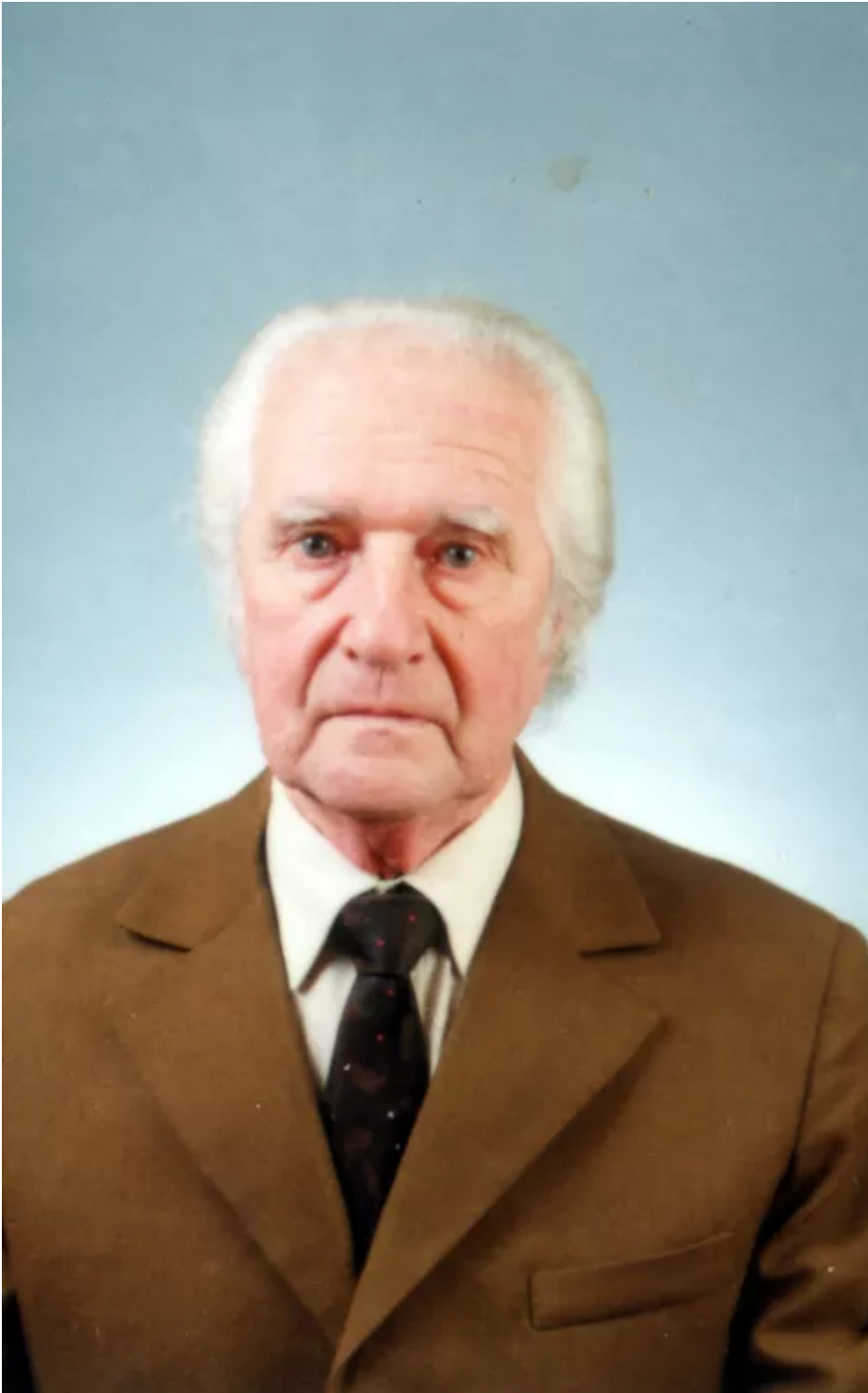


Semyon Falk



This is a photo of me, taken for my passport in Uzhgorod in 2002.

Many of our friends moved to Israel in the 1970s. We didn't consider this option since my wife and I both suffered from asthma and doctors didn't recommend such a dramatic change of climate. However, we sympathized with those that decided to move and were always happy to hear that they managed well in their new country.

My wife died in 2002. Her colleagues and friends came to the funeral. People liked her. We arranged a Jewish funeral and buried Riva in the Jewish cemetery in Uzhgorod. Two rabbis from Israel, who visited Hesed at the time, conducted the ritual. They came to the cemetery. Almost all people came to the funeral with flowers. Jews don't bring flowers to a funeral, but those people didn't know about it. It's been almost a year that I've been going to the synagogue to recite the Kaddish for my wife. I don't know Hebrew and get a copy of the prayer printed in Russian letters. I didn't go to the synagogue before my wife died. I didn't believe in such things and didn't like it. It's too late to change one's convictions. I cannot say that I have faith, but I do read the Kaddish. I have to do it for a year.

When perestroika began in the late 1980s I felt no enthusiasm. I still believe that we had a better life before perestroika. I'm old and won't live to see the promised bright future ? if it ever comes. Plants and factories were shut down, people lost their jobs and didn't have means to support their families. Therefore, I felt negative about perestroika from the very beginning. Of course, Gorbachev gave a start for democracy. Why did they have to spoil it afterwards and destroy the country?

There has been one positive change since Ukraine became independent: the Jewish way of life has revived. In 1999 Hesed was founded in Uzhgorod and now Russians feel envious of Jews. Hesed takes care of old people. They deliver hot meals to our homes. We also receive food packages. We receive monthly allowances to buy medication. We get medical care and, in case we need medical aid, we can go to hospital and have free medical examinations there. However, I don't think this will last forever. America and Israel cannot provide assistance to us forever.

The attitude towards Jews has also changed. Jews are free to go to the synagogue now, which they couldn't do before perestroika. We celebrate Jewish holidays in the former synagogue that houses the Philharmonic now. There was a great celebration at Chanukkah. Ten cars with electric Chanukkah candles on the roofs drove across the town in the evening. It was very beautiful. This wasn't possible in the past. There are beautiful celebrations of Jewish holidays now and nobody forbids them. They attract young people, too, which is good.