

Efim Shpielberg Biography

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Odessa

Ukraine

Interviewer: Tatiana Portnaya

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Efim Israilevich Shpielberg lives in a two-bedroom apartment in a five-storied house in one of the best districts near Arcadia in Odessa. His apartment is well maintained. The furniture was bought in the 1970s. Efim Israilevich is a slim man of average height. He is quick in his movements and has shrewd eyes. He tells his story in a lively manner and gesticulates expressively when talking. He is a very good conversationalist and a great storyteller. He is in good shape for his age and does a lot of housework.

My maternal grandfather Chaim Tuman was born in Odessa in the 1850s. My grandmother told me that he studied in a yeshivah school and had a good conduct of Hebrew and Yiddish. Before the October Revolution [1] he moved abroad. My grandmother and their children were supposed to join him later, but it never happened due to the revolution and Civil War [2]. My mother told me about my grandfather whatever little she knew about his life. She said, he lived in England and then in Palestine. He was a rich man. He owned vineyards and made wine. I remember a family legend. When dying grandfather asked his assistants to 'remember his orphan children that remained in the USSR' and send them money. However, they didn't follow his will. Then grandfather Chaim came to him in his dream and said that he would take him to a better world if he didn't follow his will. That man told his companion about the dream he had had. His companion replied with his Jewish sense of humor: 'Take it easy. It's just a dream or whatever...' A month later that man died. His companion got scared and began to send money. We had a letter from grandfather that he wrote in Hebrew. His assistant sent us this letter in the early 1920s. He notified us about grandfather's Chaim death and this story in the letter. It's true that before the Great Patriotic War [3] the family received foreign money through a Torgsin store [4] and could buy food in it. I don't know exactly how it was done: all I remember is that mother somehow received some coupons in this store for the money they were receiving. I also remember that there were talks in our family that grandfather Chaim invited his younger daughters, my mother and aunt Polina, to come to him, but they didn't go. This is all I know about him. During the Soviet period it was not safe to admit existence of relatives abroad and there was no talking about grandfather Chaim.

My maternal grandmother Tsyvia Tuman was born to a very poor family in 1856. She had no education, but she was nice and caring. She lived in Moldavanka area in Odessa. There were poor Jewish families, craftsmen, tradesmen and tricksters, hooligans and thieves living in this area. Jews spoke Yiddish and Ukrainian and Russian tenants also could explain themselves in Yiddish. My grandmother said that before the revolution the whole area of Moldavanka changed during Sabbath. One could hear Sabbath songs and recitation of prayers from houses. At Yom Kippur and Jewish holidays all Jews came to the synagogue in Mikhailovskaya Street, not far from our house. This building is still there. It houses a music school. There were one-storied houses and ground

pavement in this district, but its tenants were friendly and supportive of each other. My grandmother said that when she was getting married all their neighbors were helping with the wedding arrangements. They wanted their neighbor to stand to standards and look best. There was a chuppah and tables for the wedding party installed in the yard of the house where grandmother's family lived.

My grandmother gave birth to eight children. She had a very hard time when grandfather left Odessa. My grandmother took up any work that was at hand to support the children. She baked cookies at night and went to sell them during a day. She also made and sold plum and cherry liqueurs. She was doing well supporting her family.

One day before the revolution a young man ran into grandmother's home and asked her to hide him. Few minutes later policemen came in. They asked my grandmother whether there was a stranger coming into her house. Grandmother said she was at home with her children and they left her alone. The stranger thanked my grandmother and promised to remember her. This man turned out to be Anshel, a renown thief in Odessa. He was chief of a gang of thieves in Komitetskaya Street in Moldavanka. There were also Sredniaya, Sadikovskaya, Kolontayevskaya, Miasoyedskaya, Hospitalnaya and Yevreiskaya Streets in Moldavanka. Shortly after this incident my grandmother came home in the evening after she had sold her cookies and discovered that all her liqueur stocks were gone. Somebody had been in her house. She burst into crying: how was she to provide for her children? Then Anshel came and asked her: 'Bobele, vus veynt ir?' ['Why are you crying, Granny?' in Yiddish]. My grandmother told him what happened. It turned out there was a wedding nearby and somebody stole my grandmother's stocks. Anshel and grandmother went to the party where Anshel found the thief, hit him on the face and ordered to return what he had stolen. He also gave grandmother ten golden rubles: 'This is for your children!' He often brought her money or food for the children afterward.

When I remember my grandmother Tsyvia, she lived with her daughter Polia and her family in the same house where we lived. Their home was poor, but my grandmother kept it very clean. Grandmother Tsyvia was a very religious woman. She observed all traditions and they had kosher utensils in their apartment. She always wore a kerchief. She often went to the synagogue and took me with her.

On Sabbath grandmother lit candles and cooked a festive dinner.

My grandmother died before the Great Patriotic War in 1939. She was 83 years old. She was buried in accordance with Jewish traditions. An acolyte from the synagogue came and she was wrapped in special clothing. Some adults had their clothes torn. Then she was taken outside and men from neighboring houses came to recite a prayer. Then they carried the casket along the streets for Moldavanka residents to bid farewell to her. Then they put the casket on a catafalque and buried her in the Jewish cemetery in Slobodka [neighborhood on the outskirts of Odessa].

My mother's older brother Isaac was born, I think, in the middle of the 1880s. I don't know where he studied. He spoke Yiddish like the rest of the family. He was short, but he had strong fists. During a pogrom in 1905 [5] there were stories about him. His house was one of the first houses in the street and once pogrom makers came to his house where he lived with his wife Tsyliya. He lifted two bandits by their collars, banged them one with another and threw outside. Then other pogrom makers told everyone that there was an extremely strong zhyd [abusive word for a Jew] in a house in this street that wouldn't hesitate to kill. There were daring Jewish residents in Moldavanka. They

were brave and could stand for themselves. There were fewer victims among them than elsewhere in Odessa during pogroms. Before the Great Patriotic War my uncle was a worker in a carton factory. During the Great Patriotic War

he evacuated to Tashkent in Middle Asia [3,200 km from Odessa, in Uzbekistan] with his wife. They had no children. Uncle Isaac died in the late 1950s at the age of 74. His wife died a year later. It happened so that I had to make all arrangements to bury uncle Isaac and aunt Tsyliya in the Jewish cemetery in Slobodka where all our relatives were buried.

My mother's older sister Doba could read and write in Russian. She spoke Yiddish at home. I don't know whether she ever got any education. She was a worker at the carton factory. She was married, but had no children. During the Great Patriotic War her husband perished at the front and she was in evacuation in middle Asia. She died in the 1950s.

The next child after Doba was Molka. She was a very interesting woman. She was short and pretty. She also worked at the carton factory. She married a Jewish young man named Aaron. They had a daughter named Rosa. During the Great Patriotic War Aaron perished at the front and Rosa died in evacuation in Tashkent. Uncle Molka returned to Odessa alone and exhausted. She died few years after the war.

The next child was David. During World War I he served in the tsarist army. After the revolution he went to the Red army. He took part in military action near Tsaritsyn at the beginning of the Civil War and then he returned to Odessa and joined Kotovski [6] unit with his younger brothers Yosl and Etsl. All three brothers perished during the Civil War. This is all I know about them.

My mother's younger sister Polia was born in 1905. I think she studied in a Jewish elementary school. She was a very pretty girl. When she was young she attended a dancing club. Polia got married very young. Her husband Volodia Chanyura was a very religious man. He went to the synagogue on Saturday and on weekdays. He could read in Hebrew. I don't know where he studied the language, but it was him who used to read letters in Hebrew that were sent from Palestine written by grandfather Chaim's companion. During the Great Patriotic War he went to the front. He was wounded several times. After the war he returned to Odessa. Aunt Polia and their children Rimma and Ilia were in evacuation in Fergana [3,000 km from Odessa in Uzbekistan]. After the war they returned home. Aunt Polia was a devoted mother and efficient housewife. She was a great cook. I still remember her wonderful strudels with apples and nuts and gefilte fish. She bought chicken from a shochet and made chicken broth and chicken chops. They smelled all across the yard. I loved aunt Polia dearly. I don't think she was happy in her marriage, though. Uncle Volodia was a womanizer. Once I saw him coming into a house to visit a woman. Volodia died in 1974. He was buried at the Jewish cemetery. Aunt Polia died three months later. In 1976 Rimma and Ilia and their families moved to the USA. They live in New York. They occasionally called me, but they don't any more.

My mother Maria Shpielberg, nee Tuman, was born in Odessa in 1902. She got some primary education. She could read and write in Russian, but she only spoke Yiddish. My mother became an apprentice of a dressmaker when she was very young. She learned this profession promptly and began to make clothes herself. She worked for an owner of a shop who paid her peanuts. Still, my mother was a big help for my grandmother in supporting the family.

I have no information about my paternal grandmother. I don't even know her name. I didn't ask when I was young and now there is nobody left to ask. I know that she died few years after my father was born. My father was the youngest in the family which means that she may have died in 1900. Besides my father, my grandfather and grandmother had three daughters: Etah, Rosa and Chaya. They didn't move to Odessa. They must have got married and stayed where they lived. Perhaps, my father kept in touch with them, but I know no details. I have no information about my aunts on my father's side, either.

My paternal grandfather Leib Shpielberg was born approximately in 1852. He came from a village to Odessa with his younger son, who was my father to be, during the October Revolution, but I don't know any details. I remember grandfather Leib very well: he had payes and a red beard. He had a heavy fist like a hammer.

He always wore a black cap, a white shirt and a kitel. My grandfather was very religious. He always spoke Yiddish and recited prayers in Hebrew at the synagogue. I don't know where he studied. He read Russian newspapers and the Torah in Hebrew.

He went to pray at the synagogue in the morning and in the evening. Grandfather lived near our house in Moldavanka. One year before he died he moved in with us. He died in 1937, when I was 8. He was buried in accordance with the Jewish tradition. I remember well that the casket was taken to the synagogue where they recited prayers and then it was carried along the streets in Moldavanka. There were many people in the procession: my grandfather was well respected. He was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Slobodka. My father couldn't afford to sit shivah, for he had to work hard.

My father Israel Shpielberg was born in a village near Odessa in 1898. He probably studied in cheder. He spoke Yiddish at home and knew prayers in Hebrew. It's hard to say whether he finished a secondary school, but he could speak, read and write in Russian and Ukrainian.

By the standards of our district he was a man with education. My father came to Odessa when he was a young man already. He studied the profession of fabric cutter and did his work very well.

My father met my mother at a party. After they met he came to my grandmother Tsyvia and said 'If you don't give your consent to my marrying Maria I will commit a suicide. I shall go to the sea and drown'. This is what my grandmother told me about his introductions.

My parents got married in 1928.

My mother told me that the rabbi from our synagogue was invited to the wedding and there was a chuppah installed in the yard. Grandmother Tsyvia was chief cook at the wedding and our relatives and neighbors were helping her. They made gefilte fish and a big bowl of fish soup. They didn't drink much, but danced and sang until morning. Some of the guests that could play musical instruments played the violin, harmonica or even spoons. They were poor and common people, but they were having lots of fun! My mother made a white gown and a veil for the wedding. I saw this outfit before the great Patriotic War. My father also wore a new suit that he made himself and a new cap.

My parents had three children. I was born in 1929. My sister Riva was born in 1932 and the youngest Tsylia was born in 1934.

We lived in a one-room apartment with a big verandah in the same house where grandmother Tsyvia and aunt Polia lived. My mother said that her apartment seemed like a palace to her, although we were rather poor. The walls were whitewashed and we slept on metal beds like all

other neighbors. There were often bed bugs living in those beds and every now and then a housewife put her beds outside where they made a fire and put the beds into it to burn all bed bungs. Afterward the beds were repainted. My father was a tailor.

When he stood firmly on the ground with his both feet he managed to earn enough to buy a wardrobe in the shop. All residents of Moldavanka came to look at this 'rich purchase' of ours.

We lived in a single two-storied building in Sredniaya Street. There was a gallery balcony around the perimeter of the house on the first and second floors with front doors of apartments. In summer we used to sleep on the balcony. Our neighbor, shoemaker Froik often returned home drunk. He sang in Yiddish for his wife 'My darling Surochka, I love you so' walking to his home on the second floor of the balcony. She yelled back 'You drunkard, you drank again'. Then she threw a pillow and a blanket onto him. Uncle Froik picked up his bebekhes [his bag and baggage in Yiddish] and went to sleep on the first floor near our Russian neighbor Vania's apartment. Vania made ice cream. His wife's name was Maria and my mother's name was also Maria. They were friends. Maria was a very nice woman. When she and her husband took out newly made ice cream she used to say 'Efim, kum hir - come here, Vania has already made ice cream' and I always had some ice cream. Vania came out with a cart with 3 containers on it. This was such different ice cream! I shall always remember its taste. It turned out later that he gave away Jews to Romanians during the Great Patriotic War [Odessa was occupied by Romanian troops during the Great Patriotic War]. Such bastard. When our guys returned from the front to the town they wanted to kill Vania because he gave away Jews to Romanians during the occupation. He was sitting there looking at them with his only eye left, someone beat out his eye during the war. Our guys left him alone and later he disappeared somewhere.

There was a toilet and a water tap in the yard and housewives used to do their washing near this tap. Every Thursday before Sabbath we went to the public bathroom in Sredniaya Street. We fetched water for cooking from the pump in the yard. There were primus stoves to do the cooking. We had kosher utensils: there was a drawer for dairy products where we kept a big casserole for milk and few mugs. There was another box where we kept utensils for meat products. I remember very well that the household had to observe these rule. If I did something wrong I got a cuff in the nape right away. All housewives in our yard were wonderful cooks. My mother was the best at making gefilte fish. When she started cooking it all other housewives came to watch her. When she was beginning to make the filling she asked everybody to keep silent to not spoil the fish. Isaacs's wife Tsylya was the best cook, though. She had wooden mugs in the kitchen where she kept herbs for meat, fish and bakeries. Tsylya's jellied meat was quite an object of note in Odessa. She made extraordinary strudels with almonds that tasted like baklava [Eastern sweets made of pastry, sugar, nuts and spice]. I never tasted anything like it even in the best restaurants.

I had a very happy childhood. My grandmother was raising me, my parents had to work hard. Grandfather Leib took me for a walk every day. I went often to the synagogue with him and watched him praying. He taught me the prayer 'Shema, Israel' [Listen, Israel in Hebrew.] Grandfather also prayed at home with tefillin and tallit.

My parents and I also went to the cinema. I remember mute films when there was a piano player playing during a film. However, I was mostly raised by the yard. A yard in Moldavanka is a real school of life. Parents could leave their child in our yard for a day and, doubt it or not, that would

have his food and his other needs would be taken care. Our neighbors were very sympathetic. They were very responsive when somebody was in trouble. My neighbor taught me to be decent, honest and to not hurt the little ones.

We kept geese and chickens in the yard. They were guarded by Polkan, a hug dog. Nobody dared to catch a chicken or a goose. They feared him a lot. Our neighbors also kept some livestock. Life was hard and livestock made a supporting addition to make ends meet.

We bought food in the Paitorg, a store in the corner of the street and there was a bakery next door to this store. When I was sent to buy bread I could smell it right after leaving my house. One could buy anything in Paitorg: from eggs to black caviar stored in barrels. We only bought what we needed for a day since there were no fridges to keep food longer. We bought meat and chicken in a butcher's store. I remember the butcher: a bearded Jew with overgrown hair. He followed the necessary procedure with meat and chicken, but I never knew the details.

We bought fish in Privoz [a big market in Odessa] or at a small fish market in Bazarnaya Street. There were few metal pavilions where they sold fish in a park. They delivered fish early in the morning. It was rather expensive in the morning, but in the evening the prices dropped. What they failed to sell they burned pouring kerosene over it. They didn't have fridges to keep it. We often went fishing to the sea. We took a primus stove, some oil and a frying pan with us. Men and boys dived to catch bullheads and women fried them. Then we all ate fish.

People were very frank. If a family had a problem, all neighbors got involved in resolution of it. On Jewish holidays all neighbors got together to observe it. We kept special crockery for Pesach in a small storeroom. Before Pesach we did a general cleanup of the apartment. My mother did the laundry. We took all pieces of furniture outside to wash and clean it. The kitchen utensils to be used at Pesach were kept in hot ashes. My grandmother Tsyvia knew all details about Jewish customs and she gave direction to the family about what was required to be done. We bought special kosher wine for Pesach at the synagogue. We could also buy matzah, but my grandmother baked it herself. Before Pesach the family inspected the apartment with a candle looking for chametz. We took all bread leftovers to our non-Jewish neighbors. We invited strangers to seder. I remember only that the grandfather Leib conducted the seder. We didn't eat bread a whole week at Pesach.

My favorite holiday was Chanukkah. I liked it that every night my father lit a candle. At Chanukkah all children got delicious doughnuts and money. I felt happy and rich on these days. At Purim people wore costumes, drank and enjoyed themselves as much as they could.

At Yom Kippur children and adults fasted. My grandmother was ill and had right not to fast at all, but she strictly followed the fasting. Men and women always went to the synagogue at Yom Kippur. However, some families stopped observing Jewish holidays in the late 1930s. Perhaps, some were afraid of authorities, but my grandmother always watched that our family observed traditions.

My father was a tall fair-haired, healthy and very handsome man. He was a communist. I think he joined the party in the late 1920s. He was very serious about his status as a communist and was always very honest. I don't remember my father going to the synagogue or praying at home, but he observed the Jewish holidays with the family and ate kosher food. When necessary, my father worked on Saturday.

There was famine in Ukraine [7] in 1933 and my father went to work in the port for food coupons.

The whole family could have meals in a diner at the port. My father was a senior man in a crew of loaders.

There were shipments of raisins and olives delivered to the port. Loaders stole some olives or raisins putting bags with them in their bootlegs to take them home for their families. My mother asked my father to bring some for the children, but he replied: 'I shall not do anything like this. I am a decent Jew and communist'.

Later he went to work as chief fabric cutter in the garment shop of Odessa military regiment. He worked in the shop and at home. He made wonderful uniforms for officers and very skillfully 'straightened a chest' in overcoat. When officers had an urge to have their orders completed they used to come to our home for fittings. It was quite an event and we all went to look at an officer and his car.

My father also cut trousers that my mother sewed together and sold. He was a very skilful tailor. Now, experts like my father, own fashion houses. In 1937 my father went to Middle Asia, to Tashkent, looking for an opportunity to earn more money. It didn't work there and my father returned home.

When I was to go to school my father said 'You live in Ukraine and you will go to a Ukrainian school'. I went to Ukrainian school # 62 in Mechnikov Street. On my way to school I had to pass the block in Mechnikov Street where boys from a conflicting group lied and I often had to fight with them. I learned to stand up for myself. There were Ukrainian, Russian, Jewish and Moldavian children in my school, but there was no segregation between us. I don't know to what nationality my first teacher Maria Grigorievna belonged, but I studied 4 years in the elementary school and I liked her a lot. She was slim and nice. She often invited us for a cup of tea and little dry bagels at her home. Occasionally she took us to the Kotovskiy cinema theater in Kolodezny Lane. I received 5 marks at school. I was fond of mathematic and solved problems efficiently. My handwriting left much to be desired. But I tried as much as I could to not upset Maria Grigorievna. I didn't attend any clubs. After school I played football with other boys. My friends and I liked going to the cinema. There was a cinema theater built near our house. Tickets were inexpensive and my friends and I often went there. I got along well with my sisters. My favorite was Tsylia, my younger sister. However, I didn't like it when I had to go for a walk with them or watch them. My parent often told me off for them. My sister Riva had finished two years at school before the Great Patriotic War. She studied in a Russian school in Mechnikov Street. Tsylia didn't go to school before the Great Patriotic War.

Our family didn't suffer during the period of Stalin's arrests [during Great Terror] [8], thank God. However, our neighbor Volodia's relative Zeichik was arrested. Our other neighbors delivered coal and other things on their carts. One night all men in the family were arrested and nobody saw them ever again. It was a horrible time. Before the war there were no problems that had to do with people's national identity. Secretary of our district committee of the City Ispolkom [10] was Jewish and Jews held high official positions in our district.

In 1939 my father was recruited to the army and sent to the war with Finland [9]. He returned half a year later and continued his work in the military unit fashion shop.

I remember well 22 June 1941, the first day of the war. I was playing football in the yard with other boys when I saw people running in some direction. I thought we had broken glass with a ball as usual and was thinking of hiding somewhere to spare myself of another cuff on the nape, but it

turned out that people were running to listen to Molotov [11] speech on the radio. He said that Germany attacked the USSR. My mother was crying and aunt Polia was crying. My sisters also burst into tears seeing so many women around crying.

The men from our house went to a registry office to volunteer to the front. There were long lines near our district registry office. I was 12. I felt myself grown up and was thinking of volunteering to the front. My father served in a fighting battalion [12] deployed in the town to fight landing troops of the enemy. Later my father went to the front. He served near Odessa and then their unit was retreating with Primorskaya army. My father perished near Rostov in 1943.

The situation was horrific: the town was bombed and there was no water supply. The front line was close to Odessa. Misha, the son of shoemaker Froik was a marine. He came home from his combat positions several times. When another air raid began he used to run out of the house with his five-charge gun and shoot at German bombers. We, boys, sincerely believed that it was possible to shake a bomber down with a gun. His brother Izia also came home from the front line driving his small tank. He gave us hard hats and drove us across Moldavanka.

One day assistant secretary of the district Party committee came to live with us in our apartment. His last name was Tsukerman. He was a Jew. I can remember as if it was yesterday that he always carried a gun. Once he came home and said to my mother 'Maria, Germans kill Jews. You must evacuate'. This was the last opportunity to leave the town. My mother and aunt Polia began to pack. My mother packed a backpack for each of us and made a carton note indicating our name and date of birth that we wore on the neck. We headed to the port. What a mess was there! Germans drowned the Georgia boat before our eyes.

It sank with all those on board. People around were crying and screaming. I think we boarded the Armenia boat. I have no idea how we managed to get there. It was like delirium. The wounded were taken on board first and then civilians were allowed to board it.

I can't remember how many days it sailed. German aircraft bombed us regularly in the morning and in the evening. They rarely flew during a day and passengers came onto the upper deck to take a breath of air. The rest of time we were hiding. There, with the God's help we arrived at Novorossiysk [700 from Odessa by sea].

When people began to get off, there was another alarm. There were still the wounded and civilians on board. A bomb hit the boat and it sank. There was terrible panic and jamming and I got lost. The crowd lead me to a freight train that brought me to Krasnodar region.

A Kazak family gave me shelter in their home at Bursak station, Novodonetsk village, Krasny Putilovets kolkhoz [13]. I stayed with them through the winter. German troops were advancing and the front line was 15 km from the village.

The Red army troops were retreating. It was my good luck to meet a Jewish man from Moldavanka that knew me. He was sanitary instructor of an artillery battalion. He talked to the commanding officer of his battery to take me with them. He knew that fascists had no mercy on Jews.

So I happened to get to the front. There were two other boys in the battery. We were responsible for looking after the horses pulling cannons. Once I was asleep in a haystack when a horse came to eat and bit me on my leg. It was a deep bite and I had to have bandages applied. When combat action began we had to remove horses from combat positions. During combat actions we carried ammunition, but artillerymen ordered us to hide with horses. They were trying to protect us.

Our troops were retreating. When we were near Tikhoretskoye village our battery was ordered to cross the bridge and shield the retreat of other troops. At that moment a massive air attack began. Germans intended to destroy the bridge to cut off the retreat of our tanks and infantry troops. Our battery crossed the bridge. We lost six people. Then the Germans destroyed the bridge. We were retreating again. It was July 1942. The heat was oppressive. Red army troops and civilians with their cattle moved along the same road. Germans dropped flyers from planes saying 'Give away zhydy and beat commissars!'

At times I rode a horse with the march of troops all day long. We always had horses to replace those that got tired of dragging cannons. In case of combat action or air raid soldiers came to their cannons and ordered us to hide with the horses. We came as far as Northern Caucasus. Once, when we were near the Terek River we decided to let horses drink some water. There were mountains around us and a small lake nearby. My friends Victor and Alexandr and I decided to unharness the horses and let them eat some grass and rest. We wanted to wash them and lead them into the lake that happened to be a swamp. We began to sink in the mud and so did the horses. We got frightened. I thought that if our commanding officer saw us he would shoot us for this diversion. It took us a lot of effort to get the horses out.

Retreat is the hardest road ever. Everybody wants to survive. Near Mineralnyye Vody the crowd was running in panic, but there was an iron discipline in the army.

Our commanding officer was a major. He knew how to organize people and was well respected. Soldiers and officers were protective with us, shared their food and always let us sit close to the fire to get warm. They also shared their warm clothes with us. I stayed in this division until 1943. When I turned 14 they sent me to a military school in Makhachkala. There I bumped into another man from Moldavanka. He worked as a mechanic at the parachute plant.

He told me that my mother and sisters were in Nukha town in Azerbaijan [1,700 km from Odessa]. I took a freight train to go there immediately.

Reunion with my family is one of the happiest events in my life. My mother and sisters were crying and laughing seeing me. They had lost their hope to ever see me again.

They lived in a small summer type barrack, but winters were mild there. We stoked a stove that served as a heater. My mother made plain flat cookies. Bread was expensive and we couldn't afford to buy any.

My sisters and I went to school. Like in Odessa I was good at mathematic and our teacher Ivan Petrovich, a Russian man, praised me a lot and cited me as an example for my classmates. My mother made and altered clothes and I helped her to turn it inside out. Those were the earnings that we had. When my mother boiled corn cereal and we could have a bowl it was good. We got stuffed inside, but it didn't reduce hunger. We went to sleep hungry and hungry we got up.

I fell ill with malaria. There were no medications and I was in miserable condition.

When we were in evacuation the locals were friendly with us. There was no segregation. All were equal awaiting for news from the front. We didn't think about observing traditions or kashrut. The war changed everything.

In 1944, when our troops liberated Odessa, we returned home. The town was destroyed and devastated, but our house was there intact. Our apartment was robbed, but did we think about things when every day we got news that our neighbors or friends had perished. Many of those who

failed to evacuate, perished in the ghetto, they were killed or missing.

Shortly afterward I entered Odessa military railroad school. There were many Jewish boys studying there and there were Jewish teachers, too. I didn't face any anti-Semitism in the school. I got along well with my schoolmates and we didn't care about national identity of each other. After a year of my studies there the war was over. Victory Day is one of the brightest holidays in my life. When radio announced the capitulation of Germany people ran out into the streets, knocking on their neighbors' doors, hugging and kissing.

There were tables set in our yard

for celebration like in our childhood. Veterans began returning home from the front. Some lost their leg, some had no arm. Uncle Volodia returned in 1946. He was lucky to have survived.

In 1946 after finishing my school I went to work as assistant locomotive operator.

In 1949 I was recruited to the army. I served in the Guard airborne division in Nizhneudinsk, Irkutsk region [4,875 km from Odessa]. The nature was beautiful there and in winter the river froze with ice to its bottom.

There was a lot of fish in the river. We had a nice canteen with tables for four. We had good meals: soup, schi (sauerkraut soup), cereals, bread and butter and tea with sugar for breakfast. The situation with food outside was difficult at that period. I was chief of an ammunition and automatic gun shop.

There were two mechanics working under my command. We were responsible for maintenance and inspection of equipment.

I was promoted to the rank of first lieutenant and was secretary of the Komsomol [14] unit in our division.

In 1952 I came home on leave. It was right in the height of the Doctor's Plot [15]. Our friends and acquaintances were scared with the existing situation. There was a Jewish first aid hospital in Miasoedovskaya Street in Moldavanka, one of the oldest hospitals in town. The Jewish community it for Jews and other townsmen back in the 19th century. There were very high skilled doctors working in the hospital. They began to be fired, pestered and accused. I heard people saying 'We won't go to zhydy. We don't want them to poison us' many times. When this was the governmental policy, how were common people supposed to react? I also remember an incident that happened in summer in Rasumovskaya Street. There was a man walking beside him. Some man approached him and said: 'Were did you zhydovskaya morda [a Jewish mug], buy this order? The man replied 'I am a tank man. I went through the war. And you are telling me this?' and he did hit him hard.

When I returned to my unit I face anti-Semitism. The son of secretary of regional Party committee was my fellow comrade. So I went to stand sentinel with my automatic gun once every 2-3 days, but he never did this duty.

He also laughed at me. Once, during a meal, he explained to me 'You stand sentinel because you are a Jew. You must be grateful to be still alive'.

I couldn't stand this and we began to fight. Since I was the initiator I had to stay in guardhouse for 10 days. I had a fight with another fellow comrade that asked why Jews were holding important positions in economics and medicine.

My response was throwing a kettle onto his head. I was in guardhouse again. I got along well with my commanding officer Zinoviev.

In March 1953 I was demobilized and was on my way home when Stalin died. On the day of his funeral I happened to be in Moscow. What was happening in Moscow! People sobbed and tore their hairs off their heads. They wore black armbands. Crowds of people were moving in the direction of Red Square. I didn't dare to move with the crowd. I went to the railway station and took a train to Odessa. In Odessa people were also crying. My mother and sisters were crying. People didn't understand how to go on living. We believed that Stalin lead us to the victory over fascists and thanks to him life was improving.

At 16 my sister Riva went to work at the factory that manufactured beds. She painted beds. She didn't finish school. She was naughty and aggressive and hard to get along with. In 1956 Riva married Yasha, a Jewish guy. They just had a civil registry ceremony and began to live in out one-room apartment. It was a small room of about 18 square meters and there were five of us living in it. Some time later I rented a room from our neighbor Lisa. After Riva got married, she quit the factory and began to work as a cook in the Jewish hospital. When she was 26 her daughter Raya was born. Some time later she divorced her husband Yasha. We rarely saw each other due to her hard temper. In 1996 Riva moved to New York, to the USA, with her daughter. She wrote at first, but then she stopped writing.

My younger sister Tsylia finished the Trade college and went to work at the confectionary department in a store. She had a problem there: there was a money loss in her store. I was in the army and sent Tsylia all my savings and I wrote mother to sell whatever she could and give this money to my sister. Tsylia managed to compensate the loss. I always got along well with Tsylia. She was very soft and feminine. In 1954 Tsylia married a Jewish guy named Izia Benderski. He was a worker. They registered their marriage and lived with Izia's mother in their home. A year later their daughter Tatiana was born. Tsylia quit the store and worked in a shop that manufactured stockings and string hats. These goods were in demand and Tsylia earned well. Her husband Izia began to drink some time later. He ruined himself by drinking. My sister divorced him. In 1964 she married Volodia Pinchuk, a Ukrainian guy. In 1965 their daughter Diana and in 1970 their son Andrei were born. In 1995 they moved to New York, USA. Tsylia died in 2000.

I couldn't find a job for some time after I returned from the army. I went to an employment agency several times, but they didn't have anything for me. I decided to bring a small present to a clerk there. I got a nicely packed bottle of 'Krasnaya Moscwa' perfume. She took pity on me and sent me to work at the food storage facility in Kirov Street. The manager of this facility, a short Jewish man, his surname was Shtul, lead me to a corner and asked 'Do you speak Yiddish?' I said that I could speak and understand. He began to explain work procedures in Yiddish to me: whom to give bribes and how much. Soon I was taken to work in a store. I was manager of the store. It was difficult to work in this store: there were continuous audits and inspections and I had to provide good meals and drinks to these auditors and inspectors. I didn't like it.

I went to work at the factory named after Vorovski. I was a joiner and then became leader of a construction I had many friends. We got together to go for walks, to the seashore or made parties. I met Faina Melamed at one of these parties. Faina was a very pretty, thin and slim girl with dark chestnut hair and thick eyelashes. Two years later, in 1959 we got married. We had a civil ceremony and I moved in with her. I was 30 years old and I had a

strong feeling of being able to support my family.

My wife Faina Melamed was born in Golovanevsk, Kirovograd region in 1929. She was a Jew. Her mother Leya Melamed was born in 1897. She was a very religious woman. Her father Efim Melamed was born in 1895. He perished at the front during the Great Patriotic War in 1943. My wife spent her childhood in Samarkand. In 1953 she and her mother moved to Odessa. They got accommodation in a basement in 108, Ostrovidova Street.

Faina couldn't find a job for a long time. As soon as they heard she was a Jew they refused to employ her. Her brother Boris helped her to get a job through his acquaintances. She worked at a trade base for 8 years.

After we got married we went to live in 108, Ostrovidova Street. There were two small rooms in the basement, but I was struck with how clean they were: like a surgery room. One room was divided with a curtain separating a kerogas stove, a tap with a container for water and a bucket underneath. There was no dampness in the basement. There was a coal-stoked stove heating it. We fetched water from the yard and did laundry in the yard. It was especially hard in winter. Housewives had to do their washing in ice-cold water. Here was a toilet in the yard. My wife was afraid of going there. There were rats living inside.

My mother-in-law did the housekeeping. She cooked delicious food. She observed kashrut. She managed to do everything so right as not to mix meat and dairy products. My wife and I didn't live a traditional Jewish life, but my mother-in-law went to the synagogue to pray and lit candles on Sabbath.

In 1960 my daughter Mila was born. In 1966 my wife managed to receive a two-room apartment with all comforts in a new five-storied building in Primorski district in Odessa. There were two rooms: one of them was like a passage room: 20 square meters big and another room 16 square meters big. There was a 6-square-meter kitchen and a gas stove in it. There was a bathroom in the apartment. Mila went to a kindergarten. In 1968 she went to school # 56.

A week later I bought a piano and Mila began to study music.

I continued to be leader of a construction crew at the garment factory named after Vorovski, but it was difficult to manage without any additional earnings. In the 1970s I opened a private garment shop. It was a profitable, but dangerous business. [It was forbidden in the former USSR and Efim still doesn't want to speak about details.] I provided well for my family. We often traveled. We went on cruises on the Black Sea several times. We visited Sochi, Yalta, Novorossiysk, Batumi and Sukhumi. They were fascinating, but expensive trips.

We were in the Baltic Republics where we visited Riga, Tallin and Yurmala. I liked Moscow and Leningrad. I went there on business, but I also went there with my family on vacation. We had a good time in Minsk. We liked the town. Faina had many friends in Samarkand.

I especially remember the trip to Uzbekistan. We stayed there 2 months. My wife sort of returned into her childhood and youth. I liked Tashkent, Samarkand and Buchara. The bazaar in Samarkand is far more plentiful than our markets. Fruit, greeneries, huge heaps of dried apricots and melons getting ripe in May. We even brought little yellow melons to Odessa.

In 1968 my mother Maria Shpielberg died. We had a vague idea of Jewish traditions and buried mother without keeping to traditions. However, there was a group of older Jews at the cemetery.

They recited the Kaddish for a compensation. In 1976 my mother-in-law Leya Melamed died. She was ill for a long time and we attended to her. We also buried her in the Jewish cemetery.

In 1978 Mila finished school and entered the Faculty of Cryogen Engineering in the Refrigeration College in Odessa. She studied successfully in the College. She had many friends and there were Jewish friends among them. She met a Russian guy named Andrei Makarenko, student of the Construction College at a party. Mila fell in love with him. In 1981 Mila got pregnant and they got married. We wanted Mila to marry a good Jewish man, but it happened this way. Andrei didn't have a father. His mother Luba was raising him and his sister Oksana. Luba worked as a teacher in the Navy College. She received a small salary and of course, I didn't even discuss the wedding arrangements with her. I paid for the wedding. It was beautiful. I rented a hall in a good health center. Our guests could stay inside or go outside.

After the wedding the newly weds settled down with us.

In 1982 my first grandson Igor was born. Mila finished the College in 1984 and began to work as an engineer in a design institute.

In 1986 our granddaughter Yulia was born. Mila quit her job to raise the children and Faina was helping her with the children. After my granddaughter was born I bought a car and gave it to Mila and Andrei. On

3 April 1989 they got in an accident. Mila died and Andrei survived. It's hard for me to talk about it. It's hard to bear this. One wouldn't wish it to his bitterest enemy. Faina cries every day. She cannot forget it. She can never forget it. We buried Mila in the Jewish cemetery. How do we live now? To keep going we have our grandchildren living with us.

In 1995 the Jewish school Or Sameach [16] opened in Odessa. Igor and Yulia went to this school. The children began to study Jewish traditions, Ivrit, Jewish prayers and observe Jewish holidays. They go to the synagogue on Jewish holidays and take us with them. My wife Faina cooks traditional Jewish dishes then. Igor had circumcision made at school and was given the Jewish name of Egal.

When the children grew older they moved to live with their father, but they often come to see us. Igor has finished school and entered the Faculty of Economics and Law in Odessa University. Igor studies at the extramural department and works as a consultant shop assistant in a store selling household appliances. Y

ulia entered the Faculty of Philosophy in Odessa University after finishing school. We have very nice and caring grandchildren

We are having a hard life. We cannot manage with our small pensions, just as all pensioners after perestroika [17] do not. But Jewish life became free and open. We receive food packages from Gmilus Hesed. They deliver Jewish newspapers Or Sameach and Shamrey Sabboth from them. They invite us to Jewish festivals and various culture events.

I do exercises and go to swim in the sea in Arcadia every morning. I start swimming in April and finish in October. It helps a lot, but I am aging, nevertheless. I have been in hospital twice. I had a heart problem and pneumonia. Yuri my wife Faina's nephew paid for my stay in hospital.

I want my grandchildren to grow up decent people and I want my wife and me to be healthy and

cause no problems to anybody. I want piece and wealth to rule in the world: in Israel, America and Ukraine, so that we didn't worry about our close ones.

I felt delighted when Israel was established in 1948. I thought: Jews got their own country at last. I know the Jewish history very well and I know that when Jews come to live to a country its economy goes up and it becomes wealthy. They've made a blossoming garden in the middle of a desert. May wealth and prosperity come to this land. Once I thought about emigration to Israel, but now I am too old. Besides, both my grandchildren live in Odessa.

Glossary

[1] Russian Revolution of 1917: Revolution in which the tsarist regime was overthrown in the Russian Empire and, under Lenin, was replaced by the Bolshevik rule. The two phases of the Revolution were: February Revolution, which came about due to food and fuel shortages during WWI, and during which the tsar abdicated and a provisional government took over. The second phase took place in the form of a coup led by Lenin in October/November (October Revolution) and saw the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks.

[2] Civil War (1918-1920): The Civil War between the Reds (the Bolsheviks) and the Whites (the anti-Bolsheviks), which broke out in early 1918, ravaged Russia until 1920. The Whites represented all shades of anti-communist groups – Russian army units from World War I, led by anti-Bolshevik officers, by anti-Bolshevik volunteers and some Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries. Several of their leaders favored setting up a military dictatorship, but few were outspoken tsarists. Atrocities were committed throughout the Civil War by both sides. The Civil War ended with Bolshevik military victory, thanks to the lack of cooperation among the various White commanders and to the reorganization of the Red forces after Trotsky became commissar for war. It was won, however, only at the price of immense sacrifice; by 1920 Russia was ruined and devastated. In 1920 industrial production was reduced to 14% and agriculture to 50% as compared to 1913.

[3] 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. The German blitzkrieg, known as Operation Barbarossa, nearly succeeded in breaking the Soviet Union in the months that followed. Caught unprepared, the Soviet forces lost whole armies and vast quantities of equipment to the German onslaught in the first weeks of the war. By November 1941 the German army had seized the Ukrainian Republic, besieged Leningrad, the Soviet Union's second largest city, and threatened Moscow itself. The war ended for the Soviet Union on 9th May 1945.

[4] Torgsin stores: Special retail stores, which were established in larger Russian cities in the 1920s with the purpose of selling goods to foreigners. Torgsins sold commodities that were in short supply for hard currency or exchanged them for gold and jewelry, accepting old coins as well. The real aim of this economic experiment that lasted for two years was to swindle out all gold and valuables from the population for the industrial development of the country.

[5] Odessa pogrom in 1905: This was the severest pogrom in the history of the city; more than 300 Jews were killed and thousands of families were injured. Among the victims were over 50 members of the Jewish self-defense movement. Flats, shops and small enterprises were looted by the pogromists. The police stood by and did not defend the Jewish population.

[6] Kotovsky, Grigory Ivanovich (1881-1925): Russian hero of the Civil War. He worked as an assistant to a manor manager. He was arrested several times over the years and was even sentenced to death, but this was later changed to penal servitude for life. In 1917 he joined the leftist Socialist Revolutionaries. He carried out a heroic campaign from the river Dneestr to Zhitomir in 1918 and took part in the defense of Petrograd in 1919.

[7] Famine in Ukraine: In 1920 a deliberate famine was introduced in the Ukraine causing the death of millions of people. It was arranged in order to suppress those protesting peasants who did not want to join the collective farms. There was another dreadful deliberate famine in 1930-1934 in the Ukraine. The authorities took away the last food products from the peasants. People were dying in the streets, whole villages became deserted. The authorities arranged this specifically to suppress the rebellious peasants who did not want to accept Soviet power and join collective farms.

[8] Great Terror (1934-1938): During the Great Terror, or Great Purges, which included the notorious show trials of Stalin's former Bolshevik opponents in 1936-1938 and reached its peak in 1937 and 1938, millions of innocent Soviet citizens were sent off to labor camps or killed in prison. The major targets of the Great Terror were communists. Over half of the people who were arrested were members of the party at the time of their arrest. The armed forces, the Communist Party, and the government in general were purged of all allegedly dissident persons; the victims were generally sentenced to death or to long terms of hard labor. Much of the purge was carried out in secret, and only a few cases were tried in public 'show trials'. By the time the terror subsided in 1939, Stalin had managed to bring both the party and the public to a state of complete submission to his rule. Soviet society was so atomized and the people so fearful of reprisals that mass arrests were no longer necessary. Stalin ruled as absolute dictator of the Soviet Union until his death in March 1953.

[9] Ispolkom: After the tsar's abdication (March, 1917), power passed to a Provisional Government appointed by a temporary committee of the Duma, which proposed to share power to some extent with councils of workers and soldiers known as 'soviets'. Following a brief and chaotic period of fairly democratic procedures, a mixed body of socialist intellectuals known as the Ispolkom secured the right to 'represent' the soviets. The democratic credentials of the soviets were highly imperfect to begin with: peasants - the overwhelming majority of the Russian population - had virtually no say, and soldiers were grossly over-represented. The Ispolkom's assumption of power turned this highly imperfect democracy into an intellectuals' oligarchy.

[10] Soviet-Finnish War (1939-40): The Soviet Union attacked Finland on 30 November 1939 to seize the Karelian Isthmus. The Red Army was halted at the so-called Mannengeim line. The League of Nations expelled the USSR from its ranks. In February-March 1940 the Red Army broke through the Mannengeim line and reached Vyborg. In March 1940 a peace treaty was signed in Moscow, by which the Karelian Isthmus, and some other areas, became part of the Soviet Union.

[11] Molotov, V. P. (1890-1986): Statesman and member of the Communist Party leadership. From 1939, Minister of Foreign Affairs. On June 22, 1941 he announced the German attack on the USSR on the radio. He and Eden also worked out the percentages agreement after the war, about Soviet and western spheres of influence in the new Europe.

[12] Fighting battalion: People's volunteer corps during World War II; its soldiers patrolled towns, dug trenches and kept an eye on buildings during night bombing raids. Students often volunteered for these fighting battalions.

[13] Kolkhoz: In the Soviet Union the policy of gradual and voluntary collectivization of agriculture was adopted in 1927 to encourage food production while freeing labor and capital for industrial development. In 1929, with only 4% of farms in kolkhozes, Stalin ordered the confiscation of peasants' land, tools, and animals; the kolkhoz replaced the family farm.

[14] 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.

[15] Doctors' Plot: The Doctors' Plot was an alleged conspiracy of a group of Moscow doctors to murder leading government and party officials. In January 1953, the Soviet press reported that nine doctors, six of whom were Jewish, had been arrested and confessed their guilt. As Stalin died in March 1953, the trial never took place. The official paper of the party, the Pravda, later announced that the charges against the doctors were false and their confessions obtained by torture. This case was one of the worst anti-Semitic incidents during Stalin's reign. In his secret speech at the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956 Khrushchev stated that Stalin wanted to use the Plot to purge the top Soviet leadership.

[16] Or Sameach school in Odessa: Founded in 1994, this was the first private Jewish school in the city after Ukraine became independent. The language of teaching is Russian, and Hebrew and Jewish traditions are also taught. The school consists of a co-educational elementary school and a secondary school separate for boys and for girls. It has about 500 pupils every year.

[17] Perestroika (Russian for restructuring): Soviet economic and social policy of the late 1980s, associated with the name of Soviet politician Mikhail Gorbachev. The term designated the attempts to transform the stagnant, inefficient command economy of the Soviet Union into a decentralized, market-oriented economy. Industrial managers and local government and party officials were granted greater autonomy, and open elections were introduced in an attempt to democratize the Communist Party organization. By 1991, perestroika was declining and was soon eclipsed by the dissolution of the USSR.