

# Yuriy Paskevich

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## My family background

I was born in Kiev on 19 August 1931. Both of my parents were students at that time.

My father Avraam Ruvenovich Paskevich was born in Obolonskaya Street, Podol<sup>1</sup>, Kiev, in 1906. Podol was at the boundary of the area, where the Jewish population was allowed to live<sup>2</sup>. His father Ruven Paskevich, born in Kiev in 1860s was a balagula (conversational for a freight carrier/Russian). My grandfather inherited this business from his father. My great grandfather's life story is very interesting. I don't know his first name. My great grandfather was a cantonist. The history of cantonists in the Russian empire began in the 17th century during the reign of Alexander I. The 1st canton school was established by General Arakcheyev. Military service term was 25 years then and the age of recruitment was 18. Jewish boys went to canton schools at 12 years of age. They lived in barracks. They studied military disciplines and marching songs. And they also got general education. When they came of recruitment age, cantonists were recruited to the army. Their appearance was also important. They had to be tall and well-built handsome men. The poorer Jewish families with many children used to let their sons go to canton schools. My great grandfather was a servant to Prince Paskevich. That's how he got this name. Or, to be more correct, he was count Paskevich Yerevanskiy and Prince of Caucasus (he was a Russian general that had taken part in suppression of an uprising in Poland and conquer of the Caucasus). There is a Paskevich Hill in Yerevan and I was there when I was working in Yerevan. After retirement many cantonists settled down where they had served. There were many of them in the vicinity of Kharkov for some reason. But my great grandfather didn't want to stay there. After retirement he came to Kiev, married a Jewish girl and started his freight carrier business. I believe my great grandfather was devoted to his faith even during his service. Anyway, he was raising his children religious.

His son Ruven, my grandfather, inherited his father's business as well as his constitution and temper. He managed his cart-horses with ease. This job of his was in demand and well-paid at his time. I don't quite know whether my grandfather was the oldest or not, and I don't have any info about the other siblings.



The name of my grandmother (Ruvim's wife) was Rosa. Rosa was born in Podol, Kiev, in 1870s. She came from a rich family of the Pritskers and she was a well-loved and spoiled daughter. I don't know where and how she met my grandfather, but they fell in love at first sight. Of course it made no sense to ask Rosa's parents to give their blessing and agree to their marriage. My grandmother's parents wised an aristocrat of a husband for their beautiful daughter and would have never allowed her to marry a balagula. So, my grandfather just kidnapped her. Her parents were so stunned that they refused from their daughter that brought such disgrace on their family. The couple led a miserable life for quite a while. When their younger daughter happened to be in misery after the Patriotic War she came to us and my mother gave her some food, feeling sorry for her. But my father couldn't stand her because of my grandfather. That was because my grandmother suffered too much from the Pritsker family. She was a beauty, beautiful Rosa was how people called her at Podol. I've seen a picture of her and she was truly a beautiful woman. I basically keep some distance from my relatives. But when I grew older I got interested in my family roots and I turned to my relatives asking them for any information about our family. People started sending me photographs and letters. Now I have more knowledge about the history of my family.

My grandfather's situation was improving gradually. He managed to give education to his children, boys, in particular. They had 5 boys and 2 girls. Their family was religious. They went to the synagogue twice a week. They celebrated Sabbath and all Jewish holidays at home. I don't know whether my grandmother followed the kashruth. But there was always traditional Jewish food on holidays stuffed fish, hen with prune, salad with cheese and garlic, bean with onion stuffed fish, and Jewish roast meat, and others. My grandfather and grandmother communicated in Yiddish, but they spoke Russian to their children.

In 1914 my grandfather and 2 older sons (I don't remember their names) moved to America. My grandmother stayed with their 5 younger children. My grandfather and his sons were planning to get employed in the US and take the rest of their family there. However, WWI and the following revolution destroyed their plans. As it turned out, the family was separated for good. They were to learn to survive. Miron, the oldest of the brothers, was 11 when his father left them. Miron was born in 1903. Faina, born in 1901, was the oldest, then came Lev, born in 1905, my father Avraam, born in 1906 and the youngest among them - Sonia, born in 1907. Miron, being the oldest son, became a craftsman to earn money for the family and later my father joined him to support the family. My father began to play the violin when he was about 5 years old. He played at cinema-theaters. He began to work when he was 11. He worked so for quite a long time. He supported his sisters until they got married. Then his older brother Lyova, the pianist, got employed. Lyova played at the "Continental", an expensive restaurant, where he was given good tips. By the way, in the late 1930s his brothers sent Lyova an expensive concert piano "Steinway" from America. It was a brand new piano and Lyova finally got it through the customs. The older brothers that moved to America became musicians, too. One played the violoncello and another played the violin. They visited Kiev in 1932. My father never spoke about the life of his brothers in the US. I even don't know in what town they lived. The only thing I know is that they were happy to be living in the US. They made an impression of well-to-do people. I never asked about any details of their life. My grandfather died in the US in 1925. After the war my parents wrote them every now and then, but my mother was a Communist Party member and she was afraid that this correspondence might be harmful for our family<sup>3</sup>. And they stopped writing letters. The son of one of the brothers was a colonel in the US

Army and took part in WWII. He survived, but I don't have any information about what happened to them afterwards. Lyova, the pianist, died in 1937. He got flu that resulted in meningitis and he died. Miron made beds – this was his specialty. He was married and had a daughter. I don't know anything about her. Miron died in 1960s. Faina was married. She didn't have a profession and made her living by having occasional jobs: doing laundry or cleaning, etc. Faina died in 1950. The youngest sister Sonia was single. She worked as a shop-assistant and died in 1969.

My mother Musia Moiseyevna Krakovskaya was born in Odessa in 1908. Her father Moisey Krakovski, born in 1860s was Professor in Odessa University. He died in 1907 before my mother was born. My mother's family was religious. They celebrated Jewish holidays and Sabbath. My mother remembered how they celebrated Pesah: the whole family got together at the table, my grandfather said a prayer and my grandmother lit the candle and cooked traditional food: stuffed fish, chicken, strudel with raisins and nuts. My grandfather went to the synagogue regularly and prayed.

My grandfather died leaving my grandmother with many children to feed. I don't know how many children they had in total. I only knew two of them: Ilia, born in 1904 (he lived in Odessa and worked as an electrician. He died in 1950s) and Yelizaveta, born in 1906. She lived in Kiev and was a pharmacist. She died 1960s. I have no information about the other children in the family.

My mother went to Kiev with her Uncle Ilia Dizik (my grandmother's brother). He lived in Zhdanov Street in Podol. Ilia Dizik was a craftsman. He made hats and weaved shawls. I learned making shawls from him. I can work on the weaving machine. My mother moved to Kiev in the 1920s. She couldn't stay at her Uncle's, as he had many children and she went to the children's home, located in Lukianovka (a neighborhood in Kiev). It was called "Lenin's town of children". This was an ordinary Soviet children's home for homeless children. There were also Jewish children's homes in Kiev, but I don't think my mother knew anything about them and went to work at the nearest home. My mother told me that it was a delightful beginning of her social life.

I don't know the name of my grandmother from Odessa, although she lived with us 4 years after the war. We all, including my mother, called her "Granny". She was Krachkovskaya after her husband (her nee last name was Dizik). She lived with my mother's sister, but she couldn't stay there at that time due to lack of space. I remember my Granny reading all newspapers from the first to the last page. She was very old then. She was born in 1860s and died in 1952.

In the children's home my mother was an active pioneer and then a Komsomol leader<sup>4</sup>. I understand social work was some kind of self-assertion for her. My mother learned a profession of a printer after the children's home and worked in publishing house, before she became a secretary at the Komsomol district and then town committee. She was a propagandist and took an active part in collectivization<sup>5</sup>. In 1929 my mother became a candidate to the Communist Party and became a member of it in 1930.

She went to the villages to force peasants to join collective farms. She was among those that took away everything these peasants possessed. I know nothing about this period of her life. She never told me anything. She might have whispered some things to my father at night, but I think she believed that what she was doing was right.

I don't know how my parents met. I know that my father courted her for 2 years. He was a "nobody" for her, just another musician, while she was all full of ideas, and a Komsomol member, a bright red-haired girl. She wore a red shawl (typical for Komsomol girls at that time). She often spoke at meetings. My mother was a good speaker; she could hold the audience's attention for hours and hours. She stayed a firm communist until the end of her days, she never changed. If I was saying something that was different from what she thought she disagreed with me. We did not argue and there was no confrontation. But she never gave up believing that all people had to be together. The slogan "Proletariat all over the world, unite!" was still meaningful for her when she grew old. But it doesn't mean that she was unambiguously good or bad. She was a wonderful lecturer. She had interesting ideas and she could present them in a very different manner. She lectured on the Russian history of the XVIII-XIX centuries in the university were of great interest. She loved literature and read a lot.

I don't know how my mother agreed to marry my father. Probably they belonged together. There was no wedding party; my mother's ideas did not allow her to subdue to such bourgeois vestige. But they registered their marriage to please their politically retrograde relatives. My mother received a room in the communal apartment from the Komsomol town committee. I remember my bed and my parents' sofa, two stools and a wardrobe in this room. That was all that could fit in there.

### **Growing up**

I was born in August 1931. I remember this room very well. I had it in my dreams during the war. My friend that was involved in the restoration of this building gave me recently a piece of stucco molding from the ceiling. There was beautiful stucco molding by architect Nikolaev in this room.

I clearly remember myself and the surroundings since I was 3 years old. By the way, artist Kostetskiy, a Ukrainian artist, depicted the entrance to our house in his picture "Returning from the front". There is a soldier and his wife standing in the dark doorway and his child embracing his father's legs. I remember purple and dark blue walls in the entrance. I have dim memories of our neighbors, but I don't remember their names. One of them was a kind of a janitor, another was a writer (his wife came from nobility). Their daughter was my friend. After the war she came from Frankfurt, where she lived with her husband and she found me and we met again. All children (Jewish or non-Jewish) living in this building were friends. There was a big kitchen in our apartment and after the women retired to their rooms in the evening we, kids, played our games there. In 1937 quite a few tenants of this apartment, as well as of many other apartments, disappeared<sup>6</sup>.

My mother worked from morning till night. I had a nanny. She was a very nice Ukrainian girl. Her name was Galia. She came from a village near Kiev. I have very good memories of her. Later I went to a kindergarten and Galia left us and got married. During the war she and her little daughter were taken to Germany. Her husband perished on the front. After the war Galia and her daughter came back. Galia was very ill and exhausted and she died soon. My mother took care of her daughter. She helped her to enter the topography college. She lived in the hostel and often visited us. She got educated, got married and moved to another town. Poor girl, but we did what we could to help her.

In 1932 my mother left her Party activities and entered the Kiev State University, on history faculty. I believe this saved her life during repression of 1937. She was not a public person any more, perhaps, that was why they didn't touch her. She graduated in 1939 and was offered a job at the University. She was a secretary of the Party bureau of the department and then the University. I don't know how she survived in this meat grinding machine. 1937 touched me, too. I was 6 years old when I was interrogated at the KGB (State Security Committee) office. They asked me who visited us and what we discussed at home. My mother was sitting behind the door. The interrogation lasted 6 hours in a row. You can imagine how my mother was feeling all this time. My mother never told me that anything like this might happen, so I was not prepared. But they probably didn't hear anything suspicious in my prattle and they left us alone. I went to the kindergarten at that time and recited poems about Lenin to them.

Each morning my mother took me to the kindergarten located near St. Andrew' church. I saw the blasting of the Mikhailovskiy cathedral<sup>7</sup> and people taking away remnants of the ancient brickwork. Every morning and evening we walked past the ruins of Mikhailovskiy cathedral (it is called the "Golden cupola" cathedral now). All these events resulted in a nervous breakdown. Every night in 3 years I had a dream that I was execute by shooting and the gun was installed on the building of the Central Committee and the bullet hit me. I woke up crying and was afraid to go back to sleep. I remember the kindergarten. I was making the Kremlin from wooden parts. It was big: from one wall to another. We have a picture of this structure.

I found out that I was a Jew in 1937. Hitler was in power in Germany and my parents often discussed his horrible attitude towards Jewish people. I don't know how they knew it. There was not a word in this regard in the Soviet mass media. I felt my Jewish identity in the evacuation. There was no anti-Semitism in kindergarten or school. My parents often spoke Yiddish, but I didn't understand a word of it. I wasn't inquisitive. I just felt awkward at such moments, as if I was eavesdropping.

My father didn't share my mother's political ideas. He wasn't a Party member. He was against all this way of life. He was doing his job. He was a musician and also a wonderful violin-maker. The best masters could leave their Stradivarius, Gvarneri and Galliano instruments in his care. I could sit in his shop located across the street from the Opera House for hours and hours. My friendship with my father was a friendship between two men when no words were needed. We were very close. I learned about music from him. Although I never became a musician I know about music, that's for sure.

In 1938 I went to school. It was school # 13, an ordinary Russian school, located in Vladimirskaia Street in the very center of Kiev. This school was there before the revolution and when I came to study there were few teachers that had worked in this school since the pre-revolutionary time. There were children of high Party officials in our school. I didn't enjoy studying and was a poor student at school. I became a pioneer at school. I can't remember this event in detail. I was not eager to become a pioneer, but it was necessary to do so to avoid any complications in my mother's career or my future life. There were not many Jewish children in my form, but there were more of them in another form. I didn't have friends among my classmates but we all got along very well. We went fishing, or played football together.



When I was about 6 years old I began to draw. Before the war I attended a drawing club at the Palace of sports. I am not trying to say that I was very talented. After we returned from the evacuation my mother went to the archives at the Palace of Sports to take out my pre-war drawings. I looked at them from the height of my 13 or 14 years of age. They were bad drawings.

My father took few attempts to teach me music but he didn't take it seriously. My parents took me to an oboist and he explained to them that my lips were not quite fit and I had a wrong bite, etc. I couldn't play the piano because I was left-handed that was even more inappropriate for the violin. I loved music and tried to learn to play the piano for almost a year.

### **During the war**

I remember well 21 June 1941<sup>8</sup>, the day when the war began. Our family was in Sochi [*the most popular Soviet resort at the Black Sea, Caucasus*] Or, I would say, the orchestra where my father was playing was on tour there and my mother and I were following them. It was almost every summer that we did so. My mother was a post-graduate student in Kiev University. She was specializing in the history of the USSR. I went to the Riviera on this day. We were staying on top of a mountain and I took a trolley-bus down the hill. When I was on the way I saw many planes in the air, they were all flying in a line. And almost at the same moment a terrible storm, a fantastically horrific storm began in the sea. Never again in my life did I see anything like this. There was a lighthouse quite at a distance from the seashore. Now the sea receded far beyond it, stripping the pier to the pebbly bottom. And then another wave surge and the embankment was covered with water again. The waves broke in about 100 meters from the lighthouse. One of local people told us that according to the legends such storms only occur before a war. We didn't know then that Kiev had already been bombed. Sochi hadn't heard Molotov's<sup>9</sup> speech yet.

All musicians in the orchestra were from Kiev. They all returned to Kiev. I still cannot understand why they came back; I don't think they could explain why they were going back. It was quite easy to go in any direction from Sochi and they could have left elsewhere. My father was ill at that time. He had severe psoriasis. His whole body was covered with those terrible sores. He could only be transported the train wrapped in a sheet and on the stretcher. His condition began to improve when he and my mother were on a barge on the way to the evacuation destination point. My father started getting better when the bombing began. If it hadn't been for the psoriasis my father might have been sent to the front. I don't know. But I hope, not.

We arrived in Kiev two weeks after the beginning of the war. It must have been in July. My mother was on the lists of the town Party committee which meant that she could leave only at the permission of this committee. She was not the only Jew that the authorities wanted to stay in Kiev. My mother and everybody else knew what waited for them when Germans came. My father couldn't leave either due to his illness. They had to take me out of Kiev by all means. I left by train with my mother's closest friend Zhenia Ostrovskaya, a Jew. She was like a second mother to me. She was a big Party official. In the early 1930s she was a 2nd secretary of the town committee for propaganda. Later she was secretary of the Komsomol Central Committee. But this was all before 1932. Then she got educational at the mechanical department of Kiev Polytechnic Institute and went to work as an engineer at the biggest military plant "Arsenal" in Ukraine. The plant was evacuated along with all equipment, personnel and their families. Zhenia was single. She officially adopted me and took me to Votkinsk. I remember my mother seeing me off and putting me on a

truck. She was running after the truck and I was standing on it and looking at her knowing that she was staying. When my parents understood that they had to leave Kiev there was one last barge left. The Art Museum was sending its values on this barge. Sailing was the only way left, as Kiev was encircled by Germans. They were sailing down the Dnieper on this barge that was bombed. But my father began to recover at that time. I already mentioned it. They reached Dnepropetrovsk and proceeded to Ufa. They knew that “Arsenal” plant was evacuated to the east but they didn’t know where exactly (it was a military plant and there was no information about it). In Ufa they incidentally met an acquaintance at the post office. She worked at the plant and she told them where we were. I was in the summer pioneer camp in Votkinsk (Zhenia sent me there). I didn’t know that my parents were in Ufa until my term was over. The buses with children were approaching the bus station in Votkinsk when I saw my mother’s red hair. This was the happiest moment in my life.

I left Kiev with little luggage. I had no winter clothes and was wearing a woman’s flannel coat that I received at school in Votkinsk throughout the whole winter, at minus 40 degrees. I went skiing in it as well. What a terrible memory – to be wearing a girl’s coat! But that was all I had. I have few memories of my school. Boys and I went skiing or made a snow blindage, played snowballs. We had hardly any food. I had scurvy. My mother bought an onion on her last money to help me a little. I had black teeth and inflamed gums. My teeth never recovered since then.

I heard the words “Babi Yar”<sup>10</sup> in Votkinsk in September 1941 for the first time. A newspaper wrote that 60 thousand Jews were exterminated in the Babi Yar. When I was trying to tell my friends at school about this my teacher (she was a Jew) told me to keep it to myself. I asked her why. And she said “They may laugh...”

The population in Votkinsk treated the evacuated people with calm and kindness. There were many children. There were children from Leningrad. The attitude towards them was special because everybody knew that Leningrad was literally dying from starvation, illnesses and cold weather. I had a friend there, Tania, a Russian girl from Leningrad. She was a very beautiful girl. There were always beautiful girls around me.

Zhenia, my mother and father worked at the “Arsenal” plant in Votkinsk. My mother worked at the Party bureau and my father was a locksmith. Then at some time my father was ordered to go to Stalinabad (Dushanbe at present) to join an orchestra. We were to get ready within two weeks. And again we were on the train and on the way. In Perm my father was beaten by young recruits. There was no specific reason, but I know why it happened. They were drunk and they were going to die at this war and we were staying in the rear. I cannot blame them. But I cannot forget this fear. It was fearful: they were beating a man and he couldn’t fight back and he didn’t do anything to raise their anger. Besides, I felt sorry for my father and for those guys that were to leave. They had their picture of it: Jews pulling their suitcases on the way to evacuation when they had to go to the war. Terrible. Night, Perm, street lights...

In Stalinabad we got accommodated at school. It took director Braginskiy two months to put the orchestra together. My father’s hands were bleeding until his violin corns that disappeared while he was working at the plant grew back. Same with all other musicians. Their rehearsals began after two months. We were living at the gymnasium and the rehearsals were held there, too. They were playing Symphony 4 of Chaikovskiy. I still remember it by heart as well as the parts of all

instruments. They played this symphony at their first concert. The majority of musicians were Jews. Russian musicians played mainly horns and French horns, etc. – brass instruments. I cannot remember any problems associated with the nationality in this orchestra. There was a wonderful man Misha Yampolskiy, a Jew. He was inspector of the orchestra and secretary of the Party Bureau. The orchestra was self-governed and its leaders were smart people that didn't allow any anti-Semitic demonstrations. In 1943 my mother went to work at the Party office of the Railroad.

That same year the orchestra moved to Vladikavkaz. The best concert that I have ever heard in my life was the concert dedicated to the liberation of Kiev. It took place in Vladikavkaz. Musicians and their families were living at the storage facility of the central hotel. All musicians got together and played all night through. People danced on the tables because there was no space on the floor. This wasn't a big room, but there were about 100 people in it. This celebration lasted until morning but nobody bothered us. They all knew that we were celebrating the liberation of our home town.

There were direct anti-Semitic demonstrations in Vladikavkaz in 1943-44. I never started fighting but I heard enough of the word “zhyd” and its derivatives.

There is also one horrible memory from Vladikavkaz. I had friends that were Chechen and Ingush children at school. I shared my desk with an Ingush boy. One night many vehicles full of soldiers crossed Vladikavkaz. Their head lights were off. Nobody knew what was happening. In the morning my Ingush friend came and gave me his poniard, the most valuable possession that he had. He said he was leaving. I asked him where and then he told me. Soldiers went to the mountains to move the population, find those that were hiding and shoot the resisting ones. They moved all Chechen and Ingush people within 3-4 days<sup>11</sup>. I never saw them again. Nobody ever talked about what happened. I kept silent, too. The following week there was silence in the class. There was only half of schoolchildren left in class.

There was another time when I witnessed deportation of people. It was “clean-up” of the Crimea from the Tatars that populated the Crimea. In 1945 I spent two terms in Artek, the main pioneer camp in the USSR. I went there on 15 May and returned home by 1 September. The camp was celebrating its 20th anniversary. There were festive celebrations; even some government representatives from Moscow were present. We went to pick up apples in a Tatar village. The Tatar people had been recently deported and the villages were absolutely empty. Everything, all their possessions were in place. Nobody took anything with them. The Tatar families were thrown out of their houses and into the barred vehicles. The only man left there was an elderly man, a janitor. He knew that we were from the Artek. We could do or take what we wanted. It was an empty village, with nobody around. It was empty and strange. It was terrifying. There was a tree on the main square with many ribbons on its branches. It's a Tatar tradition to put little ribbons on the branches on a holiday. I will never forget this. One can never forget such things.

My two most terrifying memories are of 1944-45. The first of them (1944) was horrible. There was a counterattack of Germans near Zhytomir and they bombed Darnitsa in the outskirts of Kiev. In the morning there was a rumor at school that Germans bombed a train with food and tinned meat. Our whole class ran to that site hoping to find some food. But this was not a food train. It was a hospital. It was bombed to ashes. Arms, legs, heads, blood... I saw it all. The second horrible sight was when all school children went to watch execution of German captives in Kreschatik. It was happening as if mechanically, no sounds were heard. They were hung and they twisted and that



was all. The crowd ran to the gallows to pull the boots off the hanging people. Those were good boots... This was the most horrifying. Since then I've been afraid of crowds. No, it's not even fear, but disgust.

In February 1944 we returned to Kiev. Kreschatik<sup>12</sup> was in ruins. Proreznaya Street was all in heaps of broken and burnt bricks. We lived in the Philharmonic building at the beginning. Later we received a room at the communal apartment. All our neighbors were musicians and almost all of them were Jews. A violinist lived in one room and a flutist in another, a trombonist and a violoncellist occupied two other rooms, there was a French horn player and another violoncellist. They went to the Philharmonic in the morning and from about 3pm they rehearsed at home. In the evening they went to a concert. Oistrach, Kogan and other famous violinists that came on tours have been in this apartment. I remember Rostropovich and all conductors that came here after they arrived in Kiev.

### **After the war**

I studied at school. There were few Jews in my class. There were also Jewish teachers, but just few of them. Anti-Semitism was very strong in the post-war Kiev. However, I didn't feel it.

I became a Komsomol member one year later than the other children in my class. I had never been an active pioneer and avoided social activities. While the others were involved in the subbotniks and voskresniks<sup>13</sup>, cleaning up the school or the yard, I was playing football. I was reprimanded for it officially at the meetings. And the Komsomol activists postponed my admission to Komsomol. I wasn't eager to become a Komsomol member but it was necessary to be no different from everybody else. Besides, if one wasn't a Komsomol member, it made things more difficult at school and it was more difficult to enter an Institute.

In 1946 famine began. There was no food in stores. There were food cards, but to get some products in exchange for these cards one had to come and stand in line in the middle of the night and spend there a whole day. Everybody in line got his number that was written on the palm. In our house two women starved to death. When I was going to school their bodies were lying on the threshold.

People were returning to Kiev from evacuation. Many came to my mother to obtain a recommendation, to resume their membership in the Party or just to receive a place to live. Of all old communists only my mother was left. After I returned to Kiev in 1945 I went to the Babiy Yar. 4 of my father's distant relatives and my mother's cousin Efim (the son of her Uncle Dizik, with who she lived when she was a child) were exterminated there. At that time it was a decayed weeded area. Afterwards I attended lectures of Ilia Erenburg, a writer<sup>14</sup>, when he visited Kiev. He described the Babiy Yar in every detail. After hearing his story I went there again, to take a look at this place.

I didn't draw during the war. I didn't draw for a long time. The first drawing was a surprise to me. This was in the 8th form, in winter. I came home, it was dark and there was no light on. I opened the door to the room and saw my Granny standing by the window against the frozen pattern of the glass. She looked so lonely. Everything was dark blue: the frozen patterns on the glass, the window and my grandmother. I rushed to get my brushes and paints and made a painting. Later I was

looking at this painting and it became a revelation to me. I understood then that it was my cup of tea.

In 1949 struggle against “cosmopolites” began. My mother lost her job at the University as well as many of her friends and our acquaintances. My mother understood that it was done to get rid of Jews at the University but against any logic she didn’t think it was anti-Semitism. I finished school that year. My mother wanted me to become an architect. She was trying to bring me up in this direction. I never learned to paint professionally. I just painted something but it was so non-professional. So I went to the preparatory course to Kiev Engineering and Construction Institute. I started in April and entrance exams were in August. I made 5000 drawings between April and August. My teacher showed my drawings at the exam to demonstrate what a person could achieve in 4 months. People from Surikov Art school and from Kiev Art School were taking entrance exams there, but there were only two “5” grades. I got one of these two. And so I entered the Institute. However, this was quite an effort. I was drawing constantly. I always had a pencil, a sketch-book and paints with me. I liked it. There was a lot of competition. Competition between 9 times more entrants than the admission rate and 11 exams. It’s hard to imagine. I don’t think the nationality was as significant as some time later. Quite a few Jews entered. There were 10 Jews of 50 students at my course.

I had friends at the institute. I have friends now. But I have never had or will have such friends as my mother did – the ones that went through life with her. She had 4 friends from the University and they were together until she died.

I remember the “Kremlin doctors’ case”<sup>15</sup> in 1953. I still cannot understand. I was just a boy, but I understood the absurdity of charges against them, so how could adults take them seriously? But this was the reality. I remember a middle age man in the polyclinic. He had a swollen cheek and evidently was suffering from toothache, but he was asking the receptionist what the nationality of the dentist was. But there were other consequences, resulting from the doctors’ case. There were talks among Jewish people (and they must have had grounds) that all Jews would be forced to move to Birobijan<sup>16</sup>, the Jewish autonomous region. I remembered deportation of the Chechen and Ingush people. I had a vision of an empty village. That’s why I think there were grounds for such talks. Stalin’s death in 1953 put an end to this. Stalin’s death stirred no emotions in me. I guess it was the influence of my father. His attitude towards Stalin was critical, but my mother took his death as her personal grief.

I finished Institute in 1955. I had job offers from the Academy of architecture and “Kievproject”. They knew me there, I was even awarded a bonus at the contest there, but my job assignment was in Ashghabad, destroyed by an earthquake then. It was a hard blow for me. It might be that this case had nothing to do with my nationality. Just before graduation I had a big argument with the secretary of the Party bureau. But still, almost all Jews from my course happened to get their job assignments in Ashghabad. And there were so many requests to provide architects in Kiev.

In Ashghabad I worked at a design office for a year. The town was to be restored from the ruins. I lived in a hostel, but then I left for Kiev. I just ran away. I had to do it, because I might have lost the right to live in Kiev.

I came back to my parents in Kiev and got employed by a small design office involved in construction. I worked there 8 years. There were interesting people there but my work was dull. My work was related to communal architecture: public utilities service centers, plants, etc. Even if there was an interesting facility to be designed I couldn't do it well due to poor funding that I had to be based on. There were many Jews in this office. I think there were more Jews in smaller companies because they were not employed by big design institutes.

In 1960 I married Ella Yakovlevna, a Jewish woman. I don't usually remember names; therefore, I can't tell you her nee name. Ella was 7 years younger than I. We didn't have a place to live. Thus, she lived with her parents and I was living with mine. Later I moved to her parents' place. Her parents helped us to buy a 3-room apartment. It cost 6 thousand rubles. This was a lot of money at that time. The two of us earned about 250 rubles per month. It was a beautiful, fabulous for its time apartment. Ella was a literature specialist. She knew English well and tried to translate fiction into Russian. Unfortunately, she wasn't doing well. I don't know, perhaps she didn't have enough patience, or wasn't quite fond of what she was doing or there were other reasons. In 1965 our daughter Elena was born. But our marriage wasn't a success and even our daughter couldn't help us grow closer to one another. I believe that marriage is not just love; it is a union of two people responsible for one another. They have to help and take care of each other. Otherwise separation becomes inevitable. We got divorced. Our daughter was 12 at that moment. I asked her who she wanted to stay with. She said "You know that I would like to stay with you, but my mother needs me. She is my mother, you know". My daughter and I didn't see each other until she turned 17, her mother didn't allow her to see me and I couldn't find an opportunity to meet with her. Only when she grew older she came to see me without asking her mother permission to do so. Elena is in Israel now. She is a teacher. She got married and left in 1991. She always wanted to get out of here.

I don't feel like talking about my first wife. But I was very fond of my mother-in-law. She was a wonderful woman. She was a leather chemist and worked at the tannery in Kiev. She was a great personality! She was so knowing and understanding. A Jewish woman, very fat and unhappy, but she was a fighter and she was human. She was my friend. Her death in 1964 was a huge loss for me.

In 1964 I was offered a job at Kievproject, the biggest design institute in Kiev. I was immediately involved in the development of 1967 Kiev General Construction Plan. It was interesting. I accepted this job offer to understand the essence of a city or a town. And such understanding came to me. I retired from this work on 1 January 2001.

In the early 1960s we, a group of architects from the Kievproject, started the development of a park in the Babiy Yar. I struggled against this blasphemy. At that time I was working at the Kiev General Plan Headquarters. But then there happened an emergency situation: mudflow down the slopes of the Babiy Yar. It happened on 13 March 1961. My mother-in-law was there when it happened. She was going to work by tram, but it stopped before this mudflow. So she was safe. She explained to me the engineering background of this disaster. She showed me her files, her letters to the authorities about what had to be done to prevent the emergency. The authorities ignored her appeals. What happened there was a mere engineering fault and error. I was there, in the Babiy Yar, in 1961. What a terrible sight. I had seen mudflows before, but they were far from

populated areas. But victims and deaths in the city... People were saying that the Babiy Yar war victims were reminding the living that it would never do to arrange park alleys on their bones. That was how the Babiy Yar became a closer subject to me.

Architect Steinberg, a friend of mine, was involved in the bidding process for the design of a monument to those that were exterminated in the Babiy Yar. He offered me to join his proposal group, consisting of two architects and two sculptors. I agreed. Our group developed 5 drafts of the monument. It was a challenging and hard work lasting 5 months. We spent all our own money paying for the materials, but nobody was awarded this project. The launched the second round of the bid. We were all in debts and just couldn't afford to fail this next time. Our second draft was different from the first one. The 1st one was a reminder of the tragedy, but the 2nd one was not so revealing. And we won the second round. But our monument was not installed. The authorities announced the third round that was closed and we were not in it. I don't know why they wanted to deal with this subject at all after so many years of oblivion. I believe it was because they wanted to give its due to the world community. Undoubtedly speeches of writers and poets famous in our country and abroad also played their role. Basically, they had to react in some way.

Nevertheless, that first bid changed me significantly. I was a young man and had no strong viewpoints before. I was too immature to become a different person. I wasn't yet the personality I am now. I am not ashamed of taking part in that first bid.

For the second time I made a draft design of the monument in the Babiy Yar in 1991. The design was approved and I got to work. Our position was to install the monument at some distance from the graves, on the edge of the ravine rather than in the middle of it. I think a monument must not be installed on a grave itself. A monument is a symbol.

I was dying in this Babiy Yar all this time that I was working on the monument. How can one think of whose relatives or family died there? We were dying there. Working on the Babiy Yar monument was like going through an execution every day. But gradually work was advancing and reaching its outlines.

In 1977 I got married for the second time. My wife's name is Galina Andreyevna. She is an economist and works in this same Headquarters. She is Ukrainian. We've been together for 24 years. I am happy. We have two sons. Andrei, the older, was born in 1978, and Evgeniy was born in 1984. My older son is fond of history and writes poems. He is Master of Theoretical Cybernetics and Mathematician. He is a very nice young man. He is single. He loves literature and reads a lot. He also loves theater and classical music. He also likes jazz music. I do, too. He is a post-graduate student at Paris University. He won a students' exchange grant with no support on my part. He takes after me. Our younger son left us abruptly. He has to come to his own understanding of things. Evgeniy studies at Solomon University<sup>17</sup>. He is a first year student at the department of computer sciences. He finished school last year. He is a poor student. He doesn't feel like studying. Well, what can one do? He must come to it on his own. My sons are children of two nationalities. Evgeniy identifies himself as a Jew. He attends Gilel, a young people association at the Hesed, takes part in cheder and attends their seminars. Andrei is a man of the world, atheist and cosmopolite.

My father died in 1977. It was a sudden death. He didn't live long enough to see his grandsons. My mother lived 17 years longer. In 1958 my mother went back to the University to lecture on history. My mother was a very responsible person. After her retirement she organized a library in the basement of this building with no support from aside. There was a team of people working with her. She was director of this library until it was closed. When my mother died in 1994 many people came to the funeral. They were her real friends. They were of different ages and came from different towns. I cannot say that she was good or bad. She was like anybody else.

Nationality has never been of any importance to me. Never. A human being, a personality and his outlooks – that's what is important. My friends are my friends regardless of their nationally. Russian, Ukrainian, Jews – people, they are just my friends.

After 1991 I had to take to religious issue, the issues, related to placement of cult structures. I had to provide assistance to all confessions: Judaist sects, Ukrainian and Christian religious communities, Catholics, Greek Catholics and Protestants. They came to discuss their issues with me and I even published an article in a newspaper with the information that I was dealing with such issues, so that they knew where to go.

I came to Judaism after the Babiy Yar, after my work on the monument and Menorah. I tried to glue together this crack in my soul but I failed. Then a friend of mine asked me to help with the repairs of the Brodsky central synagogue. I went to the synagogue (I was taken there, as my leg was broken at the time and I had to stay in bed). They showed me their documentation and I gave them some advice on what could be done and made some sketches. This used to be the central synagogue in Kiev before the revolution, the biggest in the city and very beautiful. Later the Bolsheviks took away this building (as well as 300 other synagogues) and it housed the Puppet Theater. In 1996 the authorities returned this building to the Jewish community. The building was severely damaged. The inner walls were destroyed and its rear wall began to slide away from the front wall, because there was nothing to keep these two walls together. I drew the chart for them to keep this building together. I felt happy. This was my road to the temple.

Nowadays I go to the synagogue almost every day. I am always busy doing something there: a partial or a cabinet, etc. Thank God I can do this now! I am 71 years old. Did I believe in God when I was young? Yes, I did. Regardless of my mother being a communist. How can I explain how this could happen? I don't know? Can one say what creativity or inspiration is about? I don't think so. Or what happiness is. If you feel this happiness from being somewhere and can arrange it so that you can share this happiness with another individual it means that you've been led by God.

I am a Jew. We, Jews, must serve our Lord. Why are we here? Our Lord has sent us here. He is the one and only God in the world. I feel good about being aware of it. I have always known that there is only one God.

I spent 2 weeks in Israel recently. We traveled all around Israel (its holy places) one week and then I spent the next week with my daughter. They are great people and it is a great country. I admired them. However, I wouldn't want to move to Israel. If I moved there I would have to become an orthodox believer and defend this faith, I am convinced it would have to be so, although I can't explain why. I can't do it. From the spiritual point I must belong to the Judaism completely. But I am a cosmopolite. I've traveled a lot around the world since 1991, I've been to France, England,



Netherlands, Austria, Egypt, Japan, Korea. I admire any culture, pieces of art, etc. I can't focus on one culture. It's too late.

I have lived quite a life. I've been involved in the construction of the city. People have built their town throughout centuries. Builders express themselves, their life and their time, reflecting everything in their creativity.

I still have a lot to do in the Brodskiy synagogue. However, my plans are based on the sponsorship and funding. If we get funding we shall be able to do a lot, because it is not a museum, this is concentration of the idea. One can just look at things in a museum. But when one can take an XVII century brass Hanukkah in his hands one shall feel a bond of generations. It gives you the feeling that a master made this Hanukkah so long ago and you are holding it now and it breathes in your hands. One cannot create culture for today. Culture is for eternity.

## Glossary

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1 Podol - was always considered and is presently considered Jewish neighborhood in Kiev. Before the war there was 90% of Jewish population there.

2 In the Tsarist Russia the Jewish population was allowed to live at certain areas. In Kiev Jews were allowed to live in Podol, the lower and poorer part of the city.

3 The authorities could arrest an individual corresponding with his relatives abroad and charge him with espionage, send to concentration camp or even sentence to death.

4 Komsomol - the Communistic youth organization, created by the Communist Party, so that the state would be in control of the ideological upbringing and spiritual development of the youth almost until the age of 30.

5 COLLECTIVIZATION of agriculture in the USSR had to do with mass establishment of collective farms in the late 1920s - early 1930s that meant liquidation of private farms. It was a forceful process. Many peasants were repressed. It resulted in significant reduction of farmers and agricultural production and famine of 1932-33 in Ukraine, Northern Caucasus, Volga and other regions.

6 In the mid-1930s Stalin launched a major campaign of political terror. The purges, arrests, and deportations to labor camps touched virtually every family. Former rivals Zinovyev, Kamenev, and Bukharin admitted to crimes against the state in show trials and were sentenced to death. Untold numbers of party, industrial, and military leaders disappeared during the "Great Terror". Indeed, between 1934 and 1938 two-thirds of the members of the 1934 Central Committee were sentenced and executed. More than half of the high-ranking army officers were purged between 1936 and 1938.

7 The biggest Christian temple in Ukraine. It was destroyed by Bolsheviks in 1936 and restored 65 years later in 2000.

[8](#) 22 June 1941 at 5 o'clock in the morning the fascist Germany attacked the Soviet Union without declaring a war. On this day the Great patriotic War began.

[9](#) MOLOTOV (Skriabin) Viacheslav Mikhailovich (1890-1986) , a Soviet political leader During the October revolution he was a member of the Military Revolutionary Committee. In 1939-49 & 1953-56 he was Minister of Foreign Affairs of the USSR. Member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1921-57. Member of Presidium of the central Committee of the CPSU in 1926-57. He was belonged to the closest political surrounding of I.V. Stalin; one of the most active organizers of repression in the 1930s - early 1950s. He spoke against criticism of the cult of Stalin in mid 1950s.

[10](#) Babiy Yar is the site of the first mass shootings of the Jewish population that was done in the open by the fascists on September 29-30, 1941, in Kiev.

[11](#) Stalin's policy, forced deportation of the Middle Asia people to Siberia. People were thrown out of their houses and into vehicles at night. They were caught unawares. The majority of them died on the way from starvation, cold and illnesses.

[12](#) Kreschatik is the main street of Kiev.

[13](#) Subbotniks, voskresniks - Obligatory forced and not paid work at the weekend (Saturday and Sunday). People with pleasure came to work "for the good of their Native land"

[14](#) ERENBURG Ilia Grigorievich (1891-1967) , a famous Russian writer, columnist, a Jew. His adventure novels show the philosophic and satirical panorama of life in Europe and Russia in 1910-20s. He wrote books of memoirs with many facts, events and names from the history of our country and European culture and public life in the 20th century that had never been mentioned previously.

[15](#) «Doctors' Case» - was a set of accusations deliberately forged by Stalin's government and KGB against Jewish doctors of the Kremlin hospital charging them with murdering outstanding Bolsheviks. The «Case» was started in 1952, but was never finished in March 1953 after Stalin's death.

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

[17](#) Jewish University in Kiev, established in 1995.