

# Mikhail Plotkin

*I was born in 1915, still in the Tsarist times. I was born in Chashniki settlement, in Vitebsk province [today Belarus]. I lived there until I was 14 years old. My maternal grandfather's name was Bera Dvorkin. He had a nickname, 'Kharakovers,' after the village of Kharakovichi, where he had come from. Grandfather owned an inn in the middle of the settlement, near the marketplace.*



*He had a lot of authority and was very often asked to witness conclusion of deals. Wealthy people gathered in his house, such as Jewish businessmen, Polish pans [Polish nobility] and Russian officials. They discussed difficult issues to find mutually acceptable solutions. I remember how Grandfather took me to the synagogue, where we sat in the front row. We were considered kohanim; we were blessed separately from the others.*

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### **My family background**

Grandfather Bera was married twice. He loved his first wife very much, but she appeared to be infertile. According to the Jewish law he gave her a divorce letter after three years of marriage and got married for the second time. His second wife gave birth to two sons, Mulia and Folia, and eight daughters including Dynia, Sarah, Dvoira and Musia; all the rest died in childhood. All children were born and grew up in Chashniki. They were members of the local Jewish community and their families were engaged in crafts and trade. In the 1920s one by one they moved to Leningrad [today St. Petersburg]. The big city with its opportunities attracted them and they wanted to provide their children with a good education. At the end of the 1920s after the NEP [1](#) was abolished, the local authorities imposed exorbitant taxes on traders and craftsmen and threatened them with repressions in case of non-payment. After that no relatives of ours remained in Chashniki. They all escaped persecutions. Grandmother died early. I don't remember her at all. Grandfather died in 1918.

My mother's name was Dynia Bera Dvorkina. Mother was born in 1879, the year Stalin was born. She was very beautiful. Besides, she was a smart, strong-willed, practical and very thrifty woman.

She was considered an enviable bride in the village but didn't get married for a long time. She turned all the young men down, as she didn't like anyone. She was around 30 years old when she met my father. They married shortly after.

Abram Plotkin, my father, came from Parichi settlement near Bobruisk [today Belarus]. There was a village nearby, all inhabitants of which were Plotkins. Some families of our relatives lived in this village. Father was educated in his own way, though he never got any certificates. He served as a manager for local landlords and worked at several places.

My parents had three children. My elder brother – I don't remember his name – was notable for his intractable temper. He studied at cheder and constantly clashed with the teacher. The latter began picking on him. One day my brother hid a stone in his bosom and brought it to cheder and dropped it on the teacher's foot. The teacher became furious and beat him mercilessly. After that my brother was ill for a long time and died soon after. Back then teachers had the right to use forms of corporal punishment, but not cruel ones. Such cases were left without any investigation in a small borough, as the inhabitants were afraid to make complaints to the authorities.

My sister Sonya [Sofia] was four years older than me, she was born in 1911. She was my elder sister. She had an inborn flaw – a curved face, no one knew why. She was treated but to no avail. When she was 16, she moved to Leningrad in order to continue her studies and lived there independently, under the supervision of our relatives, who had left before.

Father fell ill with tuberculosis when he was 40 years old and died soon afterwards. In 1916, during World War I, he was summoned to Orsha for the Army draft. He left for Orsha with open tuberculosis. The medical commission found him fit for army service, though his consumption was in its final stage. Mother brought him home. He could barely walk, came home, lay on the bed and died. I was six months old, when he died.

After Father's death in 1916, my mother didn't get married and remained a widow for 14 years with two children on her hands; she raised me and Sonya. I was a naughty and sickly child. At first I fell sick with tuberculosis. The local medical attendant, an experienced and intelligent person, advised my mother to treat me with badger fat. I was given it as a drink and recovered. In 1919 I fell seriously ill, I ate too many sour cherries and poisoned myself with cherry stones. It happened to me often: as soon as sour cherries ripened, I climbed onto the tree and ate far too many of them. But this time I was near death. Mother was running around like crazy, she didn't know what to do. She ran to the synagogue to see the rabbi. The rabbi told her, 'He should be given another name at the synagogue.' According to the rabbi's advice I was named Itzhak, in honor of a Hassidic tzaddik. My new name was solemnly proclaimed at the synagogue. After that literally on the second day I recovered: either the name helped or it was over by itself. Three days later I was as good as new. But no one called me Itzhak. As a child I was called Meishke. My name according to my passport is Moisey Abramovich.

## Growing up

One of the most striking impressions from my childhood was connected with Polish anti-Semitism during the Civil War [2](#). When in 1920 the Soviet-Polish War [3](#) broke out, the Polish troops at first quickly moved across the territory of Belarus. Mother sent me to the village and arranged for me to stay with an old Jewish acquaintance. She thought it would be quieter there, but the Polish soldiers

entered the village. I hid on the stove <sup>4</sup>. A Polish officer in beautiful uniform and konfederatka [black or colored square Polish hat] tore out a tuft of hair from a man's beard, brought his fist to the man's nose and said, 'Well, kike! As many zlotys as you have hairs! Or I'll knife you.' Ever since then I distrusted Poles, though Stas Fialkovsky, a Pole, was my best friend since my student years.

Our Chashniki settlement was located on the bank of the river Ulla, approximately 80 kilometers from Vitebsk, the province capital. Lepel borough was even closer; it was the center of the district. Orsha was also near. Later, at the end of the 1920s, a railroad was constructed between Lepel and Orsha. This railroad passed not far from Chashniki. It was three kilometers on foot to the nearest railroad station. Chashniki is not a historically famous place. Perhaps Shlomo Ansky should be mentioned, he was the founder of the Jewish ethnography in Russia. [Ansky, Shlomo (1863-1920): born Shlomo Zaslav Rappoport; Russian-Jewish writer and playwright, author of the famous play 'The Dybbuk.'] He came from our borough, from a family of timber traders, the Rappapoorts, who grew rich during the times of Tsar Nikolai I. Only Jews lived in Chashniki. It was a pure Jewish borough, Belarusians lived in villages around. Everybody spoke Yiddish in the borough. Even Belarusians, who came to the marketplace, spoke Yiddish. We had a very solid national system there. No bilingualism. Jewish mono-lingualism. Mother spoke only Yiddish to me.

The small borough looked ordinary, like all boroughs, and looked more like a village than a town. Dirty streets, it was impossible to walk along them in spring and fall, no boots lasted long enough. It was better to go outside in winter, when the ground was covered with snow; or in summer when the soil dried out and dust stood rooted to the ground.

My mother inherited three houses from Father, who died in 1916. The biggest house served as an inn. Peasants from villages arrived with horse carts to the fairs and on market days. They entered the yard, left their horses there and went to trade. During the day, at lunchtime they came in for tea. Mother put on a huge samovar for them, first one and then another. Dozens of men and women sat at the table and drank tea with baranki [type of bagels]. Those who were wealthier bought home-brew from my mother. The marketplace was in the middle of the settlement. Food was there in abundance, one can only dream of it nowadays. All Jews had vegetable gardens. They had enough potatoes and beetroot. If someone bought something, it was usually meat, though Jews had their own goats, ducks and chickens. For every winter Mother fed 15-20 geese and a couple of dozens of hens, which grazed at the backyard. No one counted them. Two or three barrels of pickled cucumbers and sauerkraut were procured for the winter as well. We were able to live without buying food at the market.

A small paper factory was constructed in the borough in the late 1920s. One of the Jews took a contract and started a mechanical mill with a kerosene engine. There were a lot of shoemakers in our shtetl. They didn't only patch up, but also made boots, shoes and ladies' shoes. There were also specialists who felted valenki [Russian felt boots]. Nobody makes such valenki now. There was one medical assistant for the whole borough.

I remember Zusia Vasserman, our neighbor. This very quiet, modest Jew had a very warm attitude towards me and my mother. He sold apples. He drove around villages on his cart, bought apples from peasants, stored them in his cellar and sold them at the marketplace in winter. He paid a lot of attention to us and took me with him on his commercial trips. One day, early in the morning he invited me to go on a trip with him. I snatched a slice of bread and got onto the cart. When we left

the borough, a big Gypsy band drove out of the forest: horses, carts, wagons; Gypsy women in flower-patterned skirts; swarthy children. [Editor's note: Russian Gypsies can be divided into two big groups, the Roma and Luli. Historically, the Roma first appeared in Russia in the 16th century but it was only at the beginning of the 19th century that they came to Moscow and St. Petersburg. They tended to live in separate communities and often faced prejudice. During World War II they suffered from Nazi persecution along with the Jews.] They all made noise, danced and their jewelry jingled. I still have the picture in front of my eyes. Zusia's wife was my mother's friend. Later on she fell seriously ill and became jealous. So Mother stopped communicating with Zusia and told me to stay away from him. At the end of the 1920s when the authorities began pressing the traders, Mother many times advised Zusia to wrap up his business and leave. But he clung to his house, his small business he was accustomed to. He was afraid to break away and start from scratch. As a result, he was dispossessed, exiled and vanished without a trace.

All borough boys were busy with games. Every summer battles started, street against street. We all prepared clay 'shells,' ran and threw them at each other on command. After that we ran to bathe in the river. Timber was procured upstream and floated down the Ulla. We got onto these rafts and dived into the water. The current was very strong. Once I was drawn under a log by the stream. There was no air to breathe. I choked and lost consciousness. Fortunately, a man passing by noticed me and dragged me out with his boat-hook. In winter we went ice-skating. When Mother gave me real skates, I became so keen on it that I stopped going to school: in the morning I just went to the ice-rink instead of going to school. I had to repeat a year, the third grade. Mother refused to buy me a bicycle as a punishment. I asked her very much, but she was inexorable. It was the most 'acute pain' of my childhood and I still remember it.

Besides playing with my pals I liked music. My teacher taught me to play the violin when I was five years old. I played in his family orchestra. There were eight musicians: two sons and a daughter of his, a local blacksmith, a drummer and a trumpeter. He played very well and loved music. We played at weddings and formal events. We marched at the head of the column during holiday demonstrations, playing the 'Budenny March' or 'Slavianska's Farewell' [Russian military marches]. We played freilakhs and other Jewish melodies at weddings. When theater performances took place at the House of Culture, we played any music, which came to our minds, in the foyer.

I went to cheder when I was five, in 1920. We studied the Torah there. I studied the Hummash for two years. We didn't come to studying the Talmud. All studies at cheder were in Yiddish. We learnt prayers in Hebrew by heart, without understanding the meaning of the words. I didn't have time to learn Hebrew. We weren't taught to read and write in Russian. I revolted in 1922 and flatly refused to go to cheder, as it 'was not in fashion anymore.' All my friends quit. 'Mother, I will not go to cheder anymore.' 'What?' She began to beat me, but I remained inexorable. The melamed, the cheder teacher, came and complained about me, 'Your son doesn't visit me anymore.' She told him, 'What can I do? The time is gone, not only he quit.' The synagogue also was empty, only the old people gathered there. I was seven years old at that time. I didn't go to school yet.

In 1922 I went to school. The school was considered a good one. The building and the basic team of teachers remained from the pre-revolutionary times [5](#). All the studies were in Russian. In primary grades our teacher was a Pole, ill with consumption. He taught us arithmetic, reading and writing in Russian, other subjects and kept a strict order. I was even left in the third grade for another year because of truancy. They didn't want to transfer me to the 5th grade of high school because of my

social origin [between 1918 and 1936 the 'exploiters' were disabled, deprived of their rights, including the right for free education.] Mother managed to arrange it. I remember only the teacher of geography, a very intelligent Russian woman. Everything I know about geography, I remember from her lessons. I didn't manage to finish the 5th grade. In February or March 1929 my mother had to suddenly escape from Chashniki. She was threatened with arrest and trial. I was left alone and quit going to school.

At the end of the NEP in 1928-1929 all my relatives were out. Some were evicted, some were bereaved of their property. Their property was taken away like this: all of a sudden the financial inspector, the tax service inspector, sent a subpoena ordering to come for tax charging. And the amount of tax exceeded the cost of the house, all household and income ten years in advance. Even if one had sold oneself to slavery, it still wouldn't have been possible to pay the tax. So people left everything and fled, in order to avoid prison because of failure to pay.

Mother was dispossessed at the beginning of 1929. The financial inspector sent her a paper, which said that she had to pay a tax amounting to 5,700,000 rubles. It wasn't possible to earn such an amount of money in a lifetime. The paper was just written at random. If one didn't pay the tax, one was prosecuted. So smart people left their houses and escaped. Those who didn't manage to escape, were prosecuted, exiled to Solovki or Kazakhstan [6](#). Mother was warned by friends that in the evening she would be taken away and arrested. My mother was a very smart woman. As soon as she heard it, she didn't wait for any miracle to happen, she fled. She got onto a passing cart and went to the railroad station. She went to the neighboring station, not the closest one, in order not to be tracked down. She took a train from there to Leningrad where our relatives, who had left before, lived. Mother couldn't take me with her. If we had been caught, we would have both been exiled.

I was left alone with three houses. And above all, I had stocks of jam for five years maybe. I also had a dog as 'dowry.' It happened in February or March 1929, two or three months after my birthday. I was 13 years old. That's why I had no bar mitzvah. I was left all alone and there were no relatives around; no one to take care of me.

My music teacher promised my mother that he would put me on a train as soon as possible and send her a telegram to meet me in Leningrad. And so he did. Three or four months after my mother had left he tapped on the window and told me, 'Meishke, we shall leave at 3 at night.' He was a wonderful man, a person with a pure soul. He had a big family. He knew it was a risk to assist the dispossessed, but he did everything honestly. A cart approached at 3am. The teacher came with his sons. He told me, 'Give me your sack and get in.' They loaded my belongings onto the cart and secretly at night took me to the station. Secretly, so that no one would know where I was going. The dispossessed were watched. If they found out where I was going they would start looking for my mother there. She was already condemned, deprived. All her property was taken away, because she didn't pay the tax and fled. We had to go three kilometers to the station along a forest road. We came to the station. He bought a train ticket and accompanied me to Orsha, where he put me on a train to Leningrad. He sent a telegram to my sister Sonya in order to organize our meeting. The mail service worked better in those times. It cost one kopek or half a kopek to send a telegram. I had some luggage with me on the train – a sack full of holes, two times bigger than me. I traveled on the train for 15 hours and ate bread with jam. I put as much jam as I could carry into the sack: two whole pots. It was my first distant trip, and on my own. I was 13.

I arrived in Leningrad in the afternoon, at Vitebsky Station. My sister Sonya met me there. My sister brought me to a house opposite Vitebsky Station. The apartment was on the eighth floor. There was no elevator. She rented a corner of a room. The corner was separated with a screen and she wasn't allowed to use the rest of the room. I was totally out of my mind and didn't understand anything because of fear and uncertainty. I didn't stay with my sister long. She had a very strict landlady. She allowed me to stay one or two days with my sister, not longer. My sister went to school at that time; she was in the final grade. It was a famous and very good school located near the Art-and-Industry College.

Later Aunt Sarah showed mercy and said, 'Bring him to me, to 2 Chaikovskogo Street.' So I lived with her in summer and fall 1929. Aunt Sarah had three children. She was a housewife and her husband was a goldsmith. He had a workshop of his own. He did everything himself: met the clients, took orders and made golden articles. His income was rather good. The family was quite Jewish, but the husband drank and every day came back from work a little tipsy. Sarah had an unusual two-storied apartment with a nursery upstairs and a parents' room downstairs. When she left for the summerhouse [7](#) I stayed as a guard in the apartment. I wandered about the yard for two weeks and then signed up for a pioneer club [8](#) for children.

Mother couldn't take me in right away. After my mother arrived in Leningrad she lived incognito with one of her sisters on Grazhdansky Prospekt. Then her sisters found her a Jewish fiancé. They got her acquainted with a representative of the working class with the help of some well-wishers. Iosif Borisovich Barvish worked as a glue-maker at a factory manufacturing musical instruments. He came from Kazan [today the capital of Tatarstan region, Russia], arrived in Petrograd [today St. Petersburg] at the beginning of the Revolution. His wife died and he had four grown-up sons. He was an unsophisticated man, a nice one, hard-working, without interest in lofty matters and politics. After his wife had died it became difficult for him to cope with his sons. They were serious grown up people but none could cook and keep the house. Three days after Mother was introduced to this man they decided to get married. She was satisfied with his social origin; she would become the wife of a worker and wash off her past sins as a dispossessed person. He thought it convenient that he would have a wife who would feed him and his sons.

When Mother got married, Barvish had five rooms in a separate apartment on Znamenskaya Street. Such conditions were perfect at that time. Since Mother married Barvish and they registered the marriage, she became the wife of a proletarian, a worker. She didn't tell anyone that she had been repressed, she held her tongue. She kept the house, fed her new husband's sons. As soon as Mother found out about Barvish's job she started to ask him to bring home some glue. He began to bring back a small bar of joining glue every day. Mother, being a born entrepreneur, sold these bars secretly at the marketplace. In those times there was a shortage of all goods. The well-being of the family grew significantly owing to my mother's underground activity. As a result everything developed rather well.

Later when she pegged her place substantially, she told her husband, 'I also have children.' He didn't know anything either about the boy or the girl. First Sonya appeared, as if by chance arrived in Leningrad, without a place to live. She fitted in well, though she was with a 'flaw,' a warped face. Barvish had four sons and no daughters. He accepted her and decided to adopt her. She was Plotkina and became Barvish.



Since 1929 Sonya lived with our mother. She finished school and graduated from the Timber-Processing Academy in Leningrad. All her life she worked as an economist in the field of wood processing at the A. V. Lunacharsky musical instruments factory. She was considered a good expert. Her work was very hard; she was the head of the Labor and Salary Department of the whole factory. A lot of people in their team hated her. Bonuses and other payments depended on her. There were always those who wished to get a bigger bonus and other perks. But she did everything according to the rules. It was impossible to compel her, she didn't take bribes, she didn't indulge anyone and thus everyone considered her bad. My sister loved me very much. She didn't have any private life; she lived with our mother all her life and died several months after her, in 1971.

Later, at the end of fall 1929 Mother took me by the hand and brought me to her husband. Here was a son, who appeared 'accidentally.' As if she didn't know that I was brought here. 'There's nowhere to place him.' Barvish was a very nice man. Besides, he was very much pleased with the new housewife. I was allowed to stay. Thus, I began to live in my family again. I lived like his legitimate son. Barvish accepted me. But he adopted my sister legally, she became Barvish, and I remained Plotkin. All his four sons lived with us.

Barvish's elder son, Chaim, took the Party courses. He was a member of the [Communist] Party, a very ideological and committed person. He worked as a secretary of the Party organization at the 'Bolshevik' [9](#) plant shop. In 1933 Chaim was summoned to the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party and was present at Stalin's reception. He was appointed Manager of the MTS – machine-and-tractor station on the Kuban [river]. He had a hard time there. We began to get information that it was restless there. He married a Cossack [10](#) woman. It cost him a lot. His wife's relatives began to dislike Chaim because of his Jewish nationality. The Cossack woman herself never came to see us. We were informed before the war that he was killed by the Cossacks.

The second son, David, worked at the SOMP [State Optical-and-Mechanical Plant] as the head of the Planning Department. He had a good salary and he had a nice wife. Lusia was a very nice and sociable woman, she managed a perfumery store, she also sang well. They had a son, Vladimir. He became a very good design engineer and participated in designing submarines. When the war broke out [11](#), the SOMP, a modern plant, producing strategically important goods, was promptly evacuated to Kazan. David left for Kazan with the plant. He left Lusia and started a new family. After the war he stayed in Kazan and died there.

The third son, Mikhail [Matos], was the manager of a restaurant on Nevsky Prospekt. He couldn't trade or steal. He always ended up losing. His only merit in the face of the Soviet Power was that he had served in the cavalry as a young man and was a brave Red cavalryman and joined the Bolshevik Party. That is why the authorities entrusted a restaurant to him. My mother proposed her niece Lyuba to him as a wife. They got married and lived in harmony. Right before the war the restaurant went broke under his management. Either some criminals robbed it, or the employees embezzled it. Matos returned to the army, served all the way up to the rank of a captain and was in command of a battalion. Unfortunately, marriages weren't stable during the war. Matos found himself a very beautiful Russian wife. They served in one unit. They had a son. After the war Matos returned to Leningrad with his new wife and soon died from stomach cancer because of an unsuccessful operation.

The youngest son, Victor, sold kerosene in a store before the war. He was the most unfortunate one, an unprepossessing and slowwitted person. My mother married him off to Tsylia, a very rich and practical woman from Chashniki. Tsylia was a real bourgeois there. She had a big brick house in Chashniki. She wasn't a beauty, nothing to look at really, but she fitted the role of a housewife. So Victor married Tsylia. Under her skillful control he became manager of the kerosene store and the wealthiest of all brothers. They had a son, Aron. Everybody considered him a booby, though he graduated successfully from the Electrical and Technical Institute, became an engineer, a radio electronics specialist. He married a very practical girl, who took him to America as soon as Jews were allowed to emigrate from the USSR. They live in the suburbs of Chicago now and prosper. Victor and Tsylia stayed in Russia and died in Leningrad. Such were my new relatives.

By 1929 I had finished only five grades: four grades of elementary school and one grade of high school. I had to continue my studies or find a job. There was unemployment at that time. Nobody waited for such a 'responsible employee' as me, nobody kept a place for me. In August I went to the labor registry office. It was located on Maxim Gorky Prospekt. I came there and told them that I was 14. They replied, 'Grow up.' I came back in two days and said, 'I am 15.' 'Well, a 15-year-old is fine. We are taking on apprentices for the FWS [i. e. factory and works school] located in Malaya Okhta [industrial district north-east of Leningrad]. There is a cooperative of the reinforcement trust. They train metal workers, lathe operators. Do you want to go for this training?' I said, 'If you accept me, I will go.' So they put me on the list. I went to the FWS with an assignment and became an apprentice.

When I came to the FWS with an assignment from the labor registry office, I found out that it wasn't just a high school. Working personnel was being trained there for industry; they were dealing with sanitary engineering and taps. I was considered a worker and had to study at the FWS for three years in order to acquire the qualification of a metal worker and a lathe operator.

Besides learning the future profession at the FWS we had lessons based on the high school program. The school was to provide us with education at the level of a seven-year school, i.e. education level of the 5th, 6th and 7th grades. We studied mathematics, technical drawing and other secondary school subjects. We also had one lesson of Russian per week. There were also political literacy lessons – about the October Revolution, about the Winter Palace being taken by storm, though in reality there was no storm, and so on and so forth. All studies were conducted rather primitively. In fact my knowledge remained at the level of the 5th grade from the school in Chashniki.

A lot of attention was devoted to public activity, the Komsomol [12](#), participation in various events. In summer we were taken to kolkhozes [13](#) to help the agricultural workers to weed the fields and harvest. There were also girls at school, no less than half of all students. There weren't many Jews but there were some, especially in the Komsomol organization. There were no special relations between Jews there. I decided to join the Komsomol. My social origin was an appropriate one now; I came from a worker's family. I became a Komsomol member and was accepted at the general meeting.

Soon Mother insisted that I enter a part-time music school and continue to learn to play the violin. I loved music, entered the school gladly and passed the exams successfully. I told one boy at the FWS about my success. He appeared to be either very ideological or simply mean. He spoke at one



of the Komsomol meetings, having changed the issue in such a way, 'Some of our workers want to become musicians and give up our working class job. We should not tolerate such people in the Komsomol.' The Komsomol meeting resolved that I should quit the music school, otherwise I would be expelled from the Komsomol. I decided to quit the music school.

In 1932 I finished the FWS. I was assigned [14](#) to work as a turning-lathe operator at the Lapse foundry, where I did my practical work. My salary per month was 30 rubles. It was almost nothing, however, for those days it was enough to buy bread. It was as if I made my contribution to the family budget and justified my existence.

I was to make railroad joints at the plant. I could not succeed in it. My stepfather gave me some practical advice, 'Take a look at your neighbor's tools.' So I peeped at my neighbor's tools in the shop when he turned away for a moment. He had a chasing tool, the same as ours, but produced in Germany. I told Mother about it and she found a tool seller and bought me German chasing tools, and moreover, nitrated ones. They practically don't wear out, because their surface is treated with nitrogen. She bought three pieces for me.

On the sly I put the German chasing tool on my machine and cut 600 joints during my shift, all of them perfectly done. I completed my monthly work at once. When I successfully handed in my joints the next day, our supervisor came.

The foreman was a born anti-Semite, though there were few Jews at the plant. He was envious: this 'kike' was able to master something that he himself wasn't able to do. He began to watch me, looking under my hand, spying on my work. So I took a sick-leave at the polyclinic and didn't come to work for three or four days. I warned everybody that I was sick and couldn't come to work. He forgot about me. When I came to work again I made 500 joints without any rejects. The standard daily work was 25 to 30 parts per shift at most. My picture was placed on the Board of Honor with the inscription 'udarnik' [shock worker] Plotkin. I was 17 years old.

After that the anti-Semitic foreman conceived a dislike for me and began to torment me with night shifts. He put me on night shifts every other week. It was very hard for me. I couldn't stand night work. I couldn't stay conscious after one or two sleepless nights and fell asleep upright. I was afraid to fall asleep and fall into the machine. I complained to my mother, saying that I couldn't go to work at the plant. I asked her to take me away from it, though I liked the lathe operator job.

Mother found OBLONO [National Education regional department] courses, which trained teachers of polytechnic labor. Young workers were taken for these courses and trained to be teachers in six months. Graduates were assigned to work at schools as teachers of polytechnic labor, bench work and timbering. I left the foundry in 1934 and signed up for these courses.

There was a special science named pedology – a theory developed by the pedagogue L. S. Vygotsky [1896-1936], studying young people's personalities during the awkward age. This science was very much in fashion. It was based on the fact that at the age of 15-17 the teenagers' psyche has its certain peculiarities, both boys' and girls'. This science was very important for a teacher, as one should know a child's psyche. We had a pedologist at our courses. He told us about the teenager's soul and what his interests were. The teenagers were interested not in the work itself, but in relations that were generated from the common cause. Boys are mostly interested in girls and vice versa. Later a decree was introduced, stating that pedology was a pseudo-science. It was

subject to damning criticism and banned. Now the ideas of that science are used by pedagogues all over the world. Only in this country, at the end of the 1930s, it was banned and declared a pseudo-science.

In summer 1934, after finishing the OBLONO courses, I was assigned to work as a teacher of labor and drawing in Chagodoschensky district of Leningrad region. Now Chagodoscha is part of Novgorod region, but at that time Novgorod, Pskov, Petrozavodsk and Murmansk were part of the big Leningrad region. I was accepted as a teacher to a high school in the village of Pervomayskoye. It was a beautiful location with a lot of forests. Pervomayskoye was a traditional center of glass-production. There were several small glass-works around.

I was accommodated in the former manor-house, a wooden house with a stove. I lived there all alone. In winter it was sometimes terrifying, when the wolves howled. I taught village children labor according to CLI method, as I had been taught at the FWS. I showed them elements of the working movement for the purpose of developing automatism and labor skills. In any case there were no real tools at school, except for a carver's mallet, wooden hammer, and an axe, which they knew how to use better than I did. I couldn't draw, so I contented myself with talks about how to draw. There were more experienced teachers at school, mostly middle-aged women, who forgave me all my mistakes because of my young age. I was 19. There was a wonderful teacher of physics, exiled from Leningrad for his inappropriate social origin; and an experienced teacher of chemistry. They got married later.

The most difficult trial was conversations related to foreign and internal policy with the collective farmers, kolkhozniks, from neighboring villages on the instructions of the local village Soviet [local authority]. It was a very hard time. I didn't have any understanding of politics and didn't know what to say. However, everything turned out fine. Apparently my listeners knew even less than I did.

The following year polytechnic labor was abolished at schools. There weren't enough resources to support the good idea of polytechnic education. The country wasn't able to furnish schools with necessary equipment and tools. I had to return back home to my mother.

I had to find another job. I went to work as a lather operator at the plant named after the Second Five-year Plan, located on Ligovsky Prospekt. The plant manufactured paper-producing machines. It was a complicated and modern production for those times. I handled my job well and worked there until September 1935.

Working youth entered technical schools and institutes at that time. I also wanted to obtain real education. Mother went to LITMO [Leningrad Institute of Fine Mechanics and Optics] and found out that there was a rabfak [15](#) there. The rabfak ensured high school education for young workers, who didn't have a chance to finish school, but wanted to get higher education. Four years at rabfak were equal to nine grades of high school. I submitted an application to the rabfak and said that I had finished FWS. I was taken in to the 4th year right away. FWS was considered equal to seven grades. Besides I was a worker who came straight 'from the machine.'

We were taught mathematics, physics, literature, the Russian language, technical drawing and several other subjects. We also had social science. We had a wonderful teacher of literature. I still remember him. He didn't give us lectures, but arranged discussions about literature. Our whole group listened to him with their mouths open. I can't remember if he was Russian or not. There

were no differences between Russians and Jews at that time. Only the social origin mattered: if one was a bourgeois, one wouldn't be accepted anywhere, but if one was from a workers' family, one would have clear passage everywhere. The selection was social, not based on intelligence or nationality.

I graduated from the 4th year of rabfak in 1936 and entered the LITMO. I took two exams; mathematics and physics. I got two poor marks for both. But since my social origin in my papers was stated as proletarian by my stepfather and I myself was considered a worker, I was accepted and taken in to the 1st year of studies. Other boys and girls had excellent marks but they didn't pass the entrance exams. Social origin was the most important issue at that time.

I wasn't the most successful student and had no big achievements in my studies. I strived after knowledge, but my school education gaps and my shyness were an obstacle. The educational level in LITMO was very high. Our teachers were leading specialists in the field of optics and mechanics. They set up their own scientific and pedagogical schools. Their students held the highest positions in the optical industry, fine mechanical engineering, computing equipment manufacturing. The intellectual and professional level of the environment in which I spent five years as a student of the institute, was very high. I was not distinguished by capabilities and success against such a background, but the knowledge and skills I obtained, proved useful to me in my practical work.

My public activity was more successful. I made friends with Max Mikhailovich Rosenberg, a Communist, Chairman of the trade-union committee at the Institute of Fine Mechanics and Optics. He got me engaged in trade-union work. I was entrusted with the social sector. I was mostly busy with distribution of tickets to health centers and rest homes.

Irina Nagibina studied together with me at the institute: when I was a 5th-year student, she was a 2nd-year student. She was a tall and beautiful girl with fair hair. I liked her very much. We were friends. We didn't even think about the fact that she was Russian and I was a Jew. It wasn't significant at that time. Her father worked in Gostiny Dvor and being a salesman, had a lot of important contacts. He didn't like the fact that his daughter had a Jew as a friend; however, he died in 1940.

## **During the war**

At the beginning of June 1941 I ate too many plums at the market and found myself in the Botkinsky barracks, the municipal infectious diseases hospital, in a couple of days with typhoid fever. Right before the war there was a rumor in our ward that all walking patients, those who could walk, should be discharged. Space was to be made for a military hospital. I was discharged on 18th June. No one knew that I was discharged and no one came to meet me. I went outside, got into the rain and hardly made it home. I dropped on the bed at home and stayed in bed. At night I had high temperature and we called for a doctor. The doctor was very much surprised, 'How could he be discharged in such a condition?' I stayed in bed on 22nd June, when Molotov announced on the radio that Germany had attacked us and war had broken out.

We didn't know the truth at that time, we knew nothing. We didn't know, how strong and predatory that enemy was, which wanted to eliminate Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, to exterminate all Jews and resettle all Russians and others beyond the Urals. We didn't know that our leaders hadn't expected the German invasion and were taken aback; we didn't know that Stalin sank into depression and

hid himself during the first days of the war. When the first confusion was over, we began to receive reasonable instructions from above and we started to work. The Germans advanced quickly to the East, so most important enterprises of Leningrad, its defense industry, which was always the support of the Russian state, were prepared to be evacuated. The required number of cargo cars was allocated for evacuation of the most important defense enterprises. Special trains marked with a letter carried everything away to the East, both the equipment and the employees.

I was subject to the military draft, but all LITMO students had a draft deferment. The institute was considered a military one, as it trained engineers for the defense industry. However, the situation at the front was very difficult. Volunteers were enlisted to the People's Volunteer Corps. At the end of June a friend of mine came from the institute, 'Look, we all got signed up for the People's Volunteer Corps, what about you?' 'I am ill, I can hardly walk.' 'It doesn't matter, write an application, we will take it there.' I wrote an application. The medical commission for the People's Volunteer Corps was set for 3rd July. I received a call-up paper. I was sick, but I got up and went there. I didn't want to be a deserter during wartime. Mother went to see me off.

The commission was located in the Palace of Culture named after the First Five-year Plan, behind the Mariinsky Theater. Mother brought me there. There were crowds of people, hundreds, thousands of draftees. We were waiting for two or three hours. I was so weak after having typhoid that I can't even remember how I stood there. The examination was quick. 'What do you have?' 'A call-up paper.' 'Go to the medical commission.' I came to the commission, the doctors checked my sight, my hearing, my legs and my arms. 'Suitable.' Then one doctor, an old 60-year-old woman, asked me, 'Why do you have such a heart beat? Are you scared or something?' I explained that I had been in Botkinsky barracks with typhoid. 'Move away from the others.' After that I was handed over to a different commission. They started to touch me all over again and told me I had heart complications after typhoid. They gave me an army deferment for two months. I was issued a note about deferment and I dragged myself home, understanding nothing. That piece of paper saved my life.

All our students from the 5th year, except for three people, who got deferment, were sent to the People's Volunteer Corps Division. Several days later, the 50 boys, who didn't have any military training, were sent to Luzhsky Line, to defend the far approaches to Leningrad. They were bombed on their way and incurred their first losses. In the middle of August the German tanks broke through our defenses and all our boys perished. No one survived. There was a rumor that in the last battle the secretary of the Party organization of our year and his assistants gave themselves up and went over to the German side.

Two days after the medical commission the same friend of mine visited me, 'Why are you sitting here? The Dean's office is looking for you, they want you to come immediately.' I had already finished five years at the institute. Only the diploma remained. I went to the institute. The Scientific Work pro-rector jumped on me, 'Where have you been?' 'I came as soon as I heard you were looking for me.' 'Go to this room, there is a commission. The Defense Ministry has assignments for all those who graduated from this institute, without defending a diploma. Go there and they will tell you what to do.' I went to the commission and told my name. 'We have been looking for you. Here is an assignment from the Ministry. Where would you like to go? Pick a place. There is Novosibirsk, Tomsk, Sverdlovsk, Izhevsk and another dozen of cities. Pick any plant you want - a firearms plant or an artillery plant...' All graduates were already drafted to the People's Volunteer Corps, so there

were a lot of free assignments. I started to think, 'What plant would be farther from the frontline?' These ministry assignments were for the whole Soviet Union: central regions, Siberia, the Far East, the Urals. I read, 'Kaluga, Ryazan, Voronezh... that's bad, the Germans are close there... Izhevsk.' I counted quickly that it was 1,500 kilometers to Izhevsk. 'I choose Izhevsk.' 'Fine. You will go to Izhevsk and work at an arms plant. Sign here, take the ticket and go.' I was assigned to the Izhevsk arms plant as an engineer-researcher to work with CME – control and measurement equipment.

Everything was happening so fast, no one understood anything. I had to say good-bye to my relatives. All my friends and relatives got together in our apartment on Vosstaniya Street. We had a real feast, because the assignment papers were accompanied with a trip advance payment, a tremendous amount of money for that time. We drank champagne.

Then Irina Nagibina, my first girlfriend, came running: 'Oh, you're leaving, what about me?' 'Stay with your parents.' She told me when we said good-bye, 'Don't forget me.'

In the morning of my departure day I packed my things, took my ragged light coat, shoes, my cap and left for the Moscow railroad station. Everybody who could, came to see me off. I left together with my friend and institute-mate Stas Fialkovsky. Our train was one of the last ones, which left Leningrad. In the middle of August the Germans broke through near Kingisepp and Luga, later near Gatchina and at the beginning of September barred all the ways to and from the city. We didn't have any misgivings about the future Leningrad siege terrors [16](#).

Our train departed successfully. There was real pandemonium at Bologoye station. There were troop trains with refugees from the Baltic Republics and Belarus; crowds of evacuated people. Then we continued our trip. The next station was in panic. Deserters from the frontline and refugees cried that the Germans were killing everybody. Those who could, have to save their souls. We continued the trip. Soon we arrived in Kazan. We had to change trains there. So we went to look for that train, but the way to Izhevsk appeared to be barred. Some nice people told us, 'Instead of waiting for the train, go to the dock three kilometers from here, take a boat and get to your place.' So we did. It took us four days to get to Izhevsk, the capital of the Udmurtsk Autonomous Republic.

We immediately went to the plant in Izhevsk. We had no place to stay – no apartment, no hotel. We came to the personnel department and showed our papers. 'We have been waiting for you. I will give you an assignment to the chief engineer.' The chief engineer, a real Jew called Moisey, told me, 'Moisey Abramovich Plotkin – this is very good. We have a lot of such people. I will issue an assignment for you to this department and you will have to register there.' I was taken on the staff and the personnel department allocated me and my friend a separate apartment in the center of the city.

120,000 people worked at that time at the Izhevsk Arms Plant. That was a large-scope production. The plant produced machine-guns, rifles, antitank guns, TT pistol, later it began to produce Tula revolvers. We didn't make anything new. These were tested shooting weapons tried in battles. They were produced in different times and in various quantities.

I got to the CML, equipped with the most modern American equipment. I was the only Jew among Russians, Tartars and Udmurts, mostly women. Almost half of all employees, including the manager of the Laboratory, were sick with open tuberculosis.



Everybody at the plant waited for a big specialist to arrive. I was yesterday's student and didn't even know the nuts and bolts. I couldn't understand why I was assigned as an engineer, if any experienced worker or lab assistant knew and was able to do more than me. The lab manager, an old plant employee, saw that I didn't understand anything. He gave me certain educational tasks and followed me like a nanny during the first three months. Soon I began to grasp the basics.

Meanwhile the Germans approached Moscow. In December 1941 L. P. Beriia [17](#), the almighty and formidable People's Commissar of Internal Affairs visited our plant. All plant managers and specialists were gathered. Beriia said several very common words: 'The army requires rifle armament. Everybody knows about our tremendous losses. The Army is lacking arms. You have to save the country. You now produce this amount, but by 1st February, i.e. in two months, you have to produce daily two sets of rifle arms for a division.' We fulfilled the task.

At the beginning of 1942 a new plant, specialized in production of revolvers, was constructed on the basis of our big plant. Militia and partisans were equipped with such revolvers. There was a refugee camp with people from West Belarus and Ukraine arranged at the plant. It wasn't possible to enlist them for the army, as they didn't have Soviet citizenship. There were a lot of Jews and Poles among them. There was a construction base. They were told to build big wooden barracks at that base. They built those barracks. There was a lot of timber. Later revolver-making machines, brought from the Tula plants, were placed in those barracks. After a while they started to produce parts, but it was difficult to assemble revolvers. When a lot of these parts were produced and first samples were assembled, the military representatives rejected them. The assembled samples didn't shoot. Military representatives refused to accept them.

At that time I fell sick with tuberculosis because of defective food and got covered with eczema. But I came to the plant every day. I was appointed head of the CML. We were looking for the reason which would explain the production of rejects. It appeared that the drawings and the produced articles had little in common. Each Tula expert contributed his own share of knowledge and experience to each produced part. Tula experts had magical hands, they didn't work according to the drawings. The 'Tsar-template' that was used to assemble the article, the main pattern, was lost in evacuation. Without it nothing worked. So we took away a reliable and tried revolver from our old security guard, disassembled it into the smallest parts and used it as a model. Revolvers assembled with the use of these new patterns began to shoot. Our team gave me a nickname, the 'King of Calibers.'

In 1942 Irina arrived. After evacuation from Leningrad she managed to obtain an assignment to the Izhevsk Arms Plant in order to be closer to me. She fell sick with typhoid, she was covered with lice and got into the hospital upon arrival. I visited her and took care of her. We got married soon after. Our daughter Genrietta was born in August 1943. It was a compromise solution: a sonorous foreign name, neither Jewish, nor Russian. Our relations were very good at that time. The problems came later.

In 1944 our forces thrust the Germans back from Leningrad. But the evacuated weren't allowed to freely return home, it had to be organized. Irina dreamt of going back home and decided to abandon everything. She left for Leningrad together with the Artillery School, which was returning from evacuation. She left me and our six-month-old daughter. I couldn't forgive her for such betrayal. Besides, the role of a 'nursing father' was a hard one for me. I was very busy at the plant.

So I had to send Genrietta to a 24-hour kindergarten. Those were hard times.

### **After the war**

I stayed in Izhevsk up to the beginning of 1946. I had a good reputation at the plant, but I lived alone among strangers. My wife, with whom my relations were not broken off completely, had already returned to Leningrad, as well as all my relatives. I took my daughter Genrietta to Leningrad in 1945 and left her with my mother and sister Sonya. She lived there alone without her parents' care. My wife sent me an invitation after she successfully managed to find a job at LITMO. They asked me to stay at the plant and promised to recommend me for a government decoration, but I decided to leave. I came back to Leningrad on 1st February 1946.

My relatives had stayed in Leningrad, besieged by the Germans. They stayed there all through the winter of 1941-1942, the hardest starvation time of the blockade. Such is the fate of the Jewish nation!

Uncle Folia, Mother's younger brother, was a very important and businesslike person, a watchmaker and a jeweler. We thought he was very rich. Just like Mother, he managed to escape from Chashniki to Leningrad right on time and lived in Pavlovsk. He had a house of his own, kept a cow, which produced 50 liters of milk daily. This cow provided milk to all summer residents, who lived in Pavlovsk. He had a family, a wife and a daughter. This was all before the war. When in September 1941 the German troops suddenly approached Pavlovsk, he managed to escape to Leningrad with his wife to his sisters. He took only several gold pieces with him, which he kept for a rainy day. In the morning he went outside and tried to sell them in order to buy some food. But he was arrested by a military patrol and tried for jobbery during wartime. This saved his life. The thing was that all prisoners were taken out of Leningrad at the beginning of the siege. Their life at the camp on the Big Land was hard, but not as desperate as in the besieged city. After the war Folia was released. He returned home and lived the rest of his days quietly.

My stepfather, Iosif Barvish, was about 70 in 1941, but he still worked. He continued to make joiner's glue. That glue was organic, produced out of bones and gristles. He brought some glue home from work. Mother cooked galantine out of it. She added something to it, some water and divided it into equal parts. Thus they maintained their strength a little bit.

Later my stepfather poisoned himself with this glue and died. It happened in February 1942, at the peak of the blockade. He brought a half-bar of glue and Mother cooked a large plate of galantine. She cut it into small pieces, distributed it, wrote down the sizes of portions and hid it. There were no fridges at that time and all food products were kept outside the window. Mother kept watch over it, so that no one would filch their last food. The neighbors could find out about it and filch it. Soon everybody went to bed. Stepfather woke up and felt hungry. He knew where the plate with galantine was and ate not only his portion but another piece, and went back to bed. Suddenly he felt an attack of diarrhea and then dysentery started. He died soon after that. One shouldn't eat a lot of that galantine, as the human body can't digest it.

Mother and Sonya stayed in besieged Leningrad until summer 1942. Later they were evacuated, barged across Ladoga Lake [18](#) and put on a train to Novosibirsk [large industrial center in Western Siberia]. The troop train traveled across Siberia and on the way local managers chose specialists they required among the evacuated. Mother and Sonya settled in the village of Cherepanovo near

Novosibirsk. Sonya was taken on as an accountant at the local kolkhoz, she was received very well. Mother also found a good job for herself. They helped her dig up a big vegetable garden and plant potatoes and millet. When the first crop was gathered, Mother started to cook pasties with potatoes and millet and sell them at the station. She was a real entrepreneur. She could make money out of nothing in order to feed the family. When I came to visit them she gave me a whole sack of millet. However, on my way back the sack was stolen in the train, while I was asleep.

Our compatriots, Jews from Chashniki borough, had a tragic fate. I never visited the place after 1929, though I had some information from our relatives. There were about 2,000 Jews in Chashniki when the German occupation began. The Belarusian policeman brought them together, took them to the swamp nearby and shot them. All of them. Old people and children. There were no Jews left after the liberation. Only Belarusians.

Having returned from evacuation, my mother and sister Sonya discovered that their apartment, located on the corner of Vosstania Street and Ryleyeva Street, was occupied by somebody else. So they were moved to a room in a communal apartment [19](#) one storey higher, where another eight families lived. There was one toilet for everyone, it was horrible! There was a bath in the bathroom but it never worked. There was only a tap. I had to stay with them.

The situation with work appeared to be better. I met my institute-mate Gelman, who worked as a chief technologist at 'Radiopribor,' a new plant set up on Koli Tonmchaka Street in the Moscow district. He invited me to work with him as the head of the CML. I worked for 40 years in this position, having started the metrological service for an important military plant.

However, my personal life was not that successful. Relations with my wife didn't improve, in spite of reconciliation efforts. There was nothing in common between us. Her relatives disgusted me. We became strangers and soon got divorced. Our daughter Genrietta stayed with me. She only hindered Irina in her career.

My cousin Vera, the daughter of my mother's sister Musia, was married to Abram Meyerovich. She got me acquainted with her husband's Jewish relative, Marianna Abramovna Meyerovich. We got married soon. It happened on 28th August 1948.

The Meyerovich family came from Pochep, located on the border of Russia and Ukraine. Pochep was not a town, but a sort of borough before the Revolution, a small town in Chernigov province. Now it is a district center in Bryansk region. Their ancestors owned a private printing-house in Pochep. They printed books and magazines. All their sons and their whole family worked in that printing-house. They were considered a wealthy and prosperous family, middle-class for those times. They were someone who is called 'ikes' in boroughs, which means cultured respectable people with a developed dignity.

Kusiel Meyerovich moved to Petersburg before the Revolution. He settled in Petrogradskaya Storona and, being a craftsman, obtained a residential permit [20](#). His wife Nishama gave birth to 14 children. They all grew up and obtained an education. Kusiel died in 1913. His grave can still be seen at the Jewish cemetery. By 1929 all Meyeroviches moved to Leningrad from Pochep to be closer to their relatives. Their whole family clan gathered in Leningrad. Their relations were very warm. They visited each other often and gathered at the table on Jewish and Soviet holidays, eating gefilte fish, chicken galantine, beetroot with garlic and other Jewish meals.

My father-in-law, Abram Semyonovich Meyerovich, was the elder son of Simcha, Kusiel's elder son. In 1923 he married his distant relative, Miriam Yudovna [Maria Yuryevna] [21](#) Medvedeva. In 1924 their only daughter Marianna, my wife-to-be, was born.

Before the Revolution, Abram Meyerovich finished a vocational school, obtained engineering education in the 1920s and worked at a bread-baking plant. He was arrested in 1932 in connection with a slanderous denunciation, accused of participation in a Zionist organization; they tried to get a testimony from him against the bread-baking plant general manager, a Jew. He was a courageous and physically strong man, so he passed the ordeal. He didn't slander anyone and didn't sign anything. Meanwhile his relatives found some acquaintances who managed to get a release for him.

During the war, Abram Meyerovich was in technical units of the Baltic Navy aviation, took part in the defense of Leningrad, liberation of the Baltic countries and the seizure of Koenigsberg [22](#). His wife and daughter were in evacuation in Omsk at that time and worked at an aircraft plant. A lot of their relatives starved to death in besieged Leningrad. In 1947 Abram Meyerovich was demobilized and the family was re-united in Leningrad. After the war he worked at the 'Krasnaya Zaria' plant, specialized in production of communication means, until he retired. Maria Yuryevna graduated from the Library Institute and worked in a library at the Kulakov plant. They lived at Petrogradskaya Storona in two rooms in an apartment, which they inherited from their parents. This four-room apartment completely belonged to the Meyeroviches before, but after the war a lot of locals had to make room for others. There was not enough space for everyone to live.

## **Marriage life and children**

When Marianna and I got married, we didn't know each other well enough. We liked each other when we met. She promised to be a faithful and devoted wife, but there was no time for the mutual feeling to grow stronger. I wanted to put my personal life in order as quickly as possible and to bring up my daughter in a normal family environment. Marianna was a 5th-year student of the Medical Institute at that time and her marriage allowed her to stay in Leningrad when it came to getting an assignment. Otherwise she should have been sent to work in some far-away countryside district of the country with hard conditions.

Nevertheless, our marriage became a really happy one. We matched each other very well and got closer and closer every year. Marianna appeared to be a real Jewish wife, totally living in the interests of the family. She brought up Genrietta as if she were her own daughter. She supported me in all my life struggles.

In 1949 our son was born. Jews have a tradition to name their children with traditional family names, in honor of their grandfathers. But in 1949 it would have been cruel to give the name of Abram or Simcha to a child. Anti-Semitism increased in the country. So the children were given Russian names, but at least the first letter matched. We gave our son the name of Konstantin in honor of his great-great-grandfather Kusiel.

We lived with my wife's parents, the six of us in two rooms. I always appreciated the kind and benevolent atmosphere in our home. Even some tiffs with my mother-in-law, inevitable in every married man's life, didn't prevent me from feeling our family and our home as a reliable and strong rear.

The beginning of our family life clashed with the campaign aimed against cosmopolitans [23](#) in the USSR. We found ourselves in a difficult atmosphere of anti-Semitism, both state and domestic. Eighty Jews were fired at our 'Radiopribor' plant, mostly qualified engineers, who held average managing positions. Only four Jews remained, including me. The fact was that my position wasn't needed. The salary was low, only 92 rubles. There were no promotion prospects. Besides, the job of the head of the CML is very responsible and requires highly specialized knowledge in the field of metrology. Only this saved me from being fired.

My wife graduated from the Medical Institute and couldn't find a job for a long time. Finally she was taken on in a microbiologic laboratory at the Children's Infections' Hospital in Leninsky district. The laboratory was headed by a famous microbiologist, Doctor of Medicine, Moisey Solomonovich. He himself was mercilessly expelled from the Medical Institute because of his Jewish origin. This prominent scientist had to work in a district children's hospital for many years. Marina worked under his supervision during the first two years without a salary. She had to wait until one of the employees retired and the position with a salary became vacant. After that she worked in that hospital for 40 years.

The most dramatic story happened to my wife's uncle Boris Girshbert. He was a wonderful specialist in chill casting and worked at the Kozitsky plant as a leading mold designer. In the heat of the 'struggle against cosmopolitans' he was suddenly fired. He couldn't bear the shock and died of a heart attack in 1953. His wife Raisa and little daughter Marianna were left without any means for living. We helped them as much as we could until Marianna grew up. Now she has adult children and she is a very successful businesswoman.

A lot of Jews had a hard time in those years. The most heavy blows fell on the most talented and bright people, those with leadership capabilities. On the whole, our family lived like all Soviet people in the post-war decades. We worked a lot in good faith, getting modest salaries. I made more than 50 inventions and innovations in the field of metrologic equipment. I was awarded the 'Best Rationalizer in Leningrad' memorable insignia for the sample heating muffle furnace that I designed.

In summer all our family left for the summer-house, which we rented in the country-side. Most of all we liked to spend our time in Zelenogorsk, though we have been to several places. Sometimes I went to the South or traveled along the Volga River with my wife. I still remember these rare trips like real holidays.

During the war and after it I was several times offered to join the Communist Party. The positions I held weren't very important, but rather responsible, that is why a 100 percent controllable and manageable person should have held them. I quite shared the Communist ideals at that time, but refused to join the CPSU. I pretended that I wasn't ready to take such a responsible step. But in fact I was simply afraid. I feared that in case of a serious check-up of my papers they would find out that I was a fake proletarian and that my mother had been 'dispossessed.' While Stalin was alive one could be seriously punished for false information in the questionnaire. Later this danger was not real anymore, but the fear was still there. I even told my children the true story of their grandmother only in 1989, on the eve of the USSR's break-up [as the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, irreversible changes took place in the Soviet block]. This was the way the Soviet power brought us up.



This fear sat deep inside us and was transferred to our children. When my daughter was 16 years old, she had to obtain a passport. She said she was Russian. At her school all Jewish boys and girls wrote 'Russian' [24](#) when asked about their nationality.

My children's youth fortunately fell into Khrushchev's [25](#) thaw period, when all anti-Jewish restrictions were relaxed. They managed to obtain university education and make a lot of Russian friends. My daughter graduated from the Faculty of Mathematics-Mechanics at [Leningrad State] University, and our son graduated from the Faculty of History. However, I was always against his humanitarian interests. My daughter happily worked all her life as a teacher at the sub-faculty of Mathematics at the [Leningrad] Polytechnic Institute and our son was constantly driven from place to place. After five-seven years of work at most modest positions he had to leave because of insults and persecution, in order to vacate the place for another 'original Slavic talent.' He stayed in Pskov for 20 years, between 1980 and 1999. He was not able to find a job in his native city.

After the Six-Day-War [26](#) in 1967, at the beginning of the 1970s we were given the possibility to immigrate to Israel. Talks about leaving became an obsession among my relatives and friends. We listened to the programs of the 'Voice of America' [27](#) and BBC about Jewish life. Our friends stealthily shared with us news received from their relatives [28](#), who had left for Israel and the USA. I remember how we gathered at Victor and Tsylya Barvish's place to see their son Aron off to the USA. We sat at the table and during several hours spoke only about the departure problems, perspectives to find a job 'there,' and so on. Later Tsylya retold me in detail and with pride the rare letters from her son.

However, I had to avoid these plans and even these conversations, as I had absolutely no possibility to leave the USSR. I have worked in the military industry all my life and had access to secret information, including documentation marked 'OV' [short for 'very important' in Russian]. Systems, the components of which we produced, are still the basis of Russia's defense potential. The perspective to join the army of unemployed Jews, who received a refusal, didn't attract me at all. That is why the problem of departure was not really considered in our family.

My children were brought up in the Russian cultural environment. Their life is quite successful. They had some problems with their ethnic origin, especially our son. But they didn't dare to lose contact with their 'pre-historic motherland' and start life all over. They began to take an interest in the life of their nation and the Jewish community in Petersburg during the last several years. They participate in the 'Hesed Avraham' [29](#) charity center programs: my daughter conducts one of the 'warm homes,' two dozens of old Jews come to see her every week to talk and spend time; my son collects materials for the Jewish museum.

My grandchildren have a different fate. My daughter has two children: son Ilya and daughter Julia. In 1989 they were 20 and 17 years old correspondingly. They both announced that they are tired of 'changing color,' that they want to be real Jews, so they left for Israel. Ilya became an Orthodox Jew, he wears traditional clothes, is keen on Jewish mystics; he married a charming Jewess from a family of Orthodox Jews from Belgium. His wife gave birth to three wonderful children, my great-grandchildren. Julia turned out to be a very talented girl with a strong personality. She entered the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and defended a Master's thesis in sociology. Her dissertation was considered the best graduate's work of 2000 in the field of sociology and anthropology in Israel. Now she is working for a Doctor's degree. I see the future of our family in our grandchildren and I

like this future.

My daughter has been to Israel four times to visit her children. My son also has been to Israel at the Yad Vashem [30](#) seminar. They brought back brilliant, unforgettable impressions.

Many of my friends and relatives have died already. Mother died in 1971 at the age of 92. Sonya died right after her, six months later. My father-in-law died untimely, in 1965, he was only 65 years old. My mother-in-law was ill for a long time after that, she couldn't get over his death. She lived with us until 1983. Almost all relatives of mine, my wife's relatives and my friends also died, and their children left for Israel, the USA or Germany. Only some remain in Leningrad.

In 1994 not long before my 70th birthday my wife Marianna died. I was sick for a long time after such a blow of fate and couldn't come to my senses. Fortunately, my children supported me. My daughter has been taking care of me for several years. I also receive great support from the Jewish Charitable 'Hesed Avraham' Center. In 1999 my son finally decided to come back home from Pskov. He lives with me now and I don't feel lonely anymore.

## **Glossary:**

### **1 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.

### **2 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.

### **3 Polish-Soviet War (1919-21)**

between Poland and Soviet Russia. It began with the Red Army marching on Belarus and Lithuania; in December 1918 it took Minsk, and on 5th January 1919 it drove divisions of the Lithuanian and Belarusian defense armies out of Vilnius. The Soviets' aim was to install revolutionary governments in these lands, while the Polish side had two territorial programs for them: incorporative (the annexation of Belarus and part of Ukraine to Poland) and federating (the creation of a system of nation states sympathetic to Poland). The war was waged on the territory of what is today

Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine and Poland (west to the Vistula). Armed combat ceased on 18th October 1920 and the peace treaty was signed on 18th March 1921 in Riga. The outcome of the 1919-1920 war was the incorporation into Poland of Lithuania's Vilnius region, Belarus' Grodno region, and Western Ukraine.

#### **4 Russian stove**

Big stone stove stoked with wood. They were usually built in a corner of the kitchen and served to heat the house and cook food. It had a bench that made a comfortable bed for children and adults in wintertime.

#### **5 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 World War I, 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.

#### **6 Gulag**

The Soviet system of forced labor camps in the remote regions of Siberia and the Far North, which was first established in 1919. However, it was not until the early 1930s that there was a significant number of inmates in the camps. By 1934 the Gulag, or the Main Directorate for Corrective Labor Camps, then under the Cheka's successor organization the NKVD, had several million inmates. The prisoners included murderers, thieves, and other common criminals, along with political and religious dissenters. The Gulag camps made significant contributions to the Soviet economy during the rule of Stalin. Conditions in the camps were extremely harsh. After Stalin died in 1953, the population of the camps was reduced significantly, and conditions for the inmates improved somewhat.

#### **7 Dacha**

country house, consisting of small huts and little plots of lands. The Soviet authorities came to the decision to allow this activity to the Soviet people to support themselves. The majority of urban citizens grow vegetables and fruit in their small gardens to make preserves for winter.

#### **8 All-Union pioneer organization**

a communist organization for teenagers between 10 and 15 years old (cf: boy-/girlscouts in the US). The organization aimed at educating the young generation in accordance with the communist ideals, preparing pioneers to become members of the Komsomol and later the Communist Party. In the Soviet Union, all teenagers were pioneers.

#### **9 Bolsheviks**

Members of the movement led by Lenin. The name 'Bolshevik' was coined in 1903 and denoted the group that emerged in elections to the key bodies in the Social Democratic Party (SDPRR)

considering itself in the majority (Rus. bolshynstvo) within the party. It dubbed its opponents the minority (Rus. menshynstvo, the Mensheviks). Until 1906 the two groups formed one party. The Bolsheviks first gained popularity and support in society during the 1905-07 Revolution. During the February Revolution in 1917 the Bolsheviks were initially in the opposition to the Menshevik and SR ('Sotsialrevolyutsionery', Socialist Revolutionaries) delegates who controlled the Soviets (councils). When Lenin returned from emigration (16 April) they proclaimed his program of action (the April theses) and under the slogan 'All power to the Soviets' began to Bolshevize the Soviets and prepare for a proletariat revolution. Agitation proceeded on a vast scale, especially in the army. The Bolsheviks set about creating their own armed forces, the Red Guard. Having overthrown the Provisional Government, they created a government with the support of the II Congress of Soviets (the October Revolution), to which they admitted some left-wing SRs in order to gain the support of the peasantry. In 1952 the Bolshevik party was renamed the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

## **10 Cossacks**

an ethnic group that constituted something of a free estate in the 15th-17th centuries in the Polish Republic and in the 16th-18th centuries in the Muscovite state (and then Russia). The Cossacks in the Polish Republic consisted of peasants, townspeople and nobles settled along the banks of the Lower Dnieper, where they organized armed detachments initially to defend themselves against the Tatar invasions and later themselves making forays against the Tatars and the Turks. As part of the armed forces, the Cossacks played an important role in Russia's imperial wars in the 17th-20th centuries. From the 19th century onwards, Cossack troops were also used to suppress uprisings and independence movements. During the February and October Revolutions in 1917 and the Russian Civil War, some of the Cossacks (under Kaledin, Dutov and Semyonov) supported the Provisional Government, and as the core of the Volunteer Army bore the brunt of the fighting with the Red Army, while others went over to the Bolshevik side (Budenny). In 1920 the Soviet authorities disbanded all Cossack formations, and from 1925 onwards set about liquidating the Cossack identity. In 1936 Cossacks were permitted to join the Red Army, and some Cossack divisions fought under its banner in World War II. Some Cossacks served in formations collaborating with the Germans and in 1945 were handed over to the authorities of the USSR by the Western Allies.

## **11 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.

## **12 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.

### **13 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.

### **14 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.

### **15 Rabfak (Rabochiy Fakultet - Workers' Faculty in Russian)**

Established by the Soviet power usually at colleges or universities, these were educational institutions for young people without secondary education. Many of them worked beside studying. Graduates of Rabfaks had an opportunity to enter university without exams.

### **16 Blockade of Leningrad**

On 8th September 1941 the Germans fully encircled Leningrad and its siege began. It lasted until 27th January 1944. The blockade meant incredible hardships and privations for the population of the town. Hundreds of thousands died from hunger, cold and diseases during the almost 900 days of the blockade.

### **17 Beriya, L**

P. (1899-1953): Communist politician, one of the main organizers of the mass arrests and political persecution between the 1930s and the early 1950s. Minister of Internal Affairs, 1938-1953. In 1953 he was expelled from the Communist Party and sentenced to death by the Supreme Court of the USSR.

### **18 Road of Life**

It was a passage across Lake Ladoga in winter during the Blockade of Leningrad. It was due to the Road of Life that Leningrad survived in the terrible winter of 1941-42.

### **19 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.

## **20 Residence permit**

The Soviet authorities restricted freedom of travel within the USSR through the residence permit and kept everybody's whereabouts under control. Every individual in the USSR needed residential registration; this was a stamp in the passport giving the permanent address of the individual. It was impossible to find a job, or even to travel within the country, without such a stamp. In order to register at somebody else's apartment one had to be a close relative and if each resident of the apartment had at least 8 square meters to themselves.

## **21 Common name**

Russified or Russian first names used by Jews in everyday life and adopted in official documents. The Russification of first names was one of the manifestations of the assimilation of Russian Jews at the turn of the 19th and 20th century. In some cases only the spelling and pronunciation of Jewish names was russified (e.g. Isaac instead of Yitskhak; Boris instead of Borukh), while in other cases traditional Jewish names were replaced by similarly sounding Russian names (e.g. Eugenia instead of Ghita; Yury instead of Yuda). When state anti-Semitism intensified in the USSR at the end of the 1940s, most Jewish parents stopped giving their children traditional Jewish names to avoid discrimination.

## **22 Königsberg offensive**

It started on 6th April 1945 and involved the 2nd and the 3rd Belarussian and some forces of the 1st Baltic front. It was conducted as part of the decisive Eastern Prussian operation, the purpose of which was the crushing defeat of the largest grouping of German forces in Eastern Prussia and the northern part of Poland. The battles were crucial and desperate. On 9th April 1945 the forces of the 3rd Belarussian front stormed and seized the town and the fortress of Königsberg. The battle for Eastern Prussia was the most blood-shedding campaign in 1945. The losses of the Soviet Army exceeded 580,000 people (127,000 of them were casualties). The Germans lost about 500,000 people (about 300,000 of them were casualties). After WWII, based on the decision of the Potsdam Conference (1945) the northern part of Eastern Prussia including Königsberg was annexed to the USSR and the city was renamed as Kaliningrad.

## **23 Campaign against 'cosmopolitans'**

The campaign against 'cosmopolitans', i.e. Jews, was initiated in articles in the central organs of the Communist Party in 1949. The campaign was directed primarily at the Jewish intelligentsia and it was the first public attack on Soviet Jews as Jews. 'Cosmopolitans' writers were accused of hating the Russian people, of supporting Zionism, etc. Many Yiddish writers as well as the leaders of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee were arrested in November 1948 on charges that they maintained ties with Zionism and with American 'imperialism'. They were executed secretly in 1952. The anti-Semitic Doctors' Plot was launched in January 1953. A wave of anti-Semitism spread through the

USSR. Jews were removed from their positions, and rumors of an imminent mass deportation of Jews to the eastern part of the USSR began to spread. Stalin's death in March 1953 put an end to the campaign against 'cosmopolitans'.

## **24 Item 5**

This was the ethnicity/nationality factor, which was included on all official documents and job application forms. Thus, the Jews, who were considered a separate nationality in the Soviet Union, were more easily discriminated against from the end of World War II until the late 1980s.

## **25 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.

## **26 Six-Day-War**

The first strikes of the Six-Day-War happened on 5th June 1967 by the Israeli Air Force. The entire war only lasted 132 hours and 30 minutes. The fighting on the Egyptian side only lasted four days, while fighting on the Jordanian side lasted three. Despite the short length of the war, this was one of the most dramatic and devastating wars ever fought between Israel and all of the Arab nations. This war resulted in a depression that lasted for many years after it ended. The Six-Day-War increased tension between the Arab nations and the Western World because of the change in mentalities and political orientations of the Arab nations.

## **27 Voice of America**

International broadcasting service funded by the U.S. government through the Broadcasting Board of Governors. Voice of America has been broadcasting since 1942, initially to Europe in various European languages from the US on short wave. During the cold war it grew increasingly popular in Soviet-controlled Eastern Europe as an information source.

## **28 Keep in touch with relatives abroad**

The authorities could arrest an individual corresponding with his/her relatives abroad and charge him/her with espionage, send them to concentration camp or even sentence them to death.

## **29 Hesed**

Meaning care and mercy in Hebrew, Hesed stands for the charity organization founded by Amos Avgar in the early 20th century. Supported by Claims Conference and Joint Hesed helps for Jews in need to have a decent life despite hard economic conditions and encourages development of their self-identity. Hesed provides a number of services aimed at supporting the needs of all, and particularly elderly members of the society. The major social services include: work in the center facilities (information, advertisement of the center activities, foreign ties and free lease of medical

equipment); services at homes (care and help at home, food products delivery, delivery of hot meals, minor repairs); work in the community (clubs, meals together, day-time polyclinic, medical and legal consultations); service for volunteers (training programs). The Hesed centers have inspired a real revolution in the Jewish life in the former Soviet Union countries. People have seen and sensed the rebirth of the Jewish traditions of humanism. Currently over eighty Hesed centers exist in the FSU countries. Their activities cover the Jewish population of over eight hundred settlements.

### **30 Yad Vashem**

This museum, founded in 1953 in Jerusalem, honors both Holocaust martyrs and ‘the Righteous Among the Nations’, non-Jewish rescuers who have been recognized for their ‘compassion, courage and morality’.