

Rahmil Shmushkevich Biography

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Ukraine

Interviewer: Ella Orlikova

Rahmil Shmushkevich lives in a small two-room apartment in one of the most picturesque neighborhoods in Kiev – Goloseyevskiy forest. He has poor furniture, but his apartment is clean and tiny. Rahmil is an old gray haired man. He is slender. He can hardly walk and he speaks very slowly, but he is glad to have guests and share his hospitality. Many of his friends and acquaintances died. Only his friends' widows call him every now and then. His neighbors bring Rahmil fruit and grapes from their gardens. He treated me to these fruit with great pleasure.

My father Yudko (Idl) Smushkevich was born in the town of Belaya Tserkov in about 150 km from Kiev in 1891. It was quite a big town for that time with brick buildings, big stores, a market and enterprises. Jews constituted about 50% of the population. They were tradesmen and handicraftsmen. There were also Ukrainians and Russians in the town. People spoke mixed Yiddish and Ukrainian. Most of the people spoke fluent Yiddish and Ukrainian. There were quite a few synagogues and Christian churches in town. All temples were destroyed by the Soviet power in 1930s during the period of struggle against religion.

My father was a younger son in a big Jewish family. His father was a shathen (matchmaker). It was his choice: he decided this what he wanted to do. His name was Haim. He was born in Belaya Tserkov in 1854. My grandfather studied at the cheder, and he was a very intelligent man. My grandfather studied at the cheder until he turned 14. He read a lot and was a self-educated man. He read lots of Russian and foreign classic books. He had fluent Yiddish and a good conduct of Hebrew. He also knew Russian very well. He often traveled to other towns within the residential areas. He often went to Kiev and stayed with those people who he was going to match together. If somebody was a sociable individual and liked to work with people he could choose this profession at that time. Many people addressed my grandfather asking him to find a match for their single relatives. He made lots of acquaintances and people gave his address to one another increasing his clientele with each successful match. He was paid after the couples he introduced to one another got married. He was a popular matchmaker and people believed that the couples that Haim Shmushkevich matched had strong family ties in the future.

Haim often traveled and spent little time with his family. I know very little about the life of my grandfather and father. I know that the family was very religious. My grandfather, though, didn't go to the synagogue. He said he didn't need an intermediate to communicate with God. He wore a kippah or a hat, but he shaved his face. He celebrated all Jewish holidays and prayed on Saturday eve, but if his business required him to be at work on Saturday he went where he was needed. I don't know his first wife's name, my grandmother. She died in Belaya Tserkov in 1920. My grandfather married Professor Bykhovsky's (Professor of Matematic) widow shortly afterward and moved to Kiev. I have visited him at his new home, his wife Ida Bykhovskaya, and I called her "Grandma". They lived in a 3-room apartment in 5, Yaroslaskaya Street. My grandfather didn't look

for his years, he was always smartly dressed and looked young. He liked Sholem Alechem and other Jewish classic writers. He had a collection of books in Yiddish and Russian at home. I only visited him twice a year: on his birthday and another time – whenever I could make it.

He liked to tell Jewish jokes and funny stories about match making. He showed me a box full of letters from men and women requesting him to help them find a match and their photographs. There were more letters from women. I met people in Kiev before the war saying that my grandfather made them happy when hearing my last name. They were doctors, academicians, architects and writers. The Soviet authorities didn't allow him to do his business officially, but he continued to help people find a match. My grandfather was 88 when he went to the Babiy Yar on 29 September, but he didn't look older than 60. Few days before Germans occupied Kiev I went there to offer my grandfather and my grandmother Ida to leave Kiev with me. My grandmother appreciated the idea, but my grandfather said that he wanted to stay. He didn't trust the Soviet power and didn't like it and to have a better life when Germans came to power. Many older people believed that Germans were civilized people and everything bad they heard about them was a communist propaganda. Grandfather Haim and Ida perished in the Babiy Yar in 1941.

Grandfather Haim had 7 sons and a daughter from his first wife. His daughter's name was Eidl. I only met one of his sons – Isaac, born in 1899. He lived in Kiev. He made shoe polish. He lived in Podol and had 3 sons: Naum, Joseph and Jacob. Isaac died in 1939. Naum and Joseph perished at the front. I don't know what happened to Jacob. Isaac's children lived in Belaya Tserkov. I never met them. They must have finished cheder and acquired professions. They lived in Belaya Tserkov and I never saw them.

My father Yudko Shmushkevich moved to Kiev after finishing cheder. He was 16. He became an apprentice at the confectionery of Kluchaskiy, a Jew, in Podol. Kluchanskiy made all kinds of sweets. He employed Jews that didn't have a residential permit to live in Kiev, and he could pay them very little. His employees lived illegally in their employer's house. They celebrated all Jewish holidays with their landlord's family. They didn't work on Saturday and went to the synagogue in Podol (it is still there – in Schekavitskaya Street). My father became a very good specialist. He met my mother in 1910. She worked for the family of rich Jews as a housemaid. Their house was near the confectionery.

My mother Freida Shmushkevich, nee Gurevich, was born to a poor Jewish family in Rzhyshev, a small town not far from Kiev, in 1892. Parents in such families used to send their daughters to work for richer families in bigger towns, hoping that their employers would treat them well and might even give them some education. My mother didn't get any education, but she met my father.

I have very sweet memories about my mother's father Abraham. My grandfather Abraham Gurevich was born in Rzhyshev (in 200 km from Kiev) in 1860s. Rzhyshev was a small town on the right bank of the Dnepr. It stood on the Lelech River and Dnepr was in about 500 meters. The Jewish population constituted about 95%. There were few synagogues and a cheder in the town. My grandfather was a balagula (cab driver). He had red hair and a curly beard, a hooked nose and kind laughing eyes. He only spoke Yiddish, but he understood Ukrainian. He always joked and used to say that he loved Seryozha (his horse) and me more than anybody else in the world. My grandfather was a very religious man. He even prayed when he was on the road when the first star

of Saturday (Friday evening) rose. On Saturday he always went to the synagogue. He was a poor man and went to the synagogue for the poor. It was a shabby building and there were no decorations in it. People respected my grandfather and often turned to him for a piece of advice. My grandfather lived in a small house with thatched roof. The windows were on the ground level and there were ground floors in it. There was a shed in the yard where he kept his horse Seryozha. My grandmother was a housewife. She was taking care of their many children. She died of dropsy in 1911.

My mother returned to Rzyshev after her mother died and my father followed her. My parents got married and had a traditional Jewish wedding, although they were poor. There was a huppah and a rabbi at the wedding party in the synagogue in Rzyshev. My mother learned to cook in the house where she lived previously and cooked all traditional food for the wedding party. My parents lived in a rather poor house of their own in Rzyshev.

When I was a boy I liked to visit my grandfather. He put me on his horse and led the horse around his old house. He told me stories from the Bible and about Jewish traditions and holidays. I don't think my grandfather cooked for himself. There was a stove in his house, but he only used it for heating. His main food was milk and bread and he had meals with us on holidays. He used to say that I would become a hazan (cantor) - I sang nicely when I was a child. I loved my grandfather Abraham even more than my parents. We were very good friends. In the early 1919 my grandfather Abraham was murdered by bandits in Rzyshev. I can still remember it as if it happened yesterday. I pressed my finger to the window glass to melt the ice and looked whether my grandfather was coming home. He went out to give some food to the horse.

Many Jews were hiding in our house in 1920s. The situation was very hard: the power switched from the white, to the red or Petlura units. All of a sudden a poor old woman came to our house screaming "Come there - they are killing your father!" I was 6 years old and was crying and begging that somebody went to my grandfather's rescue. But everybody was afraid. The bandits murdered my grandfather with planks from the fence. He happened to help an injured man the day before on his way back from Kagarlyk. That man was a Jew and a Bolshevik. When we all ran to see what happened my grandfather was lying on the snow with no clothes on and there was blood all around him. He was covered with frost. All his neighbors and relatives were looking around in fear of bandits. My grandfather had a piece of cloth on his chest where the bandits wrote a message to bury him after 3 days passed. My grandfather was laying near his house for 3 day before he was buried. Since then I've had negative feelings towards my relatives from Rzyshev, because they didn't come to my grandfather's rescue and because they didn't bury him for 3 days. That is why I know so little about them. I saw my grandfather in my dreams for a long time after he died.

Of all his children I only know my mother's sister Fira, born in 1887. She lived in Kiev. Her husband was a driver. He didn't live long and my aunt had tenants in her basement in Podol to earn her living. Her three children's were deaf and dumb and went to a special school. This is all my mother told me about Fira. During the war she was in evacuation in the Ural with my mother. She died in 1947.

My father and mother had 6 children. I am the oldest of my brothers and sisters. My sister Eva, born in 1915 died from measles when she was 4 or 5 years old. My other sister Rosa, born in 1919 died when she was 1 year old. She was the loveliest girl in Rzyshev. I was 7 years old and went out

to walk with her. My friends were playing and I ran with them and dropped the girl. She fell injuring her head. She died in 3 days' time of this injury. It was my fault. The feeling of guilt has never left me since then. Two other children died shortly after they were born. There were only Rachel, born in 1917 and Abram, born in 1922 and I left. Abram died in Kiev in 1938. It was a tragedy. He was playing with other children in the yard and one of the boys hit him on his stomach with a steel bar. My brother didn't tell any of us what happened. He became very ill and the doctors thought he had tuberculosis. He told me the truth 15 minutes before he died. He said "I am dying and I will tell you the truth. Vibo, the janitor's son hit me with a steel bar". And my handsome and intelligent brother died of blood poisoning.

My sister Rachel and our mother lived together in Kiev. Rachel finished an accounting course and worked as an accountant at the confectionery factory in Kiev before the war. She married David Dubinsky, a worker and a Jew. He was on the front during the war, was wounded and returned home almost blind. Rachel was in evacuation in Sverdlovsk region in the Ural. She worked at the military plant. She gave birth to a boy - Alik - in 1942. After the war she continued working as an accountant. Now my sister and her son live in Israel. Her husband David Dubinskiy died in 1965. They were a traditional Jewish family. They spoke Yiddish in the family and observed Jewish traditions even after the war.

I was born in Rzhyshev in 1913. At that time the Beilis case was at its height. All Jews were waiting impatiently for the sentence in the case. At the moment of my birth a message from Kiev came that Beilis had won the case. An obstetrician helping at the delivery took me outside saying "Here is the best proof of victory!" Somebody carried me across the whole town and the people were shouting "Long live Beilis!"

I and my family were living in a shabby hut with thatched roof. In this same hut my father made sweets and my mother helped him. Making sweets was a very complicated process, especially of caramel candy. My father made stuffing in a big bowl, then boiled candy from sugar and had the candy wrapped in paper supplied from Kiev. Rzhyshev was a very poor town and my father didn't do very well, but people were still buying some sweets. Tinsmiths used to make pans for marmalade and chocolate bars that my father made. There was always a sweet smell in our house and we didn't eat candy. The smell was enough to make us sick. My parents worked from morning till night. Women came to my father to take candy for sale at the market. I had to help my parents from my early childhood wrapping candy in paper or washing the utensils.

Our family observed all Jewish traditions and celebrated Sabbath and Jewish holidays. We spoke Yiddish in the family. My mother was more religious than my father. She went to the synagogue more frequently (every day) than my father did. We went to the synagogue for the poorest Jews. There were synagogues for richer and poorer Jews. The one we attended was a shabby building with old furniture and no decorations whatsoever. Our synagogue was located near the town public sauna. There was another synagogue a big and beautiful one in the center of the town. My mother always made thorough preparations for Saturday. There were no luxuries in our house, but we had silver candle stands, silver wine glasses and a silver saltcellar that were put on the table on Friday evening. By that time all housework was finished and my mother put on a clean kerchief, lit two candles and prayed. Grandfather used to visit us on Friday. He prayed, too. I remember I was given a little wine and a piece of hala even when I was small. My grandfather

blessed Saturday and the children and we all had dinner: bread and vegetables. We sometimes had chicken or fish and always sang religious songs after dinner. We had a rest and read on Saturday. In general, we had a common family believing in God. We went to the synagogue and fasted at Yom Kippur. Children began to fast after they turned 5. I didn't eat anything either. I was hungry, but I knew that I could steal something after the Moon rose. At Pesach the family got together for dinner. We were poor and couldn't afford much, so we ate just matsah on its own. My father made me learn few questions in Hebrew. According to the tradition I ask my father and he replied. I don't remember these questions now.

Once a Jewish theater came on tour to our town. I remember kerosene lamps on the floor of a big shed that seemed huge to me. They performed Shakespeare's "King Lear" in Yiddish. After we saw it our neighbor's girl Paris (this was her name) and I made performances for the family playing theater. My father sang very well and liked performances. I heard him reciting Shakespeare and Sholem Alechem in Yiddish and Shevchenko in Ukrainian. I sang very well when I was a child and my father dreamt that I would become a singer.

In 1918 I went to cheder. I studied the Torah, prayers and writing in Hebrew. Our old teacher liked me a lot. I was a success with my studies and my teacher was proud of me. The cheder was closed after the rebbe died. I went to a Jewish primary school where we studied the ABC and the basics of mathematic and languages. I enjoyed studying. There was a "Spartak" organization established at school (young revolutionaries) and I was an active participant there (we got together a couple times per week, read revolutionary books and newspapers and prepared ourselves to the struggle for a happy communist future). In 1924 I finished this Jewish primary school and went to Ukrainian school to continue my studies. Handicraftsmen and workers of Rzhyshev were very enthusiastic about the revolution of 1917. They all believed that all people would be equal.

In January 1924 Lenin died. All people Jews and non Jews in Rzhyshev came out into the streets on the day of his funeral. They were all crying and we all had a strong feeling of togetherness. My father became a member of the Communist Party. He declared that he became an atheist and stopped going to the synagogue. He loved my mother and he didn't mind her attending the synagogue. My father opened a confectionery in a house in Rzhyshev. My mother and father and several other employers worked there. All the boys wanted to be my friends, because they could have some candy as my friends. I didn't eat candy. I don't like sweets. I helped my parents carrying bags with sugar.. I was a very active pioneer: I issued wall newspapers, collected waste paper and helped junior pupils with their studies. My teacher was the father of a well-known Ukrainian poetess Lina Kostenko. In 1927 I became a member of trade unions.

In early 1927 a contest for best work of art dedicated to Lenin was announced in Ukraine. I made his portrait from various seeds and set it to the contest. It occurred to me that I might as well take part in this contest. I didn't know whether or not I had any artistic talent. In summer I was requested to come to Kiev. It turned out that the portrait I made was awarded the 2nd prize and I got an offer to enter the Art College. I was impressed by Kiev and decided to stay. In Kiev I wrote my first short story in Yiddish. It was about a prostitute. I saw a hunchbacked woman near the funicular. I was so impressed that I wrote a short story and went to read it to my grandfather HaimHe liked it. He got so excited that he burst into tears and hugged me. I lived with my aunt Fira in Kiev. She had 8 or 9 tenants in her basement, but she was still very poor.

I didn't go the Art school, though. I met a guy from Rzhyshev in Podol. I told him that I was going to study at the Art school, but he exclaimed "Anybody can be an artist, but who will build socialism? One needs to be a worker. Are you a member of trade unions?" I replied that I was and he told me to go to the teenager employment agency in 4, Borisoglebskaya Street. At that time it was more prestigious to be a worker than an artist and I followed his advice. I decided that a communist society would gain little from me as an artist and that a metalworker would be of more use to his country and I went to the employment agency. We were all patriots of our young country and wanted to take every effort in the construction of the happy communist society. I became a metalworker apprentice at the music instruments factory. My parents didn't have any objections against my choice. I worked and studied for two years. I became a Kosomol member. I lived in the hostel. In 1929 I got a job assignment at the metalwork factory Friend of Children (Editor's note: Late 1920s - early 1930s: community «Friend of Children» in the USSR supporting homeless children.) where employees were former homeless children and children from children's homes. I worked for some time until I became a secretary of the Komsomol committee unit. In the evening I studied at the rabfak. Sometimes I went to bed at 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning. Soon Komsomol sent me as a senior pioneer tutor to the Jewish children's home in Yaroslavskaya Street in Podol. At that time there were many homeless children that had lost their parents during the civil war. Everything was a mess in this home. Its director was a poor manager and there was a lot of theft and lack of discipline. I was only 17 and tried to improve the situation with all enthusiasm of my youth. By the way, there were quite a few Jews in the Komsomol and Party authorities of the town. I would like to mention one of these activists: Clara Gotlib. Many people in Kiev knew her and called her "Red-hair Clara". She was Chief inspector for struggle against juvenile delinquency and a member of the Bolshevik Party since before the revolution. She decided whether to send a juvenile delinquent to a work farm or not. She was an uncompromising and ruthless revolutionary in her decisions. I visited her many times to help my pupils, because work farms closed all perspectives for the children. Clara perished in 1937 during Stalin's repression following into steps of many devoted revolutionaries of her time.

In 1931 I was appointed director of this children's home. Some of my pupils were of the same age with me. At that time the home was no more Jewish, we had many children of other nationalities. We switched from Yiddish to Russian and Ukrainian in the teaching process. There was no anti-Semitism at that time. Anti-Semitism was considered a crime against the state and was suppressed, if necessary. To be director of the children's home was a risky job, considering the situation in the country: any manager or supervisor was subject to a closer attention of the authorities. And the authorities were quick to accuse an individual of all existing sins. Once I was even imprisoned. In 1931 there was a flood in Podol. Our building was flooded and I turned to one of our sponsors (we had quite a few sponsors at that time). It was a military unit and they gave us a truck that drove all children to Kreschatik. The building in 2, Kreschatik, was vacant and we went there. Militia came immediately to take me to prison, because I acted on my own without obtaining an approval from higher authorities. I stayed in the cell overnight, but in the morning they released me, as the situation was clarified. I was responsible for running the children's home and provision of all necessary things. Of course, I have forgotten many of my pupils, but recently I received a letter from a woman that had lived in the children's home a few years. I was pleased to hear from her. She wrote me from the US.

In the children's home in 1934 I wrote my first 10-page novel "Knopkele" ("Little tacks") in Yiddish. It was about the children working at school shops that decided to make tacks from metal wastes. This novel was published in parts in the pioneer newspaper "Zai Great!" ("Be ready") and was a success. My mother was happy about my successes, and my father took it calmly. It was translated into Russian and was published in the all-Ukrainian newspaper "Yuny Leninets". I was offered a job in the editor's staff, first as a literary employee and then deputy chief editor. I received a small apartment in Yamskaya Street and my family - my parents, my sister and brother moved in with me till this time they were live in Rzhyshev. My father went to work at the Karl Marx sweets factory, but he didn't work there long. He felt hurt that he was offered a job of a worker when young girls that graduated from rabfak or Food Institute were his supervisors. He thought that he was an experienced professional and was worth more. My father was involved in some public activities, my mother was a housewife, my sister and brother went to school and I happened to be the only breadwinner in the family. I began to forget about Rzhyshev and about my Jewish origin. It was of no significance at that time. In spite of the fact that my family spoke Yiddish at home, my mother celebrated all holidays and cooked traditional Jewish food, but I thought all these to be vestige of the past. We were the society of the "Soviet people" and I was very proud of it. I switched to my literary pseudonym Mikhail Shmushkevich, although I didn't change my name and my nationality in my passport or other documents.

I remember famine of 1933 very well. All Komsomol activists including myself were sent to villages to collect grain from farmers. This was a horrible period. Even the secretary of the village council that I was staying with didn't have anything. I had a small piece of bread that my mother had given me for the road. When I took it out of my bag, his two small children entered the room and stood in front of me looking at this bread with their hungry eyes. His wife said that she had an onion and a little oil. We gave this food to the children and on the following morning we had to go around the villages demanding that starved farmers gave all their bread away. This is what socialist discipline was like. At that time we had no doubts in the correctness of our actions.

I worked a lot during the day and studied by correspondence at the Philology Faculty of Kiev University. Our family were sleeping in our single room and I studied in our small kitchen at night. I wanted our newspaper "Yuny Leninets" to be very popular among young people, I was its editor. I tried to publish interviews with the prominent people of our time. I met writers, actors, producers, pilots and state officials and wrote about them in the newspaper. In 1930s it became risky to meet with such people. You interviewed a commandant like Fakir Iona (a Jew) one day and on the following day he was declared an enemy of the people and one could pay with one's freedom or even life for knowing him. But God was merciful. I was a member of Kiev Town Komsomol Committee, but I didn't become a Party member until 1940.

Many Komsomol officials spent their vacations in Crimean recreation centers. I went into a recreation center of the Central Committee in 1934 and met a nurse - Seva Bronevaya. She was 19 years old. We liked each other. Seva was born in Yalta in 1915. Her father was a sailor and then was appointed as director of Yalta film studio and her mother was a nurse. We met in autumn 1934 and in March 1935 she joined me in Kiev. We had a civil registration ceremony and there was no wedding party. We corresponded all this time. By the time she arrived my parents and I had a two-room apartment in Yamskaya Street. My parents liked Seva, but my aunt and my mother's sister didn't like her. My aunt Fira called her "goika" (meaning "non Jewish girl"). But Seva was very nice

and kind and my aunt came to liking her. Seva was a nurse and studied at the Medical Institute.

She became a Party member and she had very strict ideological principles. At that time official propaganda was very strong. There were often party meetings at which officials often asked provocative questions about other people, like "Are you sure that he is a decent man and that he is devoted to the party?". They asked my wife "Where is your husband You know that half of members of the central Committee of Komsomol have been arrested? Does he know them?", etc. She managed to put an end to this discussion, but she trusted the official propaganda so much that she didn't have a full trust in me. She often said "You have talked with those traitors and enemies. What if you are an enemy, too?" But we loved each other and were a good family. In 1939 our son was born. We named him Valery after a Soviet pilot Valery Chkalov. We were still living in our apartment. My mother was a housewife and looked after our son and Seva and I could work and study.

We were thinking about the possibility of the war, but again, we were convinced that we would never allow the enemy to cross our borders and would win a prompt victory in any case. I believed in Stalin. I believed him to be a strong and just man.

On 22 June 1941 I was in Moscow. I took a 3 months training course for Party officials at the Lenin Academy. I stayed with my friend, a very popular Soviet poet Evgeniy Dolmatovskiy. He worked at the "Komsomolskaya Pravda" newspaper. He received a phone call early in the morning about the beginning of the war. I ran to the Academy and all who came there flew to the Kiev Military division. I was on the front on the 2nd day of the war. My wife and son were visiting Seva's parents in Yalta at that time. At the beginning of the war she evacuated to Ladozskaya village Krasnodar region with our son. Her sister Evgenia, 13 years of age, was with them. They rented a room in the village. Seva knew German and she was to stay there to be a messenger for a partisan unit. Germans came there in autumn 1942 and in few days somebody betrayed their unit (16 members). They were all hung, including Seva. All local population was to be there. Evgenia and Valery were there, too. Valery called "Mamma, Mamma!" and Germans captured them, took them away and burnt. Seva's parents evacuated from Yalta on a boat. In 15 km from Yalta they were hit by German mines and their boat sank. I heard about the tragedy after the war in 1945, after I received a response to my request submitted to one of official organizations.

My father, mother and sister were at home in Kiev. At the end of July my mother, my father and sister evacuated to the Ural via Dnepropetrovsk. On the way there my father left them and returned to Kiev to defend the city. He perished in the Goloseyevskiy woods.

On the 2nd day of the war I was senior instructor of the division political department at the Southwestern front. I was on the battlefield in various divisions and armies. I went to Western Ukraine and the locals told me about ghettos and mass shootings of the Jews. Besides, all Jewish men between 15 to 50 years of age were recruited to the army and perished having no military training or weapons. Millions of people perished in that way including Jews. I was involved in the defense of Kiev. I was in the city in September 1941 and saw my grandfather Haim (my father's father) for the last time. We reached Kharkov where I got another assignment to the "Stalinets" newspaper in division 47. This newspaper was one of the best newspapers of the front line in the Soviet Union. I was editor of this newspaper and editor of the military intelligence unit. Our editorial office was located in the town of Izyum near Kharkov.

In 1942 our military units were encircled. It was for the first time when the Soviet Information agency issued official information that 780 thousand people were encircled. The official propaganda had never issued information about millions of deceased or captured before. It was considered to be demoralizing information for the armed forces. Commander of our division shot himself. I believed that I would manage to get out of this encirclement knowing the locality, but I didn't. There was a horrible battle. I was wounded and lay in a ravine among dead bodies for 12 days. I ate wormwood and looked for breadcrumbs in the pockets of my dead comrades. When I climbed out of there I saw a Hungarian military. I pointed my gun at him but it didn't shoot because it had dampened. The Hungarian grabbed my belt tying it round my neck and began to pull me along the field. I was captured. All captives were taken to a huge camp for prisoners-of-war in Smela (a town in Cherkassy region) on a truck. A German soldier and an interpreter walked among the captives putting down their names. I gave them the name of Nekhoda, my best friend and a Ukrainian poet Ivan Nekhoda. I cursed in Ukrainian and gave them the name of the village where my friend was born as my place of birth. I only made one mistake telling them that I was stealing from the collective farm - Germans didn't like thieves. Later I was telling them that I came from the family of kulaks and that I never liked the Soviet power. I grew a moustache like a Ukrainian kozak. Nobody knew that I was a Jew.

The staff of our field hospital was captured, but they didn't betray me to Germans. Later first lieutenant Rusetskiy began to cooperate with Germans and our nurse Lola Dzhavanidze, Georgian, told me to be careful. Our nurses hid me among those that died from dysentery and in 3 days they took me to the barrack for the prisoners that had dysentery. No officials ever entered this barrack. Later we were put on the train and traveled for a long time until we arrived Bolhanne, a small town in Lorraine, near the French border. We were taken to the Shtalag 12F, a camp for prisoners-of-war. At the end of September 1942 I went to work at the gas engine plant and met some French that were very nice to us. They always bought us some food. One other man and I decided to try to escape. The French brought us some clothing and documents. Our escape failed and Germans captured us. We were interrogated and tortured, didn't get any food or water for 5 days and were thrown into a stone pit. It was 10 degrees below zero but we survived. I always remembered that Germans might find out that I was a Jew and I kept thinking about an option of being shot instantly to avoid any torturing.

In February 1943 I worked at the stone quarry near Zaarbrukken in Western Germany. I became a member of an underground organization. We established contacts with German anti-fascists and French resistance. We began to receive some information about the situation at the front and it helped us a lot. We were crashing stones in the quarry and I remember a conversation with a German worker. I was talking with him when he seemed to have got lost in his thoughts. I asked him what he was thinking about and he said that he had recalled a Jewish girl that was torn by German dogs. He said she was a beautiful girl. There were different Germans. Sometimes they pushed weak workers into the quarry from a slope. Once a Ukrainian inmate (shoemaker Nesterenko from Poltava region) told me that he knew I was a Jew. I told him that I wasn't, but the rumor about a Jew spread in the camp. The commandant of the camp interrogated all inmates, but Nesterenko didn't betray me.

There were boxes with medications in the medical facility of the camp. I could read the names of medications and pretended that I knew what they were for. Nobody else in the camp knew

anything about medicine and Germans believed that I was a medical professional and appointed me as a nurse. I kept stealing medications transferring them to the underground unit to help inmates that were ill. This lasted from the end of 1943 until 1945.

We, about 300 prisoners-of-war got free on 18 March 1945 and went to the Alps mountains. We had weapons and I became commander of battalion of former inmates of the camp. American units were moving in the Eastern direction and we met with them in Trier, Germany. (Editor's note: where Karl Marx was born). We were all so happy about our victory. Americans treated us very nicely and arranged a reception in our honor. There was a professor from Philadelphia at the reception. He approached me and asked me whether I was a Jew, giving me a wink. There was commission for repatriation of Soviet citizens and the USSR Embassy in Paris. I got in touch with Paris requesting instruction my conduct in Trier and with Americans (Editor's note: Soviet people could only contact or communicate foreigners upon obtaining permission from the Party and governmental officials). I was summoned to the Soviet Embassy in Paris. In Paris I met quite a few participants of French Resistance. I met a communist writer Elsa Triolet and her husband Louis Aragon. I also met Marcel Cashin who was the editor of the "L'Humanite" newspaper. On the eve of 1 May 1945 Charles de Gaulle, President of France, arranged a military parade and invited two Soviet battalions: one of them was the one under my commandment. The Communist Party of France awarded a medal with Stalin's portrait to me. This was a special award for Soviet prisoners-of-war. I was also awarded a medal "de la Legion d'Honneur". It vanished during a search that was conducted at my home in 1949.

In May 1945 I was called by Chairman of the Repatriation Commission General-Colonel Golikov. He gave me a task to write a play persuading Soviet citizens to return to their Motherland, because many girls were meeting French or Italian men and intended to stay in their countries. I wrote the play "Meeting" about returning to our Motherland and a happy future life. It was a lie on my part, but I didn't just lie to my comrades and friends - I lied to myself. I believed in what I had written. Even Elsa Triolet, a communist, whispered to me "Stay here. In France. Do you know what is happening there? Numbers of people are arrested". I told her that I couldn't possibly be arrested after my struggle with partisans and in the underground, when de Gaulle greeted me in person in the Soviet Embassy. No, I said, this couldn't be possible.

I went in Paris several times. At last in the end of July 1945 we were ordered to get on the train to the Soviet Union. How happy we were to cross the border of our country and find ourselves in our own country. We were taken to the woods in Byelorussia. We had given away our weapons before getting on the train. We were lined and I heard some noise. I looked back and saw that we were encircled by the NKVD (People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs) troops. There were about 300 of us. We were escorted to the barracks. We were staying there for some time. Our position was uncertain. Every now and then we were asked general questions. We were not allowed to leave the area of our camp, but we were allowed to write letters home. I decided to not notify my family where I was. I hadn't heard from them since 1942. In April 1946 I was called to the headquarters along with several dozens of my comrades. We received our documents and went to Kiev. All of my comrades got into Stalin's camps sooner or later. Some of them were sent to Siberia from Byelorussia and some were exiled later, in 1949.

In Kiev I went to look for my family. All of a sudden I saw my mother near the water pump in Yamskaya Street where we lived before the war. She screamed seeing me and she was screaming in Yiddish. My mother, her sister and her sister's family were living in a small room with no heating. I moved in with them. We lived a very poor life.

My mother introduced me to a young nurse Ida Gurevich, a Jewish girl. They became friends during evacuation. Ida was born in 1927. Her father perished at the front and her mother (I shall not call her by her name) was such a quarrelsome and hysterical person that Ida could only find warmth and sympathy from my mother and her sister. Ida was a very nice and kind girl. We got married in 1946. We had no wedding party. We rented an apartment in a small house in Goloseyevo.

In 1947 our daughter Julia was born. I got a job at the "Stalinskoye Plemia" newspaper. I was Head of agricultural division. I was a Party member. I believed that life was improving. However, anti-Semitism was gradually growing. And one of its demonstrations was struggle of the state against cosmopolitanism. My name Mikhail Shmushkevich didn't sound like a Jewish name and people didn't suspect that I was a Jew. They spoke openly in my presence and I heard so many anti-Semitic expressions in my life and the Jews that were staying in the rear instead of going to the front, that they were to blame for all misfortunes persecuting the country and that Hitler should have killed more of them, etc. Once I lost my temper and hit one of such orators on the face. They never again had discussions of this kind in my presence.

This happened on 10 May 1949. On this day I was arrested at night in the street. I had written an article about achievements in labor of the Soviet working people for the "Stalinskoye plemia" newspaper. I submitted it to the office and was walking back home. A car stopped near me and a group of KGB guys encircled me. They showed me their IDs in the car. I was sentenced to 25 years for espionage in favor of the American and German intelligence forces. Their main evidence was a photograph of 1945 from the French communist newspaper "L'Humanite" where I was photographed standing beside de Gaulle's wife. Many Jewish writers and activists of culture were arrested at that period. My investigation officer said to me smiling that I was lucky to have been accused of espionage and that this could have been much worse if I had been accused of Zionism like many other people. They interrogated me for 170 nights. I signed under all their idiotic accusations or otherwise I would have been destroyed in that prison.

I had my left hand and my left leg paralyzed because of the tortures, and I could hardly move when I reached the camp. I traveled to the camp in a "Stolypinsky" railcar (Editor's note: special railcars for prisoners in Russia since 1906) and at the destination point they carried me from the railcar on a stretcher. I was at the Vorkuta Camp, in the Far North in about 4000 km from Kiev. I got into hospital and 3 people rescued me from death. I had seen many interesting people before, but I was tremendously impressed by those I met in the Vorkuta camp. It was Professor Turkevich, Doctor of Sciences from Leningrad, - he was innocent, too, Alexei Kapler a famous producer, that got into a camp for having an affair with Stalin's daughter Svetlana, and Sasha Savich, a poet from Kiev. The 3 of them helped me to survive. I stayed in hospital for over 5 months. Kapler managed to have his friends in Moscow send us some Nobocain. It helped me a lot. Later I work at the wood cutting site. We lived in barracks, 150-200 people in one. We lived in terrible conditions. We were starved and could wash ourselves only once per month.

There were many Jews in the camp, but there was no anti-Semitism. I had friends among the people that came from Western Ukraine. They didn't accept the Soviet power, but we were friends. I spoke Ukrainian with them. They didn't even know what anti-Semitism was about. I had a friend – Victor Vassilenko, an art specialist from Moscow University. He entered into a discussion about Jesus Christ with them. He told them that Jesus was a Jew. So, an inmate that had been sentenced to 25 years for anti-Soviet activities and said: “I shall listen to what you say. That zhyd (and Vassilenko wasn't a Jew) says that Jesus Christ was a Jew. Tell me if it is true”. I said that it was true, but he didn't believe me. They were poor ignorant people and they didn't know anti-Semitism until it was instigated on them.

I could get only one letter at a month from my house, and send too one at a month, but I knew that beside them okay. Parcel and meeting with native were forbid.

Stalin died on 5 March 1953 and we had a feeling of concern and hope. We knew that our life was going to change but we didn't know in what direction. Our warders were furious. I remember one of them, a red hair man cursing that if we dared to say a rude word about Stalin's death he would shoot us. So we kept silent, but we could hardly help smiling. We were political prisoners and in 2-3 years we began to get released. Sometimes I ask myself where the situation was worse: in the German captivity or in the GULAG. I was captured by enemies and put into a German camp, but in the GULAG I felt so hurt by being imprisoned for nothing. I was a Soviet citizen and I had struggled for the Soviet power and believed in it and had to suffer so for my faith.

My family waited for me. I returned in 1956. My daughter Julia was in the 3rd form already. She didn't know where her father had been. If they found out at school she would have been treated with suspicion. My wife Ida was a nurse in the polyclinic and my mother and sister were living in my old apartment.

Once I met by chance a prominent Ukrainian poet and a very honest and decent man Maxim Rylskiy. He helped me a lot. He advised me to stay at home and write. He said I had a great experience and witnessed so many events. I wrote books for children and adults: “Two Gavroshes”, “Zhenia at one time”, “A Parisian woman” and “A night in the churchyard”. I also wrote novels about Germany: “The Sun doesn't fade”, “A warm autumn” and “Geology of Conscience”. I wrote in the only possible at that time style of writing: socialist realism. I wrote my works to glorify the Soviet reality, Communist Party and raise our children in the spirit of Soviet patriotism. I wrote in Ukrainian. There were only Ukrainian and Russian characters in my books. Jewish characters were not appreciated at that time. My books were published.

I never wrote about the GULAG. I still believed in the idea of communism. I thought that everything bad was Stalin's fault. Maxim Rylskiy promoted publication of my books. He also advised me to work with big commandants of the Soviet army and heroes of the war developing their memoirs into books. Memoirs were very popular in the 1950-60s. This work was paid well and I wrote memoirs for two generals of the Great Patriotic War. They were published and the authors were generals, of course. My name was not mentioned.

I borrowed some money from Rylskiy and in 1962 we bought a two-room apartment. My wife Ida continued working. She was a very reserved, nice and kind woman. She understood me very well and we had a very warm and close family. My mother Freida Shmushkevich died 1963. She had always had a poor heart and a hard life. My mother and Rachel's (my sister) family always

observed Jewish traditions. At Pesach my mother and then my sister went to the synagogue and stood in lines over night to get some matsah. We always visited them on these days. My mother was a very good housewife. She made delicious stewed chicken, stuffed chicken neck, cutlets and clear soup. We also visited them on Soviet holidays. We didn't observe any Jewish traditions. Firstly, we were communists and secondly, we had no faith in anything, although we always remembered who we were.

In 1965 I became a member of the Soviet writers' Union. I could rest and write in the so-called Creativity homes for writers and travel around the country being paid for such trips. I also conducted meetings with my readers. Our life was improving. My daughter graduated from the Institute of Foreign languages. She worked as an English-Russian-Ukrainian translator and editor in scientific publishing offices. She married a Russian man. My wife and I had no objections to this. In 1969 her son Evgeniy was born. She divorced her husband soon afterward. My wife and I helped her to raise Evgeniy.

In 1990 my sister Rachel, her son Alik, her daughter-in-law and two grandchildren left for Israel. I never considered emigration for myself. I sympathized with the people that were leaving, but I knew that I would never be able to live in a different country. I am too old to change my place of living. In 1991 my wife Ida died of cancer.

I live alone. My daughter lives in another part of the city. Unfortunately, in 1990s many institutes and publishing homes were closed and my daughter lost her job. Also, at that time many preachers of various religions came to the country and my daughter was converted to Christianity. She attends a Christian church and she was baptized. Her son Evgeniy followed her. I try to explain to her that she is a Jew and she should turn to Judaism, but she wouldn't listen to me. I am so unhappy about this.

In 1920s I stopped identifying myself as a Jew after I moved to Kiev. The word "Jew" came back to me during and after the war. I only remembered that I was a Jew when there was much ado about the issue of Jewry. But now, when I am alone, Jewish organizations stretch their hand of help to me. They help me with medication and food. A woman visits me to do the apartment and shopping. I feel myself again as a Jew. I am interested in the events in Israel. I correspond with my sister and friends in Israel. I am too old to go there. I shall turn 90 soon. I have been to two hells in my life: German-fascist and Stalin - GULAG I am thinking about my life and I can finally write the truth about my life. I hope somebody will need it.