

# Amalia Laufer

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Chernovtsy

Ukraine

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Amalia Laufer lives in an old Jewish neighborhood of Chernovtsy where the ghetto was located during the war. Her house is small and shabby. There is a small room and a kitchen that also serves as a dining room. There is a bed, a table, two chairs and a wardrobe. Amalia lives alone and has a cat. She usually does not communicate with strangers, so I was introduced to her by a volunteer from Hesed, who visits her. Amalia is a short thin woman with thick black hair. She has polyarthritis and hardly ever leaves her home. There is a candle stand on the table. She lights candles on Sabbath. She keeps her mother's prayer book open on the table. Her mother had this book with her when they came to the ghetto. During our conversation Amalia switches to Yiddish. She quotes the Torah and mentions biblical stories when recalling episodes from her life.



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## My family history

My father's parents lived in Kabaki village, Kosov district, Stanislav province, Poland [today in Belarus]. I have very little information about my father's parents. My grandfather, Duvid Laufer, and my grandmother, Mariam, died before World War I. They were farmers. They were doing all right, I believe, and they were religious, like all other Jewish families in smaller towns and villages.

My father, Leizer Laufer, had three older brothers. They were born in Kabaki. I never met them. They moved to America after their parents died. My father wasn't really good at writing and didn't correspond with his brothers. I don't know anything about their life in America. My mother said they were nice people. My father was born in the winter of 1892. He told me that his mother gave birth to him on Chanukkah hoping that his life would be like a holiday. But one's dreams don't always come true.

My mother, Reizl Laufer [nee Gofar], was born in Vizhnitsa, a big Ukrainian village on the bank of the Prut River. Vizhnitsa is a village of timber floaters. Timber floated down the river and the men

from Vizhnitsa were pulling it to the bank to take it to a timber cutting and drying facility. The timber was stored until it got sold to merchants. Vizhnitsa is located on the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains, and its inhabitants kept sheep. My mother's father, Haim Gofer, owned a small food store. My grandmother, Haya, helped him in the shop. My mother was born in 1894. She had four sisters. My grandparents hired a teacher from cheder for their children to teach them to read and write. I only saw my grandfather and grandmother once. My grandfather died in 1923 and my grandmother in 1930. My parents and my older brothers went to my grandfather's funeral, but when my grandmother died my mother couldn't go to her funeral because she had to stay with us.

My mother and father were introduced to one another by matchmakers. This was a customary approach to marriages back then. There were no divorces at that time because families discussed all the details in advance, and young people didn't expect any surprises. Love came later and was based on care and respect. I believe love means care for and respect of one another and one's children. My mother came from a traditional religious family. She was raised to believe in God, her family observed all traditions, and she was taught to honor and respect all Jewish laws. My parents had a Jewish wedding - my mother wouldn't have got married without a chuppah. After the wedding my mother moved to Kabaki.

Kabaki was a Ukrainian village. There weren't many Jews there and no synagogue or cheder in the village. About seven kilometers away was Kutty village whose inhabitants were Jews in their majority. There was a synagogue and a cheder in this village. In Kabaki there were only ten Jewish families. Two families had stores. One of the owners was called Simkhe-Yan Zukerman. There was also a tailor and a shoemaker. Haim Dudinskiy, a blacksmith, lived nearby. He was a tall and strong man. His three sons were as strong as their father. They also worked in their father's forge. Whenever I was passing by their house I heard them hammering away. The rest of the Jewish families were farmers. There were no conflicts between Jews, Poles and Ukrainians. There were no pogroms <sup>1</sup> in the village. The Jews of Kabaki only went to the synagogue in Kutty on big Jewish holidays. They also had their poultry slaughtered by a shochet in Kutty. There were kosher stores in Kutty, but for most of the time the Jews of Kabaki koshered their utensils and food themselves and prayed at home.

## Growing up

My parents had seven children: three sons and four daughters. I was the youngest and my mother called me 'my little finger'. My oldest brother, Mayer, was born in 1913, Moshe-Leib in 1914, and Joseph, my youngest brother, in 1916. My sister Mariam, named after my father's mother, was born in 1917, Reisia in 1919, and Amalia in 1920. Amalia died in infancy though. I was born in 1921 and was given her name.

My mother always wore a long dark skirt, shirt and shawl. According to Jewish tradition she cut her hair after she got married. My father had a long beard and wore a yarmulka. My parents were very religious. My father prayed at home on weekdays. On big holidays he went to the synagogue in Kutty with my mother. They spoke Yiddish at home and Ukrainian and Polish with the neighbors. My father and mother were very kind.

We lived in a small wooden house, plastered and whitewashed on the outside. Most of the houses in Kabaki had thatched roofs, but our house had a tin- roof. There was one big bedroom for my parents and the girls. The sons slept in a small room without a stove. There was also a kitchen with

a big stove and a stove bench. In cold winters we spent long hours on this bench. The stove was stoked with wood. Wood was expensive and my parents bought enough to cook. In fall we [children] were collecting brushwood in the forest to fill up the wooden shed in our yard. This brushwood was left from wood cutting activities that stopped in winter, so we tried to get as much brushwood as possible during the fall.

My father dug a well in the yard. There was an orchard near the house with apple, pear and plum trees. In the backyard there was a stove to cook in summer. There was also a chicken yard. My mother kept chickens, geese and ducks. There was a pond near the village where all our neighbors took ducks and geese, and they stayed there all day long. We had a cow. From early spring to late fall it was tended in the village herd. Families tended cows in turns. My older brothers, when they were old enough, also tended the village cows. In winter our cow was in a cowshed, and we had to store enough hay to feed it. My father rented a hayfield. In summer we went to mow grass once every two or three weeks. We dried it and stored it in the big attic of the shed. The hay lasted as food for the cow in winter and we had milk, butter, sour cream and cheese for both the family and to sell. My mother sold dairy products to her clients. The schoolteacher was one of my mother's clients. She said that Ukrainian farmers added water to milk and that my mother never cheated like that. People knew that my mother was an honest and decent woman.

We had two hectares of land that my father inherited from his father. We worked on this land since we were small children. My mother never begged for anything. She bought what she needed, but she never begged. She used to say that charity began at home. We took grain to the mill in the village to have it ground into flour.

We grew potatoes, corn, rye and wheat, working from dusk till dawn. We did the weeding of the field. That way we managed to do the farming ourselves. It was only during the harvest season that my parents hired employees and paid them with potatoes and wheat. My mother made rye-bread, sufficient to last for a week. When she took freshly made bread from the oven she sprayed every loaf with water, covered it with a white napkin and took it to the storeroom. It stayed fresh for a whole week.

We were a traditional religious family. My parents observed all Jewish traditions and raised us religious. On Friday my mother made challah. On Friday mornings she got up to start making dough for the challah and dumplings. She made gefilte fish, chicken broth and boiled chicken for Sabbath. She also cooked cholent, stew with potatoes, beans and carrots in a ceramic pot. She capped the pot with dough and put it in the oven to keep the food warm for Saturday. It was not allowed to light a fire in the stove on Saturday. My mother also made a big bowl of pancakes, and we ate them with milk. On Friday evenings we got together for a prayer. My father recited a blessing on the holy Saturday, the children and the food. My mother lit Saturday candles and said a prayer over them, then we sat down for a festive dinner. We didn't work on Saturday. On big Jewish holidays, such as Pesach, Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah, we went to the synagogue in Kutu. I remember my mother carrying me when I was small. On Saturday Jewish families got together in a minyan to pray.

We didn't have much pastime. We had to work about the house and in the field from morning to night, but sometimes in the evenings in winter our parents told us biblical stories and Jewish legends.

My brothers didn't go to cheder. My mother taught them to read and write. She taught us Yiddish and Hebrew. She also knew Polish and German. Her parents had hired a teacher for her when she was young. She learned a lot from her teachers and her parents, was very intelligent and a very good teacher.

In 1927 our father fell ill and died within a few days. There was no hospital in the village. My father was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Kutý because there was no Jewish cemetery in our village. My mother and father had six children and now she was all alone to raise us. Life became more difficult, but she taught us never to beg for anything. She used to say that if God took away our breadwinner He would help us. On weekdays we had boiled potatoes and mamaliga [corn flour meal], rye-bread and malai [pudding from rye and corn flour]. We also had apples, pears and plums. We never stole fruit from orchards like other children did. We had our cow and my mother sold milk and butter. She didn't keep any butter for us, because she needed the money to buy clothes and shoes.

There was a Polish elementary school in the village. It was free of charge, and children of all nationalities could study there, but if they wanted to continue their education they had to pay. We went to this school. We studied all subjects in Polish. We spoke fluent Polish and German. My mother always told us to wear clean and decent clothes to schools. She bought shirts and blouses at the store for us to wear to school. She didn't give us any food to have at school, so we didn't eat anything until evening. Later we were provided with free lunch at school. It wasn't kosher food, but we had no choice - having some food was better than having no food at all, and my mother was glad that her children weren't starving.

My mother always followed the kashrut. She even had different pieces of cloth to wash utensils for dairy and meat products. She also had different casseroles and pots for dairy and meat products and we had to be careful to use the right utensils. She was very strict about it. When we ate a slice of bread and a piece of meat we had to wait at least six hours before we could have some milk. When we had milk we could have meat about 10-15 minutes after rinsing the mouth. My mother made potato dumplings with meat. She bought 300 grams of meat from peasants at the market. Meat was rather expensive at that time, like it is at present. She sprinkled meat with salt, left it for an hour and then dipped it into water for half an hour to make it kosher. After that she boiled and ground it and divided it between the children. Everybody had enough and we never argued about food.

Before Pesach she took all her kitchenware to the attic and brought down fancy utensils and tableware. She knew all rules. She made gefilte fish, chicken and stuffed duck or goose. We did a general cleanup of the house before Pesach so that not a single breadcrumb was left in the house. The whole family sat at the table. After my father died my older brother Mayer conducted the seder. He turned 13 years old and came of age according to Jewish tradition.

My mother had a poultry yard. She sold eggs and geese. She usually kept one goose for the family for Pesach and other holidays. She also left a bucket full of eggs for holidays. She made dumplings from eggs and matzah, pancakes and sponge cakes from matzah meal at Pesach. We also had cream and milk on holidays.

Gershl Raizman, a farmer in the village, had a separate room with a stove to bake matzah, and all Jewish families helped each other to make it for Pesach. We needed a lot of matzah for our big

family considering that we weren't allowed to eat any bread during the holiday. My mother cooked a lot of food for Pesach. She used to say that she wanted her children to have enough food and not to beg for anything on a holiday.

We fasted on Yom Kippur and before Rosh Hashanah from the age of 5. We didn't go to the synagogue because it was so far away from our house, but we prayed at home. Nobody worked on this day. Before Yom Kippur we went to the cemetery where my father was buried, and my brothers recited the Kaddish.

There was an entertainment center in the village where young people got together in the evenings, but my mother didn't allow us to go where the goyim [non-Jews] went. She told us to study, do our homework and clean the house. She kept us busy to keep us away from the center.

My three brothers moved to Buenos Aires in 1932. My mother accepted their decision. She wanted her children to be happy and was hoping that they would have a better life in a different country. They borrowed some money from a farmer in our village, later they sent the amount to my mother and she gave it back to the farmer. They learned to drive a car and became drivers. They married Jewish girls and had children. We corresponded until 1940, but the contact stopped due to the war.

When my sisters grew up matchmakers began to come to our house. Once the father of a son came to my mother and asked for her consent to his son marrying Mariam. He was a Polish man from Rivno. He promised her to build a big house for the young couple in Kabaki. My mother refused and said that while she was alive her daughters would never marry anyone but Jewish men. She told him that she didn't want her daughters to hear things like, 'You damn zhydovka [kike], don't go to the synagogue, go to the Catholic church', from their husbands. So, the man left.

Later a Jewish man from Zhabiye village in Kolomyya, not far from where we lived, proposed to Mariam. He had a house and kept sheep. He was two years older than Mariam. My mother and sister liked him. Mariam and her fiancé had a Jewish wedding with a chuppah in Kabaki. There weren't many guests at the wedding, just close relatives and friends. The rabbi said a prayer, the bride and bridegroom sipped wine from a wine glass, broke the glass and signed the ketubbah. There were tables laid in the yard of the synagogue for men and women. They danced and sang. When the party was over Mariam moved to her husband in Zhabiye village. Zhabiye was a Ukrainian village. There were farmers and cattle breeders in it. There were several Jewish families. It was only a small village so there was no synagogue, only a small prayer house.

I finished my 4th year at elementary school in 1933. There was no work in the village for me. I could have become a housemaid for a richer family, but my mother didn't want me to. She thought that there was enough work to do at home. Our schoolteacher liked me. She told my mother that I needed to continue my education in town, but my mother hated the thought. She believed that for a girl it was most important to get into a successful marriage and be a good housewife. She thought that I had sufficient education to live my life in our village. She couldn't imagine a different life for a girl. She said that she would teach me everything I needed to know about life. Reisia also stayed at home. We worked in the garden and about the house and there was more than enough to do.

## **During the War**

Germany attacked Poland in 1939, but the war was still far away from us. Three families of Jewish refugees came to the village. They went to live with richer Jewish families that had bigger houses. These refugees told people what Hitler was doing to Jews. We were horrified, but we were hoping that Hitler wouldn't reach us. In 1940 the Soviet army came to Poland and the country was divided. A bigger part of the Carpathians, Belarus and Zakarpatyiye became a part of the USSR. The Soviet power came to Kabaki and took land away from the richer families. We weren't rich and thus weren't arrested for this reason, but the authorities expropriated half of the plot of land we had. We had one hectare left. Our place became part of Ukraine, and we were ordered to speak Ukrainian. Many local farmers resisted the Soviet power. Young people escaped to the woods and joined partisan units, but the Soviets pursued them and killed them like wild animals.

At the beginning of June 1941 my three brothers came to visit us. Their families stayed in Buenos Aires, because it was too expensive to take them on the trip. They brought us gifts: dresses, sweaters and cardigans. They brought a big flowered shawl for my mother and thin stockings and high-healed shoes for us. We had never seen anything like it before. My brothers had changed a lot since the time they left Kabaki. They were wearing suits and ties. They brought pictures of their wives and children. They had Jewish wives, but my brothers became very estranged from religion. They observed very few traditions and only went to the synagogue on holidays. They liked their new life and were planning to take us to Buenos Aires when they could.

On 22nd June 1941 the Great Patriotic War [2](#) began. My brothers went to visit Mariam and her husband in Zhabiye before the Germans approached Kabaki. Mariam and her husband invited them to celebrate Sabbath with them. We were expecting them back on Sunday afternoon. We woke up early to start making dinner when we heard shooting. Our Ukrainian neighbor, who respected my mother a lot, stormed into our house to tell her that the Germans were in the village and killing Jews. We hid in her hayloft and stayed there until the next morning. In the morning her husband came and told us that the Germans were killing families who gave shelter to Jews. They had already killed a villager whose housemaid was a Jewish girl and burnt his house. The man apologized for not being able to hide us any longer. He was afraid for his family and the baby in the cradle. He also told us that the Germans had burnt down the synagogue in Kutu. When the Jews in Kutu got to know that the Germans were in the village they went to the synagogue to pray to God to rescue them. The Germans locked the door from the outside, poured gasoline onto it and set it on fire. All people inside perished.

We went home. The door to our house was open. We went in and saw my three brothers in blood on the floor. They had all been killed. My mother couldn't contact their families. We didn't even bury them. On the next day the Germans ordered the Jews to come to the square for registration. My mother and Reisia decided to stay and hide in the attic of the shed. They tried to convince me to stay at home, but I just couldn't disobey the order. All Jews came to the square. The Germans were taking them away and shooting them in groups. When there were only a few Jews left I said in Yiddish, 'Kill me so that I don't have to see how you kill all my loved ones'. Their commanding officer replied in German and I understood what he said, 'I can't'. He put his hands on my shoulders, turned me around and pushed me slightly in the direction of the street. I went home. 50 or 60 people were killed that day, and I was the only survivor of the tragedy.

People told us that the Germans killed my sister Mariam and her 11-month-old son in Zhabiye. A German soldier grabbed the baby and hit his head on a tree and shot my sister. She was 23. Her

husband returned to the village a few days later and was shot, too. The Germans shot all the Jews in Zhabiye.

We had to leave Kabaki. We packed some clothes and a little food and left the village at night. On the road local young men stopped us, took away our luggage and threatened that they would call the Germans if we didn't give it to them. We had no food left. Early in the morning we came to a neighboring village, and a villager invited us into his house. His wife gave us some meat and mamaliga. We didn't eat the meat, because she said it was pork. The villager took us to a chapel and told us to stay there until dark. His wife gave my mother a small pillow. When it got dark he told us to go to the wood and promised to bring us some food. We didn't really believe him, but he did bring us food. He said that he knew who we were. He knew that we were Jews from a neighboring village, that we had survived miraculously and that we were no tramps but had our house and livestock. He wanted to help us. He told us to move at night to be on the safe side. My mother thanked him for his help and said that God would bless him for his courage.

I don't know how many nights we walked. In the daytime we were hiding in the woods fearing that the Germans or the Romanians might find us. Later I found out that we walked over 100 kilometers. We reached the Jewish neighborhood in Chernovtsy. We came to the old Jewish hospital and saw candles burning inside one of the houses. It was Saturday. We knocked on the door and asked the hosts to let us in. There was a ghetto in Chernovtsy, but outsiders weren't allowed to go there. The newcomers were sent back to where they came from to be shot there. The Jewish woman that opened the door said that she was afraid to let us in because they were ordered to let nobody in on the penalty of death. She had small children and was afraid for them, but then she took pity and let us in for a short while.

Our hostess was from Tarnov, Poland. She didn't have any food for us. She was very poor. But at least she had a house to live while we had left behind everything that we had owned. My sister went to the Jewish community, but they told her that they had nothing to give to us. The rabbi gave her a little money out of his own pocket. We were starved, but alive.

We had been staying in the ghetto for about two months when our hostess told us that the Germans were going to raid the ghetto and check everybody's documents. She asked us to leave her house. Her husband worked at the laundry in the ghetto. He took us to the laundry. He hid my sister and mother in the laundry, and I was waiting outside when policemen approached me and asked my name. He gave me a sign to remain silent and told them that I was a deaf and dumb girl from the village and came to ask for a piece of bread. He said he knew me and that I wasn't a Jew. They left.

Then a Jew from the synagogue said that he knew an empty house. He said we could settle there, but the community couldn't help us with food. We cleaned a room and it became our lodging. My mother didn't work in Chernovtsy. She was very sickly after what she had to go through. My sister and I went to work. I became a housemaid for a local Jewish woman. I washed the floors, cleaned her apartment, fetched water and did her laundry. There was an old people's home nearby, and I washed floors there, too. I was given a meal there, but I didn't eat it. I took the food to my mother. My mother asked me whether I had had something to eat, and I assured her that I did, when in truth I felt nauseous from hunger.

My sister also worked in the old people's home. There were no other jobs. Jews had to wear the star of David on the sleeve and chest. I looked like a Ukrainian girl and nobody took me for a Jew, so I didn't wear the star. When my mistress saw that I didn't have a star of David on my sleeve she asked me how I went outside without it. And I replied that God helped me. I said that I believed in God and that the place for the star of David was in the synagogue, not on a sleeve. My mistress gave me her old clothes, because I didn't have any. Her husband had a good job and provided well for his family. My mistress treated me to a meal every now and then and made sure that I ate it in her presence. But I returned each day to the ghetto to my mother and my sister. My mother was spending her days sitting in the room waiting for my sister and me to bring her some food. She was very weak and couldn't work. My sister was earning very little money, and I was their only hope and support. Life was very hard.

At some point, Jews were sent to Transnistria [3](#). By the beginning of the war there were 90,000 Jews in Chernovtsy. Before the Soviets came to power in 1940 there were several synagogues, yeshivot, cheders, Jewish theaters and clubs and the population of the town knew Yiddish. The Germans and the Romanians brought 60,000 Jews to the old Jewish neighborhood in Chernovtsy which had about 5,000 Jewish inhabitants before the war. It was stuffed and overcrowded with people. There were two or more families in the smallest rooms in this neighborhood, houses and entrances to houses were stuffed with people. People even lived in the streets. 90,000 Jews were taken to Transnistria. Only 10,000 survived. 16,000 Jews remained in Chernovtsy.

Marian Popovich, the mayor of the town, wrote a letter to the Romanian king in Bucharest explaining to him that there weren't enough people left in Chernovtsy to do all the work required to support the infrastructure of the town. He saved many Jews from extermination and deportation to Transnistria. Israel awarded him the title of the 'Righteous Among the Nation' posthumously. In 1943 the deportation of Jews stopped. The mayor issued certificates to the 16,000 Jews, who were left in Chernovtsy, stating that they weren't subject to deportation to Transnistria. Gendarmes let them alone during raids and richer people paid bribes for their freedom. We were sort of lucky to get to this ghetto. In other ghettos there were mass shootings of the inmates, whereas we managed to survive.

We didn't observe any Jewish traditions or celebrate holidays during the war - life was too hard, and the only thing we concentrated on was to save our lives. My mother used to pray quietly for her deceased sons in the corner.

### **After the War**

In 1944 my employer left for America and offered me to go with her. She told me that she knew what the Soviet regime was like. She lived under the Soviet power and was afraid of arrests and deportation to Siberia [4](#). She said that Stalin was no better than Hitler. I told her that I couldn't leave my mother, that if I went there would be nobody left to give her food. Now I sometimes think - why did God pay me back with problems and bad luck for my kindness? I was a caring and decent daughter.

The Soviet army came to Bukovina in 1944. I went to work in the neuropathologist office as a cleaning woman for two years. We were very poor. My sister came to my work place once and said that she wouldn't agree to work there. She probably thought it was humiliating to be a cleaning woman. Besides, it was very hard work for a miserable salary. I replied that one has to take a job

when it's available to be able to buy at least a piece of bread. Later I fell ill with pneumonia and got to hospital. When somebody brought me a piece of mamaliga and a glass of milk my nurse stole this food from me. People were hungry, even in the hospital. The doctors didn't believe I would survive, but I said that I would if such was God's will. One Jew from the synagogue brought me oranges and said to me that I was a righteous woman and God would help me. I survived. I went to the synagogue to thank that man.

My sister Reisia moved to Palestine in 1946. My mother was very sickly and I couldn't leave her. Besides, I would have been afraid to go to a place I knew nothing about. We had no information about Palestine or what it was like there. Reisia became an accountant there. She got married and had a son. She corresponded with us for a couple of years, but then she stopped writing. She had her own life and wasn't really interested in ours. Besides, I worked and didn't have much time left for writing letters. Reisia died in Israel in 1982.

I worked at the down and feather factory in Chernovtsy for 35 years. Our director, Fridman, was an old Jewish man. He lives in Germany now. I was a laborer and stuffed pillows with down and feathers. I was the only Jewish woman at the factory. It was very hard work. Male employees teased me and laughed at me calling me 'this greedy zhydovka [kike] who doesn't drink or smoke and wants to earn all the money'. I got so tired of this word 'zhydovka' that now I try to stay away from the goyim [non-Jews]. I stuffed 1,000 pillows per day when the standard number was only 300. I started work at 6 a.m. and stayed at work after-hours. I tried to earn as much as I could. I had to provide for my mother, who needed care and medication. I had a bite for lunch and got back to work when all other employees were taking their lunch break. I was awarded a medal 'For remarkable performance' and my portrait was on the Board of Honor. I also received other awards and the management was satisfied with my work. I never went on sick leave.

In 1947 there was a famine. I could only afford to buy some food for my mother whereas I was starving. My mother and I celebrated Jewish holidays. On Yom Kippur we went to the synagogue to pray. We mentioned all our dear ones in our prayers. On Rosh Hashanah we always put an apple with sugar on the table. We didn't follow the kashrut because there were no kosher stores where we lived. I had to work on Saturdays. My mother told me that it wasn't a sin. However hungry we were, we never ate bread on Pesach. My mother received a little bit of matzah at the synagogue. Even when we only had a piece of matzah on Pesach, it was enough for us to feel the spirit of Pesach. I never celebrated Soviet holidays. We have our Jewish holidays to celebrate. I didn't have any friends. I didn't have time for friends because I had to work.

I met Simhe Gruber, my future husband, at the factory. He was the son of a poor Jewish shoemaker from Telkhov, in the Carpathians. He was born in 1920 and finished a Russian lower secondary school. He worked as a mechanic at a plant. We got married in 1953. We just had a civil ceremony. We didn't have money for a wedding party. Shortly after I got married my mother died. She was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Chernovtsy. I followed my mother's will to have a traditional Jewish funeral.

We lived in the same house in the old Jewish neighborhood where we had settled down in the ghetto during the war. This is where I still live now. Our son, Leonid, was born in 1955. He was named after my father, Leizer, the initial letters of their names are the same. We spoke Yiddish at home and Russian everywhere else, so Leonid knew both languages. When my son was about one

year old, I found out that my husband was seeing an accountant from our factory. I divorced him. When he saw me at the factory he pretended we didn't know each other. He didn't want to see our son. I have no information about him. I don't even know whether he's still alive.

After the divorce I took on my maiden name again, but my son kept his father's surname, Gruber. There was nobody to help me raise my son, and there were no kindergartens in our neighborhood. I tied him to the leg of the table to be on the safe side and went to work. When I returned home from work he clutched to me and begged me to stay at home. But I had to go to work to provide for him. I worked all day long, and he stayed at home alone.

I tried to raise my son religious. I taught him Hebrew and spoke Yiddish with him. I told him about the religion and traditions of our people. We didn't celebrate holidays. I had to go to work on holidays if they fell on weekdays, but I told my son about them. We always had a piece of matzah on holidays [Pesach], but we also ate bread.

Leonid finished a Russian secondary school and entered a trade school. He had Jewish, Russian and Ukrainian friends. He was a pioneer and a member of the Komsomol [5](#) league like any other Soviet child. He went in for sports. In summer he went swimming with his friends, they played football and went to discotheques. He became a welder and got a job at a construction site. He was highly valued at his work. He married a nice Jewish girl from Chernovtsy. They have two children: Semyon and Anna. In 1990 he moved to America with his family promising to take me there as soon as they had settled down. More than ten years have passed since then. My son has a good job in America, but he doesn't need me. I'm alone.

Such is my destiny. My son has his own life. He doesn't write to me, and I don't know how he is doing. I don't ask anything of him. I don't want him to support me, I only want him to tell me about his life, his family and his children, but he doesn't. My grandchildren don't write to me either. His friends told me that I have a great-granddaughter in America. I wish for Leonid to be in good health and happy with his children and grandchildren.

I'm living my life trying to make the best of it. My mother and father lived their lives like that. I have a miserable pension and don't receive any allowances for my stay in the ghetto. The authorities told me that my stay there was unofficial. I need money to pay for the house and utilities. I need to think about tomorrow. There's nobody else to take care of me. However, I don't understand Jews that move to Germany. The Germans killed my family. Let God punish them. I believe that the Germans would kill innocent Jews again if there was a war.

I'm a religious Jewish woman. I celebrate Sabbath. On Friday evenings I light candles. I know all the prayers by heart. I live according to God's rule. I don't do any work on Saturdays. God said that the seventh day is a day of rest. I try to do all work on weekdays. On Friday afternoon my time comes to stand before God because I have to give this time to him. I know all the commandments and most of the Torah by heart. I get challah in Hesed. I fast on Yom Kippur and before Rosh Hashanah. On the 2nd day of these holidays I sit at the table after the evening star appears in the sky. I can't go to the synagogue - I can't walk. I get meals delivered from Hesed and am grateful to them. They also bring me medication. Thank God I have enough to eat.

## **1 Pogroms in Ukraine**

In the 1920s there were many anti-Semitic gangs in Ukraine. They killed Jews and burnt their houses, they robbed their houses, raped women and killed children.

## **2 Great Patriotic War**

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

## **3 Transnistria**

Area between the rivers Dnestr and Bug, and the Black Sea. It was ruled by the Romanians and during World War II it was used as a huge ghetto to which Jews from Bukovina and Moldavia were deported.

## **4 Forced deportation to Siberia**

Stalin introduced the deportation of Middle Asian people, like the Crimean Tatars and the Chechens, to Siberia. Without warning, people were thrown out of their houses and into vehicles at night. The majority of them died on the way of starvation, cold and illnesses.

## **5 Komsomol**

Communist youth political organization created in 1918. The task of the Komsomol was to spread of the ideas of communism and involve the worker and peasant youth in building the Soviet Union. The Komsomol also aimed at giving a communist upbringing by involving the worker youth in the political struggle, supplemented by theoretical education. The Komsomol was more popular than the Communist Party because with its aim of education people could accept uninitiated young proletarians, whereas party members had to have at least a minimal political qualification.