

# Sophia Stelmakher

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Chernovtsy

Ukraine

Interviewer: Ella Levitskaya

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*Sophia Stelmakher and her husband live in an apartment that they bought recently in a new neighborhood of Chernovtsy. Her son and his family live in their own apartment. Sophia and her son have a very warm relationship. I came to Sophia's house two mornings in a row and both times I saw her son visiting her on his way to work. Sophia had a leg fracture and hadn't left her home in half a year. She is a very friendly and sociable woman who looks younger than her years. Sophia and her husband spent three horrible years in the Jewish ghetto in Rybnitsa when they were children. They lived in one and the same building. When Sophia was telling me about this period of her life she couldn't hold back her tears, but she was willing to tell me the details since her memories are fresh and don't leave her. Sophia is a very kind and responsive woman and has a very warm relationship with her beloved husband and many other people. She has many friends and her house is always open for people. Sophia blankly refuses to be photographed saying that she doesn't look that good and wouldn't like to be looked at by so many people. There are no photos of her after 1963 in her family album. She wants her dear ones to remember her young and attractive.*

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## **My family background**

My mother's parents lived in the small town of Rybnitsa that was in Odessa region before the Great Patriotic War [1](#) and after the war it became a part of Romania. [Editor's note: before 1917 - Russia, 1917-1922 - Russian Federation, 1922-1991 USSR, now Ukraine.] My maternal grandfather, Isaac Bekker was born in the 1860s. I don't know exactly where he was born, but it was a small town in Odessa province [Russia]. My grandfather came from a Jewish family with many children. I didn't know anyone from his family. He studied at cheder. His father was a poor craftsman who could hardly provide for a big family. My grandfather's family couldn't afford to pay for his education. When he turned ten he became an apprentice to a Jewish shoemaker. Apprentices spent two years working for free receiving meals and training. After the training was over an apprentice could go on working for his master and would be paid for his work. My grandfather became friends with the son of the owner of the shop where he was apprenticed. He went to grammar school. My grandfather

took his textbooks and studied. This student of grammar school began to help my grandfather. My grandfather did so well that he passed exams for four years of grammar school and later for eight years of grammar school. It took him five years. He continued working for his master saving money. When he got enough money to pay for one year at university my grandfather went to Odessa in 1880. At that time there was a five-percent admission restriction [five percent quota] [2](#) for Jews in all universities. My grandfather passed the admission exams. He was an excellent student and after the first year of studies the dean solicited that my grandfather had his fees waived. My grandfather was allowed to get training at the Odessa clinic of veterinary medicine. Upon graduation he was offered a veterinary job in Rybnitsa. There was no veterinary clinic and my grandfather received his patients at home. My grandfather was the only member of the family to get a higher education.

My maternal grandmother, Sarah Bekker, nee Mirochnik, was two or three years younger than my grandfather. She was born into a family of doctors in Odessa. Her family was wealthy and intellectual. Their wealth was based on their practice. My grandmother told me that all her father's brothers were doctors. My grandmother finished grammar school and entered Pedagogical Institute in Odessa. It wasn't usual for women in those days. I guess she met my grandfather when she was a student. I don't know any details. My grandmother told me that when she got married her husband, my grandfather, bought a small house in Rybnitsa; that took place about 1895. My grandmother waited until he earned enough money to buy one. Nobody helped them. I think they had a religious wedding but I don't know it for sure.

Rybnitsa was a small town surrounded by orchards and vineyards. I guess the Jewish population constituted about one third of the population in Rybnitsa. Jews resided mainly in the center of the town along with Moldavian and Russian doctors, teachers and lawyers. Russian and Moldavian farmers lived on the outskirts of the town. Jews were involved in crafts: they were shoemakers, blacksmiths, tinsmiths and tailors. There were also Jewish doctors and lawyers. There was a synagogue in Rybnitsa before 1917. The Soviet powers struggled against religion, and the synagogue and Christian church were destroyed in the process. One of the religious Jews arranged a house of prayer in his house and men came to pray there. This religious Jew's grandson learned to play the shofar and one could hear the sound of it at Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. This was at the time when the Soviet regime struggled against religion [3](#). Fortunately, nobody reported this prayer house to the authorities, otherwise the owner of the house and its attendees might have been punished severely.

I remember my mother's parents' house: it was a stone building with its narrow façade facing the central street. It was typical of the town. The biggest room was my father's office. There was a small side room where he stored his instruments and medications. There were two other rooms and a kitchen with a backdoor. There was a small shed and a toilet in a small yard. They had plain furniture: a table, chairs and beds. There was a big Russian stove in the kitchen that served for heating and cooking. There was a well in the yard.

My grandmother had tuberculosis when she was young and later she suffered relapses of this disease. My grandparents had more than ten children. I don't remember how many exactly. The children were born weak and died in infancy. Only three survived: my mother's older brother, Grigory, born in 1898, my mother Evgenia born in 1902, and my mother's younger sister Polina, born in 1908. Their Jewish names were Gersh, Genia and Perl, respectively. My grandmother was a

housewife and looked after the children. She was a very smart and intelligent woman.

My grandfather was very religious. He went to the prayer house mentioned earlier, on Saturdays and Jewish holidays. He also prayed at home in the morning and in the evening with his tallit on and a prayer book. We, children, knew that we were not supposed to distract grandfather when he was praying. I still have my grandfather's tallit as a keepsake. My grandmother wasn't religious at all, but she celebrated holidays. I don't know whether she followed the kashrut.

My grandmother had a big wooden box with dishes and utensils for Pesach. My grandfather and grandmother had no bread during all eight days of Pesach. They only had matzah. Matzah was baked by a group of women living in the same neighborhood. They traveled from one house to another to make matzah for the whole family. My grandmother made gefilte fish, chicken, baked honey cakes, strudels with jam, raisins and nuts. My grandfather couldn't close his office for holidays since cattle couldn't wait that long. For this reason my grandfather even had to work on Saturday sometimes, but he never did any work on the first two days and the last day of Pesach. My grandparents fasted at Yom Kippur, as my grandfather used to say 'from the star to the star'. They also celebrated Purim and my grandmother made delicious hamantashen. At Chanukkah our grandparents gave us Chanukkah gelt. My grandmother and grandfather spoke Yiddish to one another and Russian to their grandchildren.

My grandfather was a slim man of average height. He wore black jackets of thin wool and dark shirts. He had a well-groomed gray beard and moustache and thick gray hair. My grandfather wore a yarmulka at home and a big cap when going out. As far as I remember he only wore a hat when he went to the synagogue. My grandmother wore fashionable clothes. She never wore traditional Jewish outfits: long dark skirts and dark blouses. I can't remember what she wore in winter, but in summer she wore nice skirts and light blouses with embroidery and lace. She didn't wear a wig. At the time I remember her she had bright gray hair curling round her face and gathered in a knot on the back of her head. She never wore shawls - only a kerchief sometimes at home when she was cooking. In winter my grandmother wore a nice fur hat and she had nice summer hats decorated with artificial flowers. When going out during the summer, she took her light parasol with lace on the edge. My grandmother was short and wore high-heeled shoes even when she was old.

My grandfather was a very kind man. He loved his granddaughters dearly and we loved him. He always had some sugar candy or little toys in his pocket for us. My grandmother was more reserved. I'm sure she loved us much, but she didn't show it. She was a very reserved and cold person and often looked arrogant. She didn't play with us or tell us fairy tales - it was our grandfather that did that. My mother took after my grandmother and was also cold and austere.

My mother told me that there were Jewish pogroms [4](#) in Rybnitsa before and after the [Russian] Revolution of 1917 [5](#). Rybnitsa was near Odessa where there were the 'black uniform units' [Black Hundred] [6](#) that often initiated pogroms. When the black units started a pogrom in Odessa the local black units became active and got together to initiate a pogrom in Rybnitsa. They killed men and raped and beat women. They robbed and destroyed Jewish houses. Christians used to hide Jews in their cellars and houses during pogroms. My grandfather and Grigory were hiding in their Ukrainian neighbor's house, and my grandmother and her daughters found shelter in another house. Christians used to hang an icon on the front door and pogrom makers went past such houses. In their majority those taking part in the pogrom were local tramps and drunkards. Also, some

farmers were among them, but since my grandfather took care of their cattle they didn't touch his office. I guess they realized that it was in their own interests to have a vet available in the village. There were victims in almost every pogrom. There was a Jewish cemetery in Rybnitsa and there were inscriptions on many gravestones 'Killed during a pogrom'. The Germans destroyed this cemetery during the war.

My grandfather made good money, but my grandparents were not wealthy people. They spent money to buy food and clothes and the remaining amounts were spent on providing education for the children and buying books. My grandfather bought books on medicine and veterinary matters and my grandmother bought fiction in Russian and French. They also bought some books in Yiddish. All children received religious education at home. They had a Jewish teacher to teach them to read and write Yiddish and Hebrew, and they studied the Torah and the Talmud. My mother could read and write in Hebrew. Children also studied music. I remember my mother's violin. Inside there was the inscription 'Stradivarius', but of course, it wasn't an original instrument. My mother kept this violin until the war and often played it.

There were many books in Yiddish and Russian at her home. All three children studied in a grammar school in Odessa when they were nine or ten years old. It was a private school. There were separate schools for boys and girls. Rybnitsa was 150 kilometers from Odessa and during their studies the children lived in the boarding school, which had classrooms, a canteen and bedrooms for few pupils. The children could go home at weekends. Jewish children had no classes on Saturday. I don't know whether Jewish students had to forego their religious rules, kosher food for example, and traditions at school. My mother had two close friends, Jewish and Russian, from grammar school. She said that she was a very short girl. She did well at grammar school and finished every year with honors. My mother told me that when she came home on vacation after she finished the 1st grade my grandmother told her to walk along the street holding her diploma of honor so that everybody might see how smart her girl was.

Of three children, only my mother's brother managed to finish grammar school before the Revolution of 1917 and enter the Medical Institute of Kharkov University. My mother finished seven years of grammar school. After the Revolution the grammar school was closed and my mother returned to Rybnitsa. The next year my mother went back to Odessa where she entered the Faculty of Philology of Odessa University. Her younger sister, Polina, entered the Faculty of Mathematics in Odessa University after finishing school.

My mother's older brother Grigory got married upon graduation from the Medical Faculty of Kharkov University and got a job assignment to Gomel in Belarus. His wife, Raissa, a Jew, also studied at Kharkov University - two years junior. When Grigory got a job assignment in Gomel, Raissa quit the University and followed Grigory. She had completed three years of medical education and worked as a nurse. Grigory and Raissa weren't religious. They had three sons. During the Great Patriotic War Grigory was a military doctor at the front. After the war he and his wife visited us in Rybnitsa. This was our first meeting after many long years of separation. In the last years of his life Grigory had lung problems. Doctors advised him to get a change of climate. He and his wife moved to the town of Reni in the south of Moldova. His children didn't move with him. He died there in the 1960s. His wife and children moved to Israel in the 1970s.

My mother didn't tell me much about her years at university. I know that she rented a bed from a Jewish woman who had a daughter. She also had meals with them. Her father sent her money to pay the rent and pay for meals. Since my mother needed more money to buy textbooks, notebooks, etc. she gave private lessons. She graduated from university with honors. She had a job offer in Odessa, but she decided to return to Rybnitsa. She got a job as teacher of Ukrainian and Russian languages and literature in a lower secondary school in Rybnitsa. At the beginning my mother stayed in a school dormitory, where she shared a room with two other teachers. Later she received a room at the school. I spent my childhood in this big room and I remember it well. It was on the first floor at the rear of the two-storied school building. The room faced the school garden and the trees shadowed the room. There was my mother's bed and my bed and a wardrobe in the room. My mother's younger sister Polina came to stay with my mother upon graduation from the Faculty of Mathematics of Odessa University. Polina had lung problems, like her mother. She had tuberculosis with hemorrhages. She was weak and sickly and my mother always took care of her. My mother tended to her and fed her when Polina was ill. Polina lived 82 years thanks to my mother. Polina was smart and pretty. She settled down with us in our room and began to work as a teacher of mathematics at school. Polina wasn't married either.

### Growing up

I was born on 29th December 1935. I was named Sophia and given the Jewish name Sarah. My cousin, Polina's daughter, was born in the summer of 1936; I didn't know her father. She was given the same name, Sophia. I don't know why we were named after our grandmother who was alive - it was against the Jewish tradition. I never knew my father. When I was a child I never gave it a thought why my last name was Bekker, the last name of my grandfather. When I was a child my mother told me that my father was working in the Far North and after the war she said that he had perished. I wasn't surprised, since there were many fatherless children after the war. Only when I had a son at the end of the 1950s my mother told me the truth about my father, though she never disclosed his name. She was probably afraid that I would want to find him and didn't want it to happen.

My father graduated from the Faculty of History of Odessa University and came to work at the school in Rybnitsa where my mother was working. My mother told me that my father was a tall handsome man. He was a member of the Communist Party and was soon promoted to director of the school. I believe they liked each other and began to live together without marrying officially. My mother had no idea about housekeeping and didn't wish to learn. When my mother was a child she lived with her parents and my grandmother did all the housekeeping. Later at boarding school she was provided with everything she needed and when at university she had everything done by her landlady. When my mother began to work at school she had meals at the school canteen. She thought housework was a sheer waste of time that she could spend reading or playing her violin.

When I was born there was a lot more work to do. At the beginning my father changed my diapers, washed me and got up to tend to me at night if I cried. It was perhaps my mother's helplessness about routine work about the house that made my father leave when I was six months old. Before the war my mother received money from him, but then he stopped sending her money. He may have perished during the war, but I will never know for sure. My mother didn't communicate with him. That's why I don't know anything about my father's family or background. After my father left my mother was appointed director of school, although she wasn't in the Party.

Polina and her daughter always lived with us. They had their beds in the opposite corner of the room. There was a desk by the window and a kitchen table near the door with a Primus stove on it where my mother did her cooking. We were always pressed for money and my mother cooked simple and inexpensive food: soup, cereal, boiled or fried potatoes. It wasn't really Jewish food. We rarely had meat. There were shelves with dishes and utensils over the table. There were bookcases by the walls. My grandmother gave my mother her collection of books and my mother spent all her money buying books. She usually bought fiction, Russian and foreign classic and books by Soviet writers and poets. We cherished our books.

My mother had an austere style in clothing. She wore dark dresses with white lace collars that reminded you of a school uniform or dark suit. In warm weather my mother wore dark skirts and white blouses. She cut her hair short and never had it waved. She thought a teacher wasn't supposed to dress up or do her hair in a fancy manner.

Neither my mother nor her sister and brother were religious people, but my mother always identified herself as Jew. She could speak Yiddish and Hebrew and knew the Torah. My mother never prayed or celebrated Jewish holidays. The only exception was Pesach. In all eight days of Pesach we didn't have any bread at home - only matzah.

Before I turned one year old my grandmother and Polina took care of me. My mother only came to feed me at intervals. At one I went to a nursery school. I can remember back as far as when I was three. I was in kindergarten. I was a sociable girl and had many friends. I don't know whether there were Jewish children at kindergarten. There were children of other teachers. We were raised to be patriotic. We learned poems about Lenin and Stalin and sang songs. I remember a song 'Thank you, our dear country, for our happy childhood!' My mother picked me up from kindergarten in the evening and put me to bed at home.

### **During the war**

I was five and a half when the war began. On Saturday 21st June 1941 we went to bed and I was thinking about the weekend that I was going to spend with my mother. She promised to take me for a walk on Sunday morning. We woke up to the sound of an explosion. I began to cry, but my mother calmed me down and I went back to sleep. In the morning there were rumors in Rybnitsa that the war had begun. My mother got a phone call from the department of public education of Rybnitsa - they told her that although official evacuation had not been announced she had better leave Rybnitsa since she was the only Jew at the school. My mother got a horse-drawn cart, packed promptly, put Polina, Sophia and me on the cart and we went to pick up grandmother and grandfather. They refused to go with us. They were reluctant to leave their home and they didn't believe that something bad might happen. We got on our way, but when we reached the village of Krutye about 20-30 kilometers from Rybnitsa we saw German soldiers. My mother turned the cart back to Rybnitsa. In a few days the Germans occupied Rybnitsa. During first few days the Germans were just looting the houses. They took away my mother's violin and almost all the books even though they were all Russian.

One day all Jews in Rybnitsa were ordered to get together in the central square. People were told to take few things with them, but mainly money and valuables. My mother, Polina, Sophia, my grandfather, my grandmother and I went there, too. We were all lined up and set on the way somewhere convoyed by German and Romanian police. My grandfather was walking with my

mother and I heard him whisper to her 'Run away - save the children'. When we stopped for a night I heard my mother and Polina arguing in whispers. My aunt was trying to convince my mother to escape while my mother said that we had to share everybody else's destiny. My aunt told her that it was impossible for all to escape and that Russian families back in our town would be able to give shelter to one Jewish family, but not to all Jews.

When it got dark the four of us began to move towards the woods. I believe God was our guardian since nobody noticed us. My mother carried me or sometimes I walked by myself and we got to Rybnitsa before dawn. My mother knocked on the door of an acquaintance of hers, asking her to give us shelter. This was Zhenia Ryzhkovskaya. She and her sister hid us in their houses and supported us later. I shall always be grateful to these people. We stayed with them for several days. We were hiding in their cellar since there were police raids almost every day. One day Zhenia told my mother that a part of the town was fenced with barbed wire and the Germans were taking people from other locations to that area. Later Zhenia went there to find out what it was. She returned and told us that it was a Jewish ghetto. My mother decided that we should go to the ghetto since we couldn't put Zhenia's life at risk. The Germans threatened to shoot anybody that was helping Jews.

The four of us went to the ghetto. We entered the ghetto through a gate with a Romanian guard. Nobody asked us where we were from or why we had come to the ghetto. They probably hadn't registered inmates of the ghetto as yet. We began to look for a place to live. All houses were full, and we settled down with a Jewish family from the town of Roshkany. That family consisted of three members: Avrum Stelmakher, his wife Beilia and their eight-year-old son Shmil. Avrum was a cooper and his wife was a housewife. Shmil had finished the 1st grade at school. They had two small rooms, one of which they gave to us. They only spoke Yiddish and Romanian. We starved and froze. Later Avrum fixed a stove and we could cook on it when we had something to cook. Adults were taken to work every day. If somebody got too weak to work he was shot. In this ghetto Jews were often killed, especially men. Several times doctors from hospital came to select boys to take their blood for transfusion later to wounded soldiers. We often had to hide Shmil in the wardrobe and let him out at night. Many inmates were dying every day. There were epidemics of enteric and spotted fever and no medicines whatsoever. Inmates starved or froze to death. Polina was ill almost all the time.

Inmates of the ghetto were sent to work. The Jewish administration made daily lists of inmates that were to go to work. My mother went to work one day for herself and another day for Polina. We had few clothes to exchange for food and they didn't last long. Russians, Ukrainians and Moldavians in Rybnitsa were helping us. If it hadn't been for them we would have starved to death. Zhenia and Polina Ryzhkovskaya brought us food. There were others that helped us - only I don't remember their names: my mother's colleagues and parents of her pupils. They were at risk bringing food to the barbed fence of the ghetto, but their children also crawled under the wire to bring food and warm clothing to where we lived. Many people in the ghetto were saved thanks to these kind people.

I remember that inmates of the ghetto were taken to a construction site for a park. When construction was finished Germans put a portrait of Hitler at the entrance. Since the Jewish administration of the ghetto knew that my mother was a teacher they suggested that I should make a speech in German or Romanian at the opening ceremony. I didn't speak German or

Romanian. My mother made notes with the text that I had to learn by heart. I was different from other members of the family. I mean I wasn't that quick and smart and I remember my mother crying - she was afraid that I wouldn't be able to remember the words and that we might be killed for that. We studied day and night. I remember the day of the ceremony. High-ranking German and Romanian officers attended the opening ceremony of the park. I was taken to the stand, but I couldn't say one word from fear. A gendarme pulled me off the stand and beat me so hard that I was more dead than alive. I remember this well.

There were many children in the ghetto that studied at schools before the war, but began to forget even the alphabet in the ghetto. My mother installed benches in the yard of our house and began to gather children to teach them. My mother thought it was her duty to teach children in the ghetto. She went to work in the morning and after work she conducted classes for children. She had to do it in secret since if the authorities had found out about it they would have had her shot. They shot inmates of the ghetto for even smaller infractions. They studied mathematics, languages and history and my cousin and I patrolled the area around the house. If we saw a gendarme we began to sing and the children scattered. We didn't study, we were on lookout. I didn't even know my ABC. In the evening my mother taught me to count and do mathematics, but it was too dark to learn to write or read. We had no lighting.

In March 1944 the Soviet troops came close to Rybnitsa. There were rumors in the ghetto that the Germans were going to shoot all inmates in the ghetto before retreating. Zhenia Ryzhkovskaya came to take us to her home from the ghetto. We escaped from the ghetto at night and came to her house. There were battles for several days before the Soviet troops entered Rybnitsa. The people of the ghetto survived. We were overwhelmed with happiness. Inmates of the ghetto and other people hugged and kissed Soviet soldiers. We returned home. Many houses were ruined, but not the school building. We settled down in our room.

### **After the war**

I went to the 1st grade and my cousin went to the 2nd grade at school. She was smarter than I was and she had no problems with studies. My mother and Polina worked at school. My mother was a teacher of the Russian and Ukrainian languages and the director of the school and Polina was a teacher of mathematics. I wasn't very successful with my studies and my mother was very unhappy about it. She wanted her daughter to be an exemplary pupil, of course. The only top grade, 'five', that I had at school was in history. I was very fond of history. I was a sociable girl and had many friends. I sang in a choir and attended dancing classes. I became a Young Octobrist [7](#) and then - a pioneer at school. I became a Komsomol [8](#) member later than others due to unsatisfactory grades in some subjects. I was very upset about it. I enjoyed being involved in public activities. There were quite a few Jewish pupils in our class. Some people from the ghetto stayed in Rybnitsa, some people came back from evacuation. We didn't face any anti-Semitism. There were no grounds for it in our town, where the population had been helping and supporting inmates of the ghetto during the war.

In 1946 my mother's older brother Grigory and his wife came to see us. We had lost track of him during the war. Everybody was happy to see them. The adults couldn't stop talking and were happy to have survived this horror and found each other. Afterwards we kept in touch with him until he died.



In 1947 my mother married Peter Segul, a Jewish man whom she had met a long while before. He also came from Rybnitsa. He was born in 1900. His father was a shoemaker who had several children. Peter was good at music. After the war he finished a conservatory somewhere and returned to Rybnitsa. Peter got a job as a music teacher at the school where my mother was working. He got married and had two daughters. Peter went to the front at the beginning of the war. His wife and daughters perished at the very beginning of the war. He heard that his family perished after he returned from the front. Peter was a very nice and kind person and I liked him a lot. He taught me music; he became a real father to me.

In 1948 a former pupil of my mother's that she met incidentally in the street, told her about what happened to my grandmother and grandfather. This girl was also in that group of Jews from which we had escaped. The Germans took this group to Dubossary in Moldavia. Germans ordered old and sick people to dig twelve graves and when they were done, the Germans shot them. Many Jews were still alive when the Germans filled the graves. The girl saw Germans burying my grandmother and grandfather alive after they pushed them down the pit. She said that the soil stirred over the graves for quite some time after this happened. My mother returned home in a shock. Grigory and his wife were visiting us at that time. The three of them and Polina left for Dubossary to find the graves. When they returned my mother announced that we were moving to Dubossary. My mother had already made arrangements regarding a job for her and her husband at a local school. My mother wanted to live close to her parents' graves. Our family, Polina and Sophia moved to Dubossary. We rented an apartment until we received an apartment from the school. This was a standard two-bedroom apartment in a recently built house. My mother and Peter were schoolteachers and this apartment building was built for schoolteachers. We lived like most Soviet families at that time. Life was miserable. We didn't have enough food. Teachers got very low salaries. To buy food we had to stand in long lines, but we didn't lose hope that life would improve in due time

My mother took care of all twelve graves. She planted flowers and cut grass on the graves every spring. There was an obelisk installed at the place of this mass shooting of Jews. It was funded by local authorities and individuals that wanted to make a contribution. They are common graves with the lists of victims on the gravestone. Every year on 9th May, Victory Day [9](#), people from all over the world go there to honor the memory of innocent victims of fascism.

I have no recollection of the events of 1948, the campaign against cosmopolitans [10](#). I was too small to understand. I remember Stalin's death in 1953. I was ill and had to stay in bed. I had fever and felt miserable. My mother had had her radio on since the morning. She had already heard the news of his death and was crying bitterly. In the afternoon there was to be a mourning meeting at the stadium and my mother was supposed to make a speech. When I saw my mother leaving I asked her to stay; I was afraid to be alone. My mother yelled at me, 'I'd rather you'd died than he!' Even after the 20th Congress of the Party [Twentieth Party Congress] [11](#) my mother believed that Stalin was innocent and that his subordinates were evil while he was unawares of millions of innocent victims, executed and worked to death in camps. I was confused; I always took my mother's opinion for granted, but there was something wrong in this case. Stalin should have known about what was happening. But if he was a criminal, how could people believe him implicitly and call him their father? I believed what Khrushchev [12](#) said at the Congress, but I developed a strong aversion to politics and ideology afterwards.

In 1954 I finished the 10th grade in Dubossary. My cousin and I went to Kishinev. I passed the entrance exams for the Medical Institute and Sophia took the entrance exams for the Polytechnic Institute. Sophia had a better knowledge of subjects than I did, but she got a 'satisfactory' grade in compositions. 'Satisfactory' wasn't good enough to enter the institute. When my mother heard about it she said it was unbelievable. She came to Kishinev and managed to convince the management of the Polytechnic Institute to show her the composition. There were no grammar mistakes, but there were a few extra commas. My mother said that the color of ink was different, but it didn't help. Sophia had to return home. She entered the Polytechnic Institute in Kishinev next year.

When I was in the 10th grade at school I met a young Jewish man that was on military service in Dubossary. He was a driver for an officer. His name was Alexandr and he was two years older than I was. His parents lived in Chernovtsy. We began to see each other. He visited me in Kishinev when I became a student at the Medical Institute. His term of service was nearing its end and he proposed to me. He said that he and his parents were common people and that I didn't need higher education either. I didn't really enjoy studying and I decided to leave the institute. I took him to Dubossary to introduce him to my mother. When I told my mother that I didn't want to continue my studies my mother said that I had to finish a medical school and get a profession before getting married. I entered a medical school in Dubossary. Alexandr went to his parents in Chernovtsy and waited for two years until I finished medical school.

In 1956 I received my diploma and went to Chernovtsy. My mother also came to Chernovtsy to discuss the wedding arrangements with Alexandr's parents. When Alexandr's mother opened the door she began to hug and kiss my mother all of a sudden. They both cried and laughed speaking Yiddish. We didn't understand what it was all about. My mother told me that this was Beilia Stelmakher and this was the family that shared their dwelling with us in the ghetto for three years. Alexandr turned out to be that boy named Shmil that had been hiding in the wardrobe. Of course, I didn't recognize him. We were children then and many things had changed since then. Our mothers remembered each other. This was miraculous, but it was true. We met twelve years after liberation.

We got married. We didn't have a traditional Jewish wedding since only my husband's parents were religious, while the rest of us were far from Jewish traditions. We had a civil ceremony in a registry office and our mothers arranged a festive dinner for us. Just the immediate family was at this dinner. After the wedding my mother left and I stayed with my husband's family. They had a small two-storied house. I wasn't used to the traditional Jewish way of life. My mother-in-law only cooked traditional Jewish kosher food, which I wasn't used to. There was little choice of food products at that time, but she was one of these housewives that could make the nicest dinner out of nothing. My mother never learned to cook and I was used to plain food. I could have a glass of milk and a slice of bread for dinner and see nothing unusual in it. I didn't understand how one could spend so much time cooking. Gradually I got used to their way of life and began to learn to be a housewife in the same traditional ways. My in-laws only spoke Yiddish at home. I didn't understand a word and decided to learn Yiddish. I did learn it.

Before World War II the Jews constituted over 60% of the population of Chernovtsy. During the war many Jews perished in the ghetto in Chernovtsy or in Transnistria [13](#). There were fewer Jews left after the war. After the war the border with Romania was open for some time and many Jews left

the USSR to go to Romania, Israel or other countries. Many people that lived during the Soviet regime for a year before the war could never accept it and kept leaving. However, there was still a Jewish population: one could hear Yiddish in the streets and the synagogue was open. There was a rabbi. The local population treated Jews nicely. There were community arrangements for matzah and other needs during holidays.

My husband's parents were religious people. They celebrated Sabbath and all Jewish holidays. On Saturday my father-in-law went to the synagogue alone and on holidays his wife joined him. This was a legal working synagogue till the 1970s. They always made matzah at Pesach. My mother-in-law made traditional Jewish food at Pesach. Even in the first years of our life together when there was a lack of everything she managed to get fish and chicken for Pesach. She made gefilte fish, chicken broth with matzah and strudels. On the first evening of Pesach my father-in-law conducted the seder according to Jewish rules. My husband and I always participated in it. Alexandr's parents always fasted at Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah. My husband and I weren't religious, but we respected his parents' belief. We tried to do no work at home at Sabbath to please our parents and took part in celebrating Jewish holidays.

My husband was a driver and I got a job as a midwife in a maternity hospital. I had a good relationship with my colleagues. I never faced any anti-Semitism. Of course, I cannot say that there wasn't any anti-Semitism, but I witnessed no instances of it. I worked in the hospital for 22 years and the attitude towards me was always good. I retired quite a while ago, but my former colleagues often visit me and come to see me on holidays.

Our son was born in 1957. We named him Igor so the first letter of his name begins with the same letter as my grandfather's name: Isaac Bekker. He was circumcised. I had a short maternity leave and came back to work when my son was three months old. My mother-in-law took care of the baby. My work was quite near where we lived and she took him to my workplace for me to feed him. My mother-in-law began to feel ill because she had lived three years in the ghetto, but she raised our son nevertheless. Igor was a nice boy. He wasn't particularly good at his studies, but I hadn't been either. His teachers and classmates treated him well. After finishing school he entered the College of Refrigeration Units. After finishing college our son married one of his classmates, a Jewish girl. In 1980 their daughter Diana was born. Regretfully, my son's marriage didn't last. His ex-wife and his daughter live in Germany now. After perestroika [14](#) my son and his friend opened a company involved in the manufacture of plastic bags. That's what he does now. He got married again. His wife is Jewish. They didn't have a traditional Jewish wedding. She is a dentist. They don't have children yet.

When Jews began to leave for Israel in the 1970s my husband and I thought about trying our luck. When my mother heard about it she said that this is the country where I was born, where we went through good things and bad things and this was where our dearly departed were buried. She was categorically against my departure and after thinking about it I agreed with her. My cousin Sophia and her daughter and Grigory's sons left for Israel. Many of my husband's relatives left. We visited them several times. Of course, Israel is such a gorgeously beautiful country! It's like a blooming oasis. I admire those courageous and hardworking people that built this country on bare stones. The people I love live in this country.

I also traveled to Canada and USA at the end of 1990 at the invitation of our friends and my husband's distant relatives. Well, home is best - they have a different life in those countries. I do not fit in there. When I went to Rybnitsa recently (where I was last before we moved to Dubossary in 1948) I felt so much at home. I felt like this was the most beautiful place in the world. Of course, it was difficult to recognize Rybnitsa - so much has changed. It's a nice little town with beautiful new houses and a cozy hotel. It is true - of all places I've been, Rybnitsa is the most beautiful town. One can go on a visit to another country, but one has always come back to the country where one has spent one's life. I can't understand people who survived through the horrors of the Great Patriotic War that move to Germany. I understand that a few generations of Germans have changed, but I can't forget the horrors that I went through. When I hear the word 'German' I recall a German soldier that after another mass shooting of Jews in the ghetto threw a three-year-old child alive into a pit with dead bodies and began to backfill it with soil.

We've always had Jewish and non-Jewish friends and I never paid much attention to their nationality. We didn't celebrate Soviet or Jewish holidays, but we liked to get together with friends and have a good time. We discussed books that we read and shared our joys and sorrows. Our friends used to visit us for a cup of tea. We sang our favorite songs and danced.

The beginning of Perestroika in the 1980s didn't raise any emotions in me. I didn't care after the disappointment I had felt after mother's words about Stalin's death. I cared about my family, work and friends and that was it. However, there were visible changes. One could get books that had been forbidden and the Iron Curtain [15](#) that separated our country from the rest of the world fell down. We got an opportunity to go abroad and invite friends from abroad who hadn't been allowed into the USSR. I liked the changes in our life during Perestroika.

My husband's father Avrum Stelmakher died in 1988. We buried him according to the Jewish traditions in the Jewish section of a new town cemetery since the old Jewish cemetery was closed. His wife sat shivah after him. In the same year my stepfather Peter Segul died in Dubossary. His grave is near where my grandfather and my grandmother were buried in one of twelve graves of Jews shot by fascists. There wasn't an open cemetery near these graves, but my mother could do it. Teachers and pupils of the school where my mother worked look after those graves. After my stepfather died my mother joined my husband and me. She was 86 and she couldn't live alone. My mother-in-law died in 1990. She was buried according to the Jewish tradition. Her grave is near her husband's. My mother died in 1993. My mother was an atheist and we buried her in the common way.

Jewish life has been restored to Chernovtsy in the past ten years. There are Jewish newspapers, TV and radio programs. This all makes so much difference for those of us who lived our lives in the Soviet regime. My husband and I are atheists. We don't know any prayers or Jewish traditions, but we are so happy that Jews can feel like Jews rather than just Ukrainian people. There are many Jewish communities and the Jewish culture is being restored. In 1999 Hesed was established. My husband still goes to work - our pension is too low to make ends meet. I liked Hesed and attended clubs, lectures and meetings there. I met many people that became my friends. I don't go there any more, regretfully. Since I broke my leg I haven't left home. My new friends haven't forgotten me. They often come to see me and I always look forward to seeing them. Our life has improved.

## **1 Great Patriotic War**

On 22nd June 1941 at five 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.

## **2 Five percent quota**

In tsarist Russia the number of Jews in higher educational institutions could not exceed 5% of the total number of students.

## **3 . Struggle against religion**

The 1930s was a time of anti-religion struggle in the USSR. In those years it was not safe to go to synagogue or to church. Places of worship, statues of saints, etc. were removed; rabbis, Orthodox and Roman Catholic priests disappeared behind KGB walls.

## **4 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.

## **5 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 World War I, 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.

## **6 Black Hundred**

The Black Hundred was an extreme right wing party which emerged at the turn of the twentieth century in Russia. This group of radicals increased in popularity before the beginning of the Russian Revolution when tsarism was in decline. They found support mainly among the aristocrats and members other lower-middle class. The Black Hundred were the perpetrators of many Jewish pogroms in Russian cities such as Odessa, Kiev, Yekaterinoslav and Bialystok. Although they were nowhere near a major party in Russia, they did make a major impact on the Jews of Russia, who were constantly being oppressed by their campaigns.

## **7 Young Octobrist**

In Russian Oktyabrenok, or 'pre-pioneer', designates Soviet children of seven years or over

preparing for entry into the pioneer organization.

## **8 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.

## **9 Victory Day in Russia (9th May)**

National holiday to commemorate the defeat of Nazi Germany and the end of World War II and honor the Soviets who died in the war.

## **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 antisemitic 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 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956**

Khrushchev publicly debunked the cult of Stalin and lifted the veil of secrecy concerning what was happening in the USSR during Stalin's leadership.

## **12 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.

## **13 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.

#### **14 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.

#### **15 Iron Curtain**

A term popularized by Sir Winston Churchill in a speech in 1946. He used it to designate the Soviet Union's consolidation of its grip over Eastern Europe. The phrase denoted the separation of East and West during the Cold War, which placed the totalitarian states of the Soviet bloc behind an 'Iron Curtain'. The fall of the Iron Curtain corresponds to the period of perestroika in the former Soviet Union, the reunification of Germany, and the democratization of Eastern Europe beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s.