

# Elkhonen Saks

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Tallinn

Estonia

Interviewer: Emma Gofman

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Elkhonen Saks, despite his advanced age, is very active and engaged full-time in public work. He is thin, energetic, very benevolent and intelligent. Since the death of his wife he has been living alone but frequently meets with his son and granddaughters. He has a clear mind and good memory.

My ancestors both on my father's and my mother's side lived in Poland. It was from there that in the second half of the 19th century the families of my paternal grandfather, Yehuda Saks, and my maternal grandfather, Vulf Saks, came to Estlyandskaya province. They did it illegally, because Estlyandskaya province was outside the Pale of Settlement [1](#). Both families bore the surname Sachs, although they weren't relatives. They were just namesakes, and later, in the 1930s, the name transformed to Saks, which was closer to the norms of Estonian spelling.

My father's parents, Yehuda and Rivke Saks, settled in the small town of Valga in the south of Estlyandskaya province. My grandfather Yehuda was very religious. He only ate kosher food, never worked on Sabbath and read prayers several times a day. For as long as his health permitted him he visited the synagogue on Sabbath and holidays. Grandfather wore the same type of clothes as other residents of our town. An ordinary suit, a coat and a hat. He always wore a kippah at home. He had a thick, but short and well-trimmed beard. He didn't complete a yeshivah but was very well acquainted with all Jewish laws and traditions and observed them very strictly.

My grandfather was a small merchant. He toured around villages on a horse cart and sold various goods to peasants. The family wasn't poor, but neither rich. Grandfather didn't only travel within Estlyandskaya province on his cart, but also across Russia, and he even got to Palestine through Turkey in the 1880s. At that time a lot of Russian Jews emigrated to Palestine, but he decided to see first what the conditions for living in Palestine were like. He came back soon. He found that it was very problematic to move to Palestine with his family and remained in the small Estonian town of Valga. His four sons and daughter were born and grew up there. Their native language was Yiddish. My grandmother Rivke died in 1929 when I was only 2 years old, and I cannot remember her at all. After her death grandfather lived for a few years with our family, and in 1935 he moved to Tallinn where his daughter and one of his sons lived at the time. He passed away in 1943 in evacuation in Samarkand.

He was a very caring father and tried to give his children at least some education. He sent his oldest son, Haim-Leib, to Vilno to study in a yeshivah. After graduation, before World War I, Haim-Leib was directed to go to Russia where he became a rabbi in the small town of Mozhaysk near Moscow. My grandfather was very proud of the fact that his son became a rabbi. Haim-Leib was a very educated person. He read the works of philosophers. He could speak about Marxism. Uncle Haim-Leib corresponded with Israeli rabbis on religious issues. This is what he was accused of and

arrested for in 1935 [2](#). He spent three years in the Soviet prison camps [3](#), but survived and returned to Mozhaysk in 1938. There he lived with his family until 1941. Certainly, he could not be a rabbi any more and had only occasional earnings. I'll tell you about the further destiny of this relative of mine later.

My grandfather's other son, Moisei, caused him a lot of trouble. He wasn't religious in any way and never visited a synagogue, which upset his father very much. Uncle Moisei finished the Russian high school in Valga, studied jewelry and worked in Valga as a jeweler. When Estonia became an independent republic in 1918, he moved to Tallinn and worked there in a big jewelry workshop. He was well off financially, but, for some reason, he adhered to socialist ideas from childhood. He was one of the active Yiddishists [4](#) that carried out propaganda among Estonian Jews against Zionism and the emigration of Jews to Israel. They felt that Jews would be all right in any state provided cultural autonomy [5](#) was created there. Uncle Moisei was firmly convinced of the correctness of the ideas of Marxism-Leninism. He was one of the founders and directors of the leftist organization 'Licht' [German for light] in Estonia. Members of this organization preached the ideology of communism and distributed Marxist literature among Jews. I saw The History of the VKP(b) [6](#) in Yiddish at Uncle Moisei's house in 1937 with my own eyes.

In 1940 he welcomed the establishment of the Soviet authority in Estonia and was happy with the fact that we would all start a new life. He believed it fair to take property from the rich. He even wanted to transfer all valuables his family possessed to the new regime. However, his wife didn't share his views and hid away some things. Uncle Moisei received a good post - he was appointed the head of a big nationalized jewelry shop. In the same year he went to Mozhaysk to visit his brother. The Soviet reality and the stories of his brother who came back from the labor camp, astounded him. When he returned, it seemed to us that he had been brought down to earth. He didn't speak about Marxist ideology any more.

When the Germans attacked the Soviet Union [7](#), Uncle Moisei, his wife and their 12-year old daughter Lia were evacuated earlier than our family. We hoped that he would get a job somewhere in Russia and help us. They first went to Moscow, then to Alma-Ata, then to Karaganda, but couldn't settle anywhere. And the longer he traveled like this the more disappointed he got in his ideas. At the end of 1941 Uncle Moisei committed suicide. In his last letter he wrote to his wife that he found himself bankrupt in his life theory, that he was unable to ensure a decent life for his family. His daughter Lia now lives in Saint-Petersburg and is a doctor.

My father's younger brother was called Josef. He was a rather active young man. In the 1920s, after completing elementary school, he worked for a few years in some store in Tartu. Then he decided to see the world and went to America in 1925. He lived there for eight years and was a simple worker. During this period Uncle Josef managed to save 10,000 dollars. He kept his money in a bank, but during the crisis in the USA [the Great Depression] [8](#) the bank went bankrupt, and Uncle Josef came back home as poor as he had left. What he had saved for memory's sake were a few coins with the portraits of American presidents.

The destiny of Uncle Josef turned out to be a very tragic one. After Uncle Moisei's death, he went to Karaganda to find out how all that had happened. He thought it was possible to say what you thought in the Soviet Union, just like in America. He talked too much in Karaganda and was arrested for that. When they searched him they found the American gold coins and declared him

an American spy. He was sentenced to five years in prison. After the war, when he was about to be released, and we were already waiting for him, we learnt that he had died in the camp. We don't know to this day what happened exactly.

Hanna was the last child in the family. She was born in 1902. She received a good education: she finished the Russian high school, and, already in the Estonian Republic, graduated from the Medical Faculty of Tartu University. She married Haim Ring, who was also a graduate of Tartu University. All their life, except for the time of the war, their family lived in Tallinn, where Hanna worked as a doctor. Before the war she had a private business, and after the war she worked as a doctor in a state clinic. They brought up two daughters, who still live in Tallinn: Ruth is a doctor and Nata is an engineer. Aunt Hanna died in 1980.

I cannot remember my mother's parents at all. They died, when I was little. I know that my grandfather's family, having arrived from Poland, settled in the north of Estonia in the city of Rakvere. Some Jewish families already lived there at that time. My grandfather had attended yeshivah in Poland, he was very religious, and the Jews of Rakvere chose him to be their rabbi. The family spoke Yiddish, and the children were brought up in the spirit of Judaism. Besides my mother, there were two sons and two daughters in the family. Both sons left for the USA in the 1920s. One of them (I don't remember his name) got rich within a few years and kept sending grandfather money for some time, but after a while he converted to Christianity. After that grandfather cut off all contacts with him and never mentioned him again. The second son, who had left for America, fell ill and died early.

My mother's sisters were called Blume and Basya. Blume never married. She studied pharmaceuticals and worked in a drugstore in Narva before the war. Basya was a seamstress by trade. In 1926 she married a fairly rich Latvian Jew, Volf Mentsovsky. He was a widower and had two children, a daughter called Lyuba and a son called Sergey. The family first lived in Mittava, then in Riga. After the death of her husband in 1937, Basya returned to Estonia and lived with her sister Blume in Narva. At the beginning of the war both of them were evacuated along with our family to Russia. After the war both sisters lived in Tallinn; they died there, too. Mentsovsky's children Lyuba and Sergey were always on good terms with Basya.

My father, David Saks, was born in 1891 as the second child in the family. He didn't get a good education; he only completed elementary school. Later, for a few years, he helped his father, delivering goods to neighboring villages. At the age of 18 my father was drafted to the tsarist army. He served as a simple soldier, participated in World War I, and was taken prisoner at the Austrian front. He used to say that it wasn't so bad in captivity in Austria.

My father spoke five languages: Estonian, Latvian, Russian, Yiddish and German. The Austrians used him as a translator in their camp office, so he didn't have to do hard work. He even had the opportunity to go to Vienna every now and then. In Vienna he got acquainted with Austrian Jews and was treated well in their homes. He said that he could have even got married and stayed in Austria. All the same, he came back home to Estonia in 1920.

Soon he got acquainted with his future wife, Haya-Hanna Saks, my mother. I think it happened in the town of Tartu at a meeting of the Jewish youth. At that time Tartu, which was a university town, was a center of both Estonian and Jewish cultural life in Estonia. It was the hometown of many Jewish students and intellectuals. The performances of the Jewish drama society in Yiddish

attracted young people from all over Estonia. In general, my father was a very sociable person, able to deal with different people and find a common language.

My parents got married in 1921. The wedding was held in the Valga synagogue. My mother received a small marriage portion, and they opened a small family store in the city of Valga, where they worked together, trading in all kinds of trifle: haberdashery, linen, etc. Mother embroidered tablecloths, napkins and towels beautifully. Those were also sold in the store. The family lived very modestly. They rented a small apartment in an old house. The apartment consisted of four rooms: one was big, the others very small. The house was heated with stoves; electricity was only introduced ten years later.

At the end of 1921 my sister Ite was born. My mother was frequently sick, so she was helped around the house by an elderly Latvian lady, Zelma. Zelma was illiterate, but very kind and nice. I was born in 1927. My birth, I think, was the reason for my mother's death. She died when I was only 7 days old. My sister told me that when mother was alive all Jewish traditions were observed in the house. She tried to cook kosher meals only, observed Sabbath and celebrated all Jewish holidays.

After her death all the housework was done by Zelma. As a boy I believed that Zelma was my mother because she looked after me. The first language I started to speak was Latvian. At the same time my sister and my father taught me Yiddish and I knew it perfectly well by the time I turned 3. In the family we used several languages, Yiddish always being the main one. Yiddish was also spoken in the families of our friends, and so I learnt the language very well communicating with Jewish children and their parents. Since then I write in all questionnaires that my native language is Yiddish, although I speak several other languages fluently. I believe I do that because Yiddish is the language of my childhood.

Zelma tried to stick to the order my mother had established, but, certainly, we didn't have a real Jewish life any more. Our father was moderately religious. He didn't always observe Sabbath, but on holidays he would go to the synagogue. We bought products at the market and in ordinary stores, so they were not kosher. However, we never ate pork, and used separate utensils for cooking meat and dairy dishes. Since the meals were prepared by Zelma, my grandfather Yehuda never sat at the table with us. He thought that meals prepared by a Christian woman couldn't be kosher. Therefore, when grandfather lived with us, he used to buy kosher products for himself and cooked his own food.

Soon after my mother's death father liquidated his shop that brought very little income, and decided to become a manufacturer. He founded a small factory for the production of soap with one of his friends. They hired two workers. My father bought the raw material himself, sold the soap and worked a lot, but all the same, in two years the business failed. He was ruined and left with huge debts. He wasn't even able to pay taxes. We waited with fear for a judicial police officer to come and order all our property to be auctioned off.

My father couldn't find a permanent job for a long time. For some time he worked for a rich Jew who traded in timber. He used to take long trips to forests where he allocated sites for peasants to fell trees. In 1936 he managed to get a good position in Tallinn. The widow of a rich Tallinn manufacturer called Besprozvani asked him to work as a sales agent for a knitting factory. Since then he lived in Tallinn, received a good salary and visited us in Valga a few times a month. He

used to spend holidays with us or just came for two or three days. His job implied constant travelling, that's why he thought we would be better off in Valga, although he did plan to take us to Tallinn some time in the future.

There were lots of different Jewish organizations in Tallinn at that time: cultural, sports, professional. Father took an active part in all that. Besides, he frequently went to Tartu for various Jewish events, as Tartu University was the center of Jewish culture in Estonia before the war. In 1939 my father and me spent a summer in the small and very beautiful town of Elva, near Tartu. Before the war it was a favorite resort town for Tartu Jews. My father met a lot of his acquaintances there. And I remember one funny episode. Local jokers removed the railway station signboard 'Elva' at night and replaced it with a signboard reading 'Jerusalem', alluding to the large number of Jews among the holiday-makers. I cannot remember any of our friends considering this joke as an insult or offence.

My sister Ite and I became independent early, because from 1936 to 1941 we lived in Valga alone. Of course, Zelma stayed with us taking care of the household, and for me she was both a nurse and a mother. By that time we had no relatives in Valga any more, but there were many good friends of my parents. They were Jewish families. I frequently visited them and made friends with their children. I clearly remember the Slomka family, especially Aunt Tsilya. She was a dentist. She was very nice to me, cared for me as if I was her son. We celebrated Pesach with her family; they always invited us. All Jewish traditions were strictly observed there, and I liked it a lot. That's why I believed Pesach was the best holiday when I was little.

Valga was a multicultural city. The basic population was Estonian, but there were many Latvians, Russians, Jews and Germans. Almost everybody could speak several languages. I had friends among the Estonians and the Latvians. I don't remember any manifestations of ethnic animosity. In the 1920s-1930s the Jewish community of Valga led a rather active life. The population of the town was 10,000 and about 500-600 were Jews. We didn't have any Jewish quarter or Jewish street. Jews lived scattered around town. Some families owned houses, but the majority rented apartments.

The Jews in Valga looked similar to other inhabitants in their appearance, but their way of life was a little different. We had a synagogue and a rabbi. The community rented a building for the synagogue. On Jewish holidays more than 100 people attended. We also went to the synagogue on holidays. I remember the day of my bar mitzvah very well. For two months our Valga rabbi, Katz, taught me how to read the Torah at the ceremony. It found it very interesting. On 13th April 1940 our relatives and friends came to the synagogue, around 25 people all in all. I read well and was very proud that my first reading of the Torah passed successfully. Then the celebrations continued in our home. During Jewish holidays and Sabbath Jewish stores and workshops were closed everywhere in town. We had a shochet, and if you wished you could always have kosher food. There was a Jewish cemetery in Valga as well. My mother and grandmother are buried there.

The Jews in Valga were craftsmen, merchants (there was one big shop which belonged to Rauhman, and many smaller stores), employees and doctors (the Polyakovsky family). Public Jewish organizations operated in town as well. There was a sports club called Maccabi where many young people worked out. Women were united in an organization called Vico. There was also a public Jewish club where celebrations were held and amateur theatre performances staged. There were two youth organizations, Hashomer Hatzair [9](#) and Betar [10](#). This was the time [the beginning

of the 1930s] when the emigration of Estonian Jews to Palestine began. And lots of Jews wanted for their children to get ready for emigration. But these two youth organizations, as well as Jews in general, had different views about the future of the Jewish State. The Hashomer Hatzair was a leftist organization. Its inspirers felt that Israel should be a socialist country. The young people participating in it were eager to go to Palestine and build their own country with a shovel in their hands. On the opposite, the heads of the Betar insisted that in the future Israel should become a typical European capitalist country. And to build such a state, you were supposed to go there with a rifle.

I became a member of the Hashomer Hatzair. We wore green shirts, made camping trips, and learned how to work. When our school was closed, I went to an Estonian school and stopped to attend the Hashomer Hatzair. My sister Ite took part in the Betar movement for several months. Ite never studied in a Jewish school. The reason was that Estonian Jews always argued on what language was more important, Hebrew or Yiddish. Father thought that Yiddish was more important and necessary. And in my school Hebrew was put in the first place. So father sent Ite to an Estonian school. Therefore she was somewhat pulled away from the Jewish problems. And she only joined the Betar in 1939 because she fancied someone there. Later she recollected that the Betar members were ready to go to Palestine and fight against the Arabs. But World War II began and everything changed.

I started school in 1934. It was the Valga 6-year elementary Jewish school. The curriculum in our school was the same as in other comprehensive schools, but the teaching was conducted in Yiddish. Besides, we intensively studied Hebrew from the 1st grade, as well as the Torah. We also learned Estonian. The school was sponsored by the state, and the Jewish community helped to rent a gym and supported children from poor families. Besides, the school was under the authority of the Board of the Jewish Cultural Autonomy. The school had no premises of its own, so at first a house was rented and then only a semi-house. I remember that the surname of our director was Bakhmat, and the chairman of the Parents' Board was a very respected resident of our town: Doctor Polyakovsky.

Jewish holidays were always cheerfully celebrated at school, especially Chanukkah and Purim. We prepared performances and made suits. And on Pesach we had a vacation: this holiday was celebrated at home. When I entered that school, there were about 60 pupils, and after four years only 25 remained. The school was closed in 1938. The reason was that having become independent states, Estonia and Latvia divided our small border town in half. Almost immediately problems with trade and employment arose. Gradually, the Jewish youth began to leave for Tallinn, Tartu and Riga to study and work.

For three years before the war (that is, from 1938-41) I went to an Estonian school; two years in the 'bourgeois' period and one during the Soviet regime. I knew Estonian well, so I had no problems. During the first two years, Jewish children weren't allowed to attend school on Jewish holidays. I remember how I came to school after Rosh Hashanah once, and our group supervisor wished me a happy New Year in front of all my mates. Frankly speaking, there was one occasion when a classmate called me 'Kurati juut' for some reason. The literal translation is 'the hellish Jew', but in Estonian it sounds very offensive. I had no time to react before one of my Estonian friends rushed towards the offender and slapped him in the face.



In June 1940 the Soviet power was established in Estonia. The Jewish cultural autonomy was liquidated within a month, and all Jewish organizations were shut down. Nevertheless there were Jews who welcomed the arrival of the Soviets. My sister Ite was among them. She was under the influence of Uncle Moisei and his communist ideology. In 1940 Ite studied in the last grade of high school. She joined the Komsomol [11](#), was immediately elected secretary of the school Komsomol organization and a member of the town Komsomol Committee. So she very actively participated in the process of consolidation of the Soviet authority in Valga.

When Germany attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941, the German army was moving ahead very quickly and approached the southern border of Estonia a month later. My father was in Tallinn. I was 14 years old and didn't know what to do. My old nurse Zelma wanted me to stay with her and promised to hide me if necessary. But I was rescued by Tsilya Slomka - she had been my mother's friend. Without asking anybody, she took me to the station and put me on a train to Tallinn. After three days Ite was evacuated to Russia together with the Estonian Communist Party and Komsomol executives. And from Tallinn all of us, my father and other relatives, were evacuated to Russia, too.

The front stopped for a short time on the Emajygi river, and northern Estonia remained unoccupied by the Germans for another month. Some Jews just didn't have time to flee from southern Estonia, but everybody had a chance to escape from the northern part, if they wished so. Only the old and the sick remained behind, as well as all those who didn't believe the stories of atrocities committed by the fascists, but considered it pure Soviet propaganda instead. All of them were murdered, of course.

The train, which took me, my father, my grandfather Yehuda, my uncles and aunts and their families away from Tallinn, was heading for the town of Ulyanovsk [750 km east of Moscow]. But at the station of Kanash in Chuvashia [an autonomous republic within Russia], all the evacuees were taken off the train and transported to Chuvash villages. There we were housed in country log huts; several families in one room. We lived in the same room with my mother's sisters, Blume and Basya, and another family. Jobs were impossible to find there. To survive, we had to sell our belongings and clothes. Soon we understood that we would hardly last long this way. And then Uncle Josef, my father's brother, gathered a group of evacuated Jews, about 30 people, and we went back to Kanash railway station. There we bribed the chief of the station, who told us to get into a commodity car, hooked the car to a train and asked where we wanted to go. For some reason, we chose Alma-Ata. The chief of the station wrote 'Alma-Ata' on the side of the car, and on our way we were.

We had been travelling for almost a month along Siberian roads before we got to Alma-Ata. The town was filled with refugees, and we went further on. At last, we found ourselves in northern Kazakhstan in the small town of Turmashi. We lived there for almost a year. I went to a Russian school, finishing the 8th grade there. That was the year when I learnt Russian. Living in Turmashi, we kept inquiring about our relatives. My father and I learned that my sister Ite was working near Moscow, in Egoryevsk. During the war the Communist Party, the Komsomol and the economic leaders of Soviet Estonia lived there. Ite worked as a journalist with the Central Komsomol Committee of Estonia.

We also found out that father's older brother, Haim-Leib, who was evacuated from Mozhaysk, lived in Samarkand with his children. He had four sons and two daughters. His wife died before the war.

His older son, Josef, married a Russian girl in 1927, broke with his Jewish roots and left the family of his father. The second son Motl was called up to military service, became part of the tank corps and was killed at the front. The youngest son was caught by the war in Belarus, while visiting his relatives, and murdered by the fascists. Only the third son, Elya, and the daughters, Frida and Ite, remained with their father. Elya was about 18 years old then. Before the war he tried to enter university, but wasn't accepted because he was the son of a rabbi. Uncle Haim-Leib invited us to Samarkand. With much effort my father, my grandfather and me managed to get there at the end of 1942. We lived in Samarkand for more than a year, and it wasn't a bad time.

There were many Polish Jews, who had escaped from the war, in Samarkand at that time. They managed to create small-scale production plants there, some sort of cooperative societies. One of these cooperatives manufactured fabrics from cotton, and all our family worked there. We had a loom in the room that we rented from an Uzbek. In the morning I used to go to school where the teaching was in Russian, but Uzbek was also in the curriculum. In the evening I used to weave fabrics using the loom machine. Half of the products went to the cooperative, and the other half was sold on the black market. We earned good money. Once the militia came. The fabrics intended for the black market were hidden under the floor. The floor was covered with a carpet, and I was lying on that carpet. I was frightened to death and trembling all over. The militiaman looked at me and asked, 'What is it with the boy?'. My father told him I was sick with malaria. The militiamen decided not to disturb me and left. After that we refrained from selling goods on the black market.

When Tallinn was liberated [22nd September 1944] my father and me started to think of returning to Estonia. Uncle Haim-Leib tried to persuade us to stay. He was very wise. He stated, 'Stalin's authority is not inspired by God, it comes from the Devil. It cannot stay for long. And we, all of us, will certainly end up in Israel'. His words came true. After the war the Polish nationals received the sanction to return to Poland. Haim-Leib, his son and his daughters managed to get fictitious documents and left with some of their Polish friends. From Poland they quickly got to France. Both daughters married orthodox Jews there and left for the US. They've been living there ever since - in Cleveland. Frida's husband is a rabbi, her surname is Stern. She has eight children and many grandchildren. Ite's surname became Hildesheim after her marriage, she brought up ten children, but lost her husband early. All her kids are very religious. Ite has thirty- two grandchildren. In 1999 I visited her for the wedding of one of her granddaughters. It was a real Jewish wedding, populous and very cheerful. Uncle Haim-Leib and his son Elya left for Israel. My uncle died in 1952, and Elya lives in Israel now. He's over 80 now. He has five children and many grandchildren.

My father and I returned to Estonia in 1944. Everyone who came back from evacuation was first put under quarantine. Therefore, we were brought directly from the train to barracks fenced with barbed wire. It was near Kiviylil [130 km from Tallinn]. We lived there for about a month. We were given food and clothes from the American charity funds. Then we were allowed to continue our journey. Many years later I learned that the place, where we were put under quarantine, had been a fascist concentration camp during the war, in which thousands of Soviet war prisoners and European Jews had been killed. In Valga we were met by Zelma. She was very glad to see us again and had even kept some of our things. We were to begin a new life and went to Tallinn where my sister had found us a place to live.

My sister Ite was one of the first journalists to develop the Estonian Soviet press in the postwar years. She was a member of the editorial boards of many Estonian newspapers and magazines,



and the leading journalist of one of the central Estonian newspapers, Noorte Haal [The Voice of Youth]. She worked real hard but still managed to finish the Faculty of Estonian Philology at Tartu University by correspondence. At the same time she married a young writer, Juhan Smuul [12](#). He was an Estonian from the small island of Muhu and came from a simple fishing family. He had only elementary education, but, undoubtedly, possessed a big literary gift. It was the first editor of his works, his number one supporter and critic. His works were a great success. He soon became one of the most popular writers in Estonia, and the secretary of the Union of Estonian Writers. He received the Stalin prize for the poem entitled Stalin, and the Lenin prize for his Ice Book. Popularity and money turned him into a drunkard and idler. The family soon broke up. After the divorce Itte reverted back to her maiden name Saks.

At the beginning of the 1950s, a big anti-Semitic campaign was launched in the Soviet Union. Itte was forbidden to work as a journalist, because she was Jewish, and besides 'the niece of an American spy', Uncle Josef. Itte started doing translations at home. From childhood on she knew Latvian well. Since then she has translated over thirty books from Latvian to Estonian, as well as many plays for the theatre. In 1997 Itte was invited to the Latvian embassy in Estonia where, in solemn atmosphere, she was awarded the 'Three White Stars Order' by the president of Latvia. She also received other distinctions from the Estonian president as a sign of recognition for her efforts to promote Latvian literature in Estonia. Itte is a member of the Union of Writers in Latvia.

In the 1980s Itte actively participated in the political life of Estonia. She was one of the organizers of the National Front [13](#) in Estonia, and also the contact person between the Estonian and Latvian National Fronts. It was her contribution to the restoration of Estonian independence. Now her age and health no longer allow her to work.

Having arrived in Tallinn in 1944, I studied for half a year in the 10th grade of the Russian high school. I finished school in 1945 with a gold medal (in fact, they handed me a silver medal instead of a gold one, for some reason) and was admitted without exams to the Construction Faculty of the Tallinn Polytechnic Institute. I lived in a student dormitory because we had no flat of our own. My father rented a room from some Estonian lady for a long time, and during his last 5-6 years lived in the family of his sister Hanna.

I received a grant, which allowed for a modest life. Since then I could always provide for myself. As a student, I worked at construction sites. First as a worker, then as a foreman. My friends used to give me summaries of the lectures, and I studied them at night. During the first year I worked as a foreman with captive Germans. We were building a large dockyard. It was easy to work with them. They were very disciplined and wanted to show that they were not anti-Semitic all the time. Then I worked with a very difficult contingent, with so-called construction battalions [14](#), but I made it. In this manner I studied and worked for three years.

Then I got married in 1948 and moved from the dormitory to my wife's apartment. My wife, Erica Saks [nee Vajna], worked as a laboratory assistant in our institute. That's where I met her. Erica was an Estonian. She was 24. She was a very attractive woman. She had been married once, but divorced her husband during the war. She had a small son, Raupo, aged 6. My marriage upset my father quite badly. He wrote me a very harsh letter condemning my marriage. He believed that I shouldn't have married a woman who already had a child, and especially not a non-Jewish person. But I loved Erica so much. My sister Itte always said that father loved me more than her. However,

he had forgiven her marrying an Estonian, but he somehow couldn't forgive me.

In general, my father failed to take root in the new life; he couldn't find a decent place for himself. He became helpless. He didn't marry again. His professional career didn't work out well, either. First he worked in some civil engineering organization, later he was a salesman in a shop. He earned little everywhere. He died in 1963.

As for Erica and me, we were a good and amicable family. We loved and respected each other very much. Her father died before the war, and her only surviving relative was her mother, who was very nice to me. My wife's family wasn't religious, so we never celebrated Christian holidays in our home, but we never celebrated Jewish ones, either. We celebrated New Year and birthdays. I always remembered that I was a Jew. I never concealed that from anyone. I told my wife and children about Jewish traditions and holidays. But it all seemed to be a thing of the past at that time, and it appeared that there was little chance that it would come back. I mean there was no Jewish cultural or social life in Estonia after the war. We spoke Estonian in the family. During the first years of our marital life Erica showed interest in Yiddish. So I started to teach her a little. Of course, she could never speak the language, but at least she mastered the alphabet. What we did later was that we used to write notes to each other in Estonian, but with Jewish letters so that nobody could understand.

Having a family, I couldn't study and work at the same time any longer. I switched to the correspondence department at the institute and got a permanent job as a construction superintendent in a repairs and civil engineering organization. I graduated in 1955 and later worked as a construction engineer. In 1962 I was invited to work with Gosstroy, the state committee that supervised all design and construction projects in Estonia. I worked there for 25 years, making the progress from a simple engineer to the deputy chief of the department. To become the chief of the department one was expected to join the Communist Party. I didn't want to do that and that's why I remained a deputy chief until I retired. No one in my family ever joined any communist organizations. Our children were neither pioneers nor Komsomol members. Of course, we participated in various Soviet demonstrations, meetings, etc., but only because we had to. There were Jews among my colleagues in the construction companies, both Estonian Jews and those who came from Russia after the war. I always considered it my duty to help them, and they supported me as well. I cannot remember any manifestations of anti-Semitism towards me and my family (except for my sister Ite). Many things happened during the 25 years I worked with Gosstroy. I retired in 1987.

My wife's son Raupo grew up in our family. I didn't legally adopt him, but always considered him my son. He has a family of his own now. We are still on very good terms with him. After my own son Touri was born, I built a small house for my family. But we didn't live long in it, because it was demolished according to the municipal development plan: they constructed a big multi-storied house in its place. We bought a spacious and convenient apartment.

Touri finished high school, and then the Tallinn Pedagogical Institute. By trade he is a music teacher and leads a chorus. Estonians have always loved choral singing. Touri has supervised big choral collectives. They frequently performed in other republics and abroad. Nowadays the cultural life in Estonia is much weaker, and my son's profession is no longer in high demand. He works with a Tallinn company involved in the sale of books. He has been married for a long time now and has

two children. His daughter, Elina, is finishing the Faculty of Estonian Philology at Tartu University. She is married and lives with her family in Keila, near Tallinn. Her husband, a historian, works in the Estonian Ministry of Defense. They have two small twin daughters, Liise and Lotte. My grandson's name is Etto. He has completed a technical school specializing in mechanics, and now works with a Tallinn firm, and studies at the Polytechnic University by correspondence.

My son wasn't brought up Jewish. He doesn't know Yiddish. His native language is Estonian, and he also speaks Russian and a little English. At school he was sometimes teased because he looks more Jewish, than I do. He didn't take offence. And now he feels Jewish to some degree, maybe not fully, but he does. He helps me with all my affairs. He's interested in Jewish literature and history. He is fond of Jewish music and owns a big collection of tapes and CDs by Jewish performers. When my son was born I invented his first name, which is based on the word 'Torah'. Unfortunately, he isn't religious.

At the end of the 1980s it was possible to resume correspondence with our relatives in the USA and Israel, which we had to stop in the late 1940s. A grandson of my cousin Ita came to Tallinn in 1993. He is a Hasid [15](#). Later they invited me to visit them in Cleveland. The revival of Jewish public life was taking place in Tallinn in the 1990s. First, the Society of Jewish Culture of Estonia was founded, and then the Jewish community of Estonia. I was one of the first people to be actively involved in the process. I took part in all events, published the community newspaper and collected books for the library.

I took great interest in Jewish history and devoted all my spare time to study it. It seems to me, that we, Jews, know very little about our history and culture. And other people hardly know anything about us at all. Can this be the roots of anti-Semitism? Young people, who don't know anything about Jews, would very easily give in to anti-Semitic propaganda. I undertook the task of acquainting Estonians, who I respect very much, with Jewish culture.

In 1990 I organized a small publishing house, Aviv, in Tallinn whose basic purpose was the promotion of books by prominent Jewish authors in Estonian. My sister Ite introduced me to Estonian intellectuals who were interested in Jewish culture. The well-known novel *The Slave* by Nobel Prize winner Isaac Singer [16](#) was the first book published by Aviv. It was printed with a circulation of 10,000 copies, and most of them were sold at once. Then we published a collection of selected stories by another famous writer, Shmuel Agnon [17](#). We also published a very beautiful book for children and an anthology of Jewish poetry entitled *Dream in Jerusalem*. The last book we published was a book by Sholem Aleichem [18](#). After that the publishing house Aviv ceased to exist, and I more or less plunged into journalism.

I have been the public editor of the Estonian language version of the community newspaper *Ha-Shachar* [The Dawn] for several years now. It's a small newspaper in which I publish not only articles about our community, but also about Jewish history, literature, and a lot of information about Israel. I'm very concerned about the recent appearance of materials with anti-Semitic tendency in the Estonian press, as well as of anti-Semitic literature. In 1993 I saw *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* [19](#) in a bookshop in Tallinn. After my conversation with the director of the store the book was withdrawn from sale. But this incident had consequences.

An article appeared which said that in the free democratic Estonian state a Jew undertook the role of a censor trying to forbid the sale of certain books. The Minister of Justice whom I addressed

regarding the sale of this book, which is banned in Europe, advised the Jewish community to file a court suit. I wrote to some Estonian newspapers about this book and many members of the Jewish community talked about it on the radio. We were supported by Estonian intellectuals. However, the community still had to take the matter to court, because two months later another edition of the same Protocols appeared in Tartu. Only a second court in Tartu ruled that the distribution of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion was prohibited in Estonia and confiscated the remaining copies. For a long time there was a debate on how to destroy these copies, until two well-known Estonian journalists wrote a poignant article saying that the books should be burnt in Tartu on the very place where the fascists shot several thousand Jews. The books were destroyed but the debates didn't stop.

In 1996 I published a book entitled The Elders of Zion, in which I described the history of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion: why it was written, where it was published, how it was suppressed and so on. I also included a chapter on famous Jews who had made great contributions to the development of international culture and science. The response to my book was basically positive. I realized that we didn't have to be afraid to speak about ourselves. I started to receive many invitations to hold lectures on Judaism, on Jewish history in educational institutions and circles of Estonian historians. I never refuse to do so.

In 1997 I participated in the World Book Fair in Jerusalem as a member of the delegation of Estonian journalists, writers and publishers. I represented the Aviv publishing house and exhibited the books by Jewish authors we had published in Estonian. On behalf of the publishers I presented one copy of each book to the national library of the Hebrew University. The books arouse interest with those Estonian Jews who now reside in Israel. I was in Israel for three weeks, traveling a lot and admiring its beauty and achievements. My son Touri came with me.

Touri liked Israel very much. Two years later he went to Israel again to represent the company he worked with at the Jerusalem Book Fair. We often said that if there had been an opportunity to emigrate to Israel about 30 years ago, we would have certainly done so, without thinking twice. And my wife would have gone with us, I'm sure. But now it's different. My wife died in 1995. My grandchildren and great-grandchildren live in Estonia, and all my roots are here. I'd like to visit Israel once again and travel around the country. God willing, my dream will come true.

A few years ago I organized a circle of fans of Yiddish language in our community. We gather several times a month, communicate in our native Yiddish language and read books in Yiddish. These books occupy many shelves in our community library, but unfortunately, there's almost nobody who can read them. Members of our circle are mostly people of a very advanced age.

Glossary

## **1 Jewish Pale of Settlement**

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

## **2 Arrests in the 1930s**

In the mid-1930s Stalin launched a major campaign of political terror. The purges, arrests, and

deportations to labor camps affected virtually every family. 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.

### **3 Gulag**

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

### **4 Yiddishists**

They were Jewish intellectuals who repudiated Hebrew as a dead language and considered Yiddish the language of the Jewish people. They promoted Yiddish literature, Yiddish education and culture.

### **5 Jewish Cultural Autonomy**

The cultural autonomy, which was proclaimed in Estonia in 1926, allowed the Jewish community to promote national values (education, culture, religion).

### **6 VKP(b)**

the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks in the Soviet Union.

### **7 Great Patriotic War**

On 22 June 1941 at 5 o'clock in the morning Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union without declaring war. This was the beginning of the so-called Great Patriotic War.

### **8 Great Depression**

the period in American history beginning with the stock market crash in October 1929 and lasting until the US entry into World War II in 1941.

### **9 Hashomer Hatzair**

'The Young Watchman'; A Zionist-socialist pioneering movement founded in Eastern Europe, Hashomer Hatzair trained youth for kibbutz life and set up kibbutzim in Palestine. During World War II, members were sent to Nazi-occupied areas and became leaders in Jewish resistance groups. After the war, Hashomer Hatzair was active in 'illegal' immigration to Palestine.

## **10 Betar**

Founded in Riga, Latvia, in 1923, Betar is a Zionist youth movement, named after Joseph Trumpeldor. It taught Hebrew culture and self defense in eastern Europe and formed the core groups of later settlements in Palestine. Most European branches were lost in the Holocaust.

## **11 Komsomol**

Communist youth organization created by the Communist Party to make sure that the state would be in control of the ideological upbringing and spiritual development of young people until they were almost 30.

## **12 Smuul, Juhan (1922-1971)**

Estonian writer. He wrote poetry, plays and novels, using motifs about the sea that he had been familiar with from childhood. He also wrote propaganda against the Estonian Republic. He was awarded the Stalin prize for his poem entitled A Poem to Stalin, and received the Lenin prize for his book Antarctica Ahoy!: The Ice Book.

## **13 National Front**

A social organization founded in Estonia in April 1988. The activities of the National Front contributed to the restoration of Estonian independence. Similar fronts existed in Latvia and Lithuania.

## **14 Construction battalions**

Military units in the former USSR, to which men unfit for active military service, often people with a criminal record, were drafted. These battalions were often used for the realization of huge state projects.

## **15 Hasid**

The follower of the Hasidic movement, a Jewish mystic movement founded in the 18th century that reacted against Talmudic learning and maintained that God's presence was in all of one's surroundings and that one should serve God in one's every deed and word. The movement provided spiritual hope and uplifted the common people. There were large branches of Hasidic movements and schools throughout Eastern Europe before World War II, each following the teachings of famous scholars and thinkers. Most had their own customs, rituals and life styles. Today there are substantial Hasidic communities in New York, London, Israel and Antwerp.

## **16 Singer, Isaac Bashevis (1904-1991)**

Yiddish novelist, short-story writer and journalist. Born in Poland, Singer received a traditional rabbinical education but opted for the life of a writer instead. He emigrated to the US in 1935, where he wrote for the New York-based The Jewish Daily Forward. Many of his novellas, such as Satan in Goray (1935) and The Slave (1962), are set in the Poland of the past. One of his best-



known works, *The Family Moskat* (1950), he deals with the decline of Jewish values in Warsaw before World War II. Singer was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1978.

### **17 Agnon, Shmuel Yosef (1888-1970)**

Shmuel Yosef Czaczkes was born in the Jewish shtetl of Buczacz, Galicia. In 1913, Agnon left Israel for Germany where he remained for 11 years. His first short story *Agunot* (Forsaken Wives) was published in Palestine in 1924 under the pen-name Agnon, which bears a resemblance to the title of the story, and which became his official family name thereafter. *Temol Shilshom* (Yesterday and the Day Before), considered his masterpiece, is a powerful description of Palestine in the days of the Second Aliyah, but its spirit reflects the period in which it was written, the years of the Holocaust. Agnon was the first Hebrew writer to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1966.

### **18 Sholem Aleichem, real name was Shalom Nohumovich Rabinovich (1859- 1916)**

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

### **19 The Protocols of the Elders of Zion**

One of the primary weapons that the Third Reich used to convince the rest of the world of the evils of Judaism was *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. It is claimed that the Protocols are the minutes of a meeting of Jewish leaders at the first Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland, in 1897, in which Jews plotted to take over the world. The Protocols are a complete forgery most of which was copied from an obscure satire on Napoleon III. The Protocols were written in Paris sometime between 1895 and 1899 by an agent of the Russian secret police, Pytor Ivanovich Rachovsky, who is known to have forged other documents for various intrigues in which he took part. In *Mein Kampf* (1940), Hitler described the importance of the Protocols to his program of anti-Semitism. Even today *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is one of the principal propaganda weapons of anti-Semitism and continues to be illegally circulated.