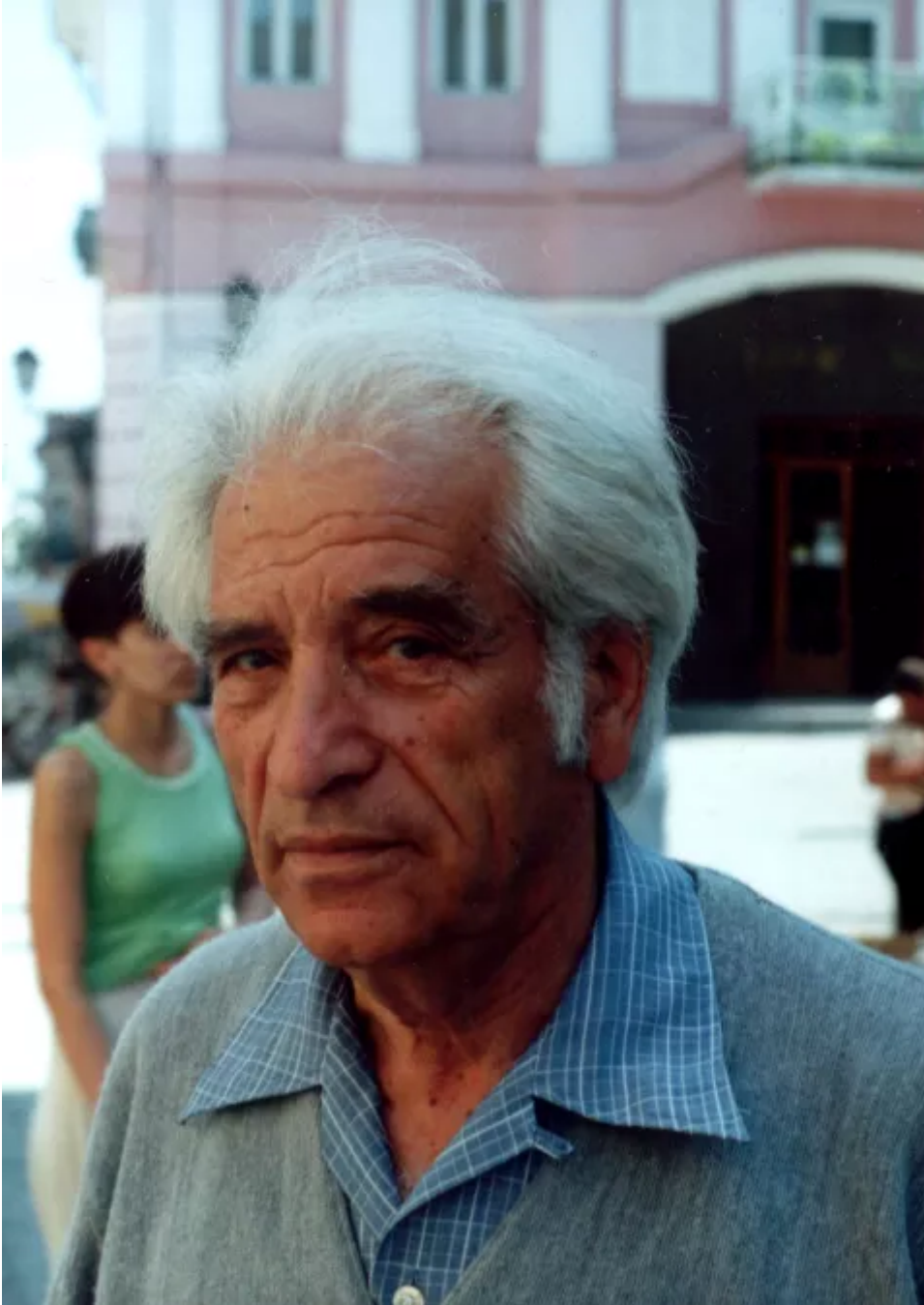


Zoltan Shtern



This is a recent picture of me, taken in Uzhgorod in 2002. In the late 1980s perestroika began. At first I was skeptical about it: I didn't believe in positive changes and believed the totalitarian regime to be unshakable. Later I saw that life was changing. Perestroika gave us a freedom we weren't used to. We could correspond with our friends and relatives living abroad, travel and invite them here. Mass media and television started to say things that in the past people were afraid to even mention when they talked in a whisper: about the lawlessness and repression in the USSR. An avalanche of information about our miserable life in the USSR depriving us of human rights fell upon us. However, many people tried to ignore it: it destroyed their understanding of the USSR, the Communist Party and many other things. Of course, from a material point of view life became more difficult: the standard of living became lower and there was unemployment that didn't exist before. As for me, I believed it was vitally important that we gained freedom. Anti-Semitism mitigated

during the perestroika. Religious people weren't persecuted any more. Another happy event in this country is that Jewish life began to revive. The synagogue began to operate in Uzhgorod. There were mostly older people attending the synagogue in the past, but after Ukraine gained independence younger Jewish people began to go to the synagogue, too. It never happens now, like it did before sometimes, that there aren't enough men for a minyan at the synagogue. I'm a Jew, I've been a Jew and I will always be a Jew. Lately I've attended the synagogue on Sabbath and Jewish holidays. I pray at home every day. I ask God for my brothers' health, for the health of my family and peace in Israel and Ukraine. Many things have changed lately. Hesed plays a big part in the social life of Jews here. It opened in Uzhgorod in 1999. Hesed takes care of all Jews: from infants to old people. It provides assistance to the old and needy and supports them when they need medical care. It's also important that Hesed also supports our spiritual life. There's a number of clubs and studios in Hesed where everyone can find something to his liking. Older people appreciate the opportunity to socialize. I still work and don't suffer from loneliness while old people that don't go to work are very sensitive about an opportunity to talk. They get together in Hesed, which offers them interesting lectures, literature and music parties. We also spend Jewish holidays in Hesed.