

Iosif Gotlib

Iosif Gotlib

Date of interview: October 2003

Interviewer: Ella Levitskaya

Iosif Gotlib lives in a three-bedroom apartment in a new district of Lvov. His wife Antonina, daughter Lilia and Lilia's son Anton, their grandson, live with him. They have standard 1970s style furniture in their apartment. One can tell that they enjoy doing things with their own hands: they've taken a lot of effort to make their dwelling comfortable and cozy. They did repairs in their apartment and Iosif's wife Antonina placed her embroidery patterns on the walls. Iosif made shelves and stands for pot plants. Their apartment is very clean and bright. There are many pot plants and there are photographs of Iosif and his wife, their children and grandchildren on the walls. Iosif is a man of average height, thin. He was ill and it affected his speech, but he willingly agreed to give this interview and said a lot about his life and family. Although he doesn't go out, he takes a vivid interest in everything happening around him. He reads a lot and likes to discuss what he has read.

I didn't know my father's parents or any members of his family. Since my father's patronymic was Mikhailovich [the customary polite address in Russian is by first and patronymic name, which consists of one's father's name and a suffix: -ovna for women and -ovich for men], I can guess that my paternal grandfather's name was Moische which is Mikhail in Russian [common name] [1](#). I don't know anything about my grandmother. My father Abram Gotlib was born in the town of Sudzha [250 km from Moscow] Kursk province in Russia in 1888. All I know about my father's childhood or youth is that he became an orphan young. Somehow he moved to St. Petersburg where he entered the medical Faculty of the university. I don't know where my father studied before he entered the university. Although my father was a Jew, and at that time there was a Jewish admission [five percent] quota [2](#) in Russian higher educational institutions, my father was admitted. My father was a very talented and educated man. He knew 5 European languages: English, French, German, Italian and Romanian; he could draw well and play the piano. After finishing his studies he was trained in a hospital for a year where he obtained qualifications as a surgeon. My father worked in this hospital until the beginning of World War I. When Russia entered the war my father was recruited to the tsarist army. He was a surgeon in a frontline hospital.

I know a little bit more about my mother's family. My maternal grandfather David Levandovskiy and grandmother whose name I don't know lived in Voyutichi village in 13 km from Sambor town of Lvov region [600 km from Kiev], in the Russian Empire. I don't know their birth date or place. I remember a portrait of grandfather David that we had at home. My grandfather had a big gray beard and had a black suit and yarmulka on. I remember my grandmother a little. She was short, fat and very kind. She spoke drawlingly and always smiled and wore long dark clothing and a black kerchief. She has a silk shawl with fringes that she wore to the synagogue. The grandparents spoke Yiddish at home, but they all knew Polish and Russian. My mother told me that her parents were religious. They always celebrated Sabbath and Jewish holidays at home. My grandfather went to the synagogue on Saturday and Jewish holidays and my grandmother only went there on Jewish

holidays.

My grandfather was a cabinetmaker and my grandmother was a housewife, as was customary with patriarchal Jewish families. Their children were born in Voyutichi. Haim was an older son and then Shymon was born. I don't know their dates of birth. My mother Dora was born in 1896, and her younger brother Leizer was born in 1898. My mother was still a child when the family moved to Lvov [510 km from Kiev]. It's hard to say why they decided to move. My mother told me that there was no anti-Semitism at the time when she was young. It appeared after World War I when even Jewish pogroms in Russia [3](#) happened, but Lvov was a big town and there were no pogroms in it. They happened in smaller towns where they were not afraid of facing any resistance. In Lvov there were no national conflicts. There were synagogues and Jewish schools. Jews also owned trade. There were Jewish teachers, doctors and lawyers, but of course, the majority of the Jewish population were poor craftsmen.

My maternal grandparents rented an apartment from a Jewish owner in Lvov. He owned a 4-storied house that he leased. He also owned a store on the first floor of this house. The owner and his family lived on the 2nd floor and had tenants in remaining apartments. There was a small hut in the yard of this house that my grandfather also rented from him and had his carpenter shop there. They manufactured furniture, doors and window frames in this shop. My grandfather had his shop closed on Saturday. His two older sons also worked with him. Leizer, the youngest son, died during flu epidemic in 1913. Grandfather David died in 1915. They were buried in the Jewish cemetery in Lvov. After grandfather died his sons inherited his shop.

My mother's brothers studied in a Polish school and cheder. My mother also finished 8 grades of a Polish school. Girls didn't go to cheder and my grandfather made arrangements with a melamed to give my mother classes at home. He came every other days and taught my mother to read and write in Yiddish and read in Hebrew and taught her prayers. My mother was very talented and wanted to continue her education, but there were very limited opportunities for women at that time. There was a choice of going to Froebel school [4](#) training governesses or becoming a medical nurse. After finishing school my mother went to study at 1-year school of medical nurses in Lvov. After finishing this school in 1915 she and other graduates were sent to a hospital at the front where my future parents met. They worked in the same hospital. They fell in love with each other and got married in 1917. They didn't have a Jewish wedding, but registered their marriage. When in 1917 a revolution [5](#) took place in Russia and the Russian Empire fell apart, new borders were established. The Western Ukraine was annexed to Poland [6](#). There was famine and war in Russia. My mother's family lived in Poland and my mother convinced him to move to her mother in Poland.

After they moved to Poland my father's life was hard. Poland didn't recognize his Russian doctor's diploma. He had to take exams in Polish, but he didn't know it. He tried to work illegally in Lvov, but it was dangerous. My parents moved to Biskovichi village Sambor district Lvov region [580 km from Kiev] also belonging to Poland. My mother's family helped them with money, and they bought a house. My father worked as a veterinary. My mother didn't work after getting married. Their first baby David was born in 1917. He was named after my mother's father. In 1919 my older sister Sima was born. After Sima Moishe, named after my father's father, was born in 1921. I was born in November 1922 and named Iosif-Leizer. My sister Haya was born in 1925. Shmil was born in 1928, and in 1930 Eshiye, the youngest boy, was born.

Our house was rather big. It was built from thick beams faced with airbricks. It was divided into two parts. There was a fore room and there was a door to two small rooms serving as my father's veterinary office. The living quarters were on the right. There were four rooms: my parents' bedroom, boys' room, girls' room and a living room. There was a big kitchen where we had meals on weekdays. On Sabbath and Jewish holidays we had meals in the living room. There was a wood stoked stove in the kitchen. It heated the kitchen and my mother cooked on it. There were smaller heating stoves in the rooms. We had household chores to do. However small we were, we fetched water, sawed wood and the girls washed dishes and cleaned the house. There was a small orchard in the backyard, few trees, a woodshed, a toilet and a small well. My father worked from morning till night. Sometimes his customers brought their animals to him and sometimes he had to go examine them at their places. Villagers mostly paid him with food products. My mother often helped my father in his office.

My parents were religious. My mother and father observed Jewish traditions. We always celebrated Sabbath at home. My mother baked challahs on Friday morning and cooked food for two days. She put cholnt with meat, beans and potatoes and a big pot with two big chickens boiling in it into the stove. In the evening my mother lit candles and she prayed, then father blessed the meal and we sat down to dinner. My father didn't work on Saturday. He read the Torah and told us, kids, stories about Jewish life and Jewish religion. We spoke Yiddish and Polish at home. There was no synagogue in Biskovichi. There were three other Jewish family in the village besides us. The rest of the population was Polish, Ukrainian and there were few Russians. Neighbors got along well and helped each other. On Saturday our polish neighbor came to stoke our stove, boil water for tea, heat food and light the lamps. My mother always gave her some money or some treatments. On Jewish holidays another neighbor rode my mother and father on his wagon to the synagogue in Sambor in 8 km from Biskovichi. Our neighbor took care of us, children.

I remember when my father had to do his job as a surgeon. There was no doctor or assistant doctor in Biskovichi. A midwife came to help with childbirth. She witnessed almost all children of Biskovichi born to this world. There was a wealthy Polish villager in Biskovichi, I don't remember his name now. He had 250 cows, farm fields and a big forest area. His wife had problems at labor and the midwife couldn't do anything to help her. The woman was dying and this farmer came to ask my father for help. My father refused at first saying that he had no right to operate on her, but the farmer begged him to rescue his wife and baby and my father agreed. My father warned him that if authorities heard about it he would have to pay a big fine and the villager promised that he would pay it if it came to it. My father went to his home and then he sent for mother. They made Cesarean section and the woman and her baby survived. They named this boy Kazimir and he became a close friend of my younger sister Haya and brother Shmil. His father was grateful to my father. Every winter he supported our family with vegetables, flour and meat.

My mother's distant relatives Shpringers lived in Sambor. They didn't have children and convinced my parents to let them adopt their older son David. David moved in with them and they gave him the last name of Gotlib-Shpringer. My brother David lived with his adoptive parents and occasionally visited us.

There was one 4-year Polish school in Biskovichi. My older sister Sima and brother Moishe went to study there. I also went to this school in 1929. I was doing well at school. I was the only Jew in my class, but I didn't face any bad attitudes due to my nationality. I had few Jewish, Polish and Russian

friends. We didn't think about who was of what nationality.

In 1930 there was a big fire in Biskovichi. Few houses in our street including our house burnt down. Our neighbors offered us to live in their houses while my father was to build a house for us, but my father decided otherwise. My father received compensation from the municipality for his burnt house and managed to buy a house in Sambor for this money. Sambor was a small town, but it seemed huge to me compared to Biskovichi. The majority of population was Jewish, but there was also Polish, Russian and Ukrainian population. There were few synagogues, Jewish schools and even a Jewish grammar school. Jews mostly dealt in trade and craftsmanship in Sambor. They owned all stores and all shoemakers, fur dealers, tailors, joiners and barbers were also Jews. Jews mainly resided in the center of the town. Land was more expensive in the center and the houses stood very close to one another. My father bought a house in the central street. It was a brick house with 3 rooms and a kitchen. My parents lived in one room, sons in another and the third room was for the girls. There was a big kitchen with a storeroom and a spacious fore room. There was only space for a small wood shed in the yard. There were wood stoked stoves and a well in a nearby street.

After we moved to Sambor it was difficult for my father to find a job. Veterinarians were not in such big demand in town as they were in a village and on the other hand, my father was not allowed to work as a doctor. He was good at drawing and woodcarving and he chose to do this to earn his living. My father carved wood sculptures. He didn't learn carving anywhere before, but he somehow happened to do it well. Wealthier people used to decorate their gardens with them. He also made stucco decorations on ceilings and building facades. All of a sudden his works happened to be in demand and my father began to earn a lot. My mother began to work as well. She was a very good cook and began to do this to earn her living. She cooked at weddings or other celebrations in wealthy families. Of course, it had to be kosher food and her clients wanted to be sure that their cook followed kashrut at home. My mother followed kashrut strictly. She did not only have special dishes for meat and milk products, but also, plates, spoons and even dish wash sponges for meat and dairy products. My mother soon became a very popular cook in Sambor and she even had to refuse from orders since she was busy in other houses on those days when they wanted her to cook in their houses. Cooking usually took a week before a party. Mother baked strudels, honey cookies and other pastries and one day before a party she cooked other dishes. My mother had two Jewish assistant ladies preparing food products for cooking and washing utensils. My mother did the cooking herself, she didn't let anyone else to do it. She had a notebook where she put her orders for months ahead.

At home my sisters were helping mother with cooking. My mother taught Sima and Haya everything she knew herself. She said the girls would always be able to earn their living if need be. Of course, we began to have a wealthier life. Shortly after she went to work, my mother bought a piano that she had long dreamed about. She had wonderful hearing. She didn't know notes, but she played tunes by ear. I remember that we gathered in our parents' room on Saturday and sang Jewish songs that we knew many and my mother accompanied for us and sang too. Later my parents bought my older brother Moishe an accordion and he often played with my mother. Later he began to teach me to play. Our family was very close and I often recall those happy hours.

My father went to the synagogue in our street on Saturdays and Jewish holidays. It was a small synagogue and there was no room for women in it. The boys went to the synagogue with our father

after they turned 7, it was a custom in Sambor that children started going to the synagogue at this age. My father didn't have a beard or payes. He only had small moustache. He wore a hat to go out and a yarmulka to the synagogue. He put it on inside the synagogue and they took it off to go home. We, boys, also took our yarmulka to the synagogue and didn't have our head covered elsewhere. Of course, when it was cold we wore caps or hats. I remember that my older brother and I usually went to play football with other boys after the synagogue. My mother went to a bigger synagogue in the neighboring street also on Sabbath and holidays. My mother didn't take her daughters with her. My mother didn't wear a wig. She had a long plait. When my mother went out she clipped it on the back of her head. My mother only wore a kerchief to go to the synagogue and at home on Sabbath or holidays.

We celebrated Sabbath and Jewish holidays at home. Before Pesach we cleaned the house. Everything was shining with cleanness. No breadcrumbs were to be found anywhere. After the cleaning all breadcrumbs or pieces of bread were taken to the yard to be burnt. We also took away our everyday kitchen utensils and took down a box with special Pesach dishes from the attic. There was crockery and kitchen utensils - casseroles and frying pans - stored in the box. My mother also kept her dishes for making matzah separately. She had a bowl for dough for matzah, a rolling pin and even a wheel to make holes on matzah. My mother baked herself. Sometimes our neighbors joined her and they made matzah for together for their families. My mother always cooked a lot before holidays. She only baked her pastries from matzah flour. My older brother and I took turns to crash matzah in a copper mortar and then sieved it. My mother made strudels, honey cakes and Pesach cookies with raisins from sieved matzah. Mother always made chicken broth with dumplings from matzah flour, a chicken neck stuffed with fried flour and chicken liver and gefilte fish at Pesach. I've never tried such delicious forshmak as my mother made. There was a white tablecloth with embroidered lions and quotes from the Torah on it for seder at Pesach. In the evening the family got together for seder. My father sat at the head of the table. He recited a prayer and then broke a piece of matzah into three pieces and put away the middle part. It was called afikoman and we had it to finish the seder. One of the children had to find the afikoman and give it back to the father for a redemption. When I did it I asked my father sweets or toys in return. Then I asked him traditional four questions in Hebrew. My father answered me. The front door was open to let Prophet Elijah ז in. There was a big wine glass with wine for him on the table. We bought wine for Pesach at the synagogue, red and very sweet. During seder each of us had to drink four glasses of wine. Children drank wine from small glasses. After answering questions my father recited a prayer and we sang Pesach songs. Nobody went to bed until seder was over. Younger children happened to fall asleep sitting at the table. My mother or father didn't work through 8 days of Pesach. We visited our parents' acquaintances and they visited us.

At Rosh Hashanah my parents went to the synagogue in the morning. In the morning my mother put a dish with apple pieces and a bowl of honey. When our parents came back from the synagogue we dipped apples in honey and ate them. There was Yom Kippur 10 days later. On this day children above 8 years of age had to fast from the morning till the lunch time. After bar mitzvah we fasted all day long. A day before my mother made a hearty dinner. We had to finish our meal before the first star when fasting began. Frankly, I never fasted. Of course, my parents didn't know about it since I didn't eat at home. There was a Ukrainian family living nearby and the boys from this family were my friends. During the fast I ran to their house and they gave me something to eat. My parents stayed at the synagogue a whole day on Yom Kippur. They came back home in

the evening and we sat down to a festive dinner.

On Sukkot my father made a sukkah in the backyard. There was a table inside and we prayed and had meals only in the sukkah. I also had two other favorite holidays: Chanukkah and Purim. On Chanukkah all our visitors gave children some money. My parents had many acquaintances and before evening I collected quite a sufficient sum. I spent this money buying sugar candy and ergots. There were dark brown hard and very sweet ergots sold in stores. We liked chewing them and my sisters made necklaces from their seeds. Purim was a merry holiday. There were performers in costumes coming to houses. My mother made lots of pastries at Purim. There was a tradition to take pastries to relatives and neighbors and children were running around with trays of treatments and they brought us theirs. In every house we went we got something sweets or some coins in return.

In Sambor we also went to a Polish school. My brother and I studied at school and cheder. There were religion classes at school for Catholic children. Their teacher was a Roman Catholic priest. Children with different faith could go home. I had a good voice and ear and I sang in a school choir. After finishing school Sima and Moishe went to a Jewish grammar school and so did I later. My parents had to pay for the grammar school, but they could afford such expenses at that time. We studied all general subjects in Yiddish. We had two religious classes twice a week. A rabbi came to conduct these classes. Some children skipped classes of religion. It was allowed and in their school records book they had a dash instead of a mark for this class. It didn't take me long to understand that it was more fun to play football than sit in class and I began to skip these classes along with other children. Of course, my parents didn't know about it. I had all excellent marks in all other subjects.

I turned 13 in 1935 and became of age. I had a bar mitzvah at the synagogue that my father attended. A melamed from the cheder prepared me for bar mitzvah. I don't remember any details, but I remember that on Saturday after my birthday I went to the Torah stand at the synagogue and read a section from the Torah, there is a special section for a boy to read on his bar mitzvah. On this day I had a tallit on for the first time in my life. It was quite a ceremony and everybody greeted me. My father brought a bottle of vodka and lekakh to the synagogue and after bar mitzvah the attendants enjoyed the treatments. In the evening my mother arranged a special dinner for the occasion. My mother's brothers came from Lvov. They visited us on almost all Jewish holidays. Haim was married and had two sons, a little older than me. He always came with his family. My cousins and I were friends. Shymon didn't have a family.

Sometimes we visited my mother's relatives in Lvov. In 1936 my grandmother, my mother's mother died. She was buried near my grandfather according to the Jewish tradition in the Jewish cemetery. I remember that on my grandmother's funeral a woman approached my mother and me and tore up our clothes. I didn't understand why she did this and my mother explained that it was a sign of the mourning. Haim, an older son, recited the Kaddish at the funeral. I don't know whether any of my mother's brothers recited Kaddish or sat shivah after grandmother, but we went home. My mother's brother Haim perished tragically in an accident in 1940. He was buried near his parents. Shymon died of typhus in evacuation in the 1940s. After his death I lost contact with Shymon's family.

In 1937 our quiet family life came to an end. My father was making stucco molding on the facade of a building and fell from scaffolds. He had a severe cranium injury. He was taken to hospital and after he recovered his doctors didn't allow him to continue doing any physical works, particularly working on elevation. My father returned home, but he couldn't work any more. He suffered from headaches and dizziness. My mother was the only breadwinner in the family. We were hard up and Moishe had to quit grammar school. Moishe became an apprentice in a railcar depot and I became an apprentice of a joiner. I studied 2 years and in 1939 I was to take my specialty exam and obtain a certificate of qualification, but this didn't happen after the fascist Germany attacked Poland. In August 1939 German troops came to Poland and the Great Patriotic War [8](#) began. My older brother David Gotlib-Shpringer was mobilized to the army.

Before German intervention there was no anti-Semitism in Poland. There were routinely incidents, but they were rare. We didn't see Germans in Sambor. We read in newspapers and heard on the radio about intervention of Soviet troops. We had a radio at home. By the way, there were newspapers issued during the war. Of course, they were not delivered to people's homes, but they were sold at post offices. We didn't know anything about the Soviet Union before. When Soviet troops liberated Poland from fascists Sambor and Lvov districts were annexed to the USSR [annexation of Eastern Poland]. They became a part of the Ukrainian SSR. We were very happy about it. We thought that the USSR was a country of justice and equal possibilities for all nations and that it was a country where there was no anti-Semitism. There were many newcomers from the USSR. They were holding high official posts. The Russian language was introduced everywhere and it took me no time to pick it up. I liked Soviet girls very much. I remember once telling my mother that I would only marry a Russian girl and she jokingly threatened me with her rolling pin. Soviet authorities began their struggle against religion [9](#). They began to close temples of all religions and conduct anti-religious propaganda. Moishe and I became convinced atheists and my mother and father were distressed by it. They kept observing Jewish traditions and we were telling them that they were holding to vestige of the past.

During the Soviet regime private shops became the property of the state. The owner of the joiner shop where I was an apprentice was also taken away from my master. I failed to obtain my certificate of qualification. However, the railroad depot of Sambor employed me as a joiner. In the first months of my employment I joined Komsomol [10](#). There was a Jewish chief of the training department of the depot. His surname was Shluze. He suggested that I attended training classes for locomotive operators after work in the evening. I studied there 6 months and I was a successful trainee. I had a medical examination and there were no restrictions. I passed all exams and obtained a certificate of qualification to work as assistant locomotive operator of freight and passenger trains. I took my first trip in June 1940. Since then I worked as assistant locomotive operator and I earned well. My older brother Moishe worked as track foreman in this same depot. The younger children went to school. Since Moishe and I went to work the material situation in our family improved.

I could play few musical instruments: piano, accordion, saxophone. I took part in an amateur club of the Sambor depot. There was a brass orchestra that often performed at concerts. I was a saxophone player, a dancer, master of ceremonies and a soloist singer. So I went on trips according to the schedule to be able to attend rehearsals. In January 1941 our orchestra went to a contest of amateur performers in Moscow. After a concert organizers of this contest approached

me and offered to move to Moscow and join the Lazar Kaganovich [11](#) ensemble. They promised that I would be able to obtain a certificate of locomotive operator in Moscow. I said I had to think it over and talk about it at home. When I came to Sambor and told my mother about this offer she asked me to work in Sambor till my younger sister and brothers finished school. The family needed my earnings. I agreed with my mother and wrote to Moscow that I would join them a couple of years later.

At 6 o'clock in the morning of 22 June 1941 I was to take a trip to Germany as an assistant locomotive operator. I came to the depot at 5 o'clock in the morning to obtain documents and do the final inspection of the locomotive before departure. I was surprised that there were no lights in the depot and there were many people in military uniforms on the platform. The depot radio announced that all depot employees had to stay in the depot and if they left it they would be executed. I didn't understand what happened. At about 10 o'clock one of militaries announced that Germany attacked the Soviet Union without an announcement and that we were at war. I climbed my locomotive and saw another operator incinerating his documents: a Party membership card, certificate and something else. Then we were ordered to drive the locomotive to a train. When we drove there I saw that the train consisted of platforms for cattle transportation with hastily made plank sides and roofs. There were women and children crowding on the platform. It turned out that we were to evacuate families of the Harrison of Sambor. We headed Stryi and then Gusiatin. The train was bombed on the way, but it wasn't damaged, fortunately. We stopped in Gusiatin for passengers to get water and food and members of the locomotive crew could rest. I fell asleep and when I woke up I saw that the locomotive operator was dead. He was killed with a shell splinter. There was no replacement operator available in the depot in Gusiatin. They provided an assistant and I had to drive the locomotive. We reached Kharkov [430 km from Kiev], our point of destination. Went to the depot office to get a job task. There was a military sitting there. He looked at my documents and gave me an application form to fill up. I wrote in this form that I studied German in a grammar school and when he saw it he told me to wait aside. There were few others in the group waiting. We boarded a truck and it left. We had no idea where we were going. We drove for few days. We were taken to a camp where they took us to take a bath and then we were given military uniforms. We didn't know where the camp was located. Only later it turned out that it was in Moscow region. Few days we learned to shoot and crawl and studied service regulations. Then we were distributed to military units. I joined an intelligence unit as an interpreter, my major duty was to interpret interrogation of German captives. The regiment was deployed near Moscow. This was September 1941. There were no actions near Moscow and we moved to Byelorussia. I went scouting with the unit several times.

We lived in trenches for the most part. We excavated wider and deeper trenches and placed planks on top. We had branches of the ground floors and slept on our overcoats. Of course, these were unbearable conditions. Everything was difficult: washing and even combing. Combs and razors broke and there was nowhere to get new ones. We shaved with sharp blades or knives: whatever we had. For this reason many frontline men grew beards and moustache, though the service regulations didn't allow it. In a short time we all got lice. There were happy moments when we could stay in village houses and got an opportunity to wash and put ourselves in order. There were no men, only elderly omen, in villages. All men of 18 through 50 years of age were at the front. Village women sympathized with us and gave us better food, though they didn't have enough either. We could wash in a public bathroom when there was one in villages, but unfortunately, it

didn't happen often.

There was a field kitchen moving with our regiment. Food product supplies were delivered from the rear. There were delays during combat action, but then we had dried bread and tinned meat. It was hard for smokers. There were delays with tobacco delivery and then they smoked dry leaves and dried rind. Tobacco served as currency: one could exchange anything for it.

I didn't stay long at the front. In January 1942 I was wounded in my arm and head. Our regiment medical unit provided first aid and then sent me to a rear hospital in Karaganda, Kazakhstan, in 2500 km from home, where I stayed for almost two months. When I was released from hospital I went to a military registry office to request them to send me back to my unit. The military commandant looked at my documents and said that there was a railroad crew formed in Karaganda and that he was sending me there. There were 3 columns formed and I joined the 28th locomotive column. There were 10-15 crews in each column, 12 members in each: 2 locomotive operators, 2 assistants, 2 stokers, 2 chiefs, 2 escort men, 2 foremen: those were 2 crews. We worked two shifts on trips: one crew taking a rest, another one working. There was a railcar carriage for crews to take a rest. There were plank beds and an iron stove where we could make something to eat. Chiefs and escort members were officers and the rest were privates. We hauled military force and military loads. We drove at night to avoid raids. When we transported weapons, especially rockets for 'Katyusha' units [Editor's note: The Katyusha Rocket 'Multiple Rocket Launcher' BM-21], we attached those shipments in the middle of a train so that Germans couldn't recognize their location. We hauled people, tanks and planes - anything. As a rule our destination points were near the frontline so that people or equipment could reach it promptly. There were frequent air raids. Almost in every trip there were losses of staff: crewmembers were wounded or killed. We looked death in the eyes every day. Of course, it was scaring, but not at work. During the shift I was calm and concentrated.

Only during my short service in the intelligence unit I didn't face any anti-Semitism. When I was in the column they often called me zhyd [Editor's note: 'Zhydy' (kike) - abusive nickname of Jews in the Soviet Union] in my absence or even looking me in my eyes. At first it was a shock for me and I tried to hit the counterpart, but then I tried to explain that it wasn't nationality that mattered I don't know which of these worked, but I didn't suffer abuse again. But who knows what they were saying when I wasn't there... They also awarded Jews so reluctantly and only when they couldn't help doing it.

In 1944 I submitted my application to the Communist Party. Two locomotive operators of our column gave me recommendations. There was one-year term of candidateship before they admitted to the Party. I believed that to be a Party member was an honorable and responsible thing and that a communist had to be an example for all.

In March 1945 we already began to drive trains in the direction of Germany. In late March 1945 our crew was awarded with orders. A locomotive operator of my crew was awarded an Order of the great Patriotic war of the 1st grade and I was awarded the same order of the 2nd grade. I was also awarded medals 'For Courage' for fighting for various towns. [Editor's note: There are orders and medals awarded to him for his combat deeds and labor achievements on his jacket, including the Order of Great Patriotic War, Order of Glory, medal for Defense of Stalingrad.]

In late April 1945 our train was running in the vicinity of Berlin, about 30 km. We didn't reach Berlin, though. I remember a funny incident at a big station. A Soviet colonel came to the train and asked for a locomotive operator. I responded and he asked me to follow him. We came to the station and I saw a beautiful shining car there. This colonel said: 'Start this car' and I replied that I was a locomotive operator, not a car driver. He grew mad, called me stupid and told me to go away. He thought that everything that could move operated in the same way.

I met my wife in this locomotive column. In late 1944 our column was stationed in Nida, a Byelorussian town. Many girls came to work in the depot at Komsomol assignment. They sent a young girl from Pskov to work as a stoker with me. Antonina Fomina was born in Pskov in 1926. Her parents were farmers. Antonina had 3 brothers and 2 sisters. She was very industrious with her work. At first I didn't take much notice of her. Later she told me that she noted my accuracy. Some operators had their cabin dirty or there was coal near the stove, but they didn't care. I liked to keep my work place clean and orderly and then it felt better to work. I shaved every day and washed my uniform. She liked it and took a closer look at me. I was seeing Galina, a Jewish girl working in the depot. We went for walks and went dancing at the club. Once we went dancing and Galina refused to dance with me saying that she was tired, but almost right away she went for a dance with another guy. Of course, I felt hurt and told her that we would not be meeting any more. She jerked at me angrily: 'Maybe you'll marry your stoker girl?' I replied: 'That's a good idea of yours!' It was a joke then, but I took a closer look at Galina: she was a nice girl. Hardworking and pretty and I could see that she liked me. I invited Antonina to dance and then we began to take walks in the town after work. Shortly afterward I asked Antonina to be my wife. Since we were both assigned as military we had to obtain permission of chief of headquarters Stepanov and column commissar Natanin to get married. They signed our request and on 12 January 1945 we went to a registry office in Grodno, the nearest Byelorussian town where we got married. We had a wedding party at our work. There were tables set in the dining hall and chief of the column made us a wedding gift: few bottles of vodka. There was another gift: we were allowed 10 days of leave.

In the middle of 1944 I met with my family. I didn't even know whether they were alive before. From Sambor they evacuated to the Ural and returned to our house after liberation of Sambor. My older brother David perished at the front in 1943 and the rest of my family survived. My parents couldn't even imagine that I would marry a non-Jewish girl. Of course, I told my mother that I had my wife to meet her. My mother asked me to not tell my father that I got married. Even my sisters and brothers told me off for marrying a non-Jewish girl. I told them that I wouldn't give up my wife for anybody. My future life showed me that I was right. When they met Antonina they got to liking her, even my mother. My father never knew that Antonina was my wife, he thought that she was just my friend. We stayed few days with them and then left for our unit.

We were near Berlin on Victory Day [12](#). Everybody was happy that this terrible war was over. People greeted and hugged one another. There were fireworks in the evening and orchestras playing in squares and streets. My wife and I were looking forward to demobilization, but we were told that our column was staying in Germany. We transported the military, military shipments and food. Only in October 1945 our column returned to Nida in Byelorussia. Only 19 of 300 who were initially in our column survived. We were awarded Stalin's award letters. In this letter they thanked us for outstanding labor during the war on Stalin's behalf and wished us success in peaceful labor.

I demobilized in early 1946. Railroad men from the Baltic Republics often came to Nida and they invited young locomotive operators to come to work there. They promised us lodging and good salaries, but I wanted to go back to Sambor where my family was. I didn't know that my parents and siblings emigrated to Israel in late 1945. Only my older brother Moishe stayed in Sambor. But we didn't meet with him: Moishe perished in early 1946. I didn't know about it for a long time. They wrote me, but I didn't receive their letter. My wife and I arrived at Sambor and went to my house: and there were strangers there. They told me that my family moved out. I felt distressed and bitter about it. I didn't know that I could claim my house to be returned to me and nobody told me there was this opportunity. My wife and I were accommodated in the hostel of the railroad depot. I went to work there as a locomotive operator. In November 1946 our son Pyotr was born.

There were people who still remembered me in the railroad depot of Sambor. I submitted my application to the Party again and obtained recommendations. Chief of depot authorized me to organize an amateur club. I spent a lot of time organizing a choir and an orchestra. We began to perform at parties and in contests. My wife didn't like it that I spent there my time that I could spend with my family. Later she confessed that she was jealous. Whatever, but she posed an ultimatum: a family or an orchestra. I chose a family, of course, but I had to give up my orchestra. When the Party bureau was reviewing my application, they blamed me that I didn't accomplish my Party task: that I gave up this amateur activity. They didn't admit me to the Party. I became a member of the party only in 1956. I was a convinced communist and a convinced atheist. Religion has been alien to me.

In 1950 I was sent to work in a depot of Lanovtsy station [360 km from Kiev] where I became chief of the depot. My wife and son stayed in Sambor till I received a lodging. In April 1951 our daughter Lilia was born in Sambor. In 1952 I received a dwelling in Lanovtsy and my family moved in with me. Antonina didn't go to work. She was to stay with our baby daughter till she turned one year of age. Then our son went to a kindergarten and our daughter was sent to a nursery school. My wife went to work in the depot.

After the war anti-Semitism grew stronger. Cosmopolite processes [13](#) began. This period didn't affect my family or our surrounding and I sincerely believed that the party was denouncing its enemies. Another round of anti-Semitism started after the Doctors' Plot [14](#) in January 1953. And again I believed it was true that many Jews happened to be enemies and saboteurs of the soviet power. Of course, I didn't tie Stalin's name to the growth of anti-Semitism. When on 5 March 1953 Stalin died, it was a big blow and horror for me like for the majority of Soviet people. I remember, the railroad issued an order for all locomotives to stop on all stations with their horns on at 13 hours on 5 March. My locomotive stopped at Drogobych station and the horn was on for 5 minutes.

After Khrushchev's [15](#) speech on the 20th Party Congress [16](#) my eyes opened. At first I believed him in disbelief. The thing is, we didn't know what was happening in the USSR before 1939 when we lived in Poland. And later we didn't have enough information. Gradually I began to think about it and compare things. I got to know that there were trains prepared to deport Jews to Birobijan [17](#), Siberia. From Khrushchev's speech I understood that the 'doctors' plot' and other 'plots' were organized specifically to strengthen anti-Semitism to justify deportation of Jews to Siberia. I understood that Stalin eliminated all Party officials and military leaders because they presented a threat to him, not because they were plotters and spies, as we were told. However, all Stalin's followers were also destroying the country, each in his own way. But I understood this only later.

Locomotives were gradually replaced with electric locomotives. I finished a locomotive school with honors and they sent me to a depot in Chanyzh station [460 km from Kiev]. My family moved to Chanyzh with me. Our children went to school and my wife and I went to work. I liked spending my weekends with the family. We went for walks, to the cinema and theater. We didn't celebrate any Jewish or Russian religious holidays at home. We celebrated birthdays and Soviet holidays. In the morning we went to a parade and then Antonina arranged a festive dinner at home. We often invited friends and colleagues. We traveled on our summer vacations. I could have free railroad tickets for the family and we traveled a lot across the country. We traveled to the south and north of the USSR and we liked tourist trips.

In 1966 I was transferred to the depot in Uzhhorod [700 km from Kiev], in Subcarpathia. This was a bigger town compared to where we lived before. We received a small 2-bedroom apartment called 'khruschovka' [18](#) and said it was to be our temporary dwelling and that we would receive another apartment. We lived in this 'temporary' dwelling for 12 years and only recently we got a comfortable apartment.

My wife decided to go to study. She finished a medical school and went to work as a lab assistant in a dermatovenerologic dispensary clinic where she worked until retirement.

My children studied well at school. They were ordinary Soviet children. They became pioneers and then Komsomol members. They didn't face any anti-Semitism. They had my typical Jewish surname of Gotlib, but my wife and I decided to change their nationality to their mother's to avoid problems in the future, in the passport they are written down as Russian. My son liked my job very much. After school he often came to the depot where he helped me and asked questions. After finishing school he decided to enter the Locomotive faculty in a Railroad School in Lvov. He passed his entrance exams successfully and was admitted. My son studied well and received wonderful recommendations after every training session. After finishing this school Pyotr received a mandatory job [19](#) to the locomotive depot of Lvov. He worked there 3 years. In 1967, when his 3-year job assignment was over, Pyotr got a transfer to Uzhhorod depot. Back in Lvov he married Tatiana Yakovenko, a Ukrainian girl. My first grandson Pyotr was born in 1968, and my granddaughter Svetlana was born in 1976. Pyotr received a 2-bedroom apartment in Lvov. He worked at the depot until retirement. Locomotive operators retire at the age of 55. Pyotr has grandchildren. My grandson Pyotr's daughter Kristina Gotlib was born in 1993, and Svetlana's son Savelyi Andriyanov was born in 1992. Pyotr and Svetlana have non-Jewish spouses. This has never been a matter of importance in our family. What mattered was that they were nice people and loved our children.

My daughter Lilia finished school with a silver medal. She entered the Faculty of Electronics of Uzhhorod University. Upon graduation Svetlana got a job assignment to work as an engineer at Uzhhorod instrument making plant. She lives with us. Her private life never worked out. Her son Anton Gotlib was born in 1985. Now he is a 2nd-year student of Uzhhorod university. After perestroika the plant where Svetlana worked closed down. She went to work as an accountant at the department of railway passenger and freight transportation. She works there now.

From 1946 I've tried to find my family. I sent requests to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and tried to search them through the Red Cross. They replied that they had no information about them. Later I gave up those efforts: for a citizen of the USSR it was dangerous to have relatives abroad [20](#).

Besides, I was a Party member. They found me after we moved to Uzhhorod in the late 1970s. I received a letter from my younger sister Haya. She wrote that she wanted to come to the USSR to see me, but they didn't issue her an entry visa. She went to Hungary. It was easier for residents of Subcarpathia to obtain a Hungarian visa compared to the rest of the USSR and I went to Budapest to meet with my sister. Of course, we were so happy to see each other. We didn't even hope that we would meet again. My sister told me about my dear ones. After returning from the front my older brother Moishe worked in the depot of Sambor. He perished in 1946, he was smashed between two trains. He was married, but they didn't have children. My father died in Israel at the age of 67 in 1955. After he died my mother lived with Sima and her family. Sima married a Jewish man in Sambor before they moved to Israel. She didn't work after getting married. She has a son, but I don't remember his name. Haya married a Jewish man from the USSR in Israel. Her family name is Strikovskaya. She finished an accounting school in Israel and worked as an accountant till she retired. Haya and her husband have two daughters: Tsviya and Esta. They are married to Jewish men and live in Haifa. I don't remember their marital surnames. My younger brother Shmil finished a Construction College in Israel and worked as a construction superintendent. He is married and has a son and two grandsons. He named his son Abram after our father. Shmil and his family have lived in New York, USA, for over 20 years. The youngest, Eshiyeh, finished a construction school and made stucco decorations. Eshiyeh got married in Israel. His wife's name is Sarra. They have no children. In 1966 Eshiyeh moved to New York, USA. Eshiyeh and his wife loved each other, but unfortunately, they had no children. Eshiyeh was the best at music in our family. He could play any instrument and had wonderful voice. Regretfully, my brother died too early. He had throat cancer. He had few surgeries, but they didn't help. Eshiyeh died in New York in 1972. I couldn't go to his funeral due to strong iron curtain [21](#), separating the USSR from the rest of the world. We couldn't even imagine traveling abroad on a visit. Later, in 1982 my sister could come to Uzhhorod and we met again.

When in the 1970s Jews began to move to Israel, I didn't want to go. I love my wife so and I was afraid she would face this prejudiced attitude as Jews face here. Also, my children were not considered to be Jews according to Jewish laws because their mother wasn't a Jew. According to the Jewish law, there are two ways someone can be a Jew. You can either be born a Jew, which means that your mother is Jewish, or you can convert. A convert is called a ger which literally means stranger. Being born a Jew means that if your mother is Jewish then so are you, if she isn't then neither are you. It doesn't matter whether your father is Jewish or not. Besides, I didn't hope to find a job at my age and I didn't want to be a dependent receiving welfare. However, I sympathized with those who decided to leave and wished them to be happy with their new life.

I became a pensioner in 1977, but I continued to work in the depot. Firstly, it was hard to live without working. It seemed to me I would die if I quit my job. Besides, it was hard to live on a pension. I had to support my daughter. I got a job of a track dispatcher. It was an interesting and responsible job and I liked it. I worked in the depot until 1992. Only after I had my first stroke my family talked me out of going to work.

When perestroika [22](#) became I thought that Gorbachev's [23](#) promises were idle. Whatever hadn't they promised on behalf of the Party... But then there were notable changes. The dead wall separating the USSR from the rest of the world, fell down. Soviet people got an opportunity to travel to other countries and invite their relatives and friends from abroad. In 1991 I visited my

relatives in Israel. It happened a year before, in 1990, that my wonderful and beloved mother died. She lived 94 years and until her last days she was in sound mind and she remained kind. I never saw her. I only managed to visit her grave in a Jewish cemetery in Rishon LeZiyyon. My mother and father were buried nearby and according to Jewish rules, of course. 2 months of my stay in Israel flew by like one day. I met with my family and saw my friends who had moved there long before. Israel is a beautiful country and I am happy to have visited it at least at my old age. Of course, perestroika gave me this opportunity. However, I think perestroika took away from much more than it gave. During perestroika our society divided into the rich and the poor. I still think they shouldn't have allowed this. In the end perestroika ended in the breakup of the USSR [editor's note: Breakup of the USSR: Yeltsin in 1991 signed a deal with Russia's neighbours that formalized the break up of the Soviet Union. The USSR was replaced by the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).]. Life became harder. I was an ace, the best locomotive operator, I have over 20 awards for my work, but now I am a beggar.

After declaration of independence the rebirth of the Jewish life in Ukraine began. Before Hesed was established in Uzhhorod in 1999 the Jewish community began its activities in Uzhhorod. People began to go to the synagogue freely and stopped hiding their Jewish identity. I've never attended the synagogue. I've been an atheist, though I believe in some superior force supervising us. My wife Antonina began to attend a women's club at the synagogue. We joke at home that Antonina is more Jewish than me. At least, it was her initiative to celebrate Jewish holidays at home. We do not celebrate Sabbath. On Jewish holidays Antonina cooks traditional Jewish food. We always have matzah at Pesach. However, we also have bread at home at Pesach since my grandson doesn't think it necessary to refuse from it. As for my wife and I, we do not eat bread at Pesach. My wife insists that I do not fast. She doesn't think my health condition is fit for fasting. I've never strived to it, but I've got adjusted. Almost all of my wife's friends are Jewish ladies. They taught her to cook traditional Jewish food and my wife cooks for holidays. Only my mother could make as delicious gefilte fish as my wife. My wife and I read Jewish newspapers and magazines Vek (Century), and Yevreyskiye Vesti (Jewish news) that we receive in Hesed and then we discuss what we've read. Of course, Hesed helps us to survive. They used to bring us meals from Hesed, but my wife and I decided we would have them brings us food packages rather than cooked meals. Not because their meals were not good. It's just that I, like any other man, think that my wife can cook better. Hesed provides medications and makes arrangements for a stay in hospital, if necessary. When my grandson Anton was at school he went to Jewish summer camps. He is much closer to Jewish life than me. Unfortunately, after my illness I cannot go to meeting or concerts in Hesed. I hardly ever leave my home, but we constantly feel Hesed's care. This is how it should be: if Jews hadn't supported each other, they wouldn't have survived and wouldn't remain a nation through centuries.

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 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 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.

4 Froebel Institute

F. W. A. Froebel (1783-1852), German educational theorist, developed the idea of raising children in kindergartens. In Russia the Froebel training institutions functioned from 1872-1917 The three-year training was intended for tutors of children in families and kindergartens.

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 WWI, and during which the tsar abdicated and a provisional government took over. The second phase took place in the form of a coup led by Lenin in October/November (October Revolution) and saw the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks.

6 Annexation of Eastern Poland

According to a secret clause in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact defining Soviet and German territorial spheres of influence in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union occupied Eastern Poland in September 1939. In early November the newly annexed lands were divided up between the Ukrainian and the Belarusian Soviet Republics.

7 According to the Jewish legend the prophet Elijah visits every home on the first day of Pesach and drinks from the cup that has been poured for him

He is invisible but he can see everything in the house. The door is kept open for the prophet to come in and honor the holiday with his presence.

8 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.

9 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.

10 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.

11 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.

12 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.

13 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'.

14 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.

15 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.

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

17 Birobidzhan

Formed in 1928 to give Soviet Jews a home territory and to increase settlement along the vulnerable borders of the Soviet Far East, the area was raised to the status of an autonomous region in 1934. Influenced by an effective propaganda campaign, and starvation in the east, 41,000 Soviet Jews relocated to the area between the late 1920s and early 1930s. But, by 1938 28,000 of them had fled the regions harsh conditions, There were Jewish schools and synagogues up until the 1940s, when there was a resurgence of religious repression after World War II. The Soviet government wanted the forced deportation of all Jews to Birobidzhan to be completed by the middle of the 1950s. But in 1953 Stalin died and the deportation was cancelled. Despite some remaining Yiddish influences - including a Yiddish newspaper - Jewish cultural activity in the region has declined enormously since Stalin's anti-cosmopolitanism campaigns and since the liberalization of Jewish emigration in the 1970s. Jews now make up less than 2% of the region's population.

18 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 Kiev.

19 Mandatory job assignment in the USSR

Graduates of higher educational institutions had to complete a mandatory 2-year job assignment issued by the institution from which they graduated. After finishing this assignment young people were allowed to get employment at their discretion in any town or organization.

20 Keep in touch with relatives abroad

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.

21 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.

22 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.

23 Gorbachev, Mikhail (1931-)

Soviet political leader. Gorbachev joined the Communist Party in 1952 and gradually moved up in the party hierarchy. In 1970 he was elected to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, where he remained until 1990. In 1980 he joined the politburo, and in 1985 he was appointed general secretary of the party. In 1986 he embarked on a comprehensive program of political, economic, and social liberalization under the slogans of glasnost (openness) and perestroika (restructuring). The government released political prisoners, allowed increased emigration, attacked corruption, and encouraged the critical reexamination of Soviet history. The Congress of People's Deputies, founded in 1989, voted to end the Communist Party's control over the government and elected Gorbachev executive president. Gorbachev dissolved the Communist Party and granted the Baltic states independence. Following the establishment of the Commonwealth of Independent States in 1991, he resigned as president. Since 1992, Gorbachev has headed international organizations.