

Nikhama Frumkina

Nikhama Peisakhovna Frumkina

Bryansk

Russia

Interviewer: Eugeny Udler

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Nikhama Peisakhovna gives the impression of a very cultured person,

she speaks slowly, carefully choosing her words.

Apparently, she enjoys talking about her ancestors and in particular about her father.



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- **My family background**

I, Nikhama Pavlovna Frumkina, was born in Bryansk in 1929. I have no family of my own, and now I live alone in the city of Bryansk. I was the single child in the family, and Mum became a housewife after my birth. My real Jewish name is Nikhama, but in the family I was called in the Russian manner, Nina [1](#).

My paternal grandfather was Elimelekh Frumkin. He came from the small city of Pogar in Chernigov province [today Bryansk region]. He was born approximately in 1860, had religious education, and all his life was a melamed. But because there were other melamedim in Pogar's cheder, he wandered around various villages and settlements and taught children traditions.

He was a deeply religious man, studied the Torah and Talmud all the time and knew the Hebrew language perfectly. His first wife, whose name I don't know, died early from some illness, leaving him with a daughter, Hana. Unfortunately, my granddad died when I was four years old and I can hardly remember him. All I know about him are the few things that my father and mother told me.

His second wife, my grandmother Dveira Chaimovna [1870s-1935] was 17 years younger than Grandfather and, being a housewife, brought up nine children: eight of her own and her stepdaughter Hana. For the most part of their life they lived in Pogar, but after the revolution in October 1917 [2](#) they moved to Bryansk and until 1929 rented a separate apartment.

At the beginning of the 1930s Elimelekh had a serious leg injury, but refused to be treated in the hospital for religious reasons [since he considered an illness a manifestation of the will of God, with which one cannot interfere].

He died of gangrene in 1933.

• Growing up

I remember Grandma much better than Granddad. She always brought us some 'gribenets' – goose cracklings – and treated me. In her last years she lived with some of her elder children in Bryansk and died in 1935. I was six years old then. I remember that I wasn't permitted to fully participate in the funeral ceremony, but I well remember the special stretcher, on which Grandmother was lying wrapped in a shroud. She was certainly buried in accordance with religious customs.

My grandfather Elimelekh had a brother named Alter Raikhinshtein. Daddy told me, that earlier Grandfather also had the surname Raikhinshtein, but in his youth he changed it to Frumkin, ostensibly with the purpose to be exempted from the army service [3](#). This uncle, unlike Elimelekh, led a secular life. Until 1941 he lived with us, and before the war he left for Kiev [today Ukraine] and perished there. Most likely, he died there during the fascist occupation.

My maternal grandfather, Moisei Goz, came from Radul, near Kiev. He was a pharmacist and died under unknown circumstances in 1918. The history of his death was always concealed in our family [An educated and rich man he had probably become a victim of Red terror or a gangster attack.]

His wife, my grandmother Ita Markovna Goz, nee Faibusovich, was born in 1861 in Radul, Kiev province, and after the death of her husband was compelled to flee with her four children from Radul to escape from Galaka's [4](#) gang to the district center of Mglin in Chernigov province, nowadays Bryansk district. Later she moved from Mglin to Bryansk, and in her last years lived in the house of her elder son Semen.

I often disputed the existence of God with her. Being a young pioneer [5](#) I was telling her – a religious woman – that actually God didn't exist, and she was nervous and tried to prove the opposite. Grandmother had an old prayer book that she used for praying every day. When I think of her, I imagine her portrait from the photo I have: an old woman in a dress that she seemed to have been wearing forever. Ita Markovna died in Bryansk in 1937 at the age of 76.

My grandmother's sister, Feiga Markovna, had no children of her own and was occupied with the education of one of Grandmother's sons, Aron. During the war she didn't want to be evacuated and stayed in Bryansk. When the city was occupied, three Germans settled in her house, who, knowing that their landlady was Jewish, didn't touch her. Probably, those were respectable and well-bred Germans. But later two Russian sisters, the Chebotarevs, Komsomol [6](#) members, who lived in the neighborhood, betrayed her. They complained to the German authorities about a Jewish person staying in town. The fascists rushed into the house, seized Feiga and stabbed her with their bayonets in a nearby ravine. After the war the Soviet authorities sentenced the Chebotarev sisters to ten years in prison.

My father, Pavel Markovich [Peisakh ben Elimelekh] Frumkin, was born in Pogar in 1902, though 1903 is written down in his birth certificate. From the age of three he studied in a cheder in Pogar, upon the termination of which he was sent to study in a yeshivah in another town, and he became a yeshivah bocher. Father told me, how with other yeshivah bocherim they went to have dinner in 'makhuntek,' that is in various Jewish families. [This is an old Jewish tradition according to which the poor yeshivah bocherim dined in Jewish families, because the yeshivah couldn't really feed them. Besides, it was considered an important religious commandment for any Jew to feed a poor

yeshivah boy – who would probably be a rabbi in the future.] It was in accordance with an important precept called tsdaki, but in different families it was followed with different degrees of generosity: some people invited them to their own table, others let them eat with the servants

It was the time when Jewish youth was eager to educate their peers. One high school girl started to study arithmetic with Daddy and as a result he left the yeshivah, causing a great scandal in his religious family. Father also undertook serious studies of the Russian language, because he had a very poor command of it from childhood – he spoke Yiddish – with the help of private tutors. Later he took lessons of Mathematics from the well-known teacher Grabovsky in Bryansk. Father didn't go to school.

Granddad, having learnt of his son's studies, was very upset and sent him to get 'a real education' to their very distant relative in the borough of Seredina Buda, telling him, 'Take this goy and make something good out of him!' I think Father was separated from his family for quite a while and then, after some time, came back.

To punish the young man, his father took him to one forestry enterprise in the small town of Seredina Buda, where he forced him to work as a contractor. Father lived there for a rather long time until pogroms began in the city. The rich owner left town with his family leaving the workers to the mercy of fate. Father recollected how he was chased by the Black Hundreds [7](#), one of the anti-Semitic gangs making Jewish pogroms in the territories of today's Eastern Ukraine and pre-border Russia, shooting at him, but missing, and Father was saved.

• **During and after the war**

After the revolution he moved to Bryansk, studied hard and entered accounting courses, after finishing which he continued studying in the All-Union Correspondence Finance and Economics Institute of Narkomfin of the USSR [Narkomfin: People's Commissariat of Finance] with a major in 'Finance and Crediting' from 1935 to 1938, acquiring a diploma as economist and financier. Simultaneously Father worked as a bookkeeper in various organizations.

In the 1920s Daddy took an active part in the Zionist organization 'Poalei Zion' [Hebrew: 'Workers of Zion'] in Bryansk, headed by a well-known Zionist, Abba Medvedev. For that activity Father had to serve a one-year term in prison, and Abba Medvedev was exiled to Palestine. There he tragically died at one of the construction sites of the Jewish settlements.

Studying at the accounting courses Daddy got acquainted with Mum, courted her for five years, and in 1927 they got married. My parents had a real chuppah, according to all rules of a religious Jewish wedding, organized in Feiga's apartment, the sister of Grandmother Ita Markovna. Feiga and her husband Neukh were well-off people, they had no children. Neukh offered his help regarding chuppah arrangements in his home and paid all the bills. He died one year after my parents' wedding, before I was born.

A few days before my birth Mother had a dream: the deceased Uncle Neukh was complaining, 'Now, when I'm dead, no one even thinks of remembering me...' Having woken up, Mother decided to name her future baby in honor of her uncle. A girl was born – and was given the name Nikhama. Another thing I remember from my mother's words is that when the bride was supposed to weep at a certain moment under the chuppah, showing her grief due to parting with her parents' home,

Mother couldn't help bursting out laughing...

After their marriage my parents lived with my paternal grandfather and grandmother, and in 1929 they received a room in the apartment with a shared kitchen [8](#), in an old wooden two-storied house which has survived until now. It is there that I was born.

From 1941 to 1945 Daddy was at war [9](#). He served in the engineering troops and finished the war in the rank of captain in Vienna. Daddy frequently told me, that he was amazed by the internationalism of soldiers and officers at war, there was not a trace of anti-Semitism there. He served with the 50th Army, formed in Bryansk, which freed the city of Bryansk in September 1943.

After the end of the war he began to work as the chief accountant of a regional trade department. Later he got a job in the State Bank: the post of head of the crediting department for the local industries in Bryansk. In 1963 he retired. Father possessed a good knowledge of Hebrew and being retired frequently read old religious books, visited the prayer house, and tried to observe Saturday and celebrate the Jewish holidays. He died in Bryansk in 1986.

All of them, all of my father's siblings, certainly, were brought up in a religious atmosphere in their families, but further on, had a poor connection with the tradition. Daddy's elder sister Hana was Grandfather's daughter from the first marriage. She lived somewhere in Bryansk district and traded various small articles in her booth. Her granddaughter's family now lives in Israel, but we, unfortunately, don't keep in touch.

Father's elder brother's name was Eine. He made hats and caps all his life and helped to support all our family with his earnings. His two sons, Veniamin and Faivel, have always lived in Bryansk. Faivel died about ten years ago, and Veniamin is in advanced years now and lives with his children and grandchildren in Bryansk.

Father's sister Sora-Mere had a most interesting destiny. She married her cousin named Isaak and for some reason left to live in Kharbin [Far East, today China]. I remember, how Aunt Sora-Mere sent me a dress of unusual beauty, which fit me perfectly, though she didn't know my size. In the 1930s, together with her husband and son Mosya, she immigrated to Australia. They regularly wrote us from Australia after the war and even sent us parcels, although via Czechoslovakia.

I know that Mosya kept a bookshop there in the 1950s-1960s, and they lived in a large two-storied house. In 1952 a son, Philip, was born to Mosya, whose bar mitzvah they widely celebrated in 1965 in one of the Australian synagogues. They even sent us a photo of that event. Now, unfortunately, I don't correspond with them, but I don't think my Aunt Sora-Mere or Uncle Isaak are still alive. Someone from my relatives informed me, that one of Philip's sons is now studying in Israel, at the Tel Aviv University.

Father's brother Iosif was always seriously ill. I don't remember what his occupation was. His wife's name was Haya-Dveira. He was unable to return from evacuation, and Haya-Dveira married a Zhytomyr [today Ukraine] Jew after the war. Father's sister Pesya was always single and was involved in trade in Bryansk. As far as I remember she lived together with her sister Genya and that sister's husband Samuil Kats. Another sister, Chasya, lived in Moscow for a long time before the war and was the secretary to Lazar Kaganovich [10](#). There she married Abram Iosifovich Khazanov, who was killed at the front.

Their son Mark Khazanov lives in Bryansk now with his sons and grandchildren. Father's sister Fruma-Riva died in the course of a pogrom soon after the revolution, but her husband Mark Getmansky managed to escape and rescued their two daughters, Zhenya [Eugenia] and Chasya. Zhenya later married a Russian boy, and they had a son. But in the 1970s she died soon after the death of her son. Chasya Markovna lives in Bryansk with her children and grandsons.

My mum, Gita Moiseevna Goz, was born in Radul, Kiev province, in 1903. She was one of four children in the family [Gita, Semen, Zalman, Aron]. Having moved to Bryansk with her parents after the revolution, she finished accounting courses, and worked as a bookkeeper in one company, but after my birth in 1929, Mother became a housewife and was taking care of my education. In my childhood I somehow made friends only with non-Jewish children, and I've never felt any anti-Semitism. My acquaintance with the Jewish traditions was going on indirectly, only through communication with my grandfathers and grandmothers. I heard nothing of Zionism when I was a girl: my father's Zionist past had always been thoroughly concealed from me. I spent the biggest part of my childhood in evacuation and it is of this period that I mostly have recollections.

During the war Mum and I were evacuated first to Stalingrad, then to Ust-Katav in Chelyabinsk region. We sailed down the Volga from Stalingrad to Ust-Katav for a whole month. We headed for this town because it was there that Father's elder brother Eine lived with his family. I can clearly remember that his son Pavel [Faivel] was involved in very exhausting physical labor at the local military plant. He used to come home early in the morning, very pale, went to sleep, and in a few hours he was picked up by his co-workers to go to work again.

Later we moved to the town of Yutazy, Tartar Soviet Republic. Being in evacuation, Mum worked in a state farm [11](#) organized by the wives of officers who were at the front. I remember the Tartar family, with who we lived. For many years after that I retained the opinion, that all Tartars were terrible anti-Semites.

The situation was very tense there and in fall 1943, immediately after the liberation of Bryansk we returned home. Our house was in the city center and remained intact, since it accommodated some German establishment during the occupation. Our apartment, too, didn't suffer, although neither our furniture, nor home utensils survived. Nearby our home there was the central cemetery, and after the war they set up a park and a stadium there. Soon I resumed going to school, which I finished in 1948.

In 1948 I entered the Moscow Regional Pedagogical Institute named after Krupskaya, the French language department, and graduated from it in 1952. In 1953 I continued training in the same institute, but in the correspondence department of German language. At the same time I was teaching French at School № 2 [12](#) in Bryansk. In 1965 I was invited to teach German and French to the students of Bryansk Institute of Transportation and Mechanical Engineering. In that institute I worked up until my retirement in 1984.

Mum was always saying, 'Everyone in the Goz family dies at the age of 76.' And indeed, Grandma Ita Markovna and all her children, except for her son, who perished at the front, died at 76. Mum was not an exception: she died in Bryansk in 1979, when she was 76.

My mother's elder brother, Semen Moiseevich Goz, lived with his family in Radul before the war and worked as a pharmacist. In his youth he was a soldier in the Imperial Army, but during the

revolution his regiment took the Bolshevik side [13](#), and Semen with his unit took part in the storm of the Winter Palace [residence of the Russian tsars]. After the war he moved to Bryansk and worked as the manager of the central drugstore in town. He had no family. Semen Moiseevich died in Bryansk in the 1970s at the age of 76.

Mother's brother Zalman also lived in Radul before the war and worked in a drugstore. During the war he died at the front. His son [Abram] moved to Bryansk after the war, and in the middle of 1990s he left for the USA, Manhattan, with his family.

Another brother of my mum, Aron Goz-Livshits, was brought up by the childless sister of my grandmother, Feiga, who gave him her surname.

Since 1996 I began to attend to the Bryansk Jewish Charitable Centre 'Hesed Tikva' [14](#) and soon became a volunteer. I'm still doing volunteer work.

- **Glossary:**

[1](#) Common name

Russified or Russian first names used by Jews in everyday life and adopted in official documents. The Russification of first names was one of the manifestations of the assimilation of Russian Jews at the turn of the 19th and 20th century. In some cases only the spelling and pronunciation of Jewish names was russified (e.g. Isaac instead of Yitskhak; Boris instead of Borukh), while in other cases traditional Jewish names were replaced by similarly sounding Russian names (e.g. Eugenia instead of Ghita; Yury instead of Yuda). When state anti-Semitism intensified in the USSR at the end of the 1940s, most Jewish parents stopped giving their children traditional Jewish names to avoid discrimination.

[2](#) 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.

[3](#) The only son was considered to be the breadwinner and thus was exempted from the army service

Therefore adoption of kids became widely spread among Jews with the aim of avoiding military draft.

[4](#) In 1918-1922, during the Civil War that followed the Revolution, independent gangs, led by fierce atamans, were plundering everywhere, especially in the countryside Jewish pogroms were their favorite entertainment. Galaka was one of such leaders.

5 All-Union pioneer organization

a communist organization for teenagers between 10 and 15 years old (cf: boy-/ girls Scouts 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.

6 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.

7 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 Revolution of 1917 when tsarism was in decline. They found support mainly among the aristocrats and members of the 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.

8 Communal apartment

The Soviet power wanted to improve housing conditions by requisitioning 'excess' living space of wealthy families after the Revolution of 1917. Apartments were shared by several families with each family occupying one room and sharing the kitchen, toilet and bathroom with other tenants. Because of the chronic shortage of dwelling space in towns communal or shared apartments continued to exist for decades. Despite state programs for the construction of more houses and the liquidation of communal apartments, which began in the 1960s, shared apartments still exist today.

9 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.

10 Kaganovich, Lazar (1893-1991)

Soviet Communist leader. A Jewish shoemaker and labor organizer, he joined the Communist Party in 1911. He rose quickly through the party ranks and by 1930 he had become Moscow party secretary-general and a member of the Politburo. He was an influential proponent of forced collectivization and played a role in the purges of 1936-38. He was known for his ruthless and merciless personality. He became commissar for transportation (1935) and after the purges was responsible for heavy industrial policy in the Soviet Union. In 1957, he joined in an unsuccessful attempt to oust Khrushchev and was stripped of all his posts.

11 Collective farm (in Russian kolkhoz)

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

12 School #

Schools had numbers and not names. It was part of the policy of the state. They were all state schools and were all supposed to be identical.

13 Bolsheviks

Members of the movement led by Lenin. The name 'Bolshevik' was coined in 1903 and denoted the group that emerged in elections to the key bodies in the Social Democratic Party (SDPRR) considering itself in the majority (Rus. bolshynstvo) within the party. It dubbed its opponents the minority (Rus. menshynstvo, the Mensheviks). Until 1906 the two groups formed one party. The Bolsheviks first gained popularity and support in society during the 1905-07 Revolution. During the February Revolution in 1917 the Bolsheviks were initially in the opposition to the Menshevik and SR ('Sotsialrevolyutsionery', Socialist Revolutionaries) delegates who controlled the Soviets (councils). When Lenin returned from emigration (16 April) they proclaimed his program of action (the April theses) and under the slogan 'All power to the Soviets' began to Bolshevize the Soviets and prepare for a proletariat revolution. Agitation proceeded on a vast scale, especially in the army. The Bolsheviks set about creating their own armed forces, the Red Guard. Having overthrown the Provisional Government, they created a government with the support of the II Congress of Soviets (the October Revolution), to which they admitted some left-wing SRs in order to gain the support of the peasantry. In 1952 the Bolshevik party was renamed the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

14 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 Former Soviet Union 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.