

# Ruvin Gitman

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Chernovtsy

Ukraine

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## My family background

The history of my family, as far as I am aware, goes back as far as my paternal great-grandfather, Iermiuya Gitman. I

don't know where he was born or when, or when he died. But I do know that when he became an adult, he settled down in the village of Koryshkov, in Kopaygorod district, Vinnitsa province. He married a local woman, but I don't have any information about my great-grandmother. My great-grandfather was a farmer. So, my father's ancestors came from Koryshkov and were farmers.

My paternal grandfather, Isroel Gitman, was born in Koryshkov in the 1860s. My father's mother, Hana Gitman, also came from Koryshkov. I don't know how they met, but I know that they had a traditional Jewish wedding. My grandfather Isroel was a farmer. When he was a boy he helped his father with farming. They grew grain of high quality, and sold it by auction. After getting married, my grandfather kept working with his father, although he lived separately.

In 1904-1905, during the Russian-Japanese war my grandfather served in the cavalry. Religious beliefs were highly respected in the Russian [tsarist] army. I believe that my grandfather had every opportunity to observe his religious traditions. He was awarded Georgian Crosses, the highest awards of the Russian Empire, for his bravery. This award was given to very few members of the military and it was a great honor. There was an amusing story associated with these awards that was often told in our family. Koryshkov was a large village of about 1,000 houses, but there were only 12 Jewish families living there. There was no synagogue in Koryshkov. My grandfather went to the synagogue in Kopaygorod, the district town, not far from Koryshkov. He went there only on important Jewish holidays. After returning from the war my grandfather went to the synagogue in Kopaygorod at Rosh Hashanah. He was wearing his medals. The local Jews had never seen Georgian Crosses before, and got very angry with my grandfather. They couldn't believe that a Jew would come to the synagogue wearing Christian crosses on his chest. They wouldn't allow my grandfather to enter the synagogue. Then the rabbi came to ask what it was all about. The other attendants told him that they believed my grandfather didn't respect the faith of their ancestors



since he came to the synagogue with all these Christian crosses on his chest. The rabbi explained to them that these were the tsar's military awards that my grandfather had earned at the front for shedding his blood. Afterwards, of course, he was allowed to enter the synagogue as a man of honor.

My grandfather and grandmother had four sons besides my father. Their oldest son, Mordekhai, perished at the front during World War I. He was a soldier in the tsarist army. My father, Wolf Gitman, was the second son. He was born in 1894. The next one was Berl, followed by Shmil-Leib, and Moshe, the youngest. I don't know their exact birth dates, but there was not much of an age difference between them.

My grandfather had a big house in the village. Tsar Nicholas also granted my grandfather 12 hectares of farmland, the monopoly for the vodka trade and a tavern with an inn in the village. So, my grandfather's family was very wealthy. My grandmother kept a cow. They also had a big garden and a kitchen garden. My grandmother managed all the housekeeping. Their sons worked in the fields with my grandfather.

My grandparents were very religious. They observed all the Jewish traditions in their home and celebrated the Sabbath and all the Jewish holidays. All of their sons were raised as Jews. They didn't go to cheder. There was no cheder in Koryshkov and my grandfather didn't want to send his children to Kopaygorod, as it was too far away. Teachers came to teach the children at home. My father and his brothers were good at Hebrew, Yiddish, Russian and arithmetic.

My grandfather, my father and his brothers prayed at home every single day. They prayed three times a day: before meals in the morning, in the afternoon, and in the evening, performing the ritual of washing hands before meals. They took their tallit and twiln tefillin to the field to pray in the afternoon [the interviewee is talking about the evening prayers, the Maariv]. On holidays the whole family went to the synagogue in Kopaygorod. Isroel had a friend in Kopaygorod who was a shochet. My grandfather's family stayed in this man's house and spent the holidays in Kopaygorod. Every member of the family had his own seat in the synagogue.

My grandfather and grandmother wore old-fashioned traditional Jewish clothing. My grandmother wore a wig and covered her head with a shawl when going out. My grandfather wore a long black jacket or a black suit, and a vest with a silver watch chain hanging from its pocket. He wore a black hat and a little black cap underneath it. At home my grandfather always wore a yarmulka. My grandfather only wore light cotton pants and shirt to do work in the field, but he still wore his yarmulka.

Koryshkov was a quiet village. There were no Jewish pogroms before or after the Revolution of 1917 <sup>1</sup>. Koryshkov village was not beside any railroad or main roads. During the Revolution a gang was passing by the village. The gang members were about to rob the 12 Jewish families residing in the village, but the Ukrainian farmers stood against them saying: 'They are our zhyds [Jews]. We do with them what we want, but we won't allow you to take one hair from their heads'. They then chased the bandits away. This was the only time such a gang came to the village.

My mother's family lived in Kopaygorod. I knew my mother's father, Moshe Perelman. He was a vendor. He was born in Kopaygorod in the 1870s. My grandmother died long before I was born. I don't even know her name. My grandfather didn't remarry and raised his children alone. When my

mother grew up she acted as mother to the younger children. The Perelmans had fourteen children, but only seven of them survived to adulthood. The rest of them died in infancy. I knew five of my mother's siblings, four of her brothers and her sister Haika. My mother's sister Bluma moved to America in the 1920s, before I was born.

I don't know the date of birth of these aunts and uncles. They were all born in Kopaygorod. My mother, Brukha Perelman, was born in 1905. Only her brother Itsyk was older than she. The next brother was Elik, then came Bluma, Psakhe, Haika and Ide-Leib. Their family was religious. All the children got a religious education. The boys went to cheder and the girls were taught at home. They could all read and write in Hebrew and Yiddish, and studied the Torah and the Talmud. The family observed Jewish traditions and celebrated the Sabbath and Jewish holidays. They communicated in Yiddish, but they all spoke fluent Ukrainian. They remained deeply religious people until old age. None of them had any special education. Uncle Itsyk held various jobs. He was logistics manager at the school and was also a businessman. Uncle Elik was the director of a store. Uncle Psakhe was a financial specialist. Aunt Haika was married and was a housewife. Ide-Leib moved to England in the 1930s and lived in London. They all died, but I don't remember when.

I don't know how my parents met, but I think it might have happened during one of the visits of my father's family to Kopaygorod. My parents married in 1922. They had a traditional Jewish wedding. They had a wedding ceremony with a chuppah at the synagogue in Kopaygorod, and they had a huge wedding party. The whole town was invited to the wedding: Jews and Ukrainians. The newlyweds moved to Koryshkov and had another wedding party there arranged by my father's parents. They settled down in Koryshkov. My grandfather gave three hectares of land to each of his sons who married. So my father worked on his own land after he married, and my mother was a housewife. At first, my parents rented a house until my father had enough money to buy one. I remember this house very well. We lived in it before the war. It was an ordinary Ukrainian house with a thatched roof and clay floors. The house had three rooms and a kitchen. We had a shed in the yard where livestock and hay for the winter were kept. We had a cow, 10 sheep and numerous chicken and geese. We also had two horses.

## Growing up

I was born on 20th August 1924. I was my parents' first child. According to Jewish tradition the mother gives a name to the first child. I was named Ruvin after my mother's grandfather. My parents had another son in 1926. He was named Iermiuya after my father's grandfather. Iosif was born in 1929 and my little sister Masia was born in 1934.

My parents worked from morning till night and all the children helped them. I shepherded geese when I was five, and then, after I grew older, I began to shepherd the cattle. My father grew grain of high quality and vendors eagerly bought his crops. My father was a very good farmer. His cows produced at least three buckets of milk each. My mother milked cows three times a day. My father was a good gardener, too. We had a nice orchard and a kitchen garden. In the autumn my father hired employees to help him with the harvesting. He paid them well.

Our family was very religious. My parents observed all the religious traditions and taught us to do the same. My mother didn't wear a wig, but she always covered her head with a shawl. My brothers, my sister and I received a religious education. We studied Hebrew, and read the Torah and the Talmud with our teachers. I can still remember when and what prayer one needs to say. I

also remember the prayers. However, during Soviet times I didn't have the opportunity to deepen my knowledge of Judaism.

We spoke Yiddish in the family, and Ukrainian and Russian with our Ukrainian and Russian neighbors. The Jews in Koryshkov visited each other and kept in touch. They often got together for dinner. They also socialized with their Ukrainians neighbors., etc. Ukrainians knew that they were not expected at Sabbath and left us alone on this day. People were very tolerant towards each other's faith. There was no anti-Semitism.

Our family always celebrated the Sabbath and Jewish holidays. My mother always cooked bean or carrot tsimes [2](#), chicken broth, chicken and fish. My mother baked challah, cookies and pies with cottage cheese or meat. We had separate dishes for meat and dairy products. The rules of kashrut were strictly followed. The shochet in Kopaygorod killed chicken and geese. If there was a calf or lamb to be slaughtered, the shochet was invited to come to our house before major Jewish holidays or family celebrations.

I liked to visit my grandfather Isroel on Saturdays. He prayed at home on Saturdays. My grandmother had all the meals prepared for Saturday. She cooked cholent in a big ceramic pot. She capped the pot with dough and put it in the oven to keep it warm for Saturday. My grandmother also cooked pitcha - chicken necks, legs and chicken giblets boiled with garlic, vinegar and eggs. This dish is supposed to be eaten cold. She also made stuffed fish and two freshly made challot covered with a nice embroidered towel. After my grandmother lit the candles and said her prayer, she turned her face to us. The door to the room was open and we always said 'Shabbat Shalom', greeting the coming in of Saturday. Then my grandfather recited Kiddush, blessing the wine. The wine was poured into a big wine glass. After my recited Kiddush he took a sip from the glass and gave it to my grandmother. She took a sip and then handed the glass to me. My grandfather also recited Kiddush over the challah. He poured himself a little cup of vodka, recited Kiddush over the challah and drank the vodka. Then he asked my grandmother to give him a bite of something to eat. She put a cookie in his hand. Each of us took a small piece of challah and ate it, dipping it into salt.

My mother's father lived in Kopaygorod. We spent Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah there. We stayed with my grandfather Moshe and my grandfather Isroel stayed at his friend's home. We all had our own seat in the synagogue and went there to pray. We all fasted on Yom Kippur, even the children, from an early age. My relatives and I have always fasted, except during the years of army service.

We celebrated Pesach at home. The first seder lasted until morning, until we read the whole Haggadah in Yiddish. We started preparations for Pesach long before the holiday. We made matzah at grandfather Isroel's home. He had all the necessary tools to make the matzah . He kept them in the attic.

Other Jews also came to Isroel's home to make their matzah . They usually made it from one or two pounds [32 kilos] of flour. There was not to be a crumb of bread in the house at Pesach. . My grandfather had a special big kosher board used only for rolling out the dough for the matzah, a special bowl, rolling pin and a wheel for making holes. Stiff dough was made from water and flour, then holes were made and in about 15 minutes the dough was to be put in the stove. The freshly baked matzah was placed on a special white sheet.

.There were people in town who made a special kind of wine from raisins. My father went to Kopaygorod to get some wine. My mother made a special beetroot drink (kvass) for the Pesach borsht. All baked goods were made from matzah flour. The matzah was crushed and then sieved. My mother made traditional stuffed fish, chicken broth, boiled chicken and beygelakh, little bagels made from matzah flour. My mother also baked keyzelakh from matzah flour, eggs and boiled potatoes with geese cracklings. My mother also made pancakes and strudels with jam, nuts and raisins. The house was always very clean. We brought out fancy dishes from storage in the attic. On the eve of Pesach we searched for breadcrumbs to burn.

On the first day of Pesach my mother covered the table with a snow-white cloth. In the center of the table there was a dish with six symbolic foods: zroa - a piece of fried meat with a bone, maror - horseradish, beitsah - hard-boiled egg, charoset - ground apple with wine and nuts, karpas - greens or vegetables with salted water in a saucer, and matzah on a plate. After the prayer it was necessary to dip the greens in the salted water and eat them to feel the bitter taste of slavery of our ancestors in Egypt. We all drank the Pesach wine. There was always an extra glass poured for the prophet Elijah. According to Jewish legend, the prophet Elijah visits every home on the first day of Pesach and drinks from the cup that has been poured for him. He is invisible, but he can see everything in the house. The door is kept open for the prophet to come in and honor the holiday with his presence.

At Purim my parents arranged Purimshpilen, holiday performances in the village. They were lots of fun. At Purim my mother always made hamantashen, and gave them to all of our family members. At Chanukkah we were given money. Mother lit the central candle on the first day of Chanukkah and recited a blessing. Then she lit one candle from it, and then each member of the family lit one candle in a beautiful silver chanukkiyah every night for 8 days. Every morning the whole family said a prayer. At Sukkot my father made a sukkah in the yard and we had lunch and dinner there. It was often cold or it rained, but we still had to stay in the sukkah and my father used to say that it was the Lord reminding us about the sufferings of the Jews.

We celebrated all holidays and followed the fasting. I don't know what my parents and grandparents thought about the Revolution of 1917, but I know what they thought about collectivization [3](#). When the decree on collectivization was issued, my grandfather called all his sons and told them to submit their applications to the collective farm [4](#) on the following day. They tried to tell him that they wanted to work on their own land. But my grandfather explained to them that if they wanted to live with their families peacefully in their houses they had to join the collective farm. My father and his brothers obeyed their father and were the first to submit their applications. All the rest of the Jews decided to go along with the collectivization. The youngest brother, Moshe, was appointed chairman of the village council. Berl became a foreman of the collective farm. Shmil-Leib became director of the store, and my father became chief of logistics.

Regardless of their official posts my father and his brothers remained very religious. However, they didn't go to synagogue openly. They went secretly and only on important holidays. They went early in the morning while people were asleep, and afterwards went to work. But they celebrated the Sabbath and all the religious holidays at home. My parents often went to celebrate holidays with my mother's parents. Many farmers refused to join the collective farms. They were declared to be kulaks [5](#) and were sent with their families into exile in Siberia. They were not allowed to take any luggage with them into exile. I can still see this picture and hear the screams and crying of women

forced to leave their homes. About one third of the Ukrainian population of Koryshkov was deported.

## My school years

I went to school in 1931 when I was 7. I attended the Ukrainian secondary school in Koryshkov. There was a Jewish school in Kopaygorod and my grandfather Moshe wanted me to go there and live in his house. My mother told him that Jewish schools had no perspectives and that I was to study where I lived. My mother turned out to be right. I studied all subjects in Ukrainian. My Ukrainian was fluent so I had no problems in this regard. There were a few other Jewish children in my class and at school. I studied successfully. I had an excellent memory and I was fond of all subjects. I knew literature and history, physics and chemistry and algebra and zoology very well. The world was opening up to me and I tried to absorb everything I learned.

We celebrated Soviet holidays at school. We had meetings in the morning where the school director and the schoolteachers greeted us. This was an official function. Then we went to the village cultural center where our parents were invited, too. We performed concerts, sang Soviet songs, danced and recited poems. We liked these holidays very much and we enjoyed the applause.

While in the 3rd grade, I became a pioneer. I was eager to become a pioneer. I believed in communism and the promised happy future. Although my parents were religious people they didn't have any objections to my becoming a pioneer. My father said: 'Do it, if you have to'. At that time pioneers were called upon to struggle against religious prejudices and make their parents atheist. But I was of two minds concerning this. I listened to what I was told at school and accepted those ideas, but also enjoyed meals at Sabbath and other holidays at home. I remember coming home after school one day and saying to my father that our teacher had told us that there was no God and that it was all a false belief devised by people. He answered, 'You'll answer your teacher following her words. However, I taught you the Ten Commandments, and they will be your guidelines all your life'. I have always done as he told me.

In 1932-33 there was a terrible famine in Ukraine [6](#). Our cow saved us from starving to death. There were only three cows left in the whole village, and ours was one of them. During collectivization, only cows and chickens were left with their owners. Everything else was made public property. We didn't let our cow go to pasture. It would have been slaughtered by starving people. My father mowed grass and fed the cow in our yard. The cow stayed overnight in the anteroom of our house. My father slept beside it at night with an ax in his hands to defend himself from thieves if they came at night. In the morning my mother milked the cow. This bucket of milk was for our family, my grandfather and my father's brothers. During the afternoon milking hungry people came to our yard, and my mother poured each of them a cup of milk until it was finished. My mother never took any money for the milk. During the evening milking she also gave milk to people. We also ate corn that had been stored in our attic for a few years. We dried and ground the corn manually and boiled it. Milk and corn was our only food for two years. Our large family survived, but many other people didn't. Many people were dying; there were often no survivors in a family.

In 1933 my mother's father Moshe starved to death. He didn't tell us about his miserable physical condition. He was afraid he would be an unbearable burden on us. He knew that things were



difficult for us, too. He lived in Kopaygorod. He was buried according to Jewish tradition in the Jewish cemetery. My father's parents also died some time later. My grandmother Hana died in Koryshkov in 1936 and my grandfather Isroel died in 1938. They were buried according to Jewish tradition in the Jewish section of the cemetery in Koryshkov. The rabbi from Kopaygorod came to their funeral.

The synagogues in Kopaygorod - there were several of them - were open until 1936. When the struggle against religion [7](#) intensified they were closed. The Christian church was also closed. In those years it was not safe to go to synagogue. There was only one synagogue left of the 300 existing in Kiev before the Revolution of 1917.

The arrests during the Great Terror [8](#) didn't touch our family. My father instructed me not to speak with strangers and to answer any and all questions that people asked with 'I don't know'. I was a sociable boy and my father realized that any person could be a KGB informer and that any of my revelations could work against him. I could inadvertently give away information; even saying that we celebrated religious holidays at home, or anything else might become a basis for further accusations. My father knew that people could be found guilty of espionage or anti-Soviet activities, even though they might be innocent. We didn't turn on lights at home until we secured the windows with blankets, and we spoke in whispers; even the most innocent words could be interpreted voluntarily, although my parents didn't have any anti-Soviet discussions.

The school director and deputy director were arrested. We were told that they were public enemies and that they were teaching works by Soviet authors who had been declared public enemies. We were just children and believed what we were told. But we couldn't imagine how these kind, nice people could be public enemies. We kept silent and didn't comment on anything.

In our free time we played football and went swimming in the summer. I read a lot. I mainly read books that glorified the Soviet power. My favorite book was How Steel was Tempered by Nikolay Ostrovsky. It is about dedicated Komsomol members of the post-revolutionary period. I idolized Pavel Korchagin, the main character of this book. I was eager to become a Komsomol [9](#) member. I entered the Komsomol before finishing school.

In 1933 Hitler came to power in Germany. My parents and our fellow villagers were common people who didn't give much thought to the situation in Germany at that period. They didn't have any presentiment of the war. The propaganda of those years was very strong. We were convinced that we were the strongest people in the world and could beat any enemy. There was also another factor. Many Jews, including my father, who knew Germans during World War I said that Germans were educated people and wouldn't do any harm to the Jews.

I finished school with honors. Our class was the first graduation class in our school. We had a school prom on 19th June 1941. It was a big event for schoolchildren and their parents. It started with an official part that turned into a party. There was a brass orchestra playing dance music. The next day I mailed my school certificate to the Faculty of Law of Kiev State University. I had the right to be admitted without having to take the entrance exams.

## **During the war**

On 22nd June my friends and I had a party to celebrate our obtaining of school certificates. Many of us were going on to study in other towns. We partied all night. When I came home on the morning of 22nd June 1941 my parents were not home. They had gone to the market in Kopaygorod. I sent my younger brother and sister to play in the yard so that I could have a good sleep. I slept like a log until I woke up hearing someone knocking on the door and on the windows. It was my schoolmate. I asked him why he was knocking as if a house was on fire. He said, 'Worse than that. The war has begun'. That was my memory of the beginning of the war. There was an announcement on the radio. Kiev had been bombed.

We failed to evacuate. We lived too far from the railroad and failed to reach it. In about a month and a half Vinnitsa region was occupied by German and Romanian troops. We were under occupation. The occupiers established a Jewish ghetto in Koryshkov. This area was under the jurisdiction of Romania. There were many Jews from Chernovtsy and Romania in the ghetto. The village was fenced in with barbed wire and a gendarme post was built. The first group of people to arrive at the ghetto was accommodated in the pigsty and spent the whole winter there. There was no heating there, not even a small stove. They all died. The newcomers were accommodated in public facilities. They were overcrowded and dirty.

We lived in our house, but we occupied only one room. Other rooms were given to newcomers to the ghetto. My mother voluntarily took them to the house to help. I cannot say exactly how many people there were in the ghetto. There were six to eight thousand people before the war when each family lived in their house. During the occupation there were four or five families in every house. Life was very hard. It was impossible to get a wash, do the laundry or change. We had a garden and a kitchen garden that helped a little with the food situation, but we were still always hungry. My mother always shared whatever we had with the others. When we ran out of all food we starved along with the others.

We were convoyed to work at the collective farm. We didn't get any food. People were shot for the slightest violations. If a person stole something to eat, he would be whipped to death. We couldn't cross the boundaries of the village. One could get shot for leaving the village. There were no mass shootings in the ghetto, but people were starving to death, and dying of diseases, hard work and tortures. There was a swamp near the river. Romanians did not take horses to the river. They didn't want them to get their hooves dirty. They harnessed strong Jewish men to the carts to bring water from the river for their horses. They whipped those that lagged behind the others.

There was a Jewish council [Judenrat] [10](#) in the ghetto. Its members were people that volunteered to serve the Romanians. But they were trying so hard to gain favor with their masters that they made the lives of the other Jews even more difficult.

Regardless of all the hardships of the ghetto, we tried to keep our Jewish traditions. We got together every Friday and on holidays to pray. We couldn't celebrate the Sabbath or other holidays, but traditional fasting came very naturally. We starved most of the time, anyway.

There was no medical care in the ghetto. There were nurses and doctors among the inmates, but they didn't have any medications. The community in Kopaygorod received some medications from the Red Cross and sometimes we could get some from them. Hundreds of people died of typhoid in the ghetto. We lived through all kinds of hardships. So, while the Germans were just shooting the Jews, the Romanians persecuted them through hunger, anti- sanitary conditions and epidemics,



which caused the mass extinction of the Jewish population. It's difficult to say what was worse, but I know that there were more survivors under Romanian occupation than under the Germans. That's all; I've had enough of reminiscences related to this period.

The Soviet army liberated us from the ghetto in March 1944. I was 20 years old. I remember the first Soviet tanks bursting into the ghetto. Romanians had left the night before. The hatch of the first tank was open. A soldier was standing there repeating one word 'Free!' We were afraid to believe it. Many people had tears in their eyes. I volunteered to go to the military registry office and was sent to the front with the units of the Soviet army that liberated us. My family stayed in Koryshkov. I was at the front for about a year and a half. I entered the Communist Party and became a communist. It wasn't like I needed it. I grew older and could analyze things. I remembered collectivization and the arrests in the 1930s. I understood that it was the intentional extermination of the people under the slogans of the Communist Party. But I understood that it was necessary to join the Communist Party to make a career.

I served in the infantry during the war. I was a good soldier and my comrades treated me with respect. I wasn't the only Jewish soldier, but at that time there was no national segregation of people. We had other criteria. Shortly before Victory Day I was severely wounded near Prague. On Victory Day I was in a hospital in Cracow. Before I was wounded I took part in the liberation of Ukrainian areas, the Carpathians, Ivano-Frankovsk and the region around it, Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary. When the war was over I was sent to serve in the reserve regiment. This regiment was sent to the Far East to fight in the war with Japan [11](#). Our military unit was based in Khabarovsk. After the war with Japan was over, I was sent to study at the Aviation School in Khabarovsk. I studied there for a year and then the school was disbanded a month and a half before our graduation. We were given qualifications as aircraft mechanics. Upon graduation I served at the air units in North Korea and China. We were fighting to liberate China, Korea and Manchuria from Japanese occupation. We lived in a military neighborhood that was a confined area with its own supplies and health services. We were not allowed to go into town. We were told that the situation in town was complicated and that provocations were possible. We worked at the aerodrome and lived in the barracks. We received newspapers and letters. I never went outside our military neighborhood. I was given the rank of sergeant during my service.

## Post-war

In 1948 my father died. I decided to return to Koryshkov. My commander was trying to persuade me to stay, promising me promotion to lieutenant technician, but I refused. In March 1950 I demobilized from the army. I returned to Koryshkov and got a job at the district industrial association in Kopaygorod. At that time I faced anti-Semitism in my daily life and on the state level as well. I couldn't obtain employment in Koryshkov for a long time, for doubtful reasons. They told me that their management was away and they were not authorized to hire personnel, or they didn't know whether this or that vacancy was still open. I was insistent. Besides, I was a party member and a war veteran, so I was employed. As for anti-Semitism in my daily life, I often heard the word 'zhyd' [kike] applied to me.

After I returned home I got married. My wife was the same age as I and came from Kopaygorod. Her name was Raissa Perelman. Her Jewish name was Rachel. My wife didn't have a professional education. She finished Ukrainian secondary school in Kopaygorod. After we married she became a

housewife. After we moved to Chernovtsy, Raissa worked as assistant accountant at the Trembita Factory, but she quit and returned to housekeeping. We just had a civil wedding ceremony. It was no time for parties. I wanted to continue my studies, but I couldn't leave my family. I had to earn a living.

I remember Stalin's death in March 1953. It was a blow for most of the people I knew, but it was a relief for me. I remembered the collectivization and the arrests of the 1930s [during the so-called Great Terror]. I knew that Stalin was aware of these. Therefore, the Twentieth Party Congress [12](#) where Khrushchev [13](#) spoke about the denunciation of the cult of Stalin wasn't a shock for me. I believed that everything they said at the Congress was true, but it was a drop in the bucket compared to what really happened in the country during Stalin's regimen.

In 1952 my brother Iosif moved to Chernovtsy. He wanted to study and find a good job and he understood that there were more opportunities in a bigger town. My mother and sister soon joined him. My brother Iermiuya and his family settled down in Zhmerinka. In 1957 my wife and I also decided to move to Chernovtsy. We rented an apartment for some time. I went to work as a mechanic at the Trembita Garment Factory. In a short while, I received an apartment. I understood that I had to get some professional education. In 1957 I entered the Faculty of Sewing Industry at the Kiev University of Light Industry. I studied there by correspondence. In 1963 I obtained the diploma of production engineer of the sewing industry. I worked at the Trembita Factory for 32 years until I retired.

My mother continued to observe all Jewish traditions after we moved to Chernovtsy. She celebrated the Sabbath and Jewish holidays and went to synagogue. There was one synagogue in Chernovtsy at that time. It is still there and is the only one in town. My brother and I visited our mother with our families on holidays, but we didn't celebrate Jewish holidays in our families. If the authorities had found out, our careers would have been over. But anyway, we continued to fast on Yom Kippur. We were communists and couldn't follow the Jewish traditions. We celebrated Soviet holidays and got together with our friends and colleagues. All Soviet holidays were days off and we were glad to relax and meet friends.

In the 1970s many Jews were moving to Israel. I sympathized with them. My brother Iosif and his family and my sister Masia with her husband and children also left. My mother died in 1970. I didn't want to leave because. I believed that my motherland was here, however difficult life in Ukraine could be. My wife agreed with me.

## **My present-day life**

I don't want to talk about the latest period of my life. It is my private life, not history. That's why I'll be brief. My brother Iosif died in Israel in 1983. My brother Iermiuya died in Zhmerinka in 1978. My sister Masia died in Israel in 2002. I have nephews, but we are out of touch with them. I don't even have family photographs. My brother and sister took them to Israel and I don't know whether they still exist there.

My first wife, Raissa, died of a disease in 1994. In 1995 I married for the second time. My wife, Ludmila Gitman [nee Artischeva], was born in the town of Chesny, Kazakhstan in 1932. Her family came from this town and she lived there before the war and for some time after the war. She graduated from the Kazakh Polytechnic University. She was a design engineer. Upon graduation,

Ludmila lived and worked in Chernovtsy. We are pensioners now. My wife is Russian, but a few generations of her family have practiced Judaism. Her ancestors accepted Judaism back in the 17th century. Many Russian families converted to Judaism. It is hard to say why it happened so. My wife knows the Torah and Jewish traditions and rituals as well as I do. We have no children.

Jewish life in Ukraine has livened up recently. Jewish public organizations have opened in Chernovtsy. Hesed provides assistance with food packages, medications, good medical care and so on. We also receive Jewish newspapers and magazines. I always read them with interest. There is a big library in Hesed. We also celebrate the Sabbath and all Jewish holidays there. At Purim there was a Purimshpil at the theater in Chernovtsy. My wife and I observe Jewish traditions. We fast on Yom Kippur. We celebrate Pesach, Rosh Hashanah and other holidays. I also take an active part in the activities of the Ghetto Inmates Association and the Association of Veterans of the Great Patriotic War [14](#). We put in order an abandoned Jewish cemetery in Chernovtsy. We search for the locations of mass shootings and the burial of Jews during the war to install monuments in these locations. The latest monument was inaugurated on Ukrainian Independence Day in the village of Mileyevo near Chernovtsy on 24th August 2002. Over 100 Jewish inhabitants of Mileyevo were killed there. We need to remember those who perished to keep further generations informed about the horrors of war. Let people remember and preserve peace on Earth.

## 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 WWI, 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](#) Tsimes**

Stew made usually of carrots, parsnips, or plums with potatoes.

### **[3](#) Collectivization in the USSR**

In the late 1920s - early 1930s private farms were liquidated and collective farms established by force on a mass scale in the USSR. Many peasants were arrested during this process. As a result of the collectivization, the number of farmers and the amount of agricultural production was greatly reduced and famine struck in the Ukraine, the Northern Caucasus, the Volga and other regions in 1932-33.

### **[4](#) Collective farm (in Russian 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 Kulaks**

In the Soviet Union the majority of wealthy peasants that refused to join collective farms and give their grain and property to Soviet power were called kulaks, declared enemies of the people and exterminated in the 1930s.

## **6 Famine in Ukraine**

In 1920 a deliberate famine was introduced in the Ukraine causing the death of millions of people. It was arranged in order to suppress those protesting peasants who did not want to join the collective farms. There was another dreadful deliberate famine in 1930-1934 in the Ukraine. The authorities took away the last food products from the peasants. People were dying in the streets, whole villages became deserted. The authorities arranged this specifically to suppress the rebellious peasants who did not want to accept Soviet power and join collective farms.

## **7 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.

## **8 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.

## **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 Judenrat**

Jewish councils appointed by German occupying authorities to carry out Nazi orders in the Jewish

communities of occupied Europe. After the establishment of the ghettos they were responsible for everything that happened within them. They controlled all institutions operating in the ghettos, the police, the employment agency, food supplies, housing, health, social work, education, religion, etc. Germans also made them responsible for selecting people for the work camps, and, in the end, choosing those to be sent to camps that were in reality death camps. It is hard to judge their actions due to the abnormal circumstances. Some believe they betrayed Jews by obeying orders, and others think they were trying to gain time and save as many people as possible.

## **11 War with Japan**

In 1945 the war in Europe was over, but in the Far East Japan was still fighting against the anti-fascist coalition countries and China. The USSR declared war on Japan on 8 August 1945 and Japan signed the act of capitulation in September 1945.

## **12 Twentieth Party Congress**

At the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956 Khrushchev publicly debunked the cult of Stalin and lifted the veil of secrecy from what had happened in the USSR during Stalin's leadership.

## **13 Khrushchev, Nikita (1894-1971)**

Soviet communist leader. After Stalin's death in 1953, he became first secretary of the Central Committee, in effect the head of the Communist Party of the USSR. In 1956, during the 20th Party Congress, Khrushchev took an unprecedented step and denounced Stalin and his methods. He was deposed as premier and party head in October 1964. In 1966 he was dropped from the Party's Central Committee.

## **14 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.