with wardrobes and curtains. We got along well with other tenants. When we got our first TV with the screen as big as a palm our neighbors came in to watch it even if it was time to go to bed or my husband had his work to do.

After returning from Bucharest where I was a housewife I went back to work in the KGB. I was employed by a secret department fighting banditry. At first it didn't occur to me that attitudes toward me and my Jewish colleagues were changing. Once the former secretary of our party

committee advised me in a friendly manner 'you shouldn't mention anywhere that you are a Jew.' Then somebody said that I should have kept my partisan passport where I was Oksana Sizova, Ukrainian.

In 1951 my second son Alexandr was born. A year later I felt like going back to work and my mother was to take care of the children when I realized that all Jews were being removed from our organization. They didn't announce any reasons for firing people due to the reduction of staff, but then it was impossible to get another job. As for the Doctors' Plot, we believed at its beginning that it was true and that the Soviet power could not do the wrong thing. We thought that what happened was done rightly and if there was something wrong we believed that it happened because Stalin was not aware of it. However, looking at the surnames of those they denounced every day finding out that most of them were Jewish names we felt uneasy. It couldn't be true that only Jews were enemies of the people.

Then Lev's management called him. He was working in the KGB 1st department (work abroad, i.e., intelligence). They told him that he should either leave his family and continue working for them or quit. He refused to leave from work. They told him openly that they were firing him for his connections with Jews. Lev went to work as forensic detective at the Ministry of Internal Affairs. He received a very low salary. Life was hard from both material and moral sides.

Stalin's death in 1953 was a big private grief for us. It was great personal grief for me. Many years were to pass and I had to read many books and meet with many people to have the scales removed from my eyes and see the horror of this regime in a different light. I was a member of the Party and it's non-existent now. Only uneducated people still believe in those crimes of Stalin and his retinue. My husband still believes in Stalin. We argue with him, but he doesn't understand.

Later I was employed as a secretary and my knowledge of Ukrainian proved to be very useful. It was the ideological organization of the Party regional committee. I was very grateful that my boss employed me without knowing of my Jewish identity and later, when he found out the truth he supported me and treated me with deep respect. We invited the best experts in science, engineering, art and policy sending them to read lectures in various organizations. Once my boss called me and said 'get prepared to become a tour guide.' This was my revelation. Kiev, museums, the history of houses and streets, very interesting. I had to read a lot and shuffle mountains of books. To earn a kopeck one had to talk for a ruble and have knowledge for 100 rubles. Later I got an offer to become secretary of presidium of the association that employed rectors of colleges and universities. I was responsible for taking minutes of the presidium once a week or two. I actually worked at three jobs from 6 am until late in the evening. I conducted tours in the morning, then worked as a secretary and then took to the presidium business.

My mother did the housekeeping and looked after the children. We put out a certain amount of money for each day of the calendar for food. Sometimes there was no money left at the end of the month. My mother made nice pastries and I learned from her. We had gefilte fish, sweet and sour beef stew, and later we began to cook pork stew as well. We didn't buy matzah and my parents didn't talk about Jewish holidays. We celebrated Soviet holidays. The biggest holiday for us was Victory Day. Our fellow comrades visited us and we recalled the past days and sang songs of those years.

My husband graduated from law school and got promoted to chief of militia department in the rank of colonel. He had his hard times. He worked at nights being a forensic detective. He captured criminals. There was a big case of counterfeiters, forgery of bonds. This kind, decent and honest

man began to drink. He still has this habit, though he is an old man now. My husband has always treated me and the children with love and tenderness, he is the head of the family, but of course, everything was done as I wanted.

We didn't observe any Jewish traditions and spoke Russian in our family. Our sons identified themselves as Soviet people. They don't know any traditions. They don't care about national origin and value personal merits.

We had a quiet life. We worked, went to the cinema and theaters. My husband was a football fan and often went to the stadium in summer. In summer we spent vacations at the seashore. We liked cruising down the Dnieper to the Crimea. It didn't cost much. In the evening we liked having a stroll in the park.

We were horrified about perestroika. We couldn't believe that this avalanche of things published in newspapers and spoken on TV could have been possibly happening in our quiet lives. We felt some uncertainty. We, dedicated communists in the past, felt like criminals, but we didn't know anything like this and lived a common lie like everybody else. 'Big shots' of party officials found their ways promptly and became millionaires and the majority of the population became poor in a jiffy. They lost their savings. Our pension is not enough to pay for utility services, not to mention medications. When I see intelligent people searching for food leftovers in garbage and eating whatever they find I find it terrible. It was out of the question in the USSR.

A good thing about this period is rebirth of the Jewish life. I never felt anything Jewish about myself, but when in the 1990s I heard songs in Yiddish for the first time I understood. I had spontaneous tears in my eyes. I recalled that my father used to sing them in my childhood, but then he probably forgot them all. Hesed is very important. I like to socialize with people and Hesed offers very interesting subjects for discussions and I like to be there. I haven't become religious, of course, and I never will, but Jewish history and traditions are very interesting and I enjoy learning them. It is wonderful that they provide assistance to poor people. They provide medications and food and take care of us. For the first time in my life I identified myself as a Jew.

UKSSI015

Hertz Rogovoy
Kiev
Ukraine
Date of the interview: October 2004
Interviewer: Ella Levitskaya

Hertz Rogovoy was interviewed by me in Hesed, after Hertz went through with reception of patients. He works as a volunteer doctor in Hesed. Hertz is a middle-aged man, with a mop of grey hair, bright young eyes and a splendid smile. As a consequence of a severe battle injury Hertz became handicapped. He is afflicted with lameness and leans on a stick. Nonetheless, Hertz is a very sociable and brisk man. He is very pleasant-looking man, an interesting personality and good company. He has a great sense of humor. Hertz was an interesting interlocutor, having his own view on the events, with unusual interpretation of familiar notions and events.

I. PRE WAR LIFE

My father's family lived in Kiev before revolution of the year of 1917. Only a few Jews were allowed to live in Kiev. The privilege was given to the lawyers, doctors, merchants of the 1st and 2nd Guilds and certain craftsmen, whose services were in demand. Craftsmen were allowed to reside on the streamside part of Kiev, Podol.

Of course, the entire family was religious. I did not happen to meet such a religious man as my mother's father. My grandfather always wore a kippah on his head. He took it off only before going to bed. My grandfather kept to praying and reading religious books. I remember a huge bookcase in his room very well. There were a lot of religious books in it. My grandfather was an inveterate stickler of all Jewish traditions. Once we came for Pesach. I remember how my grandfather carried out my first paschal seder. Grandfather clad in white attire was sitting on the pillows, as it was supposed for a king. I remember all seder rites- when I was to steal a piece of matzah, afikoman from my grandfather. I also recollect the wine glass for the Elijah ha-nevi, placed in the middle of the table. Grandfather told me to look at the glass. I was looking very closely, and it seemed to me that there was getting less wine in the glass. I was sure it was Elijah ha-nevi who sipped wine from the glass. I remember the wine goblets, placed on the table- they were beautiful, made of blue glass. Seder lasted for a long time, and it was tiresome for everybody, but grandfather did not admit any reductions. During the war grandfather was evacuated. When he came back, he had not found his books. He began to collect religious books once again. I cannot perceive how he could manage to get such books in the former USSR. He was able to collect many antique religious books.

UKGRO003

Father's wooing was successful and at the beginning of 1912 my parents got married in Kiev. It was a traditional Jewish wedding. My elder brother Grigoriy was born in 1912. Five years later my second brother Lev was born. He died the year when I was born, 1924. Mother and Lev went to Zhitomir

to see her relatives, and Lev died there. He was buried in Zhitomir in the Jewish cemetery, next to my grandmother.

I was born in August 1924. I was named Hertz after the eldest brother of my father, who died a year before, in 1923.

The store where my father worked was most likely nationalized by the new regime. My father could only regain footing due to NEP. First he began working as a salesman in the store, gradually became the owner of the store. Unfortunately the NEP period was of short duration. When the Soviet regime decided to do away with private entrepreneurship and transfer to planned economy private entrepreneurs, so-called nepmans ['NEPist, people dealing with NEP' in Russian] at that time were suffocated by taxes. Those taxes could be changed 3-4 annually. Hardly had one tax been paid, when another was levied, exceeding the preceding one 2 or 3 times as much. Smart people dropped everything and escaped abroad. Unfortunately my father did not turn out to be sagacious. He was arrested as an offender of tax laws. He went through a trial and was sentenced to three years in the GULAG. After the trial my father was sent to the camps in Solikamsk [Russia, about 2000 km from Kiev]. Even after he was released, he was not entitled to return home, he had to be exiled for a while.

Mother did not work before father's exile. When my mother and I were left on our own, she found a job in some sort of workshop. Of course we lived from hand to mouth. The most jovial event for me was when mother took me to the market, which was located close to our house, and bought me a big rice patty. It was a real feast! We were starving. But my mother strove to support me.

I remember the famine of 1932-33 [famine in Ukraine]. There were a lot of peasants, who left villages for the city, trying to survive from starvation. Their bodies were swollen from famine. Some of them could not walk, stretching their hands for alms, others kept lying, without being able even ask for alms. In the morning there were found corpses of people who died by hunger.

As a rule my parents spoke Russian to me at home, and they spoke Russian between themselves. If they wanted to conceal something from me, they spoke Yiddish. I felt insulted because they kept secrets from me. That is why I voluntarily got the rudiments of Yiddish, and later on I began to comprehend all they were saying. Of course, I pretended I did not understand a thing. I was pleased to find out their secrets without them knowing about it.

The life was hard and it was difficult to stick to all Jewish traditions. I do not remember if we observed kashrut at home. But my father never missed any religious holiday in the synagogue. He obligatorily celebrated Yom Kippur, fasted the proper way. It was sacred to him. We always celebrated Pesach at home. Beforehand we cleaned the house from chametz. All holidays were celebrated strictly according to the traditions. Father knew how to read Hebrew and pray. I do not remember how other holidays were celebrated.

I went to school at the age of seven. At that time the first grade started at the age of 8, and I was accepted in the pre-school. It was a Russian-speaking school. I cannot say that I was an outstanding pupil, but I was a pretty good one. I liked such subjects as literature, history, geography, nature studies. I always got excellent marks for those subjects.

There were a lot of Jewish children in our class. Neither teachers nor other pupils pointed at us. They were not antagonistic. Sometimes during the street frays you could hear the word 'zhyd'

['Zhyd' is an abusive nickname of Jews in the Soviet Union], blurted out in the ardent fray, but it never happened in school. I do not remember pre-war anti-Semitism.

My father and I were very close. He loved me very much, maybe for the reason that I was the junior. Father was a very intelligent man, well read and politically-minded. My friends respected him, even when we became adults. My friends took humiliation of the Jewish people very hard.

Of course after all father had to go through, he did not trust the Soviet regime very much, and due to that we argued with my father, if a discussion of a 14-15 years old boy with a wise grown-up man can be taken for a dispute. Father mocked at my ideals. I was brought up by the Soviet school, in a certain spirit. Knowledge came much later, when I learnt from life. At that time my life was short, tiny and unperceived.

My father was given lodging by local authorities. It was one-room in the wooden house in the center of Kiev, Krasnoarmeyskaya street [present Bolshaya Vasilkovskaya street]. The room was in a terrible condition, without lavatory and water. But at least it was our lodging, not rented. We lived there before Great Patriotic War started. Then I went to the Army.

II. HERTZ' MEMORIES ON WAR

In 1941 when I was in the 9th grade, I joined Komsomol. It was natural for me: I believed in communistic ideas and I honestly considered Komsomol to be the vanguard of the youth. In June 1941 I finished the 9th grade. Summer holidays were to start. There were a lot of military trainings and maneuvers by Kiev. We were used to shooting and blasts. That is why when we heard the remote sounds of the blasted shells in the morning on 22 June, we did not react to it. We thought those were routine trainings. I remember how we crowded by the black wall loudspeaker to be listening to Molotov's speech with our hearts sinking.

In September 1941 we found out that Kiev was occupied by German troops. We started a siege in Donetskiy, asking to be taken in the army as volunteers. The military enlistment offices were overwhelmed with work: hectic mobilization and evacuation. They scolded us and sent us away, but we showed up again. In the end, our aim was achieved. At the age of 17 I joined the army as a volunteer. First I was sent to the reserves troops, but in 1941 I was sent to Moscow whereabouts.

There were four lads my age in our squadron. We belonged to 42nd army. We began from Mozhaisk and reached Istra. These were my first battles. We were armed with huge triple passage rifles, the ones used during World War I. We also had gun machines of the same epoch. There were few guns in 1941. The battles were fierce. But the frosts were the most gruesome for me. The winter of 1941-42 was severe and cold. First, our uniform was not apt for such winter. Then we were given felt-boots and sheepskins, so we did not suffer from cold so much. Strange as it may be, provision, ammunition and armament was way better in that period as compared to the Stalingrad and Kursk Battles.

I was very scared. During the air raids, especially during the first one, I had such a feeling that a bomb was going right after the crown of my head. I wanted to dig up and hide. Germans used additional gadgets for determent. They attached sirens to the bombs, which produced a terrifying howling sounds. Sometimes they threw empty barrels just to appall with a terrible whistle. We had

the sense of fear, and it was very hard to get over it. Later on, of course, when I was a battle-seasoned old-stager, the fear was not so acute. At the beginning it was a feeling of consternation.

Sobriety from my hurrah-patriotism was over very quickly. When your wounded friend cries from pain close by, you do not think with slogans. I was in platoon troops. Of course, we had to attack. The head of our squadron raised us, buried in the snow, with the 'Get up!' with swear words, brandished his pistol behind our backs. And then, of course, hurrah! – and ahead. Though, we could not move forward very quickly, the snow of waist height hindered us, so we could not run. People close by fell wounded or dead. But we had to move on, and we went. There were times when they cried 'For the Motherland, for Stalin,' but most often they swore.

The battles were fierce. There were many casualties. But there were no so many burnt villages as I was to see later. On our way we came across safe villages. There we could spend the night in the warm place. At that time I got my first military award, the medal for «military merits». During bombing a shell fragment pierced my shoulder blade. I took it out somehow, but later it started to suppurate heavily and I was sent to the hospital. I stayed there for a month and then I was sent home, because I was not the age of the draftees.

Since I finished nine grades, it was decided to send me to military school. Again I headed on the road - by trains, steamboat and car. We were brought to the military school in Balakhna, a town about 50 km away from Nizhniy Novgorod. My recollections about that military school are even more hideous than war. We had such skimpy food, that we were running amuck from famine. We begged on the streets, trying not to be nabbed by the commanders. Once I went to the shanty to ask for food, where our commander was with his lover. He saw me and recognized me. I was lucky not to get into trouble. We found ingenious ways to get some food. At school we were given a tiny bar of soap. We collected that soap. Then we took wooden bars, soaked them in water and coated in soap. Then we sold so-called soap on the markets to buy food. We tried hard to survive from hunger. We were given the uniform made of thin felt. It was wintertime, and we got very cold. Our boots were horrible and left blue paint on our legs and were not waterproof. Former junior commanders and employees of the schools teased us a lot.

It was the 3rd months when the horrible battle by Stalingrad started. The entire school, 450 people, was sent to Stalingrad. I went through hell by Moscow, but it was not to be compared with Stalingrad. I had never felt more fear, terror and hatred towards the Germans during the entire war experience. The city was devastated, shells and mortar bombs were aimed at one and the same place, making a powder out of sand. We went by Kalach and I saw the camp of our captured soldiers, frozen to death in dugouts, with frozen blood, with wounds not being bandaged. I saw the tiers of frozen, coated in ice cadavers of the captured soldiers together with the wood for burning. I saw huge moats with corpses. Just imagine a moat as deep as 3-storied building, and not the house length, but the block length. In spite of the wintertime we could smell the cadavers' stench.

I remember one battle. We were brought together, the entire platoon of 45 people and were given three gun machines, each weighing 62 kilos, 32 of them the weight of the machine with rollers, and theoretically it could be rolled. But when we were crawling, it was impossible to roll the machine, we had to drag it. The barrel was another part of the gun-machine, and it had to be filled with water for cooling the gun. It was a famous gun-machine, the main weapon of World War I and the Great Patriotic War. The advantage was in its heavy weight that made it steady for precision fire. We were shown a semi-destroyed building, and were ordered to crawl there, set the gun-machines and not to let the Germans in the building. The latter could not even be called a house, because

only walls remained from it. At that time Stalin's order № 227 as of 1942 was enforced 'No retreat.' And according to the latter the so-called defensive squadrons were formed, which were to follow regular troops, and start fire if there were any attempt to retreat. That is why there was no way we could leave that house. Almost all of us were lean and emaciated boys, weighing not more that 45 kilos. It was unbearably hard for us to carry the parts of a machine-gun, each of them weighing a little bit less than each of us. But we could not violate the order, especially if it was fortified by the defense squadrons. We were able to stay in that house either five or six days. By that time two or three of our gun-machines had been crashed. Seven people remained alive out of forty-five. Then we ran out of cartridges for our gun-machine. Then we ran out food and water. Then the mortar bomb hit the house, and our last gun was destroyed. The shell hit the gun jacket, where the water for cooling was filled, and we remain unarmed. We could not go back, there was no communication, and we could not get the order to retreat. What were we supposed to do? At night German fire was feebler, and in the daytime it was very strong. We saw the hole in the floor, the passage to the basement and crawled in there. We decided that we would sit there for some time and find a solution of what to do next. But in no less than 30 minutes another shell or mortar bomb hit, and we were dug. There was no light, the air penetrated through some crevices. We crawled in the basement like blind mice, trying to find a cleft or a passage, but our efforts were futile. I do not know how long we stayed in that basement. It was impossible to observe time there. I think one day passed, but I am not sure. We had a feeling of being buried alive. At times I cried out of despair. The guys were alive. We talked. We would have probably died there, but the miracle happened. They say one shell never hits the same funnel twice. I know for sure that it is not true. A shell or a mortar bomb hit the basement again, and a big hole was made, that emanated light. We were saved. Six people out of seven were given the Order of the Red Banner, but I somehow was given the medal 'for Valor'. Later I submitted a report to the commander, and justice prevailed. I was given two awards for the battle, i.e. a medal "for Bravery" and the Order of the Red Banner, the second highest award after the Lenin Order. Chuikov, commander in chief shook my hand. I was sent to the medical and sanitary battalion. I spend more than two weeks there.

After this battle I was to be conferred the rank of a lieutenant. I was appointed the commander of the 112th platoon, the regiment of the 37th Stalingrad Guards division 62, 8, and was dispatched to the command in Balashovo. By the way, later on that 8th Guards army was the main occupational army in Germany after the war was over. We stayed there for about two weeks. The regiment had a lot of casualties, and it had to replenish both with people and ammunition. They sent about 100 Uzbeks, who were mere boys. We teased and taunted them as we thought that none of them wanted to speak Russian. We were irritated that they were able to understand things, connected with food, and at the same time they refused to understand the simplest commands of the officers, addressed to them. We thought they were pretending, but they just did not know Russian.

We were given arms for the squadron. All Uzbeks flung to take guns. But there were heavy discs for 75 cartridges in the set with the guns, and Uzbeks took the guns, throwing away the disks. We scolded them. It led to their death in the first battle. None of them survived. They were used as cannon fodder - I cannot put it otherwise. Such a contagious feeling of nationalism: if a person is not like me, it means he is homely and inferior. That was the way we treated those boys. These were young guys, full of sap, all they were "guilty of" was that they did not know Russian, and were totally unprepared for what was ahead of them there. We were trained and battle-tried and teased them instead of helping them out and supporting them. What a shame, even now I feel ashamed!

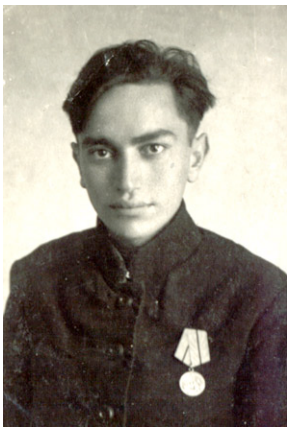
The squadron was replenished and we went to Yelets by train. We stopped there and got off the train, since the railroads were crashed from German bombing. We walked for 300 kilometers or so.

From the first days Germans were bombing so hard that we did not have a single field kitchen left. We had nothing to eat. First the sacks with the rye rusks were brought. Tarpaulin sacks for gas masks were attached to our belts. We removed the gasmasks and filled the sacks with the rusks. But these reserves did not last long. We were constantly hungry. We shot the crows, and cooked them in fire. There were a lot of carcasses of huge German horses on the ground. We crawled to them, cut a piece and then boiled it. The carcasses were decomposing, producing a terrible stench. Nonetheless we ate that concoction. Sometimes we found potatoes and beets in the villages. It was a feast for us. I could not eat uncooked potatoes; others ate them raw.

We were really lucky if we could find cellars where vegetables were stored for winter. That was the place to stay overnight. We often slept straight on the snow. Filth and lice were absolutely unbearable. We could not even think of a bath. We were exhausted. We had to walk only at night as in the daytime there were bombings. The columns stretched, people lagged behind. Once I walked half asleep and fell asleep. I woke up in the car of the commander of our division, the general. It turned out that I had been hit by his car. I did not remember all that. The general asked me: 'What's up with you, son?' I could not remember anything, it all happened in my dream. The general took me to the place where our squadron was located and gave me a piece of pig's fat and a loaf of bread. Of course I shared with my friends.

Once I found out in horror that I had lost my gun. If somebody lost his weapon, he was shot immediately in spite of the military merits. I was scared, I just had one thought –how to save my life. We walked in a column by burned hay storage. There was a fire in the center, and the soldiers were sitting around it. The weapon was placed along the wall. I crawled to the storage, saw the gun and stole it. I wanted to remain alive. And in a day, we walked by battle sites, where the weapons were piled.

We moved forward with the battles. These were the times of my hardest recollections. We came to one village, occupied by Germans and started squeezing them out of there. I saw a German running ahead of me, and I understood that I could chase him down. I was shooting and running, and because of my running I missed all the time. The German came to the destroyed house. I could see the basement. I approached him, when he was walking down to the basement. He might have wanted to hide there. I spent all cartridges left in my disk. The German fell down. His back was torn to pieces. When he was dying he turned to me, and I saw his face with a bristle. Before that, I never shot from a close distance. I shot figures from remote distance without seeing the faces. And here I saw the face of a dying man, killed by me… and this face is in front of me even now… He is the same poor, emaciated soldier.



UKGRO005

The beginning of 1943 was characterized by fierce battle. It was the period when Germans captured Orel and we had Kursk. At 6 a.m. on March 6, 1943, we were called to attack. The snow was dazzling white. We did not have camouflage cloaks, and we stood out in the usual uniform and looked like flies on the white wall. We crawled forward. Germans noticed us and started such a fire that there was no way we could cover. The bullet hit my gun, I bent and the splinter from my butt reached my face, and I still have that scar. The bullet hit my shoulder on the tangent. I did not feel pain, just a burning, like a burn from cigarette. The hand got numb, and hung like a whip. I crawled back. Of course, I was moving very slowly, and the fire was so intensive that I had to be devious. Then the mortar bomb landed by me, and the fragment of the bomb pierced my left

thigh. I was in felt pants, but they could not absorb blood. The hemorrhage was severe. I lost consciousness from acute pain. When I came around, I began to crawl. I lost the boot, and my left foot froze. I could crawl propping on my right leg and left hand. Finally I crawled to the trench, where our gun soldiers were and besought: 'brothers, help me out of here!' and they replied that they were not entitled to leave their positions.

Then, I think I was noticed by a sniper. It was getting dark, and I was on the woodland. He was aiming at me from the wood with the tracer bullets. One bullet hit right in front of me, the second on the rear, and the third hit my leg. It was a percussion bullet, which hit my tibia, and exploded when it came out. I saw a huge torn hole in my felt pants. I fell in the trench without any thoughts, and stayed there for 24 hours or more. I could not put a bandage with my healthy hand, I could not even unbutton my cloak. I lost consciousness, then I came around. And there in the trench, being feeble, wounded, with forlorn hope, I believed in God, he was my only hope. I was very scared and became even feebler. I remembered for all my life the gorgeous blue sky, with flashing lights from the tracing shells and bullets. I could not hear the explosion, it was all so far away, and over my head celestial flights were scintillating in the sky. My mouth got dry because I lost a lot of blood, so I ate snow from time to time. There were six people from our squadron who were on the way back on the same route. They carried me to the village.

I was in Moscow, Vladimir and Kaluga hospitals. In the last hospital, Izhevsk, I stayed the longest. I traveled for over 1500 km being wounded, moving from one hospital to another. In Izhevsk I was commissioned and sent home. I was awarded the Order of the Great Patriotic War, second degree for the battles on Kursk Curve. I got Order of the Red Star for the last battle.

I felt unbearable, horrifying hatred to the Germans after everything I was put through at war. How could have felt different, after the scenes of trenches filled up by frozen corpses to be burned, the Kalach camp of militaries captives, with no survivors, villages burnt to ashes, piles of cadavers of the hung civilians… Such hatred remained with me for a rather long time after war. I could not stand hearing German language, I could not stand seeing Germans.


UKGRO006

I came to Semipalatinsk [Kazakhstan, about 3000 km from Kiev], where my parents moved from Voronezh oblast in 1942. When I was on my way, the wound was open, and I had to go to the hospital in Semipalatinsk. My parents were very indigent in the evacuation. They sold everything they had, even the wedding rings, which were sacred to them. All clothes and linen were sold and exchanged for bread.

The time I spent in hospital influenced by choice of the future profession. I was firm – if I were to survive, I would become a doctor. In August 1944 I went to Kiev to enter the Kiev Medical Institute. When I was looking through the list of those who were enrolled on the first course, I did not see my name. I went to the admission board. They told me that I was not admitted for the reason of health, because I would not be able to become a doctor with my crippled hand. I was infuriated. Then I asked whether my crippled arm would be good to beg on the street. So I was admitted.

All those years I got excellent marks. Of course it was difficult. I had been walking on crutches for all those years. Often my wound was open, and the splinters were coming out, causing acute pain. Of course I was young, and I wanted to appear a hussar in front of girls, and leave the crutches. I made a stick with a handle myself so I could prop on it with both hands. By the fifth year I was able to walk, not only without a crutch, but even without a stick. The guys in my graduation year were mostly handicapped like me. There were armless and legless people among us. I entered the psychoneurotic department but then it was closed down, and I became a therapist. There was no other way out.

UKHRO013

Our pre-war apartment was occupied by other people. Probably I could fight for my rights and file in court, but I was too weak for that. For some time I stayed with my aunt who came back to Kiev from evacuation. Then I was given a room in the hostel of the medical institute. The handicapped in war were given the whole floor. During the last courses we were given the cards for dinner. But that was later. At the beginning, we just used to starve. Being unsettled, feeling hunger and cold by all means, I decided to graduate from school. So, I kept on learning, hanging on by the skin of my teeth. I was good student, remaining the monitor of the group through all student years. The clothes that I had were ill kempt, my military uniform from war. I wore my military jacket, received at war in 1941. I never took off my jacket, even during the classes, because my army pants were torn on the backside, and on the knee area. I was not ambidextrous at that time, so with my left hand I sewed patches made from my green tunic on my black pants. I did not have any other clothes. My parents were in evacuation. In Kiev there was only my aunt Feiga, who would rarely cook something for me. My scholarship was enough to buy the beans, the cheapest product at that time and a little bit of fat. The bread given by cards [Card system] was not sufficient, 300 or 400 grams. I never could make it to the hostel from the store - I ate it on my way. I could not die. Sometimes the ration included herring and sugar, so I stood by the store and tried to exchange them for bread.

In 1946 my parents came back to Kiev from evacuation. They did not have a place to stay. First they found a poky apartment for rent, and then bought it from the landlords. It was a tiny room, without conveniences, with no water and toilet. They had a hard life. They were indigent. But still I would come to see them and take potluck to them, no matter how skimpy it was. My brother came from the front twice and made great feasts for me. First he came in 1945, brought me new uniform - English boots, uniform and pants. When I saw a hen on the table, I burst into tears. Tears were streaming from my eyes, and I am not a susceptible and a mawkish boy. I practically did not have any other food, but bread. And I was not willing to eat anything else but bread. Then as a doctor I found out that a hungry person craved for bread more than for meat because of lightly digested carbohydrates. And during my student's years I would not have survived without faith. Of course I did not divulge it, but God was always in my soul.

III. POST WAR TIME

I joined the Communist Party in 1951. I had not done it because I was stickler about the party's ideas. Everybody knew that the person who was not a member of the party did not have any prospects, and could not even dream of career. I wanted to become a doctor and achieve something in my profession. That is why I joined the party. Though, at the back of my mind at that time I was prone to believe that internationalism was the major principle of the party. Of course when cosmopolite processes were in full swing, I was aware of my mistake. But there was no way back.

In 1949 I graduated from medical institute. I was allotted to work as a therapist in Podol. It was difficult for me walk, the leg did not heal up. I propped on a stick, having constant pain.

In 1946 I met Elena Cherevo, my future wife. Elena studied at medical university. In 1951 we both started practicing medicine, and then got married. Elena was not a Jew, and my parents were against our marriage, but I did not accept any objections. After getting married we lived with Elena's parents for a while. We did not get along, having quibbles since the first day of our life together. Our only daughter Irina was born 1952. I loved my daughter very much. Being a veteran of war I got a two-room apartment in Kiev. But it did not help; we had no mutual understanding. By the way, Elena's parents were also against our marriage. Only later I understood that they were inveterate anti-Semitists. My father-in-law used to say: 'Go to your zhyds,' meaning my parents. Nevertheless, we were divorced. The daughter stayed with her mother.

I left them the apartment, and came to live with my mother. She stayed by herself as my father died in 1962. We buried him at Jewish lot of the city cemetery. Father was buried according to the Jewish rite. I keep both of my father's prayer books as precious things.

Being divorced, I was not going to get married soon. There were quite a few ladies, who wanted to marry me. After my first bad experience I was certain that my wife would be only a Jew. I was lucky to meet Sofia, my wife-to-be. We met in Kiev, in our friends' house. We got married in 1978. We have been together for 26 years, and I've never questioned my choice.

UKGRO019

No matter that my daughter lived separately, I always kept in touch. We were and are getting along. I never wanted to change my name for Russian, so Irina accordingly has a Jewish patronymic Hertzevna. My daughter and her children are very dear people to me.

In the 1970s there was an outburst of mass immigration of the Jews in Israel. I longed to immigrate to Israel, but my mother would not allow it. There was no way my brother would leave, even in spite of that my mother would not let me go as she thought she would never

see me again. Israel still remained a dream. Of course it might sound preposterous that I am an ardent patriot of Israel sitting here in Kiev.

When at the end of the 1980s perestroika started in the USSR, I was delighted. We, USSR citizens, were not used to the absence of censorship in the press and literature. We were not accustomed to open honest public sources. I was happy with those events. All of it was new and delightful. But my euphoria did not last long, and my attitude to perestroika became negative. The consequences from perestroika brought the breakup of USSR, and I still regret it. Yes, I am still yearning for the Soviet Union like many of my contemporaries. Yes, it was a terrible empire, but it was a forceful foundation. We could easily go anywhere within the territory of the USSR, and now over the course of time it is getting more and more difficult to visit any of CIS countries. Of course, each type of society has its own disadvantages. I have few grounds why an independent Ukraine should exist. How did the world benefit from the breakup of the USSR? There was one monster – The Soviet Union, and now there are fifteen instead of one. We could forecast before, and now if the steps of one state could be forecasted, the other states remain totally unpredictable.

UKROG023

Frankly speaking, there were moments when I did not believe that we would win that war. How could I believe when I retreated from Stalingrad, an interminable retreat, starting from the Western borders of Ukraine, when Germans reached Volga and we had way many casualties and remained stern?

When Ukraine was declared independent, a lot of Jewish communities appeared. There is a cultural center, which I like, and Hesed, performing great useful work. I do not trust other societies because I do not understand what they are dealing with. Why they are at loggerheads with each other, and what they are trying to divide. I am a member of the Kiev organization of Jewish veterans of war. I am very grateful to Hesed, and to those people, who give money to support its work. I have been working here since my retirement. I am taking patients in the Hesed medical office every day.

I still remain religious, though there are only two holidays that I mark - Pesach and Yom Kippur. I attend the synagogue my father went to. Unfortunately I do not know Hebrew, but I have a contemporary prayer book with Russian translation.

Iosif Gotlib
Uzhhorod
Ukraine
Date of interview: October 2003
Interviewer: Ella Levitskaya

Iosif Gotlib lives in a three-bedroom apartment in a new district of Lvov. His wife Antonina, daughter Lilia and Lilia's son Anton, their grandson, live with him. They have standard 1970s style furniture in their apartment. One can tell that they enjoy doing things with their own hands: they've taken a lot of effort to make their dwelling comfortable and cozy. They did repairs in their apartment and Iosif's wife Antonina placed her embroidery patterns on the walls. Iosif made shelves and stands for potted plants. Their apartment is very clean and bright. There are many potted plants and there are photographs of Iosif and his wife, their children and grandchildren on the walls. Iosif is a man of average height, thin. He was ill and it affected his speech, but he willingly agreed to give this interview and said a lot about his life and family. Although he doesn't go out, he takes a vivid interest in everything happening around him. He reads a lot and likes to discuss what he has read.

I. PRE WAR LIFE

My father Abram Gotlib was born in the town of Sudhza [250 km from Moscow] Kursk province in Russia in 1888. All I know about my father's childhood or youth is that he became an orphan young. Somehow he moved to St. Petersburg where he entered the medical Faculty of the university. Although my father was a Jew, and at that time there was a Jewish admission quota [five percent] in Russian higher educational institutions, my father was admitted. My father was a very talented and educated man. He knew five European languages: English, French, German, Italian and Romanian; he could draw well and play the piano. After finishing his studies he was trained in a hospital for a year where he obtained qualifications as a surgeon. My father worked in this hospital until the beginning of World War I. When Russia entered the war my father was recruited to the tsarist army. He was a surgeon in a frontline hospital.

My mother was very talented and wanted to continue her education, but there were very limited opportunities for women at that time. After finishing school my mother went to study at a one-year school for medical nurses in Lvov. After finishing this school in 1915 she and other graduates were sent to a hospital at the front where my future parents met. They worked in the same hospital. They fell in love with each other and got married in 1917. They didn't have a Jewish wedding, but registered their marriage. When in 1917 a revolution took place in Russia and the Russian Empire fell apart, new borders were established. The Western Ukraine was annexed to Poland. There was famine and war in Russia. My mother's family lived in Poland and my mother convinced him to move to her mother in Poland.

After they moved to Poland my father's life was hard. Poland didn't recognize his Russian doctor's diploma. He had to take exams in Polish, but he didn't know it. He tried to work illegally in Lvov, but it was dangerous. My parents moved to Biskovichi village, Sambor district in the Lvov region [580 km from Kiev], also belonging to Poland. My mother's family helped them with money, and they bought a house. My father worked as a veterinarian. My mother didn't work after getting married. I was born in November 1922 and named Iosif-Leizer.

Our house was rather big. It was built from thick beams faced with airbricks. It was divided into two parts. There was a front room and there was a door to two small rooms serving as my father's veterinary office. The living quarters were on the right. There were four rooms: my parents' bedroom, boys' room, girls' room and a living room. There was a big kitchen where we had meals on weekdays. On Sabbath and Jewish holidays we had meals in the living room. There was a wood stoked stove in the kitchen. It heated the kitchen and my mother cooked on it. There were smaller heating stoves in the rooms. However small we were, we fetched water, sawed wood and the girls washed dishes and cleaned the house. There was a small orchard in the backyard, few trees, a woodshed, a toilet and a small well. My father worked from morning till night. Sometimes his customers brought their animals to him and sometimes he had to go examine them at their places. Villagers mostly paid him with food products.

My parents were religious. My mother and father observed Jewish traditions. We always celebrated Sabbath at home. My mother baked challahs on Friday morning and cooked food for two days. In the evening my mother lit candles and she prayed, then father blessed the meal and we sat down to dinner. He read the Torah and told us kids stories about Jewish life and Jewish religion. We spoke Yiddish and Polish at home.

There was no synagogue in Biskovichi. There were three other Jewish families in the village besides us. The rest of the population was Polish, Ukrainian and there were a few Russians. Neighbors got along well and helped each other. On Saturday our Polish neighbor came to stoke our stove, boil water for tea, heat food and light the lamps. My mother always gave her some money or some treatments. On Jewish holidays another neighbor rode my mother and father on his wagon to the synagogue in Sambor in 8 km from Biskovichi. Our neighbor took care of us children.

There was one four-year Polish school in Biskovichi. I went to this school in 1929. I was doing well at school. I was the only Jew in my class, but I didn't face any bad attitudes due to my nationality. I had a few Jewish, Polish and Russian friends. We didn't think about who was of what nationality.

Shortly after she went to work, my mother bought a piano that she had long dreamed about. She had wonderful hearing. She didn't know notes, but she played tunes by ear. I remember that we gathered in our parents' room on Saturday and sang Jewish songs that we knew and my mother accompanied for us and sang too. Later my parents bought my older brother an accordion and he often played with my mother. Later he began to teach me to play. Our family was very close and I often recall those happy hours.

My father didn't have a beard or payes. He only had a small moustache. He wore a hat to go out and a yarmulke to the synagogue. He put it on inside the synagogue and then took it off to go home. We boys also took our yarmulke to the synagogue and didn't have our head covered elsewhere. Of course, when it was cold we wore caps or hats. I remember that my older brother and I usually went to play football with other boys after synagogue. My mother went to a bigger synagogue in the neighboring street also on Sabbath and holidays. My mother didn't take her daughters with her. My mother didn't wear a wig. She had a long plait. When my mother went out she clipped it on the back of her head. My mother only wore a kerchief to go to the synagogue and at home on Sabbath or holidays.

My brother and I studied at school and cheder. There were religion classes at school for Catholic children. Their teacher was a Roman Catholic priest. Children with a different faith could go home. I had a good voice and ear and I sang in a school choir. After finishing school Sima and Moishe went

to a Jewish grammar school and so did I, later. My parents had to pay for the grammar school, but they could afford such expenses at that time. We studied all general subjects in Yiddish. We had two religious classes twice a week. A rabbi came to conduct these classes. Some children skipped classes of religion. It was allowed and in their school records book they had a dash instead of a mark for this class. It didn't take me long to understand that it was more fun to play football than sit in class and I began to skip these classes along with other children.

UKIGO001

In 1937 our quiet family life came to an end. My father was making stucco molding on the facade of a building and fell from scaffolds. He had a severe cranium injury. He was taken to hospital and after he recovered his doctors didn't allow him to continue doing any physical work. My father returned home, but he couldn't work any more. I studied two years and in 1939 I was to take my specialty exam and obtain a certificate of qualification, but this didn't happen after fascist Germany attacked Poland.

Before German intervention there was no anti-Semitism in Poland. There were routine incidents but they were rare. We didn't see Germans in Sambor. We read in newspapers and heard on the radio about the intervention of Soviet troops. We didn't know anything about the Soviet Union before. When Soviet troops liberated Poland from fascists, Sambor and Lvov districts were annexed to the USSR [annexation of Eastern Poland]. They became a part of the Ukrainian SSR. We were very happy about it. We thought that the USSR was a country of justice and equal possibilities for all nations and that it was a country where there was no anti-Semitism. There were many newcomers from the USSR. The Russian language was introduced everywhere and it took me no time to pick it up. I liked Soviet girls very much. I remember once telling my mother that I would only marry a Russian girl and she jokingly threatened me with her rolling pin. Soviet authorities began their struggle against religion. They began to close temples of all religions and conduct anti-religious propaganda. My brother and I became convinced atheists and my mother and father were distressed by it. They kept observing Jewish traditions and we were telling them that they were holding to vestige of the past.

UKIGO002

The railroad depot of Sambor employed me as a joiner. In the first months of my employment I joined Komsomol. There was a Jewish chief of the training department of the depot. He suggested that I attended training classes for locomotive operators after work in the evening. I studied there six months and I was a successful trainee. I had a medical examination and there were no restrictions. I passed all exams and obtained a certificate of qualification to work as assistant locomotive operator of freight and passenger trains. Since then I worked as an assistant locomotive operator and I earned well. My older brother Moishe worked as track foreman in this same depot. The younger children went to school. Since Moishe and I went to work the material situation of our family improved.

II. IOSIF'S MEMORIES ON THE WAR

At 6 o'clock in the morning of 22 June, 1941, I was to take a trip to Germany as an assistant locomotive operator. I came to the depot at 5 o'clock in the morning to obtain documents and do the final inspection of the locomotive before departure. I was surprised that there were no lights in the depot and there were many people in military uniforms on the platform. The depot radio announced that all depot employees had to stay in the depot and if they left it they would be executed. I didn't understand what happened. At about 10 o'clock one of militaries announced that Germany attacked the Soviet Union without an announcement and that we were at war. I climbed my locomotive and saw another operator incinerating his documents: a Party membership card, certificate and something else. Then we were ordered to drive the locomotive to a train. When we drove there I saw that the train consisted of platforms for cattle transportation with hastily made plank sides and roofs. There were women and children crowding on the platform. The train was bombed on the way, but it wasn't damaged, fortunately. We stopped in Gusiatin for passengers to get water and food and members of the locomotive crew could rest. I fell asleep and when I woke up I saw that the locomotive operator was dead. He was killed with a shell splinter. There was no replacement operator available in the depot in Gusiatin. They provided an assistant and I had to drive the locomotive.

Later I went to the depot office to get a job task. There was a military man sitting there. He looked at my documents and gave me an application form to fill up. I wrote in this form that I studied German in a grammar school and when he saw it he told me to wait. There were a few others in the group waiting. We boarded a truck and it left. We had no idea where we were going. We drove for few days. We were taken to a camp where they took us to take a bath and then we were given military uniforms. Over a few days we learned to shoot and crawl and studied service regulations. Then we were distributed to military units. I joined an intelligence unit as an interpreter and my major duty was to interpret interrogation of German captives. The regiment was deployed near Moscow. This was September 1941. There were no actions near Moscow and we moved to Byelorussia. I went scouting with the unit several times.

We lived in trenches for the most part. We excavated wider and deeper trenches and placed planks on top. We had branches on the ground floors and slept on our overcoats. Everything was difficult: washing and even combing. We shaved with sharp blades or knives: whatever we had. For this reason many frontline men grew beards and moustaches, though the service regulations didn't allow it. In a short time we all got lice. There were happy moments when we could stay in village houses and got an opportunity to wash and put ourselves in order.

There was a field kitchen moving with our regiment. Food product supplies were delivered from the rear. There were delays during combat action, but then we had dried bread and tinned meat. It was hard for smokers. There were delays with tobacco delivery and then they smoked dry leaves and dried rind. Tobacco served as currency: one could exchange anything for it.

I didn't stay long at the front. In January 1942 I was wounded in my arm and head. Our regiment medical unit provided first aid and then sent me to a rear hospital in Karaganda, Kazakhstan, in 2500 km from home, where I stayed for almost two months. When I was released from hospital I went to a military registry office to request them to send me back to my unit. The military commandant looked at my documents and said that there was a railroad crew formed in Karaganda and that he was sending me there. There were three columns formed and I joined the 28th locomotive column. We worked two shifts on trips: one crew taking a rest, another one working. There was a railcar carriage for crews to take a rest. There were plank beds and an iron

stove where we could make something to eat. Chiefs and escort members were officers and the rest were privates. We hauled military force and military loads. We drove at night to avoid raids. When we transported weapons, we attached those shipments in the middle of a train so that Germans couldn't recognize their location. We hauled people, tanks and planes – anything. As a rule our destination points were near the frontline so that people or equipment could reach it promptly. There were frequent air raids. Almost in every trip there were losses of staff: crewmembers were wounded or killed. We looked death in the eyes every day.

In 1944 I submitted my application to the Communist Party. Two locomotive operators of our column gave me recommendations. There was one-year term of candidateship before they admitted someone to the Party. I believed that to be a Party member was an honorable and responsible thing and that a communist had to be an example for all.

In March 1945 we already began to drive trains in the direction of Germany. In late March 1945 our crew was awarded with orders. A locomotive operator of my crew was awarded an Order of the Great Patriotic War of the First Grade and I was awarded the same order of the Second Grade. I was also awarded medals 'For Courage' for fighting for various towns. In late April 1945 our train was running in the vicinity of Berlin, about 30 km.

I met my wife Antonina in this locomotive column. In late 1944 our column was stationed in Nida, a Byelorussian town. Many girls came to work in the depot at Komsomol assignment. They sent a young girl from Pskov to work as a stoker with me. She was very industrious with her work. At first I didn't take much notice of her. Later she told me that she noted my accuracy. Some operators had their cabin dirty or there was coal near the stove, but they didn't care. I liked to keep my work place clean and orderly and then it felt better to work. I shaved every day and washed my uniform. She liked it and took a closer look at me. I was seeing Galina, a Jewish girl working in the depot. Once we went dancing and Galina refused to dance with me saying that she was tired, but almost right away she went for a dance with another guy. Of course, I felt hurt and told her that we would not be meeting any more. I invited Antonina to dance and then we began to take walks in the town after work. Shortly afterward I asked Antonina to be my wife. Since we were both assigned as military we had to obtain permission of chief of headquarters and column commissar to get married. We had a wedding party at our work. There were tables set in the dining hall and the chief of the column made us a wedding gift: a few bottles of vodka. There was another gift: we were allowed ten days of leave.

In the middle of 1944 I met with my family. I didn't even know whether they were alive before. From Sambor they evacuated to the Ural and returned to our house after the liberation of Sambor. My older brother perished at the front in 1943 and the rest of my family survived. My parents couldn't even imagine that I would marry a non-Jewish girl. Of course, I told my mother that I brought my wife to meet her. My mother asked me to not tell my father that I got married. Even my sisters and brothers told me off for marrying a non-Jewish girl. I told them that I wouldn't give up my wife for anybody. My future life showed me that I was right. When they met Antonina they got to like her, even my mother.

We were near Berlin on Victory Day. Everybody was happy that this terrible war was over. People greeted and hugged one another. There were fireworks in the evening and orchestras playing in squares and streets. My wife and I were looking forward to demobilization, but we were told that our column was staying in Germany. We transported the military, military shipments and food. Only nineteen of three hundred who were initially in our column survived. We were awarded

Stalin's award letters. In this letter they thanked us for outstanding labor during the war on Stalin's behalf and wished us success in peaceful labor.

III. POST WAR LIFE

I demobilized in early 1946. My wife and I arrived at Sambor and went to my house: and there were strangers there. They told me that my family moved out. I felt distressed and bitter about it. I didn't know that I could claim my house to be returned to me and nobody told me there was this opportunity. My wife and I were accommodated in the hostel of the railroad depot. I went to work there as a locomotive operator. In November 1946 our son Pyotr was born.

There were people who still remembered me in the railroad depot of Sambor. I submitted my application to the Party again and obtained recommendations. The chief of depot authorized me to organize an amateur club. I spent a lot of time organizing a choir and an orchestra. We began to perform at parties and in contests. My wife didn't like it that I spent my time there that I could spend with my family. Later she confessed that she was jealous. Whatever, but she posed an ultimatum: a family or an orchestra. I chose a family, of course, but I had to give up my orchestra. When the Party bureau was reviewing my application, they blamed me that I didn't accomplish my Party task: that I gave up this amateur activity. They didn't admit me to the Party. I became a member of the party only in 1956. I was a convinced communist and a convinced atheist.

After the war anti-Semitism grew stronger. Cosmopolite processes began. This period didn't affect my family or our surroundings and I sincerely believed that the party was denouncing its enemies. Another round of anti-Semitism started after the Doctors' Plot in January 1953. And again I believed it was true that many Jews happened to be enemies and saboteurs of the Soviet power. Of course, I didn't tie Stalin's name to the growth of anti-Semitism. When on 5 March, 1953, Stalin died it was a big blow and horror for me like for the majority of Soviet people. I remember the railroad issued an order for all locomotives to stop at all stations with their horns on at 13 hours on 5 March. My locomotive stopped at Drogobych station and the horn was on for 5 minutes.

We didn't know what was happening in the USSR before 1939 when we lived in Poland. And later we didn't have enough information. Gradually I began to think about it and compare things. I understood that Stalin eliminated all Party officials and military leaders because they presented a threat to him, not because they were plotters and spies, as we were told.


UKIGO016

I liked spending my weekends with the family. We went for walks, to the cinema and theater. We didn't celebrate any Jewish or Russian religious holidays at home. We celebrated birthdays and Soviet holidays. We often invited friends and colleagues. We traveled on our summer vacations. I could have free railroad tickets for the family and we traveled a lot across the country.

My children studied well at school. They were ordinary Soviet children. They became pioneers and then Komsomol members. They didn't face any anti-Semitism. They had my typical Jewish surname of Gotlib, but my wife and I decided to change their nationality to their mother's to avoid problems in the future, so in the passport

they are written down as Russian.

From 1946 I've tried to find my family. I sent requests to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and tried to search them through the Red Cross. They replied that they had no information about them. Later I gave up those efforts: for a citizen of the USSR it was dangerous to have relatives abroad. They found me after we moved to Uzhhorod in the late 1970s. I received a letter from my younger sister. She wrote that she wanted to come to the USSR to see me, but they didn't issue her an entry visa. She went to Hungary and I went to Budapest to meet with my sister. Of course, we were so happy to see each other. We didn't even hope that we would meet again. My sister told me about my dear ones. We couldn't even imagine traveling abroad on a visit. Later, in 1982 my sister could come to Uzhhorod and we met again.

I became a pensioner in 1977, but I continued to work in the depot. First, it was hard to live without working. It seemed to me I would die if I quit my job. Besides, it was hard to live on a pension. I had to support my daughter. I got a job of a track dispatcher. It was an interesting and responsible job and I liked it. I worked in the depot until 1992. Only after I had my first stroke my family talked me out of going to work.

When perestroika became I thought that Gorbachev's promises were idle. But then there were notable changes. The dead wall separating the USSR from the rest of the world, fell down. Soviet people got an opportunity to travel to other countries and invite their relatives and friends from abroad. In 1991 I visited my relatives in Israel. I met with my family and saw my friends who had moved there long before.

After the declaration of independence the rebirth of Jewish life in Ukraine began. Before Hesed was established in Uzhhorod in 1999 the Jewish community began its activities in Uzhhorod. People began to go to the synagogue freely and stopped hiding their Jewish identity. I've never attended the synagogue. I've been an atheist, though I believe in some superior force supervising us. My wife Antonina began to attend a women's club at the synagogue. We joke at home that Antonina is more Jewish than me. It was her initiative to celebrate Jewish holidays at home. On Jewish holidays Antonina cooks traditional Jewish food.

However, I think perestroika took away much more than it gave. During perestroika our society divided into the rich and the poor. I still think they shouldn't have allowed this. In the end perestroika ended in the breakup of the USSR. Life became harder. I was an ace, the best locomotive operator. I have over 20 awards for my work, but now I am a beggar.