

# Frida Muchnik

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Bershad

Ukraine

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Interviewer: Zhanna Litinskaya

*Frida Muchnik didn't give her consent for this interview at once: she is known to be a withdrawn and willful lady in Bershad she never has guests and hardly ever visits people. She didn't invite me to her home either. She agreed to give this interview, but later she mentioned that she did it, because she liked my voice and my gentle manners, besides, she didn't mind recalling and telling about her family. Frida visited me in the hotel: she is a handsome aged lady with her hair neatly done and her lips slightly touched with lipstick. She had trousers, a blouse and a wide-brimmed hat on: she got used to keep her head and face off the sun in Israel. She looked defiant in this small poor town and its impoverished townsfolk. Frida is a very interesting person with a clever mind and a sense of humor. She gives accurate judgments about people, harsh at times, but probably fair in Frida's opinion.*

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## **My family background**

I didn't know my grandparents. I know that my father's parents came from Bershad. Bershad is my hometown, too. I was born and lived my life here, and my parents were buried here. Bershad is a rather big Jewish town, in the 19th Century about 90% of its population was Jewish. In the early 1920s there were over 6 thousand Jews living there. Jews resided in small houses closely adjusting to one another in the central part of the town. The streets were paved with cobbles. In the old times Jews dealt in crafts: they were tailors, shoemakers, potters, glasscutters earning their living with what they were best at doing. They bought food products from Ukrainian farmers from the neighboring villages. They had good neighborly relationships. All residents of our town spoke Yiddish, but we all knew Ukrainian well, as well as Ukrainian residents could speak good Yiddish.

My paternal relatives lived long lives. My grandfather lived as long as almost 90 years, but I don't remember him. I was about 6 years old, when he died. His name was Yankel Muchnik. He was born in Bershad in the 1840s. My father said he was the son of his father Yankel's second marriage. His first wife died, but I don't know whether they had children. Yankel's second wife, my grandmother

Frima Muchnik (I don't know her maiden name) was also born in Bershad 20 years later than my grandfather, in the 1860s. I don't know what kind of education my grandfather Yankel had. I think he must have finished a vocational school. He worked as executive manager for a wealthy Jewish merchant. All I know about this merchant is that he lived near where my grandparents lived. Grandfather Yankel earned well, and the family was rather well-off. Grandmother Frima was a housewife, which was customary for a Jewish woman. According to what my father told me, grandfather Yankel was a kind and nice man, and grandmother Frima was a strong-willed woman. Papa said she did not only manage the household, but also inquired about grandfather's business issues and gave him efficient advice. Besides his work, grandfather spent most of his time reading the Torah and the Talmud. He prayed every morning. He prayed at home with his tallit and tefillin on at home, and on Sabbath and on Jewish holidays He and grandmother went to the synagogue. They piously observed all Jewish traditions at home and raised their children Jewish.

Grandfather Yankel and grandmother had four children: three sons and a daughter. My father was two-three years younger than his brothers: Motl, the oldest, was born in 1882, and Folyk - in 1884. I don't know what they did for a living. I know, though, that they were married and had children.

When WWI began, they crossed the border to Romania to avoid service in the army. At this point of time Jews gathered into groups, gave bribes to frontier guards, who pretended they didn't see how they crossed the border. From Romania they could move further on. My father brother Motl's first daughter was born then - 'prima' as we said, the first baby. She was still a baby and cried, when she could be heard. Older Jews in the group planning to cross the border, decided that uncle Motl and his family had to go back home since the baby could be an obstacle for their crossing the border. Motl could not agree to this, they began to argue and older Jews said they would kill the baby, if he didn't make it keep silent. The girl slept quietly that night, as if she understood what was going on. The group reached Romania successfully. Few months later my father received a letter from them that was sent from Canada. We terminated correspondence with them in the middle 1930s, when it was not recommended or even dangerous to have relatives abroad,<sup>1</sup> so this is all information I have about them.

My father Moisey Muchnik was born in Bershad in 1886. He took after his father: he was quiet, gentle and kind. Though my grandfather could well afford to pay for his education, my father finished cheder and decided that he had to go to work to support his aging parents. He became a craftsman making fur jackets and embroidering them, this was a popular craft in Bershad. He must have had an artistic talent since he was doing quite well. His jackets embroidered with red yarn were in great demand with Ukrainian farmers from nearby villages. When WWI began and his brothers decided to escape abroad my father didn't dare to take up this risky venture due to his gentle character, probably. He didn't want to go to serve in the czarist army either. Besides, religious orthodox Jews - and grandfather Yankel and his family belonged to them, could not kill people, even for the sake of their motherland. Some Jews turned to mutilation to avoid service in the czarist army. There were even such individuals, probably, the ones having primary medical education, who did such injuries that did not threaten those people's life, but released them from their military duty. They injured eyes, and then the person actually grew blind due to the wall rye. My father was very handsome and girls liked him. He didn't want to make himself ugly and he had one ear injured - they broke his ear drum and he had a hearing problem. My father avoided recruitment to the army, but he had a hearing problem from the rest of his life and it particularly bothered him at his old age, when he actually became an invalid. My father had a nickname of

Shmatok ['a lump' in Ukrainian]. My father's cousin brother on grandfather Yankel's side Moisey, whose surname was also Muchnik, was a big strong guy, while my father was short and frail, - a piece, to be short. However, he was a handsome young man and girls kept looking at him. He was also ready to get married. The problem was, my father had an older sister. Her name was Rosia, she was born in 1885. Rosia was not married and was not popular with young men. She was ugly and very withdrawn. According to Jewish rules, a young man could not get married before his older sister did. My father had to wait for almost ten years before Rosia finally got married. Her husband Itzyk Farberman, a wealthy Jew, didn't stay long with Rosia. He divorced Rosia leaving their daughter Hana with Rosia. Since then Rosia always lived where my father lived. When my father decided to get married, he was about 30, and he could not find a nice girl he thought he deserved in Bershadt: he had known all of them for a while and was not interested. So his parents invited Leya, a matchmaker, and she told them about a pretty girl from Chechelnyk, a town near Bershadt, and that my father could not have possibly found any fault with her.

My mother came from the Ukrainian village of Kravetskoje [This village does not exist today. It might have merged with a bigger town or may have disappeared for some other reason.], near the Jewish town of Chechelnyk. My mother's family was the only Jewish family in Kravetskoje. My grandfather's name was Iosif Roiter, but I don't know my grandmother's maiden name. They were born in the middle 19th century. My grandfather owned a store selling an assortment of everyday consumer goods. Besides, my grandfather's family rented a part of the river adjoining to the house and a mill. Every Friday my grandmother and her daughters sold the fish from the river in Chechelnyk where Jewish housewives bought it for Sabbath. My grandfather's family worked from dawn till late in the evening and was well respected by Ukrainians, particularly that my grandfather was a very honest man.

The Roiter family also respected their neighbors. Mama told me they never worked on Sunday to be seen by Ukrainian villagers or on Christian holidays respecting the other people's religion. When the Roiters had candles lit in their house on Friday, their Ukrainian neighbors knew that Iosif could not take the money in his hands to sell his goods. They could come into the store, put the money where they knew and took whatever they needed. Not once did anybody cheat on my grandfather. On Saturday a Ukrainian woman came to my grandfather's home to do whatever chores were needed. When she went to the cowshed to milk the cow, the cow mewed angrily and did not want to recognize a stranger. My grandmother usually stood beside them talking to the cow: 'Manechka, dear, give us the milk'. During the period of the Beilis case<sup>2</sup>, when Jews were accused of adding the blood of Christian babies into their matzah, the villagers in Kravetskoje, however ignorant they were, knew that nothing of the kind could happen, because they knew that the Roiter family did not even eat eggs with a drop of an embryo's blood since they were non-kosher. So, decided the villagers, Beilis cannot be guilty either. They did not change their attitude to the Roiters. Grandfather Iosif was rather religious. He prayed at home, and on holidays he went to the synagogue in Chechelnyk with his wife and children.

Mama's oldest sister Sura's marriage was also prearranged. She lived with her family in the small town of Obodovka near Bershadt. She was born in the 1870s. She was much older than mama, and her children were almost the same age as mama. Sura was a housewife and had two daughters. I don't remember their names. During the Great Patriotic War<sup>3</sup> Sura's family was in the ghetto in Obodovka. Sura's husband died. After the war Sura lived with one of her daughters. She grew blind

at her old age and died a tragic death. She burned in her bed that from a stove sparkle that fell on her bed, when nobody was home. When her daughter came home, her mother was dead, and the house had burnt down. This happened in 1968.

My mother's two sisters and two brothers moved to Argentina during WWI. Mama corresponded with them at the beginning, but in the middle 1930s she terminated their correspondence and lost their track. My mother's youngest brother Ehil Roiter, born in 1897, served in the czarist army during WWI. He got into an Austrian captivity. Later he told his family about a good attitude toward the captives. When he returned, Ehil married a girl from a wealthy Jewish family Chechelnik. They owned horses, and this was the measurement of wealth at the time. During the Civil War<sup>4</sup> in 1918 Ehil and his wife rode their own wagon to go a wedding in the neighboring village, when they were caught by a gang<sup>5</sup>, one of many in Ukraine at the time. They killed Ehil, bullied his wife and let her go. Ehil was buried in the Jewish cemetery according to the ritual. My grandfather recited the Kaddish over his grave. My grandmother mourned after him for a long time. She never recovered from the loss of her son. She died shortly afterward in 1918. Ehil had no children. The family had no contacts with his wife.

Grandfather Iosif remarried soon. My mother Elka, born in 1895, had no education. She worked hard helping her parents about the house. Her stepmother was not good to her and mama knew she needed to take care of herself. At this moment Leya, a matchmaker from Bershad, came onto the scene. She showed mama a photo of my father with his brothers where they were photographed wearing posh fur hats. Mama agreed to marry him. Since her mother had died recently, there was actually no wedding. In early 1918 the bride and the bridegroom were married under a chuppah at the synagogue in Bershad. There was a small wedding dinner at home for the closest relatives. Mama told me that people from Bershad came to take a look at Moisey Muchnik's beautiful wife. I cannot say, in what way grandfather Iosif would have hurt my mother, perhaps, she could not forgive him for having forgotten his wife so soon. At least, mama never saw him again after the wedding. All I know is that he died in the early 1920s, and my parents always ordered a memorial prayer at the synagogue for him. I never saw grandfather Iosif.

The newly weds came to live in my father's house. Hey were given one room that was actually a family living room where the family had dinners and tea from a samovar in the evening. Mama got pregnant soon. She could not go to bed earlier, though, since there were people coming into the room until late: grandfather and grandmother, papa's sister Rosia and some distant relative living in one room at the back of the house. In late 1918 my mother gave birth to a boy. He was named Velvl after my father's grandfather. Mama told me that during pogroms<sup>6</sup>, their family and their neighbors took shelter in the basement of the house. When little Velvl was crying, mama went with him to hide in haystacks in the field. In 1922 my mother had another son, whom she named Ehil after her deceased brother. Mama was always very serious about considering having children, which was different from other Jewish matrons. She always said a family should have as many children as they could afford to support and raise. She thought two children were enough, but she always wanted to have a daughter.

## **Growing up**

I was born in 1926. I was a long-awaited and beloved baby. I was born during Rosh Hashanah and mother said this was a sign that I should be happy. They registered my birth in December 1926. I

was named after my grandmother: in the synagogue they wrote my name as Frima, and in my birth certificate my name is Frida. After I was born my mama decided our family needed a room of our own. She sold all her golden jewelry, including her wedding ring and hired workers to build another room in our house. This was a low house like many other huts in Bershada. Mama only had sufficient money for a hatched roof. At that time there were four apartments in the house: one of our family, another one - for aunt Rosia and her daughter, the third apartment was occupied by the accountant of the mill and the 4th apartment belonged to some distant relatives, who were deported to the Kherson steppe in the late 1920s during the liquidation of the NEP<sup>7</sup> for being accused as 'unreliable'. This is all I know about them. Their surname was Muchnik, but I don't remember their names.

Our family had two rooms and a kitchen with a Russian stove<sup>8</sup> where mama baked bread and delicious challot for Sabbath. She kept Saturday dinners that she cooked in advance on Friday, in the stove as well. Mother and father did no work on Saturday in conformity with Jewish traditions. However, neither mama nor papa was as religious as their parents. My father was raised religious, but watching indecent conduct of Jews at the synagogue where they argued and cursed, he grew indifferent to religion. He said that if a Jew prayed from morning till night, wears a kippah, etc., this still does not prove his Jewish identity since a real Jew is the one who follows the covenants and lives an honest life. My father wore a kippah to go to the synagogue. Mama and papa went to the synagogue on holidays. In the course of time Sabbath turned into an ordinary day off in our house, and mama gave up lighting candles. She or father did not cover their heads. Celebration of holidays was just delicious dinners. I don't remember celebrating Chanukkah or Purim in my childhood, but I started fasting on Yom Kippur at the age of 13 and I follow this fasting up to date.

Our family had a modest living. My father was a skilled jacket maker and worked hard. Since there were many jacket makers in Bershada they divided the adjusting areas to avoid any disagreements about their customers. My father made jackets for few neighboring villages. He often stayed in one village for weeks to cover the demand of villagers for jackets. Villagers also stayed in our house, when they traveled to the town. They left some food products to pay for the warm welcome and a place to stay overnight. Mama was different than my gentle and quiet father. She was business-oriented and took up any work she could lay her hands on. In due time she developed her own business that was a great support to our family. Villagers brought their meat for sale to our house. Mama weighed and sold it and gave the money to villagers. They gave her some meat and other food products, so we never felt short of food in our houses. Mama's business was based on trust, and she never demanded any receipts or other security from villagers. This finally let her down. One farmer, having received money from my mother, went to a tavern where he drank all night through. Of course, he wasted his money. When he sobered in the morning, he decided that mama hadn't given him his money and came to our house with a scandal. Mama could not convince him how wrong he was. This was a hard time so for our family. This man, who had wasted his own money, kept coming to our house with scandals, threatening us and throwing stones into our windows. We were afraid of going out. Then my mother and father went to the synagogue to talk to the rabbi. Whatever he had to tell them was to become a rule for a Jew. The rebe said that if mama was saying the truth, then the villager was guilty. My parents were to wait for a year upon which period there will be a prayer said at the synagogue, and the villager would disappear. If mama was afraid of living in fear for a whole year, than the family should move to another place, but if mama was lying to the rebe, and this Ukrainian man was telling the truth, the prayer a year

from then would not help and then it would be clear that mama was to blame. Mama decided to move away. My father had doubts about leaving home. He was an irresolute man, but mama said she could live and work at any place as long as there was no threat to her family.

We locked our home, took the most necessary things with us and moved to the Jewish kolkhoz<sup>9</sup>, in Dnepropetrovsk region, 600 km from Bershada, where we received an apartment in the house with another Jewish family. Mama went to work in the kolkhoz and soon she became leader of a crew of wine growers. She was used to hard work. My father also worked in the kolkhoz. I cannot remember any details of our life there, but I remember the feeling of warmth, lots of fruit and the bright southern sun. I spent a lot of time playing with the neighbors' children outside, and in the evening the family had dinner together. In summer 1932 mama received a letter from Bershada. It said that this villager, who had abused her, died. The rebe's prophecy came true and we could go back home.

### **Before the war**

In autumn 1932 we returned home. The joy of coming home was saddened: this was a period of famine<sup>10</sup> in Ukraine. Only many years later we got to know that this famine was provoked by Stalin and his government, but at that time people felt perplexed: how could people starve to death in Ukraine that had never lacked bread? I remember dead people in Bershada, early in the morning wagon pulled by a weak horse rode along the streets full of dead bodies. The situation was hard in our house as well, but thanks to mama's energy and hard work our family survived. Mama went to work to a recently established Jewish kolkhoz. She was a crew leader. She received some miserable ration of food in the kolkhoz. My father went to work in a craftsmen association in Bershada. It consisted of those craftsmen, who managed to survive after the NEP was liquidated. After work my father made and altered clothes for the villagers he knew and they paid him with food products. They managed to grow some vegetables in their gardens. Villagers came to the town to sell whatever little food they had and mama was an intermediary for them and received some small reward for her work. Any people took their valuables to the Torgsin,<sup>11</sup> but mama had spent all her jewelry to build the house, and we had nothing left. However hard the situation was for the family, they never let me feel it - mama adored me beyond limits, and my father and brothers loved me dearly. I always knew I would never be refused of anything.

When it was time for me to go to school, my parents had no doubts about what school to choose for me. My brothers went to the Jewish school and this was where I went. This school was built as a Jewish gymnasium for girls by a wealthy Jewish woman before the revolution of 1917.<sup>12</sup> The construction was completed after the revolution and became a Jewish school. In 1934, when I went to school, my brother had finished the 7th form and went to continue his studies in Donetsk since there was nowhere else to study in Bershada. He entered a factory vocational school. I went to the 'zero' preparatory class, but since I was doing very well there, they took me to the first form. Our family spoke mostly Yiddish and this was the language of my childhood. Our family also spoke fluent Ukrainian and so did I. I studied well and even finished the 5th and the 6th forms with honors. In the 7th form, however, I lost some interest in further studies. I wanted to become a pharmacist. There was a school in town, but mama told me she was not going to let me leave home. I knew there was no place to study after school in our town and this had an impact on my study at school. I received '3's [out of 5] at school and mama looked at me with reproach, when

she returned from parents' meetings at school, but she never told me off. I do not remember any of our household raising their voices at me. At one time I was thinking of becoming a teacher, but this did not last long: I didn't like it that schoolchildren teased teachers and gave them funny nicknames. Also, like all other girls, I dreamed of becoming an actress. There was a big new club in Bershadt where theatrical groups came on tours. My father brought tickets from his work. Mama and I dressed up and went to their performances. These were amateur and professional Jewish theaters for the most part.

I had many friends, they were mostly Jewish girls – my schoolmates. I became a pioneer<sup>13</sup>, and I liked wearing a red neck tie. I liked Soviet holidays: 1 May, October revolution Day<sup>14</sup>, when there were parades in our town. I went to parades with my school, and asked my mother to make me a new outfit for every parade. I wore a Ukrainian folk outfit one time, an embroidered blouse and a coral necklace, or a kossack costume<sup>15</sup> another time. There were concerts in the club in the evenings. At one time I recited poems in these amateur concerts. Our favorite pastime was going to the cinema. I remember children's movies, movies about the Civil War and comedies. The boys were fond of the legendary hero of the Civil War – Chapayev [Chapayev, Vassiliy Ivanovich (1887 - 1919), Soviet commander, hero of the civil War. Played a significant role in the defeat of counterrevolutionary forces.] and there was a movie about him entitled 'Chapayev'. My brother Ehil watched it 15 times. I liked comedies 'Volga-Volga', 'Circus' and others. In the late 1930s we got a radio at home and I listened to brave and optimistic Soviet songs.

We didn't celebrate Soviet holidays at home. If it was a day off, mama cooked a festive dinner. Our family traditionally got together on Jewish holidays. Mama prepared for Pesach according to the customs. She cleaned the house. We also had special crockery that we kept in a special box. There was also a special dish to place the food required on this holiday. Besides mandatory dishes mama cooked gefilte fish, stew, little pies filled with mince, potatoes and cabbage, beetroot borscht. Mother and father went to the synagogue, but we didn't have seder at home. A holiday was another occasion for the family to get together. This became particularly important after my brothers left home. After finishing his vocational school my older brother returned to Bershadt. He worked at the cap factory and later he went to work at a plant in Odessa<sup>16</sup>. From there he went to the army. Velvl served in the military regiment of Leningrad and studied in the artillery school in Leningrad. We were concerned about the Finnish war<sup>17</sup>, hoping that Velvl would not be sent there, fortunately, their military unit was not involved in combat action. In early 1941 Velvl was demobilized. He stayed at home two weeks. Before his departure to Odessa my brother asked me what kind of present I would like him to bring me from there. I had a sweet tooth and asked him to bring me all kinds of sweets from Odessa that we did not have in Bershadt. Soon we received a parcel. My brother kept his word and spent a bigger part of his salary to buy presents for me. My younger brother Ehil studied in the machine building school in Odessa. He studied well and stayed in the school hostel. There, in Odessa, were my brothers, when WWII began.

### **During the war**

Our family got to know that the Great Patriotic War began from the Molotov<sup>18</sup> speech that the whole country listened to on 22 June 1941 at noon. On that same day the recruitment began. Mama was sobbing. She knew that her sons would be taken to the army and she would not see them. This was true – we never saw my brothers again. We know that Velvl perished during the defense of Odessa,

but we know even less about Ehil – he disappeared during the retreat in 1941. We got this information after the war. The first month after the war began was quiet in Bershad. One might think that nothing extraordinary happened if it hadn't been for young men going to the army and lack of food supplies. Our family did not even consider evacuation. There were rumors that fascists had no mercy toward Jews, but mama said Germans were a cultured nation and that we had nothing to be afraid of. On 22 July 1941 Germans dropped the first bombs on our little town. A bomb hit a house near the military registry office killing an old woman living in this house. Next day we moved to my uncle in Chechelnyk hoping to evacuate with him, but the roads were already jammed, we had no means of transportation to undertake and few days later we returned to Bershad. In the course of their retreat Soviet troops blasted bridges across the Dochna River hoping to stop the avalanche of the German armada, but Germans reinstalled the bridges within few hours and then motorcycles broke into the town with a horrifying and deafening roar. This happened in late July 1941.

This was the beginning of the most crucial time in my life that I've tried to forget in all years after the war. It's hard for me to recall the occupation, reopening the old wounds in my heart, therefore, I would just tell briefly about this part of my life. When fascists came into the town, they gathered all Jews in the ghetto that occupied the central part of the town. Our house was beyond the boundaries of the ghetto and we had to leave it. We moved into the house of a Jewish family that had evacuated from the town. The ghetto was fenced with a barbed wire and there were policemen guards at the gate. The inmates were not allowed to leave the ghetto. Bershad belonged to the so-called Transnistria<sup>19</sup> zone that was annexed to Romania. The Romanian occupants replaced the German troops. Many people think that the life was easier under the Romanian rule. It is true that the Romanians did not conduct actions aimed at the extermination of Jews, but we lived under the constant threat of death from hunger, infectious diseases, and hits of drunken Romanian policemen with their batons. Our lives were within a hair's breadth from death. The girls of my age were abused in a beastly manner, and my mother decided I should stay in hiding from the very beginning. It's hard to imagine that I stayed in shelters for two and a half years: in the basement, in the attic or in the shed, when fascists or policemen searched the houses. My parents managed to hide me so that I didn't go to work one day through this period. Girls were taken to wash floors in the commandant office and hospital, wash blood-stained bandages, they were beaten and abused. Mama rescued me from this. She gave money to representatives of the Jewish counsel Judenrat,<sup>20</sup> established in the ghetto and responsible for supplying workforce to the occupants, when they came to the house searching for me, or she just kept me in a shelter. Mama was also our breadwinner. She bribed policemen to get out of the ghetto where she could always find some Ukrainian friends willing to help us. Mama gave them money or things, or worked for them and they gave her potatoes, bread, beans that mama brought to the ghetto. At least, I did not starve, and mama and papa pretended they had enough food: for them the most important thing as to provide sufficient food for me. Many Jewish families gave shelter to Jews from Bessarabia<sup>21</sup> that had been deported here. They were in a terrible condition. They were not so used or adjusted to hardships. They were exhausted after their long walk here. Many of them had died. When they arrived at Bershad, they brought typhus and tuberculosis to the ghetto. Many inmates were dying. Their dead bodies were removed by a wagon and buried in a common grave in the vicinity of the ghetto. Mama refused to have Bessarabian Jews where we were staying. She was afraid of diseases, but she tried to support them sharing whatever little food we had with them.



I hardly ever left the house or met with my friends, whose parents also kept them in hiding. Mama fussed over me and was very worried about my brothers. Her motherly heart must have told her they were not among the living any longer. I often saw my parents praying. My father took his old book of prayers in his hands and mama whispered the words of prayers. They were begging the God to give them their sons back. Of course, there was no way to observe Jewish traditions in the ghetto. All we were concerned about was how to survive. However, all three of us fasted on the Judgment Day [Yom Kippur].

There was an underground movement in the ghetto headed by Yasha Thales, a Komsomol activist [22](#). In order to get out of the ghetto he imitated his death and was hauled to the woods on the wagon. He escaped and created a partisan unit. I don't know anything about whatever acts of this partisan unit, but I do know that innocent people died because of them. In late 1943 activists were collecting contributions for this unit. We had no money to give them. At somebody's hardly smart initiative they made the lists of all contributors and indicated the amounts they gave, they probably hoped to receive compensation from Soviet authorities later. They placed the list into a bottle, sealed and buried it, but there was a traitor, who reported on this bottle and fascists found the list. They made the rounds of the houses and shot all those, who supported the partisans. If those, whose names they found on the list, happened to be away from their home at the moment, they grabbed and killed their neighbors or just passers-by. Yasha Thales has turned 90. He has a good life in the USA. In the middle of March 1944 the Soviet army liberated us. The Partisan unit with Yasha at the head of it was the first to come into the ghetto and the Soviet tanks followed them. They installed their field kitchen and made delicious cooked cereal for inmates of the ghetto. I got out of the basement: I could not believe that the horrific years of occupation were over.

### **After the war**

Our house was gone: people took it apart for wood. We stayed in that house where we were during the occupation until its owners returned and we had to move out. We rented a small room in a basement. Mama was looking for her sons. Only in 1946 we received a notification of death of her older son, and a notification about Ehil. This was a terrible disaster, and mama never recovered from it. She never stopped crying and developed a cataract in both eyes. Mama grew almost blind. Mama was given a pension for her older son – 26 rubles per month, the cost of 3 loaves of bread at the time. Papa continued making jackets traveling to villages.

I went back to school and finished the 8th and the 9th forms. Then I had to go to work to help my parents. The thing is, in the postwar years education in senior school was not free: they charged 150 rubles per year. I still studied in the 10th form, when I became an apprentice in the bank where my cousin sister worked as a cashier. Director of the school did not know I was working. After finishing school I entered an extramural Bank Technical school in Vinnitsa. I worked diligently and was a smart employee, when in 1947 the bank received a direction to have no related employees in the bank. Though a nephew of the manager of the bank worked in this bank, and chief accountant had her niece working in this same bank, they fired me since I was the poorest and had no rights. So I lost my job in this hard and hungry year of 1947. Life was very hard, and again my father's Ukrainian friends helped us. Shortly afterward I went to work as a cashier to the 'New life' cooperative of invalids. I worked there a little over one year. The members of this cooperative happened to distort their documents, speculated, produced many products without

registering them in production lists, and in 1949 an assize court took place in Bershad. All employees, but me, went to trial. They were sentenced to imprisonment. I went to work in the 'Trud' [labor] cooperative. I worked there for many years. There were many Jews in Bershad in the early 1950s – almost all those who survived the Great Patriotic War returned home. Probably for this reason there was no such adamant anti-Semitism here in the late 1940s-early 1950s, the period of 'rootless cosmopolitans'<sup>23</sup> and the 'doctors' plot'<sup>24</sup> went past us. We didn't read newspapers and had no interest in politics. The main thing then was to survive and the rest seemed insufficient. I didn't hear about these campaigns till the 1990s. I remember a meeting in the central square, when Stalin died: all people were crying and so was I.

My parents lived in a sort of drowsiness after the war – they were struck by distress. We observed Jewish traditions as much as we could and we celebrated Pesach, but my father did not go to the synagogue any longer – he said he did not believe in the God, who allowed this violence over Jews. I can say that I sacrificed my life to my parents. I realized I would never be able to leave them. If my brothers had survived, my life might have been different: I would have got education and arrange my personal life. I had friends, but I did not meet with young men. We lived in a small room and I knew I would have no place for my own family, if I wanted one. In 1952 I went to see my cousin sister in Donetsk. I met a young Jewish man there. His name was David. We saw each other for few days and then registered our marriage in a district registry office. There was the first night and there few days of closeness, but this was all there was. He did not want to go to Bershad, and I could not leave my parents. I returned to my parents, but I did not say a word to my parents. Some time later my acquaintance working in the passport office helped me to obtain another passport with no trace of my short and unhappy marriage. I don't even remember David's surname. I've never seen him again. Later I met a very good man, but my parents did not give their consent to our marriage, because he was Ukrainian. This was the end of my personal life. I have no children. My parents were not feeling well and I could not even afford to spend my vacations elsewhere. I only took 10 days off every year to go to Odessa to take treatment for my back: I had osteochondrosis due to the lack of movement, I had to sit at my desk at work. We didn't have an apartment of our own for many years. I kept writing letters to the district executive committee requesting an apartment, but each time they gave apartments to somebody else, who could afford to bribe them. In 1971 we finally received an apartment – a little two bedroom Khrushchevka apartment<sup>25</sup> on the first floor. Papa died five months after we moved into it. He died on 2 July 1971. My mother passed away one year later. They were buried in the Jewish cemetery with no ritual followed.

After my parents died I felt free and lonely. I could travel a lot all over the country or to recreation homes. I had no problem buying tours: I was a member of the local trade union committee and was responsible for distribution of tours. I had many friends. We celebrated Soviet holidays and went to meetings and parades. In the 1970s, when Jewish mass emigration began, many of my friends and acquaintances moved to Israel. There were fewer and fewer Jews left in Bershad. I sympathized with those, who moved away, and felt jealous about them. I didn't consider moving to live in Israel: I was alone, and if here I had a job and still had friends and acquaintances, I knew that if I went to live in another country without knowing the language, I would just go crazy from loneliness and melancholy. However, in 1988 I received a letter from an acquaintance of mine, who was in Israel. I met him at the recreation house in Odessa. He invited me to Israel and proposed to marry me. He offered financial support. I did not love him and wrote back refusing him. My friend wrote again

until I finally made up my mind to go to Israel. However, I told him honestly that I would travel to Israel, but I didn't want to stay with him. He submitted the information about me to obtain an invitation letter for me to go to Israel. At that same time I received a parcel. Organizations from Israel specifically sent these parcels to support the future repatriates, but they wrote in the accompanying documentation that these parcels were sent by relatives to enable people here to receive them. I sold the clothes from this parcel and obtained the necessary documentation for departure. In 1990, having overcome all obstacles, bureaucracy and bribery of Soviet organizations I moved to Israel.

Israel is a wonderful country where I felt at home at once. I received a nice apartment and had a very good life, but... I felt very lonely and missed my homeland. I wanted to visit the graves of my dear ones. Every year I've come to Bershad. I go to my parents' graves. Few years ago I returned to Ukraine for good. I am a Ukrainian citizen and have a permanent residence in Bershad. I've bought a nice apartment and I receive a significant pension from Germany, being a former prisoner. I am doing very well. I like it that there are great opportunities for the Jewish community life after perestroika and after Ukraine gained independence. I am an active member of the community and a client of [Hesed26](#), it gives me material and moral support. Here in Hesed I've found new friends. We celebrated Sabbath and Jewish holidays together, study the religion and history of Israel. I have no regrets about having been to Israel or coming back to Ukraine.

## **GLOSSARY:**

1 The authorities could arrest an individual corresponding with his/her relatives abroad and charge him/her with espionage, send them to concentration camp or even sentence them to death.

2 Beilis case: A Jew called M. Beilis was falsely accused of the ritual murder of a Russian boy in Kiev in 1913. This trial was arranged by the tsarist government and the Black Hundred. It provoked protest from all progressive people in Russia and abroad. The jury finally acquitted him.

3 Great Patriotic War: On 22nd June 1941 at 5 o'clock in the morning Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union without declaring war. This was the beginning of the so-called Great Patriotic War. The German blitzkrieg, known as Operation Barbarossa, nearly succeeded in breaking the Soviet Union in the months that followed. Caught unprepared, the Soviet forces lost whole armies and vast quantities of equipment to the German onslaught in the first weeks of the war. By November 1941 the German army had seized the Ukrainian Republic, besieged Leningrad, the Soviet Union's second largest city, and threatened Moscow itself. The war ended for the Soviet Union on 9th May 1945.

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

industrial production was reduced to 14% and agriculture to 50% as compared to 1913.

5 Gangs: During the Russian Civil War there were all kinds of gangs in the Ukraine. Their members came from all the classes of former Russia, but most of them were peasants. Their leaders used political slogans to dress their criminal acts. These gangs were anti-Soviet and anti-Semitic. They killed Jews and burnt their houses, they robbed their houses, raped women and killed children.

6 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.

7 NEP: The so-called New Economic Policy of the Soviet authorities was launched by Lenin in 1921. It meant that private business was allowed on a small scale in order to save the country ruined by the Revolution of 1917 and the Russian Civil War. They allowed priority development of private capital and entrepreneurship. The NEP was gradually abandoned in the 1920s with the introduction of the planned economy.

8 Russian stove: Big stone stove stoked with wood. They were usually built in a corner of the kitchen and served to heat the house and cook food. It had a bench that made a comfortable bed for children and adults in wintertime.

9 Jewish collective farms: Such farms were established in the Ukraine in the 1930s during the period of collectivization.

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

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

12 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.

13 All-Union pioneer organization: a communist organization for teenagers between 10 and 15 years old (cf: boy-/ girlscouts in the US). The organization aimed at educating the young generation in accordance with the communist ideals, preparing pioneers to become members of the Komsomol and later the Communist Party. In the Soviet Union, all teenagers were pioneers.

[14](#) October Revolution Day: October 25 (according to the old calendar), 1917 went down in history as victory day for the Great October Socialist Revolution in Russia. This day is the most significant date in the history of the USSR. Today the anniversary is celebrated as 'Day of Accord and Reconciliation' on November 7.

[15](#) Cossacks: an ethnic group that constituted something of a free estate in the 15th-17th centuries in the Polish Republic and in the 16th-18th centuries in the Muscovite state (and then Russia). The Cossacks in the Polish Republic consisted of peasants, townspeople and nobles settled along the banks of the Lower Dnieper, where they organized armed detachments initially to defend themselves against the Tatar invasions and later themselves making forays against the Tatars and the Turks. As part of the armed forces, the Cossacks played an important role in Russia's imperial wars in the 17th-20th centuries. From the 19th century onwards, Cossack troops were also used to suppress uprisings and independence movements. During the February and October Revolutions in 1917 and the Russian Civil War, some of the Cossacks (under Kaledin, Dutov and Semyonov) supported the Provisional Government, and as the core of the Volunteer Army bore the brunt of the fighting with the Red Army, while others went over to the Bolshevik side (Budenny). In 1920 the Soviet authorities disbanded all Cossack formations, and from 1925 onwards set about liquidating the Cossack identity. In 1936 Cossacks were permitted to join the Red Army, and some Cossack divisions fought under its banner in World War II. Some Cossacks served in formations collaborating with the Germans and in 1945 were handed over to the authorities of the USSR by the Western Allies.

[16](#) Odessa: The Jewish community of Odessa was the second biggest Jewish community in Russia. According to the census of 1897 there were 138,935 Jews in Odessa, which was 34,41% of the local population. There were 7 big synagogues and 49 prayer houses in Odessa. There were heders in 19 prayer houses.

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

[18](#) 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.

[19](#) 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.

[20](#) Judenrat: Jewish councils appointed by German occupying authorities to carry out Nazi orders in the Jewish communities of occupied Europe. After the establishment of the ghettos they were responsible for everything that happened within them. They controlled all institutions operating in the ghettos, the police, the employment agency, food supplies, housing, health, social work, education, religion, etc. Germans also made them responsible for selecting people for the work camps, and, in the end, choosing those to be sent to camps that were in reality death camps. It is hard to judge their actions due to the abnormal circumstances. Some believe they betrayed Jews by obeying orders, and others think they were trying to gain time and save as many people as possible.

[21](#) Bessarabia: Historical area between the Prut and Dnestr 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.

[22](#) Komsomol: Communist youth political organization created in 1918. The task of the Komsomol was to spread 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.

[23](#) 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'.

[24](#) 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.

25 Khrushchovka: Five-storied apartment buildings with small one, two or three-bedroom apartments, named after Nikita Khrushchev, head of the Communist Party and the Soviet Union after Stalin's death. These apartment buildings were constructed in the framework of Khrushchev's program of cheap dwelling in the new neighborhood of most Soviet cities.

26 Hesed: Meaning care and mercy in Hebrew, Hesed stands for the charity organization founded by Amos Avgar in the early 20th century. Supported by Claims Conference and Joint Hesed helps for Jews in need to have a decent life despite hard economic conditions and encourages development of their self-identity. Hesed provides a number of services aimed at supporting the needs of all, and particularly elderly members of the society. The major social services include: work in the center facilities (information, advertisement of the center activities, foreign ties and free lease of medical equipment); services at homes (care and help at home, food products delivery, delivery of hot meals, minor repairs); work in the community (clubs, meals together, day-time polyclinic, medical and legal consultations); service for volunteers (training programs). The Hesed centers have inspired a real revolution in the Jewish life in the FSU countries. People have seen and sensed the rebirth of the Jewish traditions of humanism. Currently over eighty Hesed centers exist in the FSU countries. Their activities cover the Jewish population of over eight hundred settlements.