

Blyuma Perlstein

Blyuma Isaacovna is an intelligent 89-year-old woman.

She has a perfect memory, she remembers her forefathers and is very proud of them.

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My family background

I was born in 1912 in a settlement called Yanovichi in Vitebsk region. It is Belarusian territory now. My paternal grandmother's name was Genya and grandfather's name was Chaim. They were born in Belarus. I don't know the exact dates and places of their birth. Grandma raised the children – there were a lot of them, I don't know exactly how many, and I don't know any of them by name – and ran the big household. They lived not far from the ferry across the Dvina River. Grandpa was in charge of that ferriage across the Northern Dvina, ten kilometers from Vitebsk.

My brother Aron loved Grandpa very much. He visited him often when he traveled home via Vitebsk, talked to him about Jewish history. Grandpa also loved him a lot. I've never been to their house. I was born tenth in our family and I was the youngest, so I never met any of my grandfathers or grandmothers. I lived together with my parents, my brothers and sisters near Vitebsk, but opposite to where Grandma and Grandpa lived. According to my brother Aron, Grandpa Chaim was very pious and literate and he spoke Yiddish and Russian. Unfortunately, I know very little about Grandma and Grandpa and there is no one to ask, because I am the only one from our family who is alive. My grandparents were very beautiful people, they were very good-looking. Grandpa wore a beard and Grandma covered her hair with a kerchief. I was told that I resemble my grandma. I am not tall, just like she was.

Grandpa and Grandma Perlstein were very religious and celebrated all Jewish holidays. Grandpa recounted the Torah and the Jewish history to his children and grandchildren. Two of his elder sons helped him with his job, but when they grew up they left for America, so I never met them. Grandma died before Grandpa, in 1914. Grandpa lived for 98 years and died in the 1920s.

Before the Revolution [1](#) people were very anti-Semitic, whole crowds organized and participated in Jewish pogroms [2](#). Grandpa had very good relations with the municipal officials, with the village constable and other people. [Village constable – lower rank of district police in pre-Revolution Russia. The position of village constable was introduced in 1878. They were accountable to the attachment police officer and executed supervision over the elective sotsky and desyatsky (charge-hands).] Grandfather was a respected man. In the course of one such pogrom, when the crowd was

supposed to pass Grandpa's house, the village constable came to his place, sat on the house porch and when the crowd wanted to attack the house, he told them: 'Everything's fine, there's no one here, pass by.' So Grandpa's house remained untouched and safe.

I've never met my forefathers on my mother's side and unfortunately I know nothing about them. They had lived and died long before I was born. My maternal grandfather's name was Leiba Pakson and that's all I can tell about him.

The Yanovichi settlement, where I was born, was located 30 kilometers from Vitebsk. It was a very cultural place, since literate and intelligent Jews and Russians lived there. Before and after the Revolution all children, both Jewish and Russian, went to school together and I never heard the word 'anti-Semitism,' because we all lived in friendship. Only the Kolonitsky family stood out. It was a Russian family of intellectuals and three people from this family were our teachers: two women and one man, Alexey Yakovlevich, thanks to whom we have the possibility to remember Yanovichi, looking at pictures made from his drawings.

The Kolonitsky family had a big stone house with a huge fruit garden. They even had wonderful 'antonovka' [type of apple] in winter, which they stored in the attic. Alexey Yakovlevich's brothers and sisters worked a lot; they had a very big garden. They made everything with their own hands and never hired any assistants. After the Revolution their household was ravaged by the 'Reds' [3](#) and communal sites were arranged on Kolonitsky's former land. One by one the Kolonitskys left Yanovichi. These very intelligent and good people taught my sisters and brothers. Alexey Yakovlevich also taught me drawing, history, mathematics and physics. He lived the last years of his life in Moscow. My brother Aron also lived there and they kept in touch with each other. Alexey Yakovlevich gave all the pictures made from drawings, which he drew in Yanovichi, to my brother. My brother Aron died in 1977 and I inherited all these pictures.

Our family at first lived on Porechskaya Street, behind the bridge. The streets were rather poor, paved with cobblestone and the houses were mostly inhabited by workmen. You can see a hill in the background, there was a Russian cemetery. All buildings to the left were wooden. This street led to the road to Vitebsk.

The two-storey building of the school was situated on the outskirts of Yanovichi, on Unishevskaya Street. The school was old, several generations had studied in it. School teachers were mostly local intellectuals, however, during my and my brother Aron's school years a lot of newcomers taught us. They lived in an extension of the school building; you can see it in the picture [I have] as a single-storey corridor. The school owned a big plot of land, there was a vegetable garden located in the yard. I studied at this school for seven years. The school was very good with a distinguished teachers' team, who taught us a lot. Since the school was situated outside of town and the cobblestone street ended there, a planked footway was constructed to the school entrance along the school fence.

The fire-depot was located in the center of the borough near the river. It was very well equipped with fire-engines and a fire-brigade, in case of fire they immediately arrived to extinguish the fire. A local theater group began its practice in this particular fire-depot. It was easily understood that a theater was located there, since there was a sign on the building. Their first performance, 'On the way to business,' was staged in 1911.

In June 1917 a Public House was constructed in Yanovichi, so this local theater group moved there to stage their performances. [Public Houses in pre-revolutionary Russia accommodated a library, a lecture/theater hall, a Sunday school, a canteen and a book store. The first Public Houses were opened at the end of the 19th century by major manufacturers and had a significant cultural effect on the population thanks to their libraries and theatrical performances. Bolsheviks made good use of Public Houses to promote their revolutionary propaganda and organize mass meetings. After the October Revolution of 1917 Public Houses were substituted by Educational Clubs and Houses of Culture.] The Public House can also be seen in the picture [I have], there is a small house with two windows to the right. Through this small house one could get to a big auditorium with a big stage, decorations and comfortable benches for the audience. The walls and ceiling were wooden. Very often actors from other places came on tour to our borough. A Jewish troupe also visited our place. When Soviet times came, school gymnastic groups acted on stage and performed in evening shows. This small house had a room where the pioneer organization [4](#) was based after the Revolution of 1917. A single-storey building with a hall was located to the left. Behind the small house there was a barn and in front of the house there was a small flower garden.

There was a beautiful Russian Orthodox Church in the middle of the settlement close to the market square. It was used for weddings and prayers. Sometimes children came inside to watch a wedding or some other ceremony. The settlement, the market square and nice houses, where not very rich but well-to-do and rather prosperous people lived, were located around the church. There was also a big park not far from it. A big wooden bridge led to the church across the Vymnyanka River. There was a street which led past the estate of the former Polish landowner, ex-owner of the Yanovichi borough, to Vitebsk. After the Revolution this manor served the Yanovichi population. A kindergarten was arranged in one of the buildings. I attended that kindergarten. Mostly craftsmen lived in that street behind the bridge. Every evening young people gathered on the bridge to spend their free time, especially on holidays and weekends. We had real fun.

There was a market place in Yanovichi. Among the market rows there was a two-storey building with a store on the first floor and a sewing shop on the second floor. It was set up after the Revolution. Later the Soviet Power expropriated the sewing-machines from the shop. Stores were arranged in the market rows. During holidays and days off people from neighboring villages came to the market square and brisk trade was built up. Peasants offered everything for sale: cattle, food products, fruit, hay, clothes.

There was a big three-storey mill in Yanovichi, which provided the big district with flour. Flour was also sold outside Yanovichi. The mill was located on the bank of the Vymnyanka River. In spring there was flooding so there was a dam in front of the mill from the side of the river bank. In order to protect the mill from the floating ice there was a paling in the water to the left. Normally when there was no flood it was possible to walk to the mill along the dam. The dam, which forced the water wheel, sustained the stable water level. Water passing through the logs and leaving the big pieces of ice behind, fell from a rather big height and set the mill wheels in motion. There was another steam mill behind the water mill, but it didn't always work, mostly the water mill was used. The mill was surrounded with a high wooden fence.

There was an old public bath-house [5](#) on the bank of the river. There was a high chimney on the banya roof and a well, from which water was taken. The banya also had an extension, used for household purposes. The banya operated only on certain days; there were women's days and

men's days. The mikveh was inside the banya. We went to the banya together with our mom.

There was a big open square for horses near the school, it was called the Horse Square, and was situated close to the central market square. A big building near the school was the borough council. There was an office in the council building, where the council employees based their borough administration. There was a drugstore in a small corner house to the left, at the beginning of Lyaznyanskaya Street.

My mother, Chasya-Ita Leibovna – we called her Chasita – was born in 1871 in Yanovichi borough of Vitebsk region. She learnt only the Yiddish language and knew it very well. She had big prayer books in Yiddish and she always read prayers to us. Mother spoke mostly Yiddish and a little Russian, since we lived close to Russians. But she couldn't write in Russian. Mom didn't wear a wig, she only wore a kerchief.

Mom's elder brother Mendel-Chaim Pakson [1865-1941] also lived in Yanovichi with his family and worked as a carter, delivering food products. He was executed by the Germans. His daughter Genya was a housewife. Genya's husband, Lev Shaikevich, lived next door to us. Genya and Lev had two kids. In 1941 the entire Shaikevich family was executed by the Germans in the neighboring Akhryutki village.

Father [Isaac Chaimovich Perlstein] was born near Vitebsk in 1868. He found out about my mother somehow, came to Yanovichi, married her and stayed with her in Yanovichi. Mother was one of the beauties in our borough. They had their wedding in Yanovichi with a Jewish chuppah according to Jewish tradition. There was no borough council at that time, so they invited a rabbi from Vitebsk. A lot of guests came. My parents purchased a house and set up a small household store. Dad worked in that store until 1919.

My parents led a typical Jewish way of life, observing all customs and traditions, separating dairy and meat products. The children were also raised in this atmosphere. We lived in comfortable circumstances, not poor and not rich. There was a small plot of land attached to the house, where Mother kept a small vegetable garden, she grew vegetables for our own consumption; we had a cow, a cow-shed, a hay-loft, a pantry and a barn. The house consisted of two rooms and a kitchen. It was very cozy. There was an entrance-room, a Russian stove [6](#), which was used for cooking and where it was possible to get warm. There wasn't much furniture, just the most necessary things: a table, chairs, a wardrobe and beds. There was a stove-bench.

Mother baked bread herself – it wasn't available in stores – and cooked. She was a very good housewife. We didn't have any water supply system; there was a well outside in the yard, which we used for the cattle. Drinking water was supplied from the river in barrels. We cooked on the stove and heated the house with it. There was a special department in the stove which was stoked for the purpose of heating the house.

The children helped with the household. There were eight of us and we all helped our mother with the household. There were various books at home, both religious and common literature. Father played the violin. Before I went to school, my elder brothers taught me, so I learnt to read, write and draw at an early age. I had five brothers and two sisters: Lev [1890-1954], Yuda [1894-1950], Aron [1900-1977], Iosif [1902-1979], Grigory [1910-1999], Rasya [1898-1941] and Sofia [1906-1942]. They were all born in Yanovichi borough in Vitebsk region.

My elder brother Lev left Yanovichi for Petrograd [later Leningrad, today St. Petersburg] and served in the Imperial Army of Nikolai II [7](#), in a musical detachment of a small military orchestra, which accompanied governmental ceremonies. He took part in World War I. He was a very experienced watch-maker. Lev worked in Petrograd as a master at the 'Electropribor' plant. He spent a lot of time on inventions. His wife was a Jewish woman, her name was Anna Epstein. She gave birth to two daughters, Esfir and Irina. They are both retired now. Esfir, or Fira, now lives in Israel. Irina lives in Slavyansk. During the war Lev was in evacuation in the Urals. He died in 1954 in Leningrad.

My second brother Yuda left home right after my elder brother. He lived and worked in Lugansk [today Ukraine], then in Kharkov [today Ukraine] in the Hunters and Fishermen Union as a chief accountant. He had two sons, Yonya and Lyova. Yuda died in Kharkov in 1950.

My other three brothers, Aron, Iosif and Grigory, joined the military. Aron, the eldest among them, was a pilot and worked as an instructor in the Crimea, not far from Simferopol, and later as head of the Aircraft School in the cities of Poltava and Kherson [today Ukraine]. In 1938 he was arrested on a false accusation of sabotage. He spent almost a year in prison, later he was acquitted and transferred to Moscow to the Gosaviakhim Administration. [Gosaviakhim – a club, a voluntary defense society of air force friends.] He took part in the Great Patriotic War [8](#), was at the front and died in Moscow in 1977, holding the rank of colonel. His wife was Jewish, her name was Arshanskaya. They had two children, son Evgeniy and daughter Vera.

My brother Iosif graduated from a military topographic school and the Military Land-surveying Academy, faculty of land-surveying. He worked in Kiev [today Ukraine] and in Moscow. The last rank he was conferred was lieutenant colonel. He also took part in the Great Patriotic War. He had a [Jewish] wife, her name was Serafima Baskina, and daughter, Inna. Inna studied in Moscow and worked as a journalist in Tallinn [today Estonia], at the editorial staff of the 'Soviet Estonia' newspaper. Her son, Yuriy Gati, worked as a TV presenter at the Leningrad TV. Iosif died in Tallinn, Estonia, in 1979.

My brother Grigory left Yanovichi for Leningrad after Father died. He stayed with my brother Lev in Leningrad and worked as a foreman at a candy factory. Later he graduated from the Leningrad Aircraft Military School and was assigned to Novochoerkassk [9](#), where he worked as a mechanical pilot. During the Great Patriotic War he served in the North. After the war, in 1945, he returned to Novochoerkassk and continued working as a foreman at the factory. In 1970 he retired and moved to Moscow with his family. His wife's name was Yelena and they had three daughters: Inna, Arsha [Asya] and Larisa. Grigory died in Moscow in 1999.

My sister Raisa, or Rasya, lived in Yanovichi borough and was a housewife. Her husband Sigalevich-Grigoryev and son Isaac were murdered by the Germans on 10th September 1941 [in Yanovichi]. Only her son Lev managed to escape the massacre and remained alive. He got into the military school and served in a tank unit. He retired holding the rank of lieutenant colonel.

My sister Sofia worked in Leningrad at the 'Electropribor' plant. During the war she was evacuated with her children – together with the plant – to the Urals. She died there in 1942 of stomach cancer. Her husband's name was Yefim Gofman and they had two children: daughter Polina and son Alexander.

Growing up

I was born in December 1912 in Yanovichi borough, Vitebsk region. I was the youngest in the family. I was born tenth, but two of the children died, so I may be considered eighth. All my brothers and sisters were grown-up already and I was spoiled a bit. I went to a kindergarten for one summer, which was located in the former estate building. It was necessary to walk through the whole borough to reach the kindergarten. Being the youngest in the family, I hardly had to help my mother, since I had two elder sisters. Sofia was four years older than me and Rasya was a fourteen-year old bride when I was born.

My brothers went to school, we had textbooks and books at home, so with their assistance very early – when I was five years old or even earlier – I learnt to read and write. I even tried to use the drafting instruments. I went to the only seven-year Russian school, though there were Jewish schools. My parents considered it better to send me to a Russian school. We had wonderful teachers. My brothers and sisters went to the same school before me. I advanced in all subjects very well and liked algebra most of all. I also liked literature and read a lot. Our teacher of literature, Mikhail Vasilyevich, called me out when it was required to read something aloud for the class; I was his assistant. I read a lot of works of literature aloud. He even thought that I had a gift for literature. We also had a remarkable relationship with our teacher of physics and drawing. Radio was just introduced and we dismantled a crystal receiver and drew a lot. I even keep drawings which we made in our physics classes. I drew and designed a lot at home, so there are a lot of drawings in ink left. This teacher, Alexey Yakovlevich Kolonitsky, whom I already mentioned, was a real Yanovichi patriot. We had a sports group at the school which I attended. Sometimes we performed on stage at the Public House, showing sports pyramids and dances.

My parents were religious and both attended the synagogue. There were two synagogues in Yanovichi. My parents attended one of them. We always celebrated Sabbath and cooked some special meat meals on these days. We also celebrated all Jewish holidays. Those days remain the brightest days of my childhood. I remember very well – approximately from the age of six – how we celebrated Pesach. We were all believers. Before Pesach everything was cleaned, the apartment was tidied up and washed. We put away kitchen utensils which we used daily and solemnly took out the Pesach utensils. I still remember the matzah stock: a huge basket of cylindrical shape, I think, one meter wide, which stood in the room.

Inside the house, at the entrance from the kitchen to the room, there was a prayer on the wall, covered with a tin, which was called ‘Matseiva’ [mezuzah]. Every Jewish family had one in their house. My parents were not members of any political organization. My parents were educated people; Father could write in Russian, too. They read only Yiddish books. Since there were a lot of boys in the family, we had a small Russian library at home. We knew no anti-Semitism, living in the borough. There were both Russian and Jewish houses mixed up, Jewish houses were not separated. We lived in friendship both with our Russian and Jewish neighbors. Mother had a very good temper. She said that when children scuffled with each other and parents ran to her complaining about it, she calmed them down saying that there was no use to interfere, the children would settle the quarrels. Later, when at school I became a pioneer, I still believed in God.

My parents didn’t pay visits to anyone; they were too busy with our big family. However, they visited our relatives and some friends on holidays. We lived in a big family only until the children grew up. When they became grownups they left for different places, got married and had their own families.

In 1923 Father shut down his store in Yanovichi and following my brother Yuda's advice, who served in Kharkov, joined him there. He found a job in the Hunters and Fishermen Union at the gunpowder warehouse. In the course of unloading, one of the loaders lit a cigarette, an explosion occurred and Father died in the accident. It happened in 1923. My parents loved each other very much and I never saw them fighting.

When I was a schoolgirl, I remained alone with my mother and lived together with her until I finished school in 1926. After I finished school we left for Kharkov where at that time a trial regarding the pension for my father's death took place. It was my first trip in a train. We were adjudged a pension in Kharkov for losing our family provider. It was 60 rubles per month, 30 rubles for me and 30 rubles for my mom. It was a decent amount in those years, but later this amount was never increased and it turned into a very small payment. My brothers supported me and my mother with money. My brothers lived in different places. Our family was very united.

When we lived in Leningrad - we came to Leningrad in 1929 to live with my elder brother Lev - Mom remained pious, she prayed all the time and never ate any non-kosher food. When she had to go to the synagogue during holidays, I accompanied her if possible and carried her prayer-books. Mother strictly observed all Jewish holidays, kept kosher, though she cooked everything for us. She stopped eating the day before Yom Kippur, spent all day at the synagogue and continued eating only after the first star appeared in the sky. She definitely believed in God and was sure about her way of living. All Jewish holidays were celebrated in our family while Father was alive. After finishing school all children were members of the Young Communist League [10](#) and pioneers, so Mom remained alone with her faith, since we didn't approve of her beliefs anymore. But she continued to observe all holidays.

I studied for one year in Kharkov at a special technical school. Later I left for Leningrad with my mom. My elder brother Lev lived there at that time. I went to a nine-year Soviet school between 1928 and 1931. There was a contract signed with our class by the Aluminum-Magnesium Institute, so after finishing school we all came to work at that Institute. In 1935 several of my schoolmates entered the correspondence department of the Leningrad Polytechnic Institute. Being a third-year student I transferred to the full-time study department of this institute. We were accepted for the position of a laboratory assistant [medical field of activities] and developed our careers very quickly. I worked as a senior lab assistant in that institute.

I knew my husband, Yuriy Ilyich Khaitlin, since my childhood, since my first years at school. He also lived in Yanovichi and we went to one and the same school but to different classes. My husband was born in 1912. He was a Jew by nationality [11](#). He knew Russian and Yiddish. After we finished school we left for different places: he went to Moscow and I went to Kharkov, later to Leningrad. We kept in touch though. Yuriy graduated from the economic faculty of the Moscow Financial and Economic Institute. Yuriy worked at the navy engineering department in the position of a chief accountant. In 1936 we got married. We just registered our marriage, there was no big wedding and Jewish chuppah, it was impossible in those times [12](#). In 1937 our daughter Adel was born.

During the war

Yuriy worked at the civilian navy engineering department between 1936 and 1941. Later he became a soldier and obtained the rank of commissary officer. We weren't aware of the oncoming

war and sent our daughter to my sister Rasya's place in Yanovichi for the summer in 1941. When the war broke out, Adel stayed with Rasya until the fall of 1941. We weren't able to get her out because of the military situation in the country. She perished in 1941 together with Rasya's family and her grandmother, my husband's mother.

About my husband's parents I can say that they were Orthodox Jews, like my parents. My husband's father, Ilya Khaitlin, was an expert on flax. He was a manager of a flax receiving station. He died in Vitebsk. His wife remained alone and during the war she moved from Vitebsk to Yanovichi, where her granddaughter, my daughter Adel, lived. They all perished there in September 1941.

I have a picture of graves of executed men and women in Yanovichi. They were two separate pits. Our fellow countrymen, who live in Moscow, Vitebsk and Leningrad, collected funds, got together, found the place of their burial and managed to arrange a small cemetery there. Our fellow countrymen visited these graves annually. However, I don't know who visits them now. But the cemetery is safe and we were told that the borough council takes care of it.

I have a note here, a piece of newspaper, which is a notification about the death of my daughter and my sister's family. It is just a scrap of paper, but it states clearly that the Yanovichi borough council received a letter from me and sent a reply to it: 'Your relatives, Raisa Sigalevich, her husband Sigalevich, their younger son, your daughter Ada and Ada's grandmother, your husband's mother, Chaya-Isya, were executed by the Fascists on 10th September 1941. Lev Sigalevich is alive, he is a Red Army officer.' He is the only relative of my husband who survived. I keep this note. I received this letter, a reply to my inquiry, from the Yanovichi borough council chairman. The letter is written in legible handwriting. They even wrote: 'We grieve about the death of your family.' The letter was written on a piece of newspaper and sealed up in the form of a soldier's triangle. Looks like they didn't even have a clean piece of paper, because this happened right after the liberation of Yanovichi from the Germans.

Between 1939 and 1942 I worked as an engineer at the institute. My mother died a natural death in 1941 in Leningrad of blood poisoning; penicillin was not invented yet in those years. We worked at the Polytechnic Institute during the war, from 1941 to 1945. We served in a hospital under our patronage in besieged Leningrad [13](#). I was the secretary of a Young Communist League cell. I joined the army at the end of the blockade and served between July 1942 and February 1945 in a construction battalion of the Baltic Naval Depot in the position of a platoon leader commander assistant. I also worked as a library manager and by the end of the war I held the rank of headquarters clerks' master sergeant.

I returned home from the army in 1945. Our unit was stationed near Leningrad and it wasn't difficult to get home. I saw that somebody had tried to break into our apartment. I asked our neighbors about it. They were very decent people. They saw that someone had tried to break into our apartment and said that they were responsible for it, so the housebreakers left. They were janitors and house-manager employees. They wanted to do it by the order of the headquarters in charge of guarding servicemen apartments. My apartment remained safe. My neighbors were Russian Orthodox, very decent people. They behaved nobly both before and during the war. We continued our friendship after I returned from the army. Everything in my apartment remained intact and secure owing to my neighbors.

I was demobilized on the grounds of pregnancy. I served together with my husband in the same unit. I served in the attached battalion for the navy engineering department and he served in the administration of that department. When our Research Institute, where I worked, got evacuated to the Urals, I, having lost my elder daughter, didn't want to follow them and joined the army voluntarily. I hoped that my daughter would be found, but it was in vain. When our forces liberated Belarus from the Germans, we received the official notification about the death of my daughter and my sister's family.

After the war

At the end of the war our daughter Sofia was born and Raisa was born a year later. The engineering department, where my husband worked, was transferred to Tallinn and I followed him there with our baby. We lived there for three years. My husband fell ill there. Our second daughter Raisa was born near Königsberg. The doctors examined my husband and detected a malignant tumor. He stayed in hospital for a long time in Königsberg and later in Leningrad. Yuriy died in 1947 in Leningrad. He was transferred to a hospital there from Pillau, where he had worked at a navy engineering department. It was a real tragedy for me. I remained alone with my two little daughters. I moved back to Leningrad with my children. I couldn't work because of the children, so I stayed without a job for several years and lived on a pension. My relatives supported me.

I didn't really face anti-Semitism in my life. I began to feel it only after the war [1948-1953] [14](#). We all knew that Jews were refused jobs and those who returned from evacuation weren't registered at their previous place of residence [15](#). It was all owing to Stalin's personal anti-Semitic feeling, as well as owing to the increase of anti-Semitism in the party machinery. Jews were fired from cultural and educational institutions on various grounds and Jewish literature editions and printing houses were shut down. Stalin took revenge on Jews for their perceived lack of patriotism: [The State of] Israel was being established at that time and Jews supported the idea very much. A lot of Jews were subject to repressions. KBG [16](#) officials visited various enterprises, even factories and plants, hunting Zionists, especially among the management and engineers.

I personally experienced anti-Semitism twice. The first case happened when my elder daughter Sofia came back from elementary school, crying. She told me that a pupil accused her of always getting high marks and he explained it was due to the fact that she was a Jew, as was their teacher. My daughter always got excellent marks, so she was very much offended by such words. She cried bitter tears when she came home. The second time was the Doctors' Plot [17](#). I was registered at the party cell as a housewife, since I had small children and didn't work for several years. At one of our studies a woman raised an issue about Jews, alleging that the Jews had saved themselves far in the East, had not worked and had not participated in the war. I couldn't bear to hear that. I took the floor and said that it wasn't true. I couldn't prove anything to them there and then, but I promised to bring all materials for the next study. I talked to an experienced person and the next time mentioned facts about Jews: Great Patriotic War heroes, and how many of them were awarded medals. I also told them that there had been no unskilled Jewish workers and that they all sat in workshops because there were no illiterate Jews. They were all literate in a Jewish way and were capable of working properly. My speech provoked a scandal. They tried to shut me up, but I told them everything I wanted to say and defended the honor of our Jewish warriors.

I never wanted to immigrate to Israel. All my relatives, as well as the graves of those who died, are in Leningrad, so I didn't want to leave. A lot of my friends left, but it happened later. Two of my nieces left with their families and live in Israel now. When my children grew up, I started to look for a job, since my institute couldn't give me employment. My job involved business-trips; I didn't know what to do with my children. Someone suggested that I work as a teacher of physics, which I did. I attended the teachers' retraining courses and started work at a workers' school. Thus I was able to work and raise my kids. They went to school already at that time, it was 1954.

I worked as a teacher of physics until I retired. There were no conflicts at work connected with my Jewish identity. I had a rather quiet job and I was respected. When Jews got permission to leave for Israel, my elder brother's daughter's family, the family of my niece - her husband, her children and herself - left Leningrad. Aron's daughter, my niece, and her family left Moscow. Before her departure her son had left for Israel. I keep in touch with them, we correspond and even meet sometimes, they come to visit us. I've never been to Israel, they wanted me to come very much, but I didn't take the risk of going, especially in the state I am in now.

My daughters didn't have a Jewish upbringing. Their grandma, my mother Chasya-Ita, had died before they were born, and I, being a member of the [Communist] Party, deviated from the Jewry. However, they do identify themselves as Jews and support the Jews. It was very well seen when the Jewish organization 'Yeva' started to work in 1993 in Leningrad. 'Yeva' [Eve] is a name of a Jewish woman, in honor of who our organization was called. I don't know the details. They began to supply us with various parcels and helped in other ways. This organization has its own club, adult's and children's choir. Two of my granddaughters attend the children's choir. I keep contact with this organization through my daughter Raya and her children. I cannot walk anymore, so my daughter Raya became a volunteer in this organization instead of me. My grandchildren and Raya celebrate all Jewish holidays in 'Yeva' and understand very well that they are Jews. Unfortunately, I cannot visit the place anymore.

Glossary:

1 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.

2 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 other lower-middle class. The Black Hundred were the perpetrators of many Jewish pogroms in Russian cities such as Odessa, Kiev, Yekaterinoslav and Bialystok. Although they were nowhere near a major party in Russia, they did make a major impact on the Jews of Russia, who were constantly being oppressed by their campaigns.

3 Reds

Red (Soviet) Army supporting the Soviet authorities.

4 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.

5 Banya

a specifically Russian feature, a kind of big sauna for public use where people not only wash themselves, but also bring their bodies in a healthier condition by way of exposing them to the impact of very hot steam and massage with brooms of birch branches. Before the war and for a long time after the war, the majority of Soviet people did not have a bath tub at their homes, to say nothing of shower and hot water. You could only get cold water from taps. But still, the most important and traditional function of the banya was to sweat in the sweating room. The rich clients could afford paying special attendants who would beat their naked bodies hard with the birch brooms, thus increasing blood circulation and improving the overall condition of their health. Banyas are still very popular in Russia.

6 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.

7 Nicolas II (1868 -1918)

the last Russian emperor from the House of Romanovs (1894 * 1917). After the 1905 Revolution Nicolas II was forced to set up the State Duma (parliament) and carry out land reform in Russia. In March 1917 during the February Revolution Nicolas abdicated the throne. He was shot by the Bolsheviks in Yekaterinburg along with his family in 1918

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 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.

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 Item 5

This was the ethnicity/nationality factor, which was included on all official documents and job application forms. Thus, the Jews, who were considered a separate nationality in the Soviet Union, were more easily discriminated against from the end of World War II until the late 1980s.

12 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.

13 Blockade of Leningrad

On 8th September 1941 the Germans fully encircled Leningrad and its siege began. It lasted until 27th January 1944. The blockade meant incredible hardships and privations for the population of the town. Hundreds of thousands died from hunger, cold and diseases during the almost 900 days of the blockade.

14 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'.

15 Residence permit

The Soviet authorities restricted freedom of travel within the USSR through the residence permit and kept everybody's whereabouts under control. Every individual in the USSR needed residential registration; this was a stamp in the passport giving the permanent address of the individual. It was impossible to find a job, or even to travel within the country, without such a stamp. In order to register at somebody else's apartment one had to be a close relative and if each resident of the apartment had at least 8 square meters to themselves.

16 KGB

The KGB or Committee for State Security was the main Soviet external security and intelligence agency, as well as the main secret police agency from 1954 to 1991.

17 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.