

# Zakhar Benderskiy

Zakhar Benderskiy

Chernovtsy

Ukraine

Interviewer: Ella Levitskaya

Date of interview: August 2002

[Family background](#)

[Growing up](#)

[During the war](#)

[Anti-Semitism](#)

[Married life](#)

[Glossary](#)

## Family background

My father's parents came from Kishinev, the capital of Moldova, which belonged to Russia before 1918. My grandfather, Shmul Benderskiy, was born in Kishinev in the 1850s. He was married to Hana Benderskaya, born in Kishinev in 1858.

I have bright memories of my grandparents' house at the crossing of Podolskaya, Bolgarskaya and Dumbarskaya streets in the center of Kishinev. I was born and lived there for quite a long timethere.. It was a big stone house with a big yard. There was a flower garden in front of the house. My grandfather loved gardening and growing flowers. There was an arbor with grapevine in the yard. There were bunches of grapes in the autumn. There was a round table and six chairs in the arbor. The family got together for tea on summer evenings. There were quite a few rooms and a big kitchen in the house. Two or three rooms were usually rented out. The family lived in the five other rooms. It was always cool in the house in the summer. There was old heavy furniture. Everything seemed huge to me: the big chairs with high backs, the big sofas upholstered with velvet and the high wardrobes with many doors. There were pictures on the walls. They were portraits of my grandparents' family and religious pictures with biblical subjects.

There were also photographs on the walls. My grandfather was fond of photography. I didn't like to be photographed. I was a vivid boy, and I hated to sit still for a minute or two. Everybody in the family was trying to avoid being photographed, so my grandfather took pictures of houses and landscapes instead. He had a small room that served as his photo lab.

Part of the house was my grandfather's tobacco factory and tobacco store. My grandfather had another tobacco shop at the market. The factory 'Benderskiy and Sons' manufactured cigarettes and tobacco. My grandfather's agents purchased dry tobacco leaves from farmers. He had ten employees at the factory. The factory yielded good profit - people needed tobacco at all times.

I remember my grandmother in the wheel chair. She was paralyzed. In 1903 there was the most horrible Jewish pogrom [1](#) in Kishinev. It lasted three days. People said it was arranged by the



Russian government. Many Jews were killed and many houses destroyed. The police didn't interfere. There were no policemen in the streets. About 600 Jews were killed. There was a high number of injured people, too. Later the police arrested those that were involved in the pogrom. They were brought to court, and some well-known lawyers and writers spoke against them. The famous Russian writer Vladimir Korolenko [2](#) demanded the death sentence for the pogrom-organizers. But the verdict for them was a short-term sentence.

My father and grandfather told me about this pogrom. We had quite a few pictures that my grandfather took after the pogrom, but they were all lost during the war and evacuation. I remember a picture of my grandfather's store with broken windows and a total mess inside. I knew that there was also a picture of our house after the pogrom. I asked my relatives about it, and later my brother sent it to me from Israel. There's one picture of our house and another one of the street with the bodies of our neighbors on the pavement. My father told me that my grandfather presented these pictures in court.

My grandmother also fell victim to this pogrom. My grandfather was on business in the surrounding villages at the time. My grandmother was alone at home. She was beaten very severely by the pogrom-makers. They left her unconscious in the yard thinking that she was dead. She survived, but she had her backbone injured and spent the rest of her life in a wheel chair. She had a woman to look after her. My grandmother died in 1923.

My grandfather took a lot of effort and spent a lot of money to reconstruct his factory and house after the pogrom.

My father, Srul Benderskiy, was the oldest of my grandparents' eight children. He was born in 1880. All the children were born in Kishinev. I don't remember the last names of his sisters in marriage. Raya herwas married. When the Soviet power was established she escaped to France because she didn't believe in the idea of communism and the power of the poor. She lived in Paris with her husband and daughter. She died there. My father's second sister, Frida, moved to the US before 1918 and married an American. My father's third sister, Dora Korenberg, lived in Kishinev. She owned a pharmacy where she worked with her husband. They had two daughters, who emigrated to Israel later. My father's fourth sister, Fania, and her husband lived in Kishinev. She was a housewife. I don't remember what her husband did for a living. There was another sister, Nyuka. Her husband worked at the customs in Kishinev. They had a son. During the war they were in evacuation in the Ural, and they returned to Kishinev after the war. Nyuka and her husband died in Kishinev, and their son moved to Israel. He died there recently. My father's brothers, Erik and Hil, moved to Israel with my grandfather in 1925. They died there.

My father's family was religious. There were several synagogues in Kishinev. The population was multinational, consisting of Moldavians, Romanians, Russians and Jews, who constituted about a quarter of the population. They spoke Yiddish, Russian and Romanian. There was a Jewish theater, Jewish grammar school and Jewish secondary schools. All these were closed after 1940 when the Soviet army entered Bessarabia [3](#) and 'liberated it from the Romanians'. My grandfather and his sons went to the big synagogue not far from their house. They celebrated Sabbath and all Jewish holidays. My grandfather wore ordinary clothes. He had a beard and wore a kippah. Before going out he put his hat on top of it.

My grandfather's sons studied at cheder, and his daughters were educated at home. All children could read and write well in Hebrew. After cheder my father and his brothers finished the Russian grammar school in Kishinev. They all got a higher education. My father and Hil studied at the Commercial Academy. Erik graduated from the Medical Academy in Kishinev. All members of the family spoke fluent Russian and had a good conduct of German and French. My father and his brothers also knew Latin. They all spoke Yiddish in the family.

My mother's family lived in Orgeyev. Orgeyev was a smaller town, about 50 km from Kishinev. Its population was Russian, Moldavian, Romanian and Russian. There were many Jewish families in Orgeyev as well. There were several synagogues, a cheder, a Jewish school and kosher shops. There were no Jewish pogroms in the town.

My grandfather on my mother's side, Solomon Tomashyn, was born in Orgeyev in 1862. He had a hardware store. My grandmother, Tzypra, was also born in Orgeyev in 1864. She was a housewife. They had nine children. My mother, Tania Benderskaya, was born in 1885. She was the first baby in the family. She was named Tube at birth but called Tania in the family.

I knew almost all of her brothers and sisters. Sarrah Krasnaya [nee Tomashyn] lived in Orgeyev. Her husband was a driver. During the war they were in evacuation in Siberia. After the war Sarrah, her husband and daughter emigrated to Israel. Their daughter got married there and moved to Argentina with her husband. In the 1960s Sarrah and her husband went to visit their daughter in Argentina and died after an epidemic broke out there.

Mara and her family lived in Orgeyev. During the war she was in evacuation in Kokand. She fell ill with typhoid and died there in 1942. Bella lived in Orgeyev. She was married and a housewife. She had two sons. Polis, the next girl, was in a ghetto in Transnistria [4](#) during the war and perished there. Netta got married and moved to Chernovtsy. During the war she was in evacuation in Middle Asia. After the war she returned to Kishinev.

I knew two of my mother's brothers. Fuka lived in Bucharest where he owned a hat store. The Germans shot him at the very beginning of the war. My mother's second brother, Yakov, graduated from the Faculty of Law of Kishinev University. He stayed in Kishinev and became a well-known lawyer. In 1940 Moldavia joined the USSR, and my uncle moved to France. He lived in Paris. He worked for some time until he retired. His two sons lived in Paris, too. My mother had another brother called Foka.

My mother's family lived in a big house in Orgeyev. One part of the house was my grandfather's hardware store. There was an orchard and a vegetable garden near the house. My grandmother grew green vegetables, carrots, beans, and so on. A farmer from the outskirts of Orgeyev brought eggs and meat twice or three times a week; and dairy products were delivered every day.

All children in the family got a religious education. The boys studied at cheder, and the girls were taught at home. My mother and her brothers and sisters finished Russian grammar school in Orgeyev. Only Yakov had university education.

The family was very religious. My father and I usually went to the synagogue in the morning. However early we came, we always saw my mother's brother Yakov. He usually left later than we did. I asked him once why he prayed so much. He replied that there were 16 of them in his family

sitting at the table to have a meal, and he was the only one of them to pray to God. So he had to pray for all of them. My mother told me that her family strictly observed Jewish traditions, celebrated Sabbath and all Jewish holidays and followed the kashruts. I believe that people raised in smaller towns are more religious than people in bigger cities. My mother's family spoke Yiddish.

## Growing up

My mother told me that she met my father through a - shadkhan. .My mother didn't like my father's beard. My father was so eager to marry her that he shaved it off. My mother gave her consent, and they got married in 1906. They had a traditional Jewish wedding with a chuppah. They had two wedding parties: one in Orgeyev and another one in Kishinev. After their wedding Grandfather Shmul bought them a house near his house in Kishinev. There were four rooms and a kitchen. There was also an orchard and a flower garden near the house. My father worked at my grandfather's factory for some time, and my mother was a housewife. My older brother, Fivel, was born in 1908 and my sister, Frima, followed in 1910. I was born on 28th April 1912. I was named Sukher at birth. My younger brother, Wolf, was born in 1917.

In 1918 Moldavia became part of Romania. The state had a monopoly of the tobacco industry. They expropriated my grandfather's factory and store. It was different from how it was in the USSR. My grandfather wasn't arrested or exiled. They reimbursed my grandfather the cost of his property. He bought a smaller house in the neighboring street. He didn't want to start another business. He bought another house on the outskirts of town. He grew grapes, berries and vegetables and enjoyed gardening. He gave money to all his children so that they could start their own business.

My father bought a rubber goods store for this money. My grandfather also bought him a house near the railway station to open another store. I don't remember how the others invested their money. My father wasn't good at business and almost went bankrupt in 1938. He let his house near the railway station to Baptists. A delegation of Baptists came to him in Kishinev to ask him to sell his house. They wanted to remove it and build a church. My father said that if they wanted to build a church he would just give them this house. They thanked him and gave my father a Bible for his kindness. My father always gave away what he had.

Our family was very religious. The kashruts was strictly followed in our house. We only ate kosher food. We had special utensils for meat and dairy products. There were kosher food stores at the market, and there was a shochet, who slaughtered all chicken and geese.

On Friday mornings my mother began her preparations for Sabbath. She baked challah and cookies, cooked stuffed fish and boiled chicken. In the evening my mother lit two?? candles and prayed over them. On Saturday my parents went to the synagogue. We joined them when we grew older. After dinner we sang religious songs in Hebrew glorifying Queen Saturday.

Before Pesach my mother did a general clean-up of the house. She had a woman coming in to help her. They bought a lot of matzah at the synagogue to last during Pesach. We didn't have any bread in the house on these days. My mother also made beetroot kvass [beetroot broth] for borscht [vegetable soup]. She cooked stuffed fish and stuffed chicken neck. The chicken neck stuffing consisted of fried flour, onions and giblets. My mother made clear chicken soup with matzah dumplings and borsch. She made lots of pastries: sponge cakes, strudels with jam and nuts and cookies; all from matzah flour. When my brother and I grew older my mother made it our

responsibility to crush matzah in the mortar. She also made latkes, small pancakes from potatoes, matzah and eggs. My father bought special red wine for Pesach. Even children were given some wine on this holiday. We went to the synagogue and later had seder at home. Father read the Haggadah. The entrance door was kept open on the first night of Pesach. My mother explained to me that it was kept open for the prophet Elijah to come into every house.

Everybody fasted on Yom Kippur, even children over 5 years of age. On the eve of the holiday my mother brought white hens and roosters from the market for the kapores ritual. It went like this: mMy mother took a hen and gave another one to Frima, my sister. My father and all sons took the roosters. We had to turn these chickens quietly above our heads after the prayer saying, 'May this be my atonement'. Later my mother took these chickens to the synagogue for the poor. We weren't supposed to eat them. We went to the synagogue in the morning, then we came back home, read the Torah and had a nap. Then we went to the synagogue again. The services end at nightfall, with the blowing of the tekiach geedolah, a long blast on the shofar. It was required to wear white clothes on this day. The family strictly followed all rules. My mother made sure that everything went smoothly, and my father observed it all because he loved and respected her very much and wanted to please her.

My brothers and I always looked forward to Chanukkah. This was a very merry holiday. There were lots of delicious things on the table, we had guests and received Chanukkah gelt. At Sukkot my father made a sukkah in the yard, and we had lunch and dinner there. We celebrated all holidays.

I studied in cheder for a year before I went to a Romanian state school. There were a few Jewish schools in Kishinev, but they were too far from where we lived. Besides, the language of teaching in all higher educational institutions was Romanian, and my parents understood that it was better for me to study at a Romanian school. My brothers also studied in this school. It was a 4-year elementary school. Education was free of charge. Secondary education wasn't for free. We studied in Romanian. We began to study foreign languages in the 2nd grade: German, English and French. In grammar schools children also studied Latin or ancient Greek. We also studied religion, and our class was divided in two groups: one group of Christian children and one group of Jews. About half the children in my class were Jewish.

I had more Jewish friends. In our street all houses belonged to Jews. There were Jewish youth organizations in Kishinev: Maccabi and Hapoel [Hapoel Hatzair] [5](#). I attended the Maccabi. We were too young for any Zionist activities. We spoke Yiddish in these groups. We played tennis and other sports there. We arranged competitions. I was doing well in sports. There was also a cultural program in the Maccabi. We celebrated Jewish holidays. We arranged Purimshpil performances for Purim. We sang Jewish songs in a choir and arranged concerts and balls. I was also a member of the scout organization for teenagers. We wore a uniform: blue shorts, a white T-shirt and a blue necktie. We had strict rules there. The motto of our scout unit was, 'Our soul has to be as pure as the air here'. We took part in a number of competitions: start fire with one match, cross the river on a rope, and so on.

I had four friends. We were all Jews. I also had a Romanian friend. He was my classmate. He wasn't part of my Jewish company, but my Jewish friends knew that he was my close friend. I didn't feel any anti-Semitism when I was at school. But there was anti-Semitism when the Romanians came to power in the 1930s. It was difficult for Jews to enter higher educational institutions, and there were

separate seats for Jews at some universities. Students protested against this segregation and arranged demonstrations of protest. These special seats were almost always unoccupied - the students refused to attend classes, but nothing changed and many students went to study in other countries.

I read a lot. We had many books at home. They were mainly classics and religious books. I don't remember my father reading books, though. He usually read newspapers. My mother used to read a lot. She read religious books in Hebrew and fiction in Yiddish and Russian.

In 1925 Grandfather Shmul and his two sons, Erik and Hil, moved to Palestine. My grandfather always wanted to live in this country and fight for the independence of Israel. He sold his factory and bought some land in Palestine for this money. He leased this land and made money for a living that way. My grandfather returned to Kishinev after a couple of years, but his sons stayed in Palestine. He sold his house in Kishinev and left for Palestine again, leaving the money with his children. He visited Kishinev several times. Life was difficult there. They didn't have a place to live, the soil was poor and stony, there were lots of mosquitoes and scorpions and malaria was widely spread. My grandfather didn't insist on our departure to Palestine. We had a good life here, and we didn't want to leave. We thought that we could consider moving to Palestine once our relatives had settled down there.

When I was in the army in 1932, my grandfather came to Kishinev and left for Palestine with my older brother Fivel. Fivel worked as a laborer in Ramat-Gan. He went to the beach, put up a sign saying '3 piastres per hour' and went to sleep. If somebody wanted to hire an employee for this fee they woke him up. He didn't always have work. Later Fivel studied at college. After that he got a job in the logistics department of a soap factory and worked there until his retirement. Fivel and his family lived in Ramat-Gan. He died in 2000.

I finished school in 1932. I was 20 years old. I went to the army for one year. I didn't have to serve full term because I had secondary education. During my service my commanding officer sent me to the officer's course. I became a lieutenant after finishing it.

When I went to the army my grandfather came to Kishinev and left for Palestine with my older brother Fivel. Fivel worked as a laborer at first. He went to the beach, put a sign saying "3 piastres per hour" and went to sleep. If somebody wanted to hire an employee for this fee they woke him up. He didn't always have work. Later Fivel studied at college, but I don't remember the name. After that he got a job at the logistics department of soap factory and worked there until retirement. Fivel and his family lived in Ramat-Gane. He died in 2000. My grandfather came to Kishinev again in 1933 after I returned from the army. Once he went to the market to buy some fruit. He returned home, bent over the basket to put the fruit on the table and fell over. He was dead. He was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Kishinev beside my grandmother Hana. The funeral was held according to Jewish traditions. Many people came to his funeral. They all knew and loved my grandfather. We corresponded with Erik and Hil for some time after my grandfather died. It lasted until the Soviet power came to Kishinev. I kept in touch with my brother until he died.

After the army I entered Commercial Academy in Bucharest. Since I was an officer who had completed service in the army, I was admitted without exams. I had to pay for my studies. I attended classes in the morning and worked in the afternoon. I worked at an insurance company. Later I got a job as a waiter in a restaurant and worked night shifts. I was a good employee and

promoted to administrator soon. I was responsible for the waiters and the dance group at the restaurant. This was a good job and paid well. But I had to leave this restaurant after an incident.

This incident happened in 1938. The fascists were in power in Germany, and the Romanian fascists became more insolent because they felt that they had a backup. Once there was a fight in the restaurant. It turned out that members of a fascist organization, the Iron Guard [6](#), were sitting at one table, and members of another fascist, anti-Semitic organization, the Cuzist [7](#), at another table. They started a fight. I called the police, and they took the fighters to their office. They called me to the police station to testify. I told the commissar about the fight. Then one of the suspects, who wore a jacket of a military cut and boots, said that his name was Zelea Codreanu [8](#). Everybody in the room turned pale when he said his name. He was the leader of the Iron Guard. I got very scared and left the police office. On the next day I told the owner of the restaurant about the incident, but he replied that there had been no incident whatsoever. I understood that the police had hushed up this case and feared that the Iron Guard would be looking for an opportunity to take their revenge. I had to leave the restaurant. I left before they could fire me. It didn't make my life easier, but it probably helped me save my life.

I graduated from the Commercial Academy in 1938 and got married. My co-student introduced me to my future wife, Jeannette Duvidesku, a Romanian Jew. She was called Hana in Kishinev. She was born to the family of a Jewish tradesman in Bucharest in 1911. Jeannette only spoke Yiddish and Romanian. It was okay with me - I was fluent in both languages. We had a traditional Jewish wedding with a chuppah in Bucharest. It was no problem at that time. The synagogues were open and there were rabbis there. We couldn't imagine that it would be over so soon. There was a rabbi from the big synagogue in Bucharest. The synagogue issued the ketubah to us. We lived with my wife's family in the beginning. I met people in Bucharest and soon they began to address me to issue annual reports for them or conduct an audit. We purchased an apartment and good furniture. I had several permanent customers, and my wife and I were quite well off. Jeannette was a housewife. We went to the synagogue on holidays and celebrated Sabbath and Jewish holidays quite like our parents did.

In 1938 my mother died in Kishinev. She was buried in the Jewish graveyard, according to Jewish tradition. After my mother died my father sold the house and moved to my younger brother Wolf. Wolf had finished the Electro-Technical College by that time. He was married and worked as an engineer at the electric appliances factory in Kishinev.

My sister Frima finished a private French school in Kishinev. The owner and director of this school was a French woman. The children studied all subjects in French. The fee they had to pay was high, but it was worth it. After finishing this school Frima went to study at the Medical Academy in Belgium. She met a Romanian princess there. This princess did a lot of charity work. She contributed money to the construction of hospitals and supported them. The princess went to the Medical Academy in Belgium to learn about the latest medical developments. The director of the academy told her that they had a student from Romania and the princess wished to meet her. They talked for a long while and the princess invited Frima to visit her when she came to Bucharest. Frima expressed her doubts, though, saying that there was little possibility that she would be allowed to enter the princess' palace in Bucharest. Then the princess gave my sister a ring telling her to show it to the guard when she arrived. Upon graduating my sister went to visit the princess. She showed the ring to the guards, and they let her in. A new hospital was being built in Kishinev,

and my sister was appointed the supervisor of the therapeutic unit there. She worked well and liked her job.

Emigration to Palestine wasn't allowed. The British Embassy issued permits for emigration but only very few. There was also a green card emigration lottery for Palestine at the British Embassy. In 1936 Uncle Erik won a green card for a woman to go to Palestine, and he offered it to Frima. She decided to go. She stepped on the land of Palestine wearing a silk dress and high-heels. Uncle Erik and Fivel met her and took her to their kibbutz. People were working hard in the kibbutz, and they were wearing their working robes and no shoes. A woman gave Frima an old shirt and pants. My sister told me later that she looked into the mirror and didn't recognize herself. Frima wrote letters to us. She became a patriot of Israel. She wrote, 'I learned to struggle for the independence of my motherland here'. Later my sister got a job as a doctor.

She got married and took her husband's name, Kizbrunner. They lived in Haifa. This name was hard to pronounce and my sister changed her last name to Beer, which means 'well' in Hebrew. They had two daughters. They live in Israel now. When Frima and her husband retired they sold their house in Haifa and moved to the old people's home 'Golden Age'. It's an expensive home, but my sister and her husband could afford it. Recently my sister's husband died. She moved to a one-bedroom apartment in the same home. I visited her recently. There is a synagogue there. I was there on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, and I went to pray at this synagogue. My sister feels lonely in Israel. Her daughters live their own life. Frima calls me at 6pm every Friday. Every time she comes, she says the same - how lonely she is and how much she misses me. She doesn't live a religious life in Israel due to various reasons.

### **During the war**

In 1939 the situation in Romania grew very unstable. Many Polish people escaped to Romania. There were many of them in Bucharest. They told us many scary things about the horrors of the German occupation and about how Hitler treated the Jews. We were afraid that Hitler would come to Romania soon. In 1939 the Romanian fascists, members of the Iron Guard, killed Prime Minister Calinescu, because he was a democrat and refused to cooperate with the Germans. After he was shot on the road by the fascists, they went to the radio station and announced that an act of justice had been done and that Calinescu was dead. On the following day people were killing the leaders of the Iron Guard in the towns. I saw four dead bodies in the uniforms of the Iron Guard at a crossing and a poster near them saying, 'All traitors will be executed this way'. But the democrats failed to get rid of all the fascists. Once I was walking home late in the evening when three strangers approached me saying, 'Remember these words: The Guard is moving ahead'. I didn't have a typical Jewish appearance. They must have mistaken me for a Romanian. If they had known that I was a Jew, they would have killed me. I felt very upset. I understood that Hitler would find big support here when he came. We realized that we had to escape while there was still a possibility.

In 1940 Moldavia joined the USSR. Kishinev became a Soviet town. My younger brother Wolf changed his name to Vladimir to obtain his Soviet passport. He was taken to the army. Many richer inhabitants of Kishinev were sent to Siberia. My father was poor at that time, and the Soviet power didn't touch him. He had become an accountant in a tobacco store in the 1930s. He received a small salary. He always went to work wearing a hat, a tie and a walking stick. The director of the store used to tell him, 'Comrade Benderskiy, we are going to a Soviet Bank. You don't need to wear



a hat and your walking stick. There are no hats and sticks in the USSR'. But my father wouldn't listen to him. He continued to dress as he thought was appropriate and was always polite and reserved. My father never used the word 'comrade' which was commonly used at the time. He didn't have any problems because of his manners.

I knew very little about the Soviet Union. We didn't know anything about the crimes of Stalin and his companions. We watched Soviet films, which were showed the happy life in the Soviet Union. We believed that there was no unemployment or anti-Semitism in the USSR. We believed that people in the USSR enjoyed freedom. My friends were moving to the US, Turkey or Brazil from Romania to join their relatives or friends.

I also made my choice because my family was in the USSR, and I believed that everything would be fine here. When Kishinev became a Soviet town in 1940, my wife and I left our apartment in Bucharest along with all our belongings and moved to Kishinev. We obtained Soviet documents. My name Sukher was written as Zakhar in my passport, and my wife's changed from Jeannette to Hana. We rented an apartment in Kishinev. I got a job as an accountant at the Kishinev administration. The reality was different from the movies. The shops were empty, and we received food on ration cards. It was all pretty depressing, but we couldn't leave.

In June 1941 I received two tickets for a recreation center in Odessa. We had to obtain a permit to go to Odessa. Such was the procedure for all inhabitants of the areas that had recently joined the USSR. My wife and I obtained a permit to go to Odessa and went to the sanatorium for 12 days. I had 24 days of vacation, and I convinced my wife to make a trip to Moscow for the remaining 12 days. We arrived in Moscow on 22nd June 1941. We stayed at the International Hhotel near the Kievskiy railway station in Moscow. We had a distant relative in Moscow - the brother of Aunt Sarrah's husband. I had never seen him before, but I had his address and decided to go and see him. We went there and he told us that Molotov [9](#) had spoken on the radio announcing the war with Germany.

There was another announcement later saying that all holidaymakers had to return home. We went back to the hotel, and it had already been turned into a hospital. We stayed with our relative overnight, and in the morning we went to the railway station. We had to stay there for three days until I managed to get tickets to Razdelnaya in Odessa region. From Razdelnaya we went to Kishinev. On the following day I went to the military registration office and was admitted to the army. Next day there was an order issued to relieve all accountants from military conscription. We all believed that the war would be over in a few days. I went back to work. I was told there that the administration was evacuating. My wife and I were taken to the railway station and got on a train. We had one suitcase into which we had only put the most necessary clothes. We didn't know where we were going.

My younger brother and his family also went into evacuation. We were both trying to convince our father to go with us but he refused. He said he wasn't afraid of the Germans. All people that knew Germans during World War I believed that they were educated and intelligent people. My father stayed in his apartment and didn't open the door. There was a German man, Karl, who lived in our street. My father knew him very well, and they were friends. When my father heard Karl's voice at his door he opened it. Karl was with the Germans. I was told later that the Germans sent my father to the ghetto in Vinnitsa. He perished there.

Our trip lasted for about a month until we reached Tashkent [3,000 km from Kishinev]. I went to the evacuation office and told them that I was an accountant. I got a job at the equipment yard where I worked throughout our evacuation.

We shared a room with several other families. Later my wife and I moved to a separate room in a small building in the yard of the cultural center. I had good performance records at work. I learned Uzbek. I stayed there for some time after the war as an instructor in accounting. I was awarded a bicycle for my efforts. I also straightened up the tractor repair processes and was awarded a medal 'For valiant labor'. In the fall of 1945 I went to Kishinev with my family. I obtained a certificate of mobilization to the labor front from the military commandant of Tashkent.

Our daughter, Emma, was born in Tashkent in 1944. The three of us returned to Kishinev in the fall of 1945. I obtained a certificate for mobilization to the labor front from the military commandant of Tashkent.

I was told at the Ministry of Agriculture that there was no work for me. I found a job at the construction site of a shoe factory. The Germans had destroyed Kishinev. The street we used to live in was in ruins. My family lived with my childhood friend, Iosif Shwartz. He told me about the tragic fate of many of our friends. Iosif and our friend Yakov Golub were recruited to the army and went to the front. Later an order to demobilize all soldiers that came from Bessarabia and Moldova was issued. Stalin didn't trust those that had only lived under the Soviet power for a short period. They were released from the army without money or food in late fall. Many of them starved to death or died from the cold. Yakov Golub came from the family of a storeowner in Kishinev. They were a wealthy family. Yakov was helping his father at the store. He was a very nice, honest and decent man. Yakov got to Kishinev after he was released from the army. He was ill with typhoid; he had caught it on the way home. He died about a hundred meters from his home. Two of our other friends were missing. Iosif came home ill with tuberculosis.

My younger brother, Wolf, and his family returned from evacuation in 1944. During the war the electric appliances factory was in the Ural. The factory facilities in Kishinev were destroyed. Its employees and their families lived in the barracks that were storage facilities before the war. There was no heating. The barrack was heated by self-made stoves from sheet iron. My brother received an apartment in 1953 when he was deputy director of the factory.

### **Anti-Semitism**

I didn't expect to receive an apartment in Kishinev. An acquaintance of mine told me that there were many vacant apartments in Chernovtsy and that this town hadn't been destroyed during the war. My wife and I decided to go to Chernovtsy. The local authorities told us to find a vacant apartment and obtain all necessary documents to move into it. We moved into this apartment on the following day. I became chief accountant at the furniture factory. My wife was a housewife. I was very glad that we moved to Chernovtsy, which is a beautiful town. The Jewish population constituted about 60 per cent. Now there are about 3,000 Jews in town. People spoke Yiddish in the streets, and there was a Jewish theater, school and synagogue until 1948. There was a very warm and friendly atmosphere in Chernovtsy.

I had a colleague named Savchuk, a Ukrainian man. He came from a village not far from Chernovtsy. He told me that villagers could only come to town if they wore shoes. They had their

shoes in their bags and put them on when they approached the town. Jewish couples and families wearing their best and fanciest clothes used to walk in the central pedestrian street, Kobylianska street, in the evening. I didn't face any anti-Semitism, and I had a feeling that I had made the right choice to leave Romania.

By 1948 this feeling weakened. The struggle against cosmopolitans [10](#) began. Scientists and teachers were losing their jobs. Accusatory articles were published in the newspapers. Neither my family nor I had any problems in that regard but anti-Semitism was growing stronger. The Jewish theater and school were closed, and it wasn't advisable to go to the synagogue. Religious people were expelled from the Communist Party, got lower positions at work or were dismissed. The only Jewish holiday that my wife and I celebrated after the war was Pesach. We got matzah from a private underground bakery. I brought some flour there and received matzah on the following morning.

It was difficult to get food products at that time, and we cooked whatever we could get. Sometimes we had a chicken, but mainly we had potato pudding and fried fish from the canteen at work. Religious holidays were working days and so was Saturday. Anti-Semitism entered our life. There were anti-Semitic expressions in the public transport and in the streets. Gravestones were destroyed at the Jewish cemetery and words like 'Jews, get out and go to Israel' were written on the walls of buildings. This lasted for a long time.

In 1953 the Doctors' Plot [11](#) started. A doctor called Timoschuk wrote to the Pravda newspaper that a group of Jewish doctors involved in the treatment of Stalin gave him poison instead of medication. I don't know whether Stalin and Beriya [12](#) believed it to be true or whether they took advantage of this insinuation to trigger another round of anti-Semitism. Of course, sensible people knew that it was slander, but many other people believed it to be true. There were rumors about the deportation of Jews to Siberia.

In March 1953 Stalin died. There was a meeting at our factory. Many people were crying. They couldn't imagine their life without Stalin. I didn't cry, but I felt concerned. We weren't aware of all those horrors caused by Stalin. We only knew what the propaganda said. If only I had known how many people died in labor camps and all other crimes that he had committed, my attitude would have been different. The only thing we knew was that fascists and capitalists were bad, and that Stalin was good. This was what we had been told, and this was what became the conviction of many people.

I believed at once what Khrushchev [13](#) said at the Twentieth Party Congress [14](#) about Stalin's crimes. The Twentieth Congress was the beginning of the denunciation of the cult of Stalin and revealed the truth about this period. Nobody in our family was a party member.

Our daughter went to a Russian secondary school. She studied well. She finished school in 1962. It was difficult for a Jewish girl to enter a higher educational institution in Chernovtsy at that time. My daughter and I were aware of it. I had a friend in Lvov. He suggested that Emma came to study in Lvov. She entered the Faculty of Economics at the Polytechnic Institute in Lvov. My wife and I missed our daughter a lot. Emma lived at my friend's family during the first year of her studies until she got a bed in the hostel of the institute. She graduated and married her co-student, Grigory Koifman, a Jew from Lvov. Emma got a job in Lvov. Jeannette and I were happy for our daughter. Our happiness didn't last long. She died soon after giving birth to our grandson in 1969. She died of

postpartum hemorrhage.

My wife and I couldn't have our grandson with us. My wife got very ill after we buried our daughter. We wouldn't have been able to raise the baby. He was called Alexandr. His father and grandmother took care of him. I spent my summer vacations with him in Lvov every year. Alexandr was a smart and healthy boy. He went to school when he turned 7. He came to visit us on his summer vacations, and we visited him during his winter vacations. We also supported him with some money. Alexandr finished 9 years of Russian secondary school in Lvov and continued his education in Israel. He studied under the educational program Sochnut. After finishing school he served in the Israeli army. After his service he entered university. He lives in Israel now and has a job. He has two sons. We correspond and he calls me every now and then. I think Emma would be proud of her son.

I was very enthusiastic about the foundation of Israel in 1948. The dream of all Jews finally came true, and they gained a country of their own.

In the 1970s a number of Jews began to move to Israel. I sympathized with those who were moving there and was happy for them. We had many relatives in Israel, but my wife and I weren't going to move there. I worked and my wife was a housewife. She said that she would stay where her daughter's grave was. After Emma died Jeannette became very ill. She died in 1973.

There were people returning from Israel in the 1970s. I had a colleague. He was a janitor here. He moved to Israel being sure that he would get everything immediately: an apartment and a good job. He realized that he had to work hard to get all the comforts he wanted and didn't like it at all. There were TV programs and articles in newspapers about him. They were saying that a Soviet person couldn't get adjusted to the capitalist world. He got his former job and received an apartment. He was hoping to get a better job in Chernovtsy and was very unhappy about it.

### **Married life**

I got married for the second time in 1978. My wife's name is Sophia Lazko; she's Jewish. She was born to an assimilated Jewish family in Chernigov in 1920. Her parents were engineers. She finished school and worked as a typist at a military unit in Chernigov. During the war she went to the front. She was a topographer at the army headquarters. After the war Sophia decided to go to Chernovtsy. She didn't want to go back to Chernigov where all her relatives had perished during the war. Sophia was a lab assistant at the sanitary-epidemiological facility in Chernovtsy. She's a very nice and kind woman. We are very close. We have common interests and friends. I'm so happy to have met her. The Soviet power forced us to forget Jewish traditions. It's too late for me to restore them. We didn't live a Jewish life. We only celebrate holidays in Hased.

My brother Wolf left for Israel in 1985. His son had left for Israel in the late 1970s. Wolf and his younger daughter went there after Wolf retired.

In 1995 I visited my sister and brother in Israel. They showed me around the country. I admired how my people had changed the desert into blooming gardens and modern towns. I visited Jerusalem and prayed for my family at the Wailing Wall. I went to synagogues and visited Christian and Muslim temples. It's a wonderful country, but I felt homesick after a month. I wanted to be back in Chernovtsy, back at my mountain and the land where my wife and daughter are buried.

Ukraine became independent and the Jewish way of life began to be restored. We have several Jewish communities in Chernovtsy. Hesed provides big assistance to us. We get food packages and medication. There are highly qualified doctors with Hesed. We also attend lectures, concerts and interesting films about Jews. We can get Jewish newspapers and magazines for free at Hesed. If it weren't for Hesed we would live a poor and miserable life. People that had been working their whole life receive a pension that's smaller than the fee they have to pay for their apartment and everyday things. It's very important that we can go out and meet people. We celebrate Sabbath and all Jewish holidays in Hesed. There was a festive Purimshpil performance at the town theater at Purim. Volunteers from Hesed visit us at home. We also have a nurse visiting us at home. It's very helpful and makes our life different. The synagogue is open. We celebrate Sabbath and all Jewish holidays with Hesed. There was a festive Purimshpil performance at the town theater on Purim. The synagogue is open. We don't go there often, but we always attend it on holidays and on the death anniversaries of our relatives. I'm 90 years old. I'm glad to have lived to the time when I can see it all with my own eyes.

## Glossary

### **1 Pogroms in Ukraine**

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

### **2 Korolenko, Vladimir (1853-1921)**

Russian writer and publicist, honorary member of the Petersburg and Russian Academies. His stories and novels are full of democratic and humane ideas; he criticized the revolutionary terror that seized the country after 1917.

### **3 Bessarabia**

Historical area between the Prut and Dniestr rivers, in the southern part of Odessa region. Bessarabia was part of Russia until the Revolution of 1917. In 1918 it declared itself an independent republic, and later it united with Romania. The Treaty of Paris (1920) recognized the union but the Soviet Union never accepted this. In 1940 Romania was forced to cede Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina to the USSR. The two provinces had almost 4 million inhabitants, mostly Romanians. Although Romania reoccupied part of the territory during World War II the Romanian peace treaty of 1947 confirmed their belonging to the Soviet Union. Today it is part of Moldavia.

### **4 Transnistria**

Area situated between the Bug and Dniester rivers and the Black Sea. The term is derived from the Romanian name for the Dniester (Nistru) and was coined after the occupation of the area by German and Romanian troops in World War II. After its occupation Transnistria became a place for deported Romanian Jews. Systematic deportations began in September 1941. In the course of the next two months, all surviving Jews of Bessarabia and Bukovina and a small part of the Jewish population of Old Romania were dispatched across the Dniester. This first wave of deportations reached almost 120,000 by mid-November 1941 when it was halted by Ion Antonescu, the

Romanian dictator, upon intervention of the Council of Romanian Jewish Communities. Deportations resumed at the beginning of the summer of 1942, affecting close to 5,000 Jews. A third series of deportations from Old Romania took place in July 1942, affecting Jews who had evaded forced labor decrees, as well as their families, communist sympathizers and Bessarabian Jews who had been in Old Romania and Transylvania during the Soviet occupation. The most feared Transnistrian camps were Vapniarka, Ribnita, Berezovka, Tulcin and Iampol. Most of the Jews deported to camps in Transnistria died between 1941-1943 because of horrible living conditions, diseases and lack of food.

## **5 Maccabi and Hapoel Hatzair**

Zionist organizations that emerged at the end of 19 centuries in Eastern Europe. Their activity was directed on the revival of the Jewish consciousness and encouragement of the immigration of Jews to Palestine for the creation of a Jewish state. After 1948 they focused on all-round support of Israel.

## **6 Iron Guard**

Extreme right wing political organization in Romania between 1930-1941, led by C. Z. Codreanu. The Iron Guard propagated nationalist, Christian-mystical and anti-Semitic views. It was banned for its terrorist activities (e.g. the murder of Romanian prime minister I. Gh. Duca) in 1933. In 1935 it was re-established as a party named 'Everything for the Fatherland', but it was banned again in 1938. It was part of the government in the first period of the Antonescu regime, but it was then banned and dissolved as a result of the unsuccessful coup d'état of January 1941. Its leaders escaped abroad to the Third Reich.

## **7 Cuzist**

Member of the Romanian fascist organization named after Alexandru C. Cuza, one of the most fervent fascist leaders in Romania, who was known for his ruthless chauvinism and anti-Semitism. In 1919 Cuza founded the LANC, which became the National Christian Party in 1935 with an anti-Semitic program.

## **8 Codreanu, Corneliu Zelea (1850-1878)**

Romanian public activist in the early 1870s. He studied in St. Petersburg and took part in the movement of the Populists. In 1874 he organized the first socialist groups in Romania (in Iasi, Bucharest). On 24th June 1927, he founded the Legion of the Archangel Michael, and became known as 'The Captain'. The Legion was also known in Romania as the Legionary Movement - in foreign circles and in the press, as the Iron Guard. The principles of this right-wing organization were founded on the belief in God and national identity.

## **9 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.

## **10 Campaign against 'cosmopolitans'**

The campaign against 'cosmopolitans', i.e. Jews, was initiated in articles in the central organs of the Communist Party in 1949. The campaign was directed primarily at the Jewish intelligentsia and it was the first public attack on Soviet Jews as Jews. 'Cosmopolitans' writers were accused of hating the Russian people, of supporting Zionism, etc. Many Yiddish writers as well as the leaders of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee were arrested in November 1948 on charges that they maintained ties with Zionism and with American 'imperialism'. They were executed secretly in 1952. The anti-Semitic Doctors' Plot was launched in January 1953. A wave of anti-Semitism spread through the USSR. Jews were removed from their positions, and rumors of an imminent mass deportation of Jews to the eastern part of the USSR began to spread. Stalin's death in March 1953 put an end to the campaign against 'cosmopolitans'.

## **11 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.

## **12 Beriya, L**

P. (1899-1953): Communist politician, one of the main organizers of the mass arrests and political persecution between the 1930s and the early 1950s. Minister of Internal Affairs, 1938-1953. In 1953 he was expelled from the Communist Party and sentenced to death by the Supreme Court of the USSR.

## **13 Khrushchev, Nikita (1894-1971)**

Soviet communist leader. After Stalin's death in 1953, he became first secretary of the Central Committee, in effect the head of the Communist Party of the USSR. In 1956, during the 20th Party Congress, Khrushchev took an unprecedented step and denounced Stalin and his methods. He was deposed as premier and party head in October 1964. In 1966 he was dropped from the Party's Central Committee.

## **14 Twentieth Party Congress**

At the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956 Khrushchev publicly debunked the cult of Stalin and lifted the veil of secrecy from what had happened in the USSR during Stalin's leadership.