Matvey Loshak

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I was born on June 14, 1937 in the town of Berdichev, Zhitomir region. I never knew my grandparents on my mother's side. I only know that my grandfather's name was Meyer Leib Raygorodetsky; I don't know my grandmother's name. They both died in Berdichev long before I was born: Grandfather died in 1928, and Grandmother died in 1932.

I remember my grandparents on my father's side very well. My grandfather's name was Leib Loshak, and my grandmother's name was Feiga. I don't know her maiden name. I don't know where they were born, but I know that it was between 1870 and 1872. My grandfather studied sewing-machine repair, and he spent all his life working for the Zinger company. He even went to the United States for training. Then he spent all his life at this work as a common worker.

After his studies in the United States, my grandfather worked in Lvov for some time. We still have a photo of those times, with my grandfather, grandmother and their three sons. Their eldest son was Zinoviy; the middle son was my father, Govshia; and their youngest son died as a child. Nobody ever told me anything about him; I don't even know his name.

My grandparents lived in Berdichev; they rented a small flat. Before the war, they no longer worked, because did not feel well, especially had problems with their legs. They died the death of many Jews of Berdichev - shot by the fascists.

My grandparents were religious, but they were not fanatics about all the canons. They kept all Jewish holidays and traditions, but I cannot say that they attended the synagogue regularly.

My grandfather wore common clothes of a worker, he also had a holiday suit, but I don't remember every seeing his yarmulke or tallit. They both certainly had holiday clothes, but they had no savings or valuables.

Grandmother Feiga was not educated; she worked around the house. But they did not have a house of their own. They moved a lot: Lvov, Rovno,

Berdichev. I remember visiting them in their small flat, and Grandmother would take out a small box and treat me to candy. It was delicious. I remember my grandmother always had a nice hairdo, with a comb and sometimes with a small lace black scarf.

My grandfather also had a brother. You can see that the brothers were very much alike. My grandfather's elder brother, Tsadik Loshak, and his son, Mikhail Loshak, went to Vinnitsa and became artists. Apparently, their pictures are still kept in Vinnitsa. In the Soviet times, they decorated the columns for demonstrations, and when Tsadik Loshak once came to visit us, he brought several of his pictures. I don't know what happened to him, but I'm sure he is not alive. I think Tsadik and my grandfather had another brother, but I know nothing about him.

My father, Govshia Loshak (usually called Alexander), was born on December 22, 1902. His name was comes from Ishia, I believe, and Ishia is Alexander. But when he was born, in Rovno, either by mistake or by accident, they registered him as Govshia.

My father finished only elementary school - four grades - and "inherited" the profession of a mechanic of sewing machines. If I'm not mistaken, he worked in Berdichev at the "Victory" factory.

My father's elder brother, Zinoviy - or Zyama, as he was called - left Berdichev first for Moscow and then for Leningrad. He became a famous photographer. If I'm not mistaken, his wife's name was Sonya. He had four children: three daughters and a son. His daughters were Olga, born in 1922; Lubov, born in 1925; and Lena, born in 1927. His son Mikhail was born in 1935. The elder daughters graduated from the teachers' college and became elementary school teachers, while Lena became a dentist technician. Lena and Lubov died a long time ago; Olga is living in Leningrad.

An interesting fact: during the war, Zyama's family was evacuated from the blockaded Leningrad, but my uncle stayed. He worked there; he had many pictures of Leningrad during the blockade, and then after the war, he had a lot of exhibitions. He died in the 1960s.

This all concerns my father's relatives. I never knew my mother's parents. I only know that her father was a meat-cutter. It seemed to be a good job, because it enabled him to buy half of a house.

Their family was large, I believe, six brothers and three sisters. I don't remember them all, but I will try to name them. The oldest brother was Benjamin Raygorodetsky (born around 1890). The next brothers were Grigory and Boris, then sisters Roza and Nadezhda. All of them were born between 1890 and 1900. I remember celebrating Roza's 70th and 80th birthdays, but I

cannot say when she was born.

My mother, Sarah Raygorodetskaya, was born on December 21, 1904, according to documents, but her sisters said she was born in 1901.

All of this large family - almost all of them got married and had children - lived in that house, or rather in one half of that house, where I was born. They had a small yard, but there was no garden. That is why they left for Kiev.

My father's eldest brother, Benya, and his wife, Luba, and children went to Kiev. Uncle Benya married Leiba Srulevna Vaza, Aunt Luba, if I'm not mistaken, in 1912 in Warsaw. They had a daughter, Nadya, born in Warsaw. Their son David, called Danya, and daughter, Anya, Hannah, were born in Berdichev.

My mother's sister Nadya married Aunt Luba's brother, Yakov Vaza. They had a son, Boris. Aunt Roza, my mother's eldest sister, also got married. Her husband, Aaron Shafran, worked at a factory in Kiev, and Roza also moved to Kiev. Their son's name was also Boris.

Uncle Grigory and Uncle Boris and their families also moved to Kiev. Uncle Grigory had two sons: Yefim and Leonid. In Kiev, my uncles worked in commerce. If I remember it right, they were in charge of the supply department, while Uncle Benya was a bookkeeper.

Only my mother's family and Aunt Nadya remained in Berdichev. My mother was an educated person for that time. She finished seven grades of a high school or secondary school. Not long before the war, she began to work at the passport department of Berdichev.

Berdichev was a small town. Most of the population was Jewish. There were some small enterprises, mostly forestry and the wood industry. I remember the city was neat, green. I went to a kindergarten there. In general, the city was very interesting. There was an Orthodox Church, a Catholic Church, and a Carmelite monastery, if I'm not mistaken, but it was not functioning. There was an old fortress. There was certainly a synagogue in Berdichev, but I never went there, I don't even remember what it looked like. I only know that my grandparents went there on holidays, but in secret. They never took me with them, because I was very young. My parents never went there; it was not common for their generation, and authorities would not like it either. All of this I remember vaguely. I remember that a circus came and was located across from our house, next to the market. I remember the market with wagons from different villages selling poultry, fruits and vegetables. I remember all these wagons and their noise. I could not tell who was Jewish and who was not, and I was not thinking about who I was. But

as far as I remember from my parents, relations between the Ukrainians and Jews were good.

I remember our house, or rather our half of the house, in Lenin Street. I had an elder sister named Mary, born in 1931. I remember very well the room where my parents, my sister and I lived. The room looked large to me. Our beds were metal; there also was a bureau, a round table and chairs. A tablecloth with tassels was on the table, and I liked hiding under the table. Next to our room was Aunt Nadya's room, and there was a small hall between our rooms. In it there was a window, under which a samovar always stood. On holidays, the whole family came together around this table with the samovar.

I remember Hanukkah well. We always looked forward to it, because children got gifts. I received caramel candies and money. I don't know how this money was spent because my mother had it and our life was hard. I also remember Purim with three-cornered poppy pasties. My parents kept Jewish traditions and holidays, but they were not religious. On Yom Kippur, they always fasted.

Around 1936, my mother began to work at the passport department of the city police department, and her official position - she was first a private and then got an officer's rank - caused her to be afraid to go to the synagogue. I remember well that after the war people were watched, and my mother was always afraid that somebody would learn that we celebrated Passover or other Jewish holidays at home. My mother worked from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., then she had a break from 5 to 7 p.m., and then she worked again from 7 to 12 p.m.

I don't remember if any of our family members were repressed before the war - at least, I never heard of it. But my mother was so scared of the regime that she always prevented any talk on this topic. She was afraid she would be fired.

Uncle Benya's children sometime came to visit us in Berdichev: David Raygorodetsky, who in 1939 was sent to Lvov, Western Ukraine, after the Soviet troops invaded that land; his sisters Anya and Nadya, who was already married. Aunt Nadya's son, Boris Vaza, also came to visit us. He graduated from a dental college in Zhitomir and visited us often. Aunt Roza's son, Boris, also came sometimes. He studied in Zhitomir, and I remember that in 1940 he was called up and sent to serve on the border with Afghanistan.

I vividly remember the beginning of the war. The war was announced. The Germans began to bomb and shell Berdichev; their planes would fly very low and simply fire at people in the streets. As far as I remember, there were

no military objects in Berdichev. But I remember these bombing raids very well. On July 7, when bombing began, we ran out of the house and my parents pulled me into a ravine in our backyard. I remember was that there were a lot of stinging nettles there, and when my parents pressed me to the ground, I cried because of the nettles. So my father ran into the house and grabbed a children's blanket for me, and the Germans immediately began to fire at our house. When the bombing stopped, my father, mother, sister and I did not go into our house, but went to my mother's office at the police department. As soon as we got there, we were put into a truck, which took us to a train station. I don't remember whether it was Kiev or Zhitomir. We were put on a train and sent to Stalingrad. Except for that blanket in which I was covered, we had nothing - no documents, no money, no food, no clothes - nothing. On the train, people simply helped us. Some gave a slice of bread, some gave other food, some gave some clothes. In Stalingrad, we were settled at a stadium, on the benches. My mother was immediately registered as a police officer. She received food portions and documents. Then we were sent through Dubovka and Kamyshin to a village. My father was mobilized to dig trenches in Stalingrad. In 1942, when the fascists came near Stalingrad, my father went to our village - I think, it was Verkhnyaya Dobrinka.

From there we went to Kustanay, Kazakhstan. Almost the whole family was there. Uncle Benya with his family was there, as well. In the very beginning of the war, his son David found himself in the German encirclement in Lvov; while he was trying to get out, for several weeks he fell ill with tuberculoses. In Kustanay, he headed the shoe factory that was evacuated from Kiev. Their daughter Nadya and her family also were there. But their youngest daughter Anya volunteered to fight at the front.

Aunt Nadya and her husband were there, while their son Boris fought at the front. Aunt Roza was also there. Here we learned the terrible news that Uncle Grigory and Uncle Boris were too late to evacuate from Kiev and were shot in Babi Yar or in the Bykovna concentration camp.

The evacuation of the Jewish population was not organized by anyone. Enterprises and organizations were evacuated, not the Jews, specifically. In general, I think, there was no knowledge that Hitler killed all the Jews in the occupied territories. If we had known that, my parents would not have let my grandparents stay in Berdichev. Even though they were almost paralyzed, they would have been moved out. Alas, they suffered the destiny of all Berdichev Jews. When the Germans entered Berdichev, they gathered all the remaining Jews and shot them at the old fortress.

It is hard for me to say whether my parents knew about the death of my grandparents while we were living in evacuation, but judging from the fact that the fascists' atrocities were already reported on the radio, I believe

they guessed. My father learned exactly how their parents died only when we returned to Kiev and he had a chance to go to Berdichev. The locals told him all about it and showed him the place of shooting.

In evacuation my mother continued to work for the police. As soon as Kiev was liberated, my mother wrote a letter to the Ministry of the Interior, and she was sent to Kiev to work. We moved to Kiev in summer 1944; Uncle Benya with his family and Aunt Roza moved there before us.

My cousins Boris Vaza and Boris Shafran fought during the whole war. Yefim Raygorodetsky, Uncle Grigory's son, fought from 1942 to 1945. To get to the front, he added a year to his real age. He is an honorary citizen of Hungary; he liberated many cities and received a lot of awards.

Anya, the sister of David Raygorodetsky, also fought during the whole war. At the front she married a Jewish husband - Rafail Kroit.

After our return to Kiev, I went to school. It was 1944. It was here that I fully experienced everyday anti-Semitism. There were some guys in the street who beat up Jews. To challenge them, when I was in the seventh grade, I learned to wrestle at the "Spartak" society. In the 10th grade, I already had the first-class qualification in Greco-Roman wrestling. So I could handle those guys. I lived in Podol, where there were many Jewish children. One of them, Senya Berkovich, beat up everyone who used the word "kike." That's how we defended our honor and our nationality.

I remember very well that in the beginning of the 1950s, the negative attitude toward the Jews intensified. The Jewish schoolchildren knew that the path to institutes and universities was closed to us. That is why in 1954 I had to go to Uzhgorod. In Kiev, I never would have entered the institute, because there were certain quotas for Jewish students. My sister, Mary, entered the institute before me. She went to the Financial-Economic Institute, which was not very popular back then. This institute was in Podol, and she was probably admitted there only because our mother worked at the passport department of that district, so all the directors and bosses knew her. My mother did nothing to help her; people simply showed their good attitude to her.

My mother was very honest. I can give you one example. We lived in a communal flat. There were 13 people and one corridor; stoves stood in the corridor. We had a tiny room. We were very poor. We always made clothes from my mother's uniforms. Suddenly, one woman came and brought a basket of apples for my mother. The apples were good. So I ate one apple. When my mother came home during her break, she asked me about the apples. I told her that a woman had brought them to her, and I confessed that I ate one. She slapped me on the face and said, "You are a big boy, and you should

understand that somebody tried to bribe your mother, and you assisted them in doing so." That's how my mother was. And she certainly watched closely that nothing would be said in our house against Stalin or against the authorities. My parents were afraid to go to the synagogue. They just kept traditions at home, but did their best to hide it.

In 1951, however, my mother was fired from the passport department for being Jewish, and she was sent instead to work with teenagers.

The "fight against cosmopolitans" touched my cousin David Raygorodetsky too. After the liberation of Kiev, he was appointed the director of a shoe factory; he restored it after the war. He was a wonderful director; his factory was considered one of the best in Ukraine. But early in the 1950s, he was fired without explanation. It took him a long time to find another job.

Then he worked for many years at the Consumer Services' Ministry as an assistant to the chief of the department. He was never appointed director again for the same reasons, even though his professional level was very high.

Let me tell you about my cousins. Yefim Raygorodetsky graduated from an academy and began to write military memoirs. His brother Leonid was a famous heat-and-power engineer. Boris Vaza became a dentist. He emigrated to the United States and died there. Yefim and David already died too. Boris Shafran worked in the Interior Ministry after the war; he was chief of one of the camps for condemned prisoners. Later he was also fired. He lives in Israel.

After Stalin's death, our lives did not change at once. For many, Stalin's death was a shock. I remember how it was announced during a class at school. We sat there for a while, and then somebody suggested, "While we have no classes, let's share funny stories." I don't remember any special sorrow around me. I think my parents even sighed with relief.

My parents died a long time ago. My sister Mary also died a long time ago, in 1985, when she was only 54. For the whole life she worked as deputy chief of the Construction Bank of Ukraine.

I studied at the Uzhgorod University; I majored in physics. There I met my future wife, Sabina Poleschuk. She studied at and graduated from the philological department. I met her in 1956, when the 20th Congress of the Communist Party exposed the cult of Stalin's personality. Sabina's father knew Stalin's true nature back then. He was a mine director, and he saw people dying in mines and people repressed in Donbass. He hated Stalin.

Sabina was born in Chita region, Russia, in 1934. I know nothing about her grandparents, only that they were Jewish. Sabina, just like me, was brought up in a Jewish family, received a good education, finished a music school. But our families never were religious, so neither my wife nor I know Jewish traditions, religion or language. We lived at a time when it was not safe or fashionable to be religious and attend a church or a synagogue; some people even lost their jobs because of that. And nobody could tell us about Jewish traditions.

Sabina and I got married in Uzhgorod. After graduation from the institute we came to live in Kiev. I was sent to work at the plant of cemented-carbide tools. I came there in 1959. There were 30 workers in the laboratory; I was the 29th. I was ordered to organize a laboratory; later, this department grew into the Institute of Hard Alloys, which became famous in the USSR and all over the world. Its director, Valentin Nikolayevich Bakul, trusted me and let me advance there. In 1968, I defended my Ph.D. thesis, and in 1986, my doctoral theses. But then I again felt that I was Jewish. The Higher Certifying Commission did not endorse my theses; they checked our institute and said that too many Jews held leading positions. So, I had to wait for several years, until in early 1990s when the attitude to the Jews changed, and my theses were endorsed.

I was member of the Communist Party. I had to join when I was appointed chief of the laboratory - otherwise, I would not have been appointed, since it was the peak of anti-Semitism in this country, and it was hard for Jews to find jobs. If one was a member of the ruling Communist Party and had a good reputation, only then he could count on making a career; such was the policy in the USSR. But in 1991, when there was the putsch against Gorbachev in Moscow, and the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine did not respond, I went to the secretary of the Committee. To protest the wait-and-see attitude of our organization, I told him I was leaving the Party.

In April 1962 Sabina and I had a son, Viktor. He grew up as a normal Soviet child. He was always a good student, went in for sports. He finished a secondary school; there were no religious schools in the former Soviet Union. By that time our family had fully assimilated, that is why our son, just like most of the Jews in the USSR, knew nothing about Jewish traditions and religion.

Viktor came across anti-Semitism in 1979, when he was trying to enter an institute. He alone had all excellent marks in his class, but he could not pass his exams, because there was a check against his name on the list, which meant he was not to enter. A man on the entrance commission told us later that he could not give him an "A." My son went to Volgograd, graduated from the Polytechnic Institute there, and returned to Kiev to

work in science. But after the Chernobyl accident, he and his family moved to Volgograd. By that time he had been married and had a newborn son, who, by the way, was born on the day of the Chernobyl accident - April 26, 1986. It was too dangerous for a newborn to remain in Kiev due to the high radiation level.

My son took post-graduate classes for two years, but then, seeing our constant financial problems, he told me, "Dad, I will always have time to return to the science later," and he became a successful businessman. He lives in Volgograd. He has several companies of his own. He has a wife and two children, and he helps us, his parents.

Sabina, despite her philological education, worked as a music teacher, because it brought more money. Now she is on pension. I am still working. We are certainly, absolutely not religious, although after visiting Israel and feeling the power of traditions and the history of the Jewish people in general, I try to keep at least some of these traditions. I believe the Jewish state has survived mostly because it kept the canons of Judaism. And although I am a technician, and this is the 21st century, and I understand that everything depends on man himself, when I am on an airplane, I say: "God, help me!"