

# Naum Balan

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Odessa

Ukraine

Interviewer: Ludmila Grinshpoon

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Naum Balan is a tall gray-haired man with a sincere and friendly face. He and his wife Lidia Lieberman live in a two-bedroom apartment. In the living room the furniture is of 1970s style. There are a few landscape paintings on the walls painted by Naum's brother Michael, an artist, and his daughter. Naum is very proud of his brother. Naum had a file of his family that he had made himself displayed on a big table. He has a beautiful sheet with his family tree with over one hundred names in it. Naum became interested in the history of his family in the 1980s. He corresponded with his elderly relatives to get more details, but he didn't get answers to all his questions since many details were gone along with the ones that knew them.



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## Family background

My paternal ancestors came from Mostovoye, Ananiev district, Kherson province. [Editor's note: at the end of the 19th century it was called Liakhovo, Privolnoye.] There were 1,607 residents in Mostovoye and 862 of them were Jews. There was a synagogue, an elementary school, a district hospital and a steam mill in the town. There were a few markets where Jews had their shops. My great-grandfather Naftul Balan was born in 1844. He lived in Mostovoye all his life. He was a cattle dealer. Around 1864 Naftul married Sosia, a Jewish girl, born in 1845. Nobody remembers Sosia's maiden name. My great-grandfather Naftul perished during the Civil War [1](#), in 1919 when a gang [2](#) attacked Mostovoye. Bandits broke into the house and one of them cut off my great-grandfather's head when he was praying. My great-grandmother Sosia died in 1924. They had five children: three daughters - Chona, Shyfra and Esther - and two sons - Mosha and Michael. All of them were born in Mostovoye.

My grandfather Michael Balan was born in 1865. He was the first child in the family. He spent his youth in Mostovoye. Michael began to help his father when he was very young. In the late 1880s he married Reiza Bashuk, a Jewish girl from his village. My grandfather was a very business-oriented

man. He often went on business to Odessa where he had acquaintances. In the late 1920s my grandfather sold his house in Mostovoye and moved to Beryozovka with my grandmother. They lived with their daughter Lisa. Grandfather often visited my parents in Odessa and Tiraspol. I remember his visits to Tiraspol. He wore traditional dark clothes, a long jacket and boots. He had streaks of gray hair, a beard and a moustache. He always wore a cap with a hard peak. My grandfather was religious. My father said he studied in cheder. I think he had food made specifically for him in our house since we kept a cow and pigs and he wouldn't have eaten pork. I don't remember whether my grandfather went to the synagogue in Tiraspol, but he always prayed at home. I liked to watch my grandfather preparing for praying covering his head with tallit and putting on a small box [the tefillin, on his forehead and hand]. Grandfather Michael died in 1939. He was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Beryozovka. I don't know whether he had a traditional funeral.

My grandmother Reiza's father, Solomon Bashuk, was born in Mostovoye in the 1840s and died in this town in 1902. That's all I know about him. His wife, my great-grandmother Etl, lived a long life. After her husband died she lived in the family of her daughter Golda Gorokhovskaya in Odessa. She died in 1941. Besides Golda, Reiza had two other sisters: Charna and Eidia.

My grandmother Reiza was born in 1863. She was of average height and was neither slim nor fat. I remember her wearing a kerchief, long skirts and long-sleeved blouses. I believe my grandmother was religious and observed all Jewish traditions, but I never took any interest in it and don't know any details. My grandparents spoke Yiddish. Grandmother Reiza died in Beryozovka on 3rd February 1937. She was buried in the Jewish cemetery. Michael and Reiza Balan had eight children: four boys and four girls. All of them were born in Mostovoye. They studied in a Russian school. My father's brother Abram died in infancy in 1902 and another brother Semyon died at the age of 14 in 1914. Betia, one of my father's sisters, lived in Kaluga where she died in 1978. That's all I know about her.

My father's brother Minia was born in 1897. He lived with his family in Beryozovka before the Great Patriotic War [3](#). His wife's name was Sonia. They had three children. I don't remember their names. Minia worked in a kolkhoz [4](#). I don't know what he did. I only remember that he always brought watermelons when he visited us. In July 1941 when the Great Patriotic War began and our family was ready to evacuate from Tiraspol, my father went to Beryozovka to take his brother Minia's family with us. His mother-in-law said, 'Why do we have to leave our home - did we do the Germans any harm? We don't have to leave'. They stayed.

When the Germans came my uncle's family was taken to the camp in Domanevka [5](#). He saw his wife and children being shot by the Germans. He buried them himself. He would have been shot, too, but Manya, a Jewish medical nurse helped him to escape. They kept wandering in the steppe for a long while and they lived with a Ukrainian family for some time. Uncle Minia knew German and pretended he was a German. When the Germans were retreating somebody reported to them that Minia was a Jew. They arrested and beat him so hard that his leg got fractured. It didn't knit properly and Uncle Minia was lame for the rest of his life. The Germans were in a hurry. This saved his life. After the war Uncle Minia and Manya got married. They lived in Beryozovka. My uncle continued his work in a kolkhoz. They had two sons: Senia and Alik. When their sons grew up they moved to Odessa where they worked as meat cutters at Privoz market. Uncle Minia died in Odessa, where he lived with his older son, in 1962. He was buried in the Jewish cemetery. Both sons and

their families moved to Germany in the early 1990s. Senia has already passed away; Alik lives in Berlin.

Lisa, my father's sister, was born in Mostovoye in 1902. She married Moisey Rosenblatt, a local Jew. They had three children: Gedaliye, Emma and Anna. Before the war they lived in Beryozovka. When the Great Patriotic War began Uncle Moisey and Gedaliye went to the army and Aunt Lisa and her daughters were in evacuation with us. After the war they returned to Tiraspol with us. Gedaliye perished and Uncle Moisey returned home after the war. He had many awards. He worked as an accountant after the war. He died in the 1970s. Emma graduated from a pedagogical college. She was very sickly. She has already passed away. Anna, the younger sister, graduated from a technical college and worked at the wine and cognac factory in Kishinev. She doesn't work any more now. She lives in Kishinev with her husband, and their only daughter lives in Canada with her husband. Aunt Lisa died in Tiraspol in 1993.

As for my father's other sisters, Polia and Esther, all I know about them is that Polia was born in 1904, lived in Mostovoye, was married, had children and perished along with her children during an air raid in 1941. Esther was born in 1906 and lived with her husband and children in Odessa. They all perished in 1941.

My father Mark Balan, the oldest of the siblings, was born in 1890. I don't know whether my father was raised religiously, but from what I recall, he observed no Jewish tradition. After finishing a four-year elementary school, at the age of 12 my father began to work to help his father support the family since the situation was hard. They worked for their landlord Engelgardt purchasing cattle for him. Every now and then they got into trouble. Once some bandits attacked them, took away the cattle and locked them in a hut in the woods. They managed to escape from there.

When World War I began in 1914 my father was recruited to the army. He was almost 24 years old. He served in the rear in Simferopol first. He told me that one of his duties was to stand on sentinel stock-still for two hours. If his sergeant major noticed him stir, he started his countdown anew. Later my father went to the front. He was in the army of General Brusilov. [Editor's note: ?. ?. Brusilov (1853-1926): well-known Russian and Soviet commander. During WWI he was the commander of the Southwestern front. In 1916 he was in command of a successful attack of the Russian army known as Brusilov breakthrough. From May-July 1917 he was a Supreme Commander-in-Chief and between 1920-1924 he served in the Red army.] Once his regiment had to lie in hiding under the enemy's fire. My father and his fellow comrade were ordered to fetch some water. On their way back his companion was killed and my father was wounded in the neck. He was sent to a hospital in Kiev. This happened in 1916. After he recovered he returned to Mostovoye. My father never told me what he did for a living there.

My maternal great-grandfather Avrum-Itzhak Korsunski was born into a very poor family in the town of Novoukrainka, Elisavetgrad district, Kherson region, in 1818. My great-grandfather was raised in his aunt's family who also had twelve children of their own. When he turned 20 he decided to leave the family and live on his own. He had to work hard to make his living. When the Crimean War [1853-1856] began he was recruited to the army. His regiment was in Sevastopol. After the war Avrum-Itzhak purchased a small grocery store in Novoukrainka and married Getia, a local Jewish girl. I don't know my great-grandmother's maiden name. My mother didn't know the date of her death either.

My mother often talked about her paternal grandfather Avrum-Itzhak. He was a strong man with big hands and a large nose. My mother used to say, 'Azoy vi a kartoshke' [it looked like a potato in Yiddish]. My great-grandfather Avrum-Itzhak liked drinking and his nose was always of purple color. He lived in Novoukrainka separately from his children. When my mother brought him borsch or other food, when she was a girl, he always heated it on his Primus stove: he liked his borsch or tea very hot. He loved my mother and always had a small gift for her when she came to see him. My great-grandfather was tall and big; he had an upright posture and walked a lot. He rarely took his stick with him. Even in his old age, he had strong teeth and a clear sight. When somebody complained of a toothache, he used to comment that it was hard to imagine that a bone could ache. He read without glasses. He was a self-educated man. He read Russian newspapers and was interested in politics. My great-grandfather died in 1921: he was sitting in an armchair when they found him dead in the morning. He died at the age of 103. He was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Novoukrainka. My great-grandfather had only one son named Gersh.

My grandfather Gersh Korsunski's date of birth is unknown. Most likely, he was born in Novoukrainka in the early 1860s. He studied in cheder. He helped his father in the grocery store and later went to work at the mill owned by Varshavski, a local Jew. Later my grandfather bought a mill in Novoukrainka. In 1887 he married Leya Lev who came from the town of Bobrinets, Elisavetgrad district, Kherson region. My grandmother's father Tonchen Lev was born in 1822. I guess he was born in Bobrinets, too. He died there in 1912. My grandmother's mother's name was Pesia. I don't know the dates of her birth or death. My grandmother had one brother, Shlomo, and six sisters: Tsetl, Zlata, Mariam, Basheiva, Shyfra and another sister whose name nobody remembers. They were born in Bobrinets. My grandmother was born in 1870.

After they got married my grandparents lived in their own house in Novoukrainka. I don't remember this house. My parents and I went to Novoukrainka, but I was too small to remember any details. My mother told me that my grandparents were very religious. They strictly followed the kashrut and had their poultry slaughtered by a shochet. Their four children were raised religiously. They observed the Jewish traditions and rituals. They spoke Yiddish in the family. They were wealthy. My mother's brother and sisters studied in a grammar school. My mother told me that in 1919, during the Civil War, a gang came to Novoukrainka and broke into their house. Bandits demanded horses from my grandfather. Horses were of great value for villagers and my grandfather refused to give them any. One of the bandits grabbed his sable, but my grandmother began to scream and they didn't do my grandfather any harm. In 1922, after the Civil War, Soviet authorities arrested my grandfather for some reason. Grandfather Gersh never returned home and we don't know how he died. The authorities didn't offer any explanation of what had happened.

After my grandfather was arrested and gone, my grandmother Leya lived in Novoukrainka alone as all her children had left their parents' home by then. In 1934 the older children, Godia and Sonia, convinced her to move to Australia where they lived. She lived in her son Godia's house. In 1936 my grandmother died accidentally: she drowned in the bathroom. She probably felt ill, but there was nobody around and she drowned. This happened when she was visiting her daughter Sonia. Grandmother Leya was buried in Perth, Australia. For many years Uncle Godia couldn't forgive his sister Sonia that their mother died in her house. They made it up only two years before Sonia died.

Godia, the oldest in the family, was born in 1888. In 1908 he moved to Nikolaev from Novoukrainka and became a shop assistant. My uncle was a caring son and brother; he often wrote letters and

sent gifts to his family. The owner of the store valued him highly and put all his trust in him. The owner offered him his support if he wanted to open a store of his own, but my uncle decided to move to Australia in 1913. He had a hard life in Australia: he was a laborer and worked in stores, but gradually he came to standing firmly on the ground. He owned a hotel and purchased a shell-rock mine. He married a Jewish girl, but she died when she was young. They didn't have any children.

Uncle Godia often traveled to Israel for charity purposes: he built a school and supported children's institutions. He wanted to visit us, but my father was summoned to the KGB [6](#) office where they told him to write his brother that he couldn't receive him on any plausible excuse: refurbishment in the apartment or something like that. My mother missed her brother a lot. She said she would recognize him among a thousand people. Finally, Uncle Godia arrived in Odessa in 1963. He stayed in Londonski hotel on Primorski Boulevard. My parents and I went to see him in Odessa since he wasn't allowed to travel to Tiraspol where we lived. Uncle Godia wanted our family to move to Australia, but my father didn't agree to this. After my father died Uncle Godia invited my mother to visit him in Australia, but she didn't dare to travel that far. Uncle Godia died in Perth in 1971. His nephews in Australia inherited his money. My cousin Rachel contributed some money to charity in Israel in the memory of my uncle.

Rachel's mother was my mother's older sister Sonia, born in 1897. As a child Sonia was smart and had an inquiring mind. She studied well, but was a naughty girl. My mother told me a story: during the Civil War some bandits were staying in my grandfather's home. There was a redhead among them who had a remarkable appetite. When their senior ordered Grandmother Leya to make vareniki [dumplings with filling] Sonia made a big varenik filling it with wheat wastes and put it on top of others on a dish hoping that the redhead would grab it. He did and got very angry when he found out that there was something wrong with the filling. Grandmother Leya was horrified, but Sonia just burst into laughter. All of a sudden other bandits began laughing, too, and the redhead laughed with them.

Sonia got married in the early 1920s. I think her husband's surname was Katel. Sonia's son Abram was born in 1923, and in 1924 Sonia moved to her older brother Godia in Australia. I don't know what happened to her first husband.

In Australia Sonia married Yakov Roshanski, a Jewish man who came from Bessarabia [7](#). They had two sons: Harry and Tony, and two daughters: Rachel and Liya. Liya was named after her grandmother. I saw my aunt Sonia in 1976 for the first time when she came to Kishinev on a visit with her husband. Sonia was a slim woman who looked young for her age. She died in Perth in 1989. Her son Abram visited the USSR in 1990. He wanted to find his father. We met and spoke Yiddish. I correspond with Liya. I don't know whether my relatives in Australia observe Jewish traditions, but Liya always sends me greetings on all Jewish holidays.

My mother had another sister, Rosa, born in 1895. She told me that Rosa attended a Marxist club. She died of twisted bowels in Nikolaev in 1914. Grandmother Leya also adopted a boy that had problems in his own family. His name was Veniamin. He took my grandfather's last name. He went to the front during World War I and never came back to my grandmother's home. Somebody saw him in Odessa after the war. In the 1960s our relatives mentioned to us that there was a Veniamin Korsunski who lived in Leningrad. I visited him when I went to Leningrad on business. They

received me well, but that man told me that he wasn't the one I was looking for. My mother believed that he didn't want to acknowledge that he was a Jew since he hadn't told his wife that he was one. He was Russian, he said. I didn't find him looking like a Jew, anyway.

My mother Fira Korsunskaya was born in Novoukrainka in 1902. My mother enjoyed recalling her childhood. She was a healthy and cheerful girl. She was the favorite in her family and of their neighbors. She was her older brother's pet; Godia always gave her gifts. My mother told me that she always fought with street boys who teased her calling her names. They called her: 'zhydovochka - a Jewish girl [abusive] - Rukhlia died on a stove bench and other zhydy [kikes] came to her funeral...' I don't remember the rest of it. Those boys always threw stones into a bucket of water when she was carrying one. She ran after them to beat the obnoxious boys. She could always stand for herself. Her sense of humor never failed her and she was always cheerful.

My mother finished seven years of grammar school in Voznesensk. She studied well in grammar school, had an inquiring mind and was hardworking. My mother was fond of literature: she remembered poems that she learned in grammar school and often recited them to us. We liked listening to her. My mother was good at mathematics. When my brother Michael had problems doing his homework my mother helped him. She knew the Bible well and told us stories from the Bible. She wanted to become a doctor when she was a child. To enter a medical college women had to finish a school for medical nurses. My mother entered a school for medical nurses in Voznesensk in 1916. After finishing this school in 1918 she was sent to work in a hospital in Mostovoye where she met my father. My mother told me that my father made up any excuse to come to see her in the hospital: his leg hurt or he bruised his finger or something the like.

## Growing up

My parents got married in Mostovoye in 1919. I don't know what kind of wedding they had, but knowing my grandfather Michael's religiosity, I would think they had a traditional Jewish wedding. After the wedding the newly-weds spent some time with my mother's parents in Novoukrainka. Grandmother Leya made my mother a very valuable wedding gift: a feather mattress that my mother kept until she died. After a few months, in 1920, the newly-weds moved to Odessa. At first they lived on Chicherin Street in the center of the town, but it turned out to be very cold and they moved to another apartment in Nezhynskaya Street in the same part of the town. My mother told me that my father and another Jewish man named Reznik kept a few cows in the stables in a beautiful building in the backyard of Gaevski pharmacy in Odessa. There was no pasture since the stables were in the center of the town, but it was a profitable business. They supplied fresh milk to residents of the town. In the late 1920s they closed this business. Perhaps, it was due to the end of the NEP [8](#).

Their son Adam was born in Odessa in 1920. He only lived a few months. The next was my brother Nathan, born in 1922. He was named after our great-grandfather Naftul. My brother Abram was born in 1925 and I followed in 1928. I looked like a girl so much that my mother called me 'meydele' [little girl in Yiddish]. In 1929 my parents moved to Tiraspol where life was not so expensive. My brother Aron was born there in 1930. He died of scarlet fever when he was one and a half years old. The doctors couldn't determine the right diagnosis.

In Tiraspol our parents rented a wing of a house at first. Their landlord's name was Bogaty [rich in Russian]. It was a small house with a kitchen and two small rooms - 50 square meters altogether.

The living room was a little dark. There was a long old table covered with a tablecloth - my mother liked tablecloths - and five chairs. There were two wardrobes and a couch that served as a bed for Nathan and me. There was another bed for Abram. The other room was our parents' bedroom. There were two beds and a sideboard between them in the room. The rooms were heated with a stove. There was a table and a stove in the kitchen. My paternal grandfather Michael liked to pray in the kitchen - nobody knows why - when he and Grandmother Reiza were visiting us. We were the only Jewish family of many families living in the neighboring house, but we got along well with all other tenants and never had any problems.

There was a long basement that once connected a house and the shop of the landlord of the house. We, the boys used to go to this basement. There was old furniture, children's prams and other junk there. I found an old gun that was dropped there during the Civil War. My mother was a monitor of the yard. We had skittles, chess, checkers and other games in a sideboard in the hallway and all children in the yard could take them to play, but then they had to return the games where they belonged.

Around 1935, when they sold the house in Novoukrainka that my mother had inherited from Grandmother Leya, my parents managed to buy a house in Tiraspol. My mother always dreamed of a house of her own. There were three rooms, a hallway and a kitchen in the house. There was a small orchard in the backyard: there were apple trees, a cherry tree, an apricot and a plum tree that is still there. Branches of our neighbor's walnut tree hanged over the fence into our garden. I was responsible for our kitchen garden. I grew radish, onions and other vegetables on a small plot between the house and the fence. I designed and made a system of irrigation and planted bushes and flowers. There was a shed and a deep cellar in the yard. During the war we found shelter in this cellar. We kept a cow and two pigs in the shed. Although my grandfather Michael was very religious I don't remember him mentioning anything about pigs to my parents. There was also a chicken-coop in the yard where we kept chickens and ducks. We also stored wood and coal in the shed. There was a small pergola in the yard.

My father was a worker at the wood cutting factory in Tiraspol, and later he worked as a meat cutter at a market. My mother worked as a nurse in the town hospital for a short while, but then quit since she had a lot of work to do about the house and with the livestock. My mother put all her time and effort into the house and the children and my father worked to provide for the family. We spoke Yiddish in the family. My father wasn't religious. I don't remember him ever going to the synagogue while my mother always knew when there was a holiday. She told us the history of each holiday and cooked special food. I regret that I didn't listen to her as I should have and took little interest in all this. But I remember that we always had matzah for Pesach. My mother cooked fish, chicken broth and other delicacies. Before Pesach she took chickens to the shochet to have them slaughtered.

My older brother Nathan was good at drawing and liked photography. He attended a club of photographers at the town's Palace of Pioneers. I sometimes joined him to go there. Nathan and I had much in common and were very much alike. We were both dark-haired and dark-eyed while our middle brother Abram had red hair. He didn't have any hobbies, but he studied well. When I grew older I began to attend a drawing club in the Palace of Pioneers where I learned to play the mandolin and balalaika. I also attended an aviation-modeling club. Nathan went to a Jewish elementary school, but he didn't like it there and left it for a Russian school, which was the best

school in town. Nathan studied well and was a Komsomol [9](#) activist.

In 1935 I went to the elementary school located not far from where we lived. It was a one-storied cobble-stone building. My first teacher, Sophia Yakovlevna, was a Jew. I studied well, but due to my misconduct Sophia Yakovlevna sometimes told me to leave the classroom. Once I made her so angry that she grabbed me by my collar and pulled me to the door along with my desk. My bag fell on the floor and my apple and slice of bread with butter and jam, which my mother had given me, rolled onto the floor. Sophia Yakovlevna kept pulling me telling me to send my mother to school. My mother had to go to school to talk with the teacher. However, I finished elementary school and always kept good relationships with Sophia Yakovlevna. I was very happy that she survived the occupation during the war. She failed to evacuate and stayed in Tiraspol.

When I went to secondary school I became a pioneer. I had all excellent marks at school. After finishing the 5th grade my schoolmates and I went on tour to Odessa. We walked in the town and went to museums. I also remember spending vacations in a pioneer camp at the seashore.

Tiraspol was a small town. There was a musical and drama theater in the town. My mother liked going to the theater. She often took me there. She liked Nataalka-Poltavka [an opera by a famous Ukrainian composer Nikolai Lysenko] [10](#) and Zaporozhets za Dunaem [Dnieper Cossack Beyond the Danube - an opera by famous Ukrainian 19th century composer Semyon Gulak- Artemovski]. My parents often visited their relatives in Kirovograd, Bobrinets and Novoukrainka. I remember a trip to Kirovograd when we went to pay a visit to some of my mother's relatives. We went there by train and attended a birthday party of the son of one of our relative's. I remember that the food was delicious.

When Bessarabia became a part of the USSR in 1939 a special border patrol unit was organized at my brother's Nathan school. Senior pupils were to patrol the bank of the river with frontier men to prevent spies from crossing the border. We, boys, were also on guard. Once we saw a suspicious man, and we asked him to show his documents. He couldn't run away since there were people around. Some pedestrians joined us. This man didn't have any documents and we took him to a militia office. There were many such incidents.

### **During the war**

I remember 22nd June 1941 - the beginning of the Great Patriotic War. My father was an early riser. He was the first to hear explosions: a bridge across the Dnestr River between Tiraspol and Bendery was bombed. My father woke us up and we went to hide in the cellar. The front was nearby and we prepared to go into evacuation. My father obtained documents for our departure and got horses. He went somewhere with Abram at night, probably to an office, to make final arrangements. For us to get packed my mother put a kerosene lamp on the floor. The light came through between the front door and the threshold, and two patrol soldiers saw it from the outside and came into the house. One of them said that my mother was signaling to the Germans and that she should be shot. Another soldier argued in response saying that she didn't do it on purpose. The first soldier wanted to take my mother with them. We were scared. Nathan and I got up and began to scream. My father came home soon and we managed to protect my mother.

We evacuated on horse-drawn carts. We picked up my father's sister Lisa and her children in Beryozovka. The family of my father's brother Minia refused to join us. We stopped in various



towns. Once near Nikolaev I was wounded in my leg during an air raid. We reached the village of Nizhne-Chirskaya in Stalingrad region and stayed to spend a winter there. My father worked in the kolkhoz named after Stalin. He was a cattle breeder and we worked in the field. My older brother Nathan was recruited to the army in December 1941. In his letters he wrote about how they marched to Stalingrad - they had to cover a distance of about 100 kilometers - and how they stayed in a school building. Later he wrote from the front. Nathan disappeared in 1943. We don't know where or how it happened. In February 1942 my younger brother Michael was born in Nizhne-Terskaya.

When the Germans began their offensive near Rostov in summer 1942, we - I, my mother, my three brothers, Aunt Lisa and her two daughters - moved on with the kolkhoz cattle. We traveled on horse-drawn carts. Germans often bombed and fired at our group. I saw carts blowing up and people dying. German pilots pursued every person. I don't know how we survived. At the crossing on the Volga - I guess it was called Krasny Yar - there were military men crowding waiting for their turn to cross the river. The Germans bombed this crossing a lot. Soldiers found shelter in shell holes. We also looked for any hiding place we could find. We didn't unharness our horses since we didn't know when we might get a chance to get across the Volga on a pontoon.

My brother Michael was only six months old. My mother and he were hiding under the cart and my mother shielded him with her body to protect him from bullets. At night the Germans fired with tracer bullets that shone in the dark. In the daytime the sky was dark from avalanches of German planes that made a specific howling sound. There was a small church not far from the crossing where a military unit stayed. Many bombshells hit this church killing many military. I watched these bombshells falling down: there was hardly any fear left since we got used to firing. My father helped with fixing the crossing. They made a small landing stage and then the crossing began. Our cart was about to board the pontoon, but something delayed us and another cart boarded before we did. The pontoon moved, but we stayed back. We couldn't move backward since there were other carts jamming. When this pontoon was in the middle of the river it bumped into a mine. It exploded and sank and we stood there looking. We crossed the river on another pontoon. When we got to the opposite side another bombing began. The first cart turned over when trying to get on the bank. It took some time to get the horses onto the bank so that we could move on. We hid in a forest and watched the bombing from there. We saw big splashes of water created by the explosions.

We finally got to Palasovka, a railway station on the border with Kazakhstan, where we got on a freight train. Somebody stole some of our luggage at the station and we had little left. We were given bread on the train and a hot meal at the stops. I remember millet soup, however thin, but hot and tasty. We arrived in Karaganda [2,000 km from Odessa]. There were one and two-storied buildings with stone foundations and wooden structures in the town. There were barracks for workers from other locations near the railway station. There were lots of robberies and murders in Karaganda during the war.

In evacuation, people were supposed to find accommodation by themselves. We stayed in an earth house for two years. There was so much snow in winter that it was rather warm in the earth house. There were frequent snowstorms. Once there was so much snow that my father could hardly manage to get outside to shovel snow. After two years we moved to an apartment in a private house. Another family lived there. We stayed in this apartment until August 1945.

My father went to work at the meat factory. He was the head of a cattle supply department. Our life wasn't too bad. My father brought home some leftovers from the factory. We went to buy bread in Kustanai region where it was less expensive. My mother did the housework and looked after Michael. I went to the 7th grade at school. The school was big and there were wooden floors. There were children of various nationalities. I studied well. I became a Komsomol member in this school. Several times some boys called me 'zhyd' [kike] in the streets, but I fought back. Once, a boy hit me with his skates. This happened during a snowstorm in winter and I was caught unawares. There were two of them that came unexpectedly out of the blizzard saying, 'Ah, zhyd!' Well, there was some fighting, but when injured I had to run home. My mother got so worried when she saw blood dripping from the wound. I told her that I had had a fight. Basically, besides some minor episodes of this childish fighting I wasn't suppressed or persecuted in all those years.

My brother Abram finished secondary school in Karaganda and went to the army in 1943. When he received a subpoena to the military registry office he got an offer to go to work at a military plant where employees were released from service in the army, but Abram said he wanted to beat fascists like his older brother Nathan did. He went to the front. First he was sent to the town of Kushka [Turkmenistan] in the very south of the former USSR. My brother took a six-month training there: they trained horses to transport ordinance at the front. After he finished his training he went to the front. In 1944 my father received a notification that his son perished in Sumskaya region in January, but this happened to be false information. Abram was severely wounded in his face and got to a hospital in Leningrad. He was in the department of facial surgery. He recovered and went back to the front. He perished in the village of Parichi near Svetlogorsk in Gomel region at the end of 1944.

In February 1945 my father was ordered to go to the Ministry of Meat and Dairy Industry in Moscow. He received an assignment to join a military unit in Berlin. This was how he came to Berlin with Soviet troops. He was the supervisor of the cattle supply base of the Berlin meat factory for over a month. In summer 1945 he was released from his assignment due to his health condition. He was 54 years old.

On 9th May 1945 [Victory Day] [11](#) when we heard an announcement about the victory on the radio all residents of Karaganda rejoiced. There were so many people and enterprises in evacuation. We all dreamed of going back home. We waited until my father came to pick us up in late August. We went to Tiraspol from Karaganda via Moscow. This was my first time in Moscow. In the square in front of Kievskiy railway station [a railway from where trains to Ukraine and Moldova depart] where we were to board a train, I saw a staircase going down, and many people were going downstairs. I wondered where they were going and followed them. It turned out to be the metro. At that moment boarding on our train was announced and my father began looking for me. He was very scared when he didn't see me around, and he gave me quite a 'what the dickens' when I got back. I kept looking at Moscow from the train window. It was very interesting.

## Post-war

We came to Tiraspol and found out that three other families lived in our house. During the war Romanian soldiers kept horses in our house. They bit on the barks of our fruit trees in the yard. There was a mess in the house: there were partials installed, plaster damaged and floors scratched. Our neighbors took our belongings. It took us a while to have these families move out;

the town council helped us. After the war my father worked at the market. He was a foreman of the meat department. I went to the 10th grade at school. I also continued photography. I took my younger brother Michael to his teacher of music. He learned to play the violin. He was five years old then.

After finishing school in 1946 I entered the Electrotechnical Faculty of Odessa Communications College. I lived in a hostel and received a stipend, but this wasn't enough for a living and my parents supported me. Students also worked as loaders in the harbor to earn some money for a living. 1946- 47 were hard years. We tried to get up late in the morning so that we could have lunch at 12, because we usually didn't have any breakfast. We were given food coupons for a hot lunch at the canteen. After classes we bought a half-liter jar of corn flour at the market to make mamaliga [corn flour pudding] with shmaltz [melted pork fat] in the evening. We lived on the second floor and there were dancing parties on the first floor in the evening. We managed to drop by there to dance a little while mamaliga was being cooked. We didn't care about nationality at that time. There were no conflicts or anti-Semitism whatsoever in the college. I had friends in college and also visited my father's acquaintance and companion Reznik. His daughter Rita introduced me to Lidia Lieberman, a student of medical school, who was to become my wife many years later.

I finished Odessa Communications College in 1951. I studied well and got a [mandatory] job assignment [12](#) at a design institute in Kiev. But I liked practical work and chose to go to Kustanai in Kazakhstan [2,500 km from Odessa], where I was appointed as chief communications engineer. My parents gave me a pillow, a blanket and a box to store my clothing. I sent my luggage to Kustanai and went to the town via Moscow where I got an invitation to the Ministry of Communications. The deputy minister had a meeting with me. He said that I was to become the director of the communications office in Kustanai since my predecessor had been fired. Later I got to know that he had lost his job for criticizing comments regarding the Soviet regime in a discussion with friends. One of those friends sent a letter with this information to the KGB.

I even received a house when I arrived as my management thought that I was bringing my family with me. It was an old one-storied house where a cleaning woman and her daughter lived. I occupied only one room there and this woman was very grateful to me for this. I met Alexandr Lazerson at work. He came from Leningrad and worked there at the telephone station. His wife Maria worked there as telephone operator. In 1937 [during the Great Terror] [13](#) Alexandr's brother was arrested and disappeared. There was no court hearing or investigation. Alexandr and his family were allowed 24 hours to pack and leave the town. Alexandr was sent into exile to Kustanai and his wife and daughter were sent to another town. It took them a few years to get a permit to live together. They were very decent and friendly people. We were friends. Maria offered me to come to lunch every day and I took them to the theater and cinema to return the favor. There was a nice drama theater in Kustanai and a wonderful actor whose name I don't remember. He was admired in the town and we went to see performances where he took part with great pleasure.

When Stalin died in 1953 we were given red-and-black armbands. People looked preoccupied. Many cried. There were no loud discussions or laughter heard. People were asking each other how we were going to live without Stalin. Shortly after Stalin died Alexandr Lazerson was rehabilitated [Rehabilitation in the Soviet Union] [14](#), but his family stayed in Kustanai. Alexandr was like a father to me. In 1982 I went to see Alexandr Lazerson in Kustanai. He was dying. We talked and he said

he had been waiting for me and now that he had seen me he could 'leave'. I still keep in touch with his daughter Galia.

In the early 1950s I went to work as a chief engineer at the telephone station and received a room in a two-bedroom apartment in the center of the town. My neighbor tenant had tuberculosis and I believe I contracted it from her. It was diagnosed in 1953. The doctors told me that I had to go to hospital; my lungs were affected and it was a disseminating process. I underwent treatment: pneumothorax and medications. They sent me to Borovoye recreation center in Kokchetav region, and I went there for the second time in 1954. I met Elena Mazdorova, a Russian woman there. She also had tuberculosis and was getting treatment in that same recreation center.

Elena was born in the town of Mamonovo in Altay in 1931. When we got well we got married in 1956. Elena moved to Kustanai. My parents had no objections against my marriage since I just informed them de facto. When Elena and I went to see them they liked her. Elena finished Kustanai Pedagogical College. She was a teacher of Russian literature and language in a school in Kustanai. After I got married I got the second room in the apartment. Thus, Elena and I lived in a two-bedroom apartment by ourselves. There was running water in the apartment but no other comforts. Later I promoted the installation of bathtubs in apartments. In 1959 I bought my first TV, brand of Record, as I worked in the communications field. TV sets were rare at that time and our neighbors came to watch TV with us. There were first refrigerators sold in Kustanai, but they were very expensive. An acquaintance of mine helped me to get a Soviet refrigerator ZIL-Moscow.

Our son was born in Kustanai in 1963. We named him Igor. My wife and I agreed that for our son to avoid any problems in the future he would have her last name and his nationality would be Russian. I didn't face any anti-Semitism personally, but after the Doctors' Plot' [15](#) in the 1950s state anti-Semitism was very strong.

My parents lived in Tiraspol. My brother Michael studied at school. He was the only child who stayed with our parents and they spoiled him a lot. Michael was fond of drawing and collecting postage stamps since he was five. I sent him his first stamps from Kustanai. When he grew up he became a member of the philatelic society of the USSR. He had a big collection of stamps. In 1962 Michael finished school and went to the army.

I was a success at my workplace in Kustanai. I became a recognized person in the town. I was offered a responsible job in Alma-Ata, the capital of Kazakhstan, but my parents were getting older and my mother wrote me that I had abandoned them. I finally made a decision, and in 1963 I moved to Tiraspol with my wife and son. We lived with my parents. My wife stayed at home looking after Igor. I couldn't find a job for quite a while. The Ministry of Communications of Moldova promised me a job, but they couldn't give me an apartment. I worked as a technician in a construction trust and then in the laboratory of the tinned food factory. In 1965 we moved to Kishinev where I got a job as an electrical engineer at Kishinev University. My wife worked at school. We lived in a room in a hostel until I received a nice two-bedroom apartment in a new district of Kishinev in 1968. We completed repairs: whitewashed the walls and painted the kitchen with oil paint. We bought a Moldavian set of furniture: a cupboard, a sofa, a dinner-table, chairs and a low table. Moldavian furniture was of good quality. We bought Romanian beds with good mattresses for our bedroom.

My father died at the age of almost 75 in 1965. He worked as a meat cutter at the market and got up early in the morning. On that day he got up as usual. My mother said goodbye as usual. When leaving he said 'good day' to her as usual and she replied, 'Gey in gezinterheit' [have a nice trip in Yiddish]. It was an early morning in April. There was ice on the road. My father fell and hit his head, but he stayed to wait for the bus to get to work. He worked all day, but when he came home he complained that he had a headache. My mother called an ambulance and sent me a telegram. I came immediately. The doctors couldn't help him. He died. We buried him in accordance with the Jewish tradition: I remember him lying on the floor wrapped in a shroud. We buried him in a coffin in the Jewish cemetery in Tiraspol.

My brother Michael got married in 1966. His wife Marina had a Jewish father and a Ukrainian mother. Michael and his wife had two daughters: Ludmila and Tatiana. My brother and his family lived in our parents' house. My mother didn't get along with my brother's wife and my brother felt sandwiched between them sometimes. Michael was a design artist in Tiraspol: he designed the interior for exhibitions, painted pictures and portraits. He worked in his shop. My brother became a well-known artist in Moldova. He took part in many art exhibitions and became a member of the Union of Artists of Moldova. His daughter Tatiana followed into his footsteps and finished the Art Graphic Faculty of Tiraspol Pedagogical College of Moldova. His daughter Ludmila finished construction college. They are both married.

After my father died, my mother's brother Godia from Australia continuously asked my mother to move to Australia. He said that he would send a medical nurse to accompany her since she wasn't feeling well. He invited her to come and look around and then my brother and I would follow her. However, I was a patriot of my motherland and I had no doubts about my decision: of course, I wasn't going to leave my country. After my father died my mother felt ill all the time. She lived a hard life: she lost two children, my brothers, and two sons that perished during the Great Patriotic War. But she never gave up: she cooked and even went shopping to the market a month before she fell so ill that she had to stay in bed. My mother died in 1976. She was buried near my father in the cemetery.

My family life wasn't perfect. In 1972 I left my family and moved to the town of Soroki where I worked at the construction of the water supply pipeline Soroki-Beltsy. I was senior engineer in a construction company and later I became head of the industrial technical department. I received a room with electrical heating, electricity and running water. In 1975 my wife and I divorced officially. I received a one-bedroom apartment with all comforts in Soroki. I left our apartment in Kishinev to my ex-wife and son. There was a drama theater and a cinema theater in Soroki so I didn't get bored. In 1981 my acquaintances reminded me about Lidia Lieberman that used to be a friend of mine in Odessa. By that time she had also divorced her husband. Lidia lived in Odessa and worked as a lab assistant in the pathologoanatomic department of the regional hospital. I wrote her a letter and then went to see her. We resumed our relationships. Lidia came to see me in Soroki and I often visited her in Odessa.

In the early 1990s I began to attend the Jewish community in Soroki. The community regained a building of the former synagogue. There weren't many Jews in the community, but we had beautiful celebrations of holidays there.

I often traveled to Kishinev where I met with my son Igor. Igor also came to see me in Soroki. Igor went to the army after finishing school. He returned from the army and got a job at a scientific research institute. He was a locksmith in the laboratory. He had 'hands of gold'. Igor married a girl from a Ukrainian and Moldavian family in 1986. Her name was Tania. I didn't have any objections; love is what matters. They have twin girls: Alina and Oksana. Igor's wife was a painter. They received a nice three- bedroom apartment in the suburb of Kishinev. My granddaughters went to work after finishing nine years of secondary school.

When perestroika [16](#) began I believed in Mikhail Gorbachev [17](#). I thought life was improving, but it wasn't quite so. In 1991 the USSR fell apart. I happened to be living in one country and Lidia in another. Perestroika developed a problem with the Russian language: even Moldavians that had spoken Russian before began to communicate in Moldavian. Russian speaking residents were looked at as if they were foreigners. Many people left Moldova for Ukraine or Russia.

Lidia and I decided to live together in 1995. I moved to Odessa. I had to have my documents changed. Moldavian officials were helpful and so were officials in Odessa, especially when I told them that I came from Odessa. Lidia lived in a communal apartment [18](#) in the center of the town. After her aunt died she inherited a one-bedroom apartment in Cheryomushki [a new district in Odessa]. We exchanged these two apartments and settled down in a new two-bedroom apartment with a balcony and all comforts in a new district of the town. Our apartment is on the second floor. It's very convenient for us since there is no elevator in the house and we are in no condition to walk higher upstairs. My son Igor often comes to see us here in Odessa. We support him. In my time, children supported their parents, but now things are different.

In the late 1990s my brother Michael, his daughters and their families moved to Germany. They live in the very picturesque area of Turingia: a district in Darmstadt. Michael and his daughter Tania draw a lot. Michael has been exhibiting his works in Jewish communities in many towns.

I go to the main synagogue in Odessa on holidays when my health condition allows it. I don't pray since I don't know any prayers.

I identify myself as a Jew and wish all Jews to have a good life. I'm interested in everything about Jews and Israel. I knew about the establishment of Israel in 1948, but we didn't get any information about the country at that time. Israel is the life and the capital of all Jews in the world. In 1948 Israel won the war for independence, and I was glad they could stand for themselves since I heard people say more than once that Jews were no soldiers whatsoever. All my relatives, all our men were at the front during the Great Patriotic War and two of my brothers perished during the war.

The Gmilus Hesed Jewish Charity Center, established in 1992, provides assistance to Lidia and me. There is an aid visiting us. She brings us food and cleans our apartment. We receive food packages and medications. Whenever I can I attend events at Gmilus Hesed.

## Glossary

### **[1](#) Civil War (1918-1920)**

The Civil War between the Reds (the Bolsheviks) and the Whites (the anti-Bolsheviks), which broke out in early 1918, ravaged Russia until 1920. The Whites represented all shades of anti- communist

groups - Russian army units from World War I, led by anti-Bolshevik officers, by anti-Bolshevik volunteers and some Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries. Several of their leaders favored setting up a military dictatorship, but few were outspoken tsarists. Atrocities were committed throughout the Civil War by both sides. The Civil War ended with Bolshevik military victory, thanks to the lack of cooperation among the various White commanders and to the reorganization of the Red forces after Trotsky became commissar for war. It was won, however, only at the price of immense sacrifice; by 1920 Russia was ruined and devastated. In 1920 industrial production was reduced to 14% and agriculture to 50% as compared to 1913.

## **2 Gangs**

During the Russian Civil War there were all kinds of gangs in the Ukraine. Their members came from all the classes of former Russia, but most of them were peasants. Their leaders used political slogans to dress their criminal acts. These gangs were anti-Soviet and anti-Semitic. They killed Jews and burnt their houses, they robbed their houses, raped women and killed children.

## **3 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.

## **4 Kolkhoz**

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

## **5 Domanevka**

District town in Odessa region. Hundreds of thousands Jews were exterminated in the camp located in this town during the war.

## **6 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. [7](#) Bessarabia: Historical area between the Prut and Dneestr rivers, in the southern part of Odessa region. Bessarabia was part of Russia until the Revolution of 1917. In 1918 it declared itself an independent republic, and later it united with Romania. The Treaty of Paris (1920) recognized the union but the Soviet Union never accepted this. In 1940 Romania was forced to cede Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina to the USSR. The two provinces had almost 4 million inhabitants, mostly Romanians. Although Romania

reoccupied part of the territory during World War II the Romanian peace treaty of 1947 confirmed their belonging to the Soviet Union. Today it is part of Moldavia. [8](#) NEP: The so-called New Economic Policy of the Soviet authorities was launched by Lenin in 1921. It meant that private business was allowed on a small scale in order to save the country ruined by the Revolution of 1917 and the Russian Civil War. They allowed priority development of private capital and entrepreneurship. The NEP was gradually abandoned in the 1920s with the introduction of the planned economy.

## [9](#) **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.

## [10](#) **Lysenko, Nikolai (1842-1912)**

Ukrainian composer and folklore collector. Lysenko was the founder of the National School of Composers and established a number of choirs and a music and drama school.

## [11](#) **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.

## [12](#) **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.

## [13](#) **Great Terror (1934-1938)**

During the Great Terror, or Great Purges, which included the notorious show trials of Stalin's former Bolshevik opponents in 1936-1938 and reached its peak in 1937 and 1938, millions of innocent Soviet citizens were sent off to labor camps or killed in prison. The major targets of the Great Terror were communists. Over half of the people who were arrested were members of the party at the time of their arrest. The armed forces, the Communist Party, and the government in general were purged of all allegedly dissident persons; the victims were generally sentenced to death or to long terms of hard labor. Much of the purge was carried out in secret, and only a few cases were tried in public 'show trials'. By the time the terror subsided in 1939, Stalin had managed to bring both the Party and the public to a state of complete submission to his rule. Soviet society was so atomized and the people so fearful of reprisals that mass arrests were no longer necessary. Stalin ruled as absolute dictator of the Soviet Union until his death in March 1953.



#### **14 Rehabilitation in the Soviet Union**

Many people who had been arrested, disappeared or killed during the Stalinist era were rehabilitated after the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956, where Khrushchev publicly debunked the cult of Stalin and lifted the veil of secrecy from what had happened in the USSR during Stalin's leadership. It was only after the official rehabilitation that people learnt for the first time what had happened to their relatives as information on arrested people had not been disclosed before.

#### **15 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.

#### **16 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.

#### **17 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.

#### **18 Communal apartment**

The Soviet power wanted to improve housing conditions by requisitioning 'excess' living space of

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