

Saul Eskenazi

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St. Petersburg

Russia

Interviewer: Olga Egudina

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I met Saul Eskenazi in his cozy apartment in one of new St. Petersburg districts.

Saul Eskenazi speaks about his life with pleasure and in details.

At the same time there are certain things which he wants to go into under no circumstances, and here we have no choice but to hold his decision in respect.

Saul Eskenazi is a topnotch storyteller. He speaks easily. You understand that he agonizes over every recollection only when you see him nervously clenching his hands from time to time.

Not all events he remembers equally well. But if he remembers something and agrees to share it with us, it turns out to be really invaluable.

His cheerful character, his sense of humor, his interest to everything around him excites admiration, and when you get to know what he has gone through, it also commands respect.

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- **My family background**

Here you ask me, whether I remember my great-grandmothers and great-grandfathers. And immediately I start doubting: is it worth talking about my life if I remember about my relatives almost nothing (and it is wormwood to me)? I know nothing not only about my great-grandmothers and great-grandfathers, I know nothing even about my grandmothers and grandfathers. And then, you know, I relive my old memories, and I say to myself 'Are there many people in the world, whose life experience is so rich? I'll tell you everything I remember, and my relatives (may they rest in peace!) will forgive me. They are always in my heart...'



Our family never lived in the same place for a long time. But the city of my childhood was Bucharest. The city was very large, and there were a lot of Jews there. In Bucharest there were buses, trams; streets were good (paved). A part of roads were covered with bitumen. One of my childhood sensations is the feeling of my boots sticking to road during summer heat.

I do not remember houses without electricity supply. Water supply also was almost everywhere. If it was absent, people took water from special water-pumps, which looked like fountains. Housewives with pailfuls of water gathered near them to talk behind neighbors' back. I think that these scenes took place in the city suburbs.

In Bucharest there were two main streets, one of them was called Calais Doudesht (calais means a road) and the other one Calais Bucharest. I remember those two streets very well, because in Bucharest a lot of (if not mainly) Jews lived there, though in Bucharest there was no special district for residing of Jews. In Romania people had no respect to Jews [1](#).

There existed Garda di Fier (Iron Guard), a fascist organization. [Garda di Fier was a fascist organization in Romania in 1931-1944. It was dismissed and forbidden in 1944 after liberation of Romania from fascism.]

They were true Nazis. In general, in Romania there were a lot of anti-Semites. But approximately till 1938-1939 they were not in great power. Moreover, sometimes these fascist-minded swells penetrated into Jewish residential areas and behaved outrageously, but Jewish youth gave them resolute repulse. They escaped, as beaten dogs. All changed by 1939-1940. By that time these bastards, members of the Iron Guard began to march along the Calais Victoria (one of the Bucharest streets) carrying torches. And that was the moment I understood that things looked bad.

In Bucharest there was rather large Jewish community. There were several synagogues, cheders and yeshivot. There also were shochetim, and our family certainly visited them.

In Romania Jews were discriminated: it was not easy for a Jew to get higher education. Colleges and universities followed the rules of Numerus Clausus and Numerus Nulus. Numerus Clausus meant that that educational institution was authorized to have a certain percent of Jewish students. And Numerus Nulus meant that no Jews could enter. In Romania anti-Semitism was some sort of official.

In Romania there also existed Jewish organizations. I do not remember exactly: some Zionist organizations, some left ones and right ones. For the most part they assisted Jews in leaving for Palestine.

Among official holidays I can mention the King Day (on 10th May).

Jews in Romania had no right to be landowners. Sometimes a piece of land was down in the name of a gentile, and a Jew cultivated it. In general, most Jews were engaged in trade, they used to have small shops. There were a lot of Jews - owners of small pubs, where it was possible to have a drink (usually about 200 gr of green wine).

I do not remember market days in Bucharest. I only remember that it was Mum who did shopping. She often went to the market by closing time, hoping to buy something cheaper. She hugged very heavy bags, and tried to take somebody of her children with her to get help. But she (poor Mum!)

managed to get our help rarely.

I do not remember any political events of that time. I think that my parents did not discuss that sort of things in the presence of their children.

Now I'll tell you what I remember about my parents. Unfortunately, I remember very little. At the same time I am the last person on the earth, who can say these words about them. That is why we have to be content with it. My father's name was Samuel. He was a rabbi. As far as I remember, his father (my grandfather) was also a rabbi. And Mum was from the family of rabbis. In a word, there were only rabbis around me, probably therefore I became an atheist. Well, it often happens.

My father was a very clever person, and my Mum was very kind. Please do not think that my Mum was silly and my Daddy was malicious. The point is that my mother's kindness and my father's intellect arrested everyone's attention.

My Mum's name was Esther. Her maiden name was Fischer. She was born in Romania, in Fucheni. As far as I know, she got no education. Perhaps, she attended a school for girls during a year or two. And my father finished yeshivah. He was a very good rabbi! He was able to work both with Sephardim and with Ashkenazim. And people of that sort don't grow on trees!

My parents spoke Yiddish. They spoke to each other only Yiddish. And we (children) spoke to each other and to our parents only Romanian. As for me, I did not manage to learn Yiddish. Later, when I started studying German in lyceum, I began to understand their conversations. But I did not speak Yiddish.

I do not remember exactly the way my parents got acquainted. I know that they met each other in Fucheni, where my father arrived on official business. He saw my Mum somewhere there and fell in love with her. It was impossible not to fall in love with her: she was a real Jewish beauty. There they got married, and my elder sister was born. And I was born in Bulgaria, in Varna. I do not know how my Mum got there. My parents dressed as secular people. My Mum did not wear a wig, though she was a rabbi's wife. I also wonder how it could be. My father put on something special (long and black, probably a coat) only when he went to synagogue.

• **Growing up**

I told you already that during all my childhood our family moved from place to place, because my father worked in different cities. We never had either our own house or our own apartment. We always rented very modest and small apartments (two-room, usually): one room for parents, the other one for children. We had our own furniture; probably formerly it was good, but suffered very much on the wing. In general, we were hard pressed for money. But we had enough for living. Of course, for rather modest living, but we knew nothing else. In our family it was not customary to compare our income with that of others. Anyway, we were never hungry. We ate everything we had. Mum always cooked much food, and we never thought about its quality.

In these small stoves they burnt briquettes made of breeze mixed with black oil. They gave good fire. But if they used fire wood, sometimes they had to chop it. All family members used to take part in it.

At our place we always had cats.

In our family we never had any assistants. We could not permit it ourselves. Mum was a housekeeper. We (children) helped her, but the truth was that we did it not willingly: only when she asked us about it. She had a hard time: we (children) were four.

We always had many books: not only religious, but also secular ones. For example, I remember Balzac's collected works. [Onore de Balzac was a well-known French novelist (1799-1850).] I also remember books by Victor Hugo. [Victor Hugo (1802-1885) was the great French writer, a poet and a playwright, one of the brightest representatives of progressive romantic literature of the XIX century.]

There were books in Spanish, in French, in Latin. I do not know where from my father knew all these languages. In general my father was a widely read man (not only in religious, but also in secular sphere).

There were, certainly, religious books, too. I remember small rolls of Torah; I was very interested in them when I was a child: they reminded me some strange toys. My father read much, he always read when he had a moment to spare. But I do not remember my Mum reading. For my father we always bought newspapers. I remember the Romanian newspaper Morning.

Father closely watched my reading: he used to give me books according to his own choice. One day father gave me a book about origin of religion. That book impressed me deeply. I do not remember anybody from our family visiting library.

I do not remember any stories about family life told by our parents.

I know that both Mum and Daddy were from large families (10-11 children in each), but I can tell nothing about their brothers and sisters. I have a vague idea of my father's brother: his name was Margulis. If I am not mistaken, he was a rabbi, too. I know that brothers and sisters of my father ran every which way all over the world.

Our parents loved us very much, their heart was always sore for us. I was my father's favorite son. Our family was really harmonious. Now I understand that our poor, small apartments were always real HOME for me.

Perhaps I am mistaken (this is my special personal opinion), but I think that my parents were not really religious people. But they observed traditions: you know, my father was a rabbi, and everything that is in full view should be observed strictly. Every Saturday and on holidays Mum went to a synagogue (sorry, I am not sure that she did it every Saturday). At home we celebrated holidays for sure. But for some reason religiousness of my father always was open to question for me. He was very educated person, a great expert in ceremonies and traditions. But here I repeat that all my life I had some doubt in sincerity of his belief. I can not explain my doubts: only vague feeling of my childhood...

Certainly being a rabbi, my father played a great role in the life of Jewish communities in the cities where we lived. Sometimes I was invited for minyan, but since my childhood I was interested in religion very little.

My parents never joined any organizations or parties.

I do not remember friends to my parents. I know that my parents kept in touch with their brothers and sisters, but I can tell nothing about them.

Our neighbors were of different nationalities: Romanians, Jews. Our relations were always good.

My parents never went on leave. Sometimes on days off we went to suburbs with my father. Romanian nature is very beautiful! Mum always remained home. She never had time for rest and entertainment. I should think so: she had to feed such a crowd!

As I already told, I was born in Varna, in Bulgaria. My elder sister was born there, too. Soon we left for Romania (I do not remember to what city). I have a hazy recollection of my visits to a Romanian kindergarten. I also remember (from my early childhood) that we lived in some city, not in Bucharest yet (maybe in Cimpina). There was such a big parkway located on the top of a high hill or even a mountain. From that parkway there went a ladder downwards. From that place it was possible to see far out: a railway down there and a river behind it. Father showed me trains and steamships... One more I remember from my early childhood: I am lying in my bed (in some garden), and my parents are in the house. Boys are jumping over the fence into our garden. I am telling about it to my Mum with fear, and she explains me that they are schoolboys from a Romanian school, they live in a hostel at school, they are hungry, they get into our garden to eat our apples. And here I understand that my Mum is the kindest woman in the world.

Later, when I grew a little bit older, we moved to another city, and I was sent to a Jewish kindergarten. By the way, my father taught Hebrew in kindergartens and in Jewish primary schools. Later my father got a place in Bucharest. There I went to a primary Romanian school, where I studied during four years.

After that I entered a lyceum. It was not easy to get there. They did not like to have Jews as students. You remember: Numerus Nulus and Numerus Clausus. Students were admitted by competitive examination (4-5 persons for one place). But they did not accept documents to the 1st form of lyceum from Jews. Therefore I studied the program of the 1st form of lyceum by correspondence and after that passed my examinations. They allowed me to enter the 2nd form. Anti-Semitism was very strong in the lyceum. There were 40-45 pupils in every class. In our class there were 2 Jews, and in some classes there were none.

There was only one Jew among the teachers. He was a very good teacher. He was even well-known, therefore they gave him that job. One day a pupil called that teacher 'Dirty Jew'. And despite of the strongest anti-Semitism reigning in the lyceum, it turned out that prestige of a teacher was very high there. Terrible scandal burst out. They immediately arranged teachers' meeting. The point was that the pupil who had offended the teacher was a son of a major of the Romanian army, i.e. a person of rather high-rank. What was the way out? And they made a decision worthy of Solomon. As the lyceum occupied three separate buildings, the little anti-Semite was transferred to a parallel class in the building next door.

In the lyceum they used ten-mark system: 1-4 - a weak pupil, 5-10 - an advanced one. You know, it is possible to know subject differently, and there are different degrees of lack of knowledge. We had a teacher of Romanian language, Radovich. He used to say 'Only God can have mark 10 for

knowledge, possibly I can have 9, and my best pupil is worth 8.' I usually got 7-8. But one day I got 10: we were suggested to read a pray Our Father (Pater nostra) in Latin, and at the next lesson we were asked to write it down by heart. I made no mistakes! In general, it was rather difficult to study there: one year more than half a class remained in the same form for second year. Very often they transferred examinations to autumn. In one class there were 40 pupils, or even more. But they taught us very well: till now I remember everything they taught me in the lyceum. And I remember only partly what they taught me in the Soviet time.

I remember that when I was a boy I liked to read adventure novels very much. I read them at home and at school if the lesson was not interesting. For this purpose I elaborated a special system. My book was lying on my knees, and I was holding a sheet of paper before me, it had a small hole. From time to time it was necessary to tear myself away from the book and to look at the teacher through the hole. Teachers were strict, for instance one of our teachers of mathematics. He had a head on his shoulders. So, one day I was present at his lesson. My school desk was close to window. It was snowing in the street. Those snow-flakes bewitched me, I could not look away from the window. At that moment the teacher said 'And now all of you should look at me.' I did not hear him. Then he approached me and slapped my face: my cheek was red during 3 days.

Most of all I liked geography and history. But I was the last pupil in drawing. Our teacher of drawing was a great anti-Semite. But nevertheless, he never dared to give low grade to Zilberman (a pupil who was Jewish), because he was born artist. The teacher looked at Zilberman and at his drawings with undisguised aversion, but always gave him the highest mark. It is interesting that I remember nobody from my schoolmates, except that Zilberman.

Besides school I was engaged in nothing: neither music, nor languages, nor sports. You see, it was not customary among us.

Most of my friends were Romanians. I made friends only with my schoolmates, and almost all of them were Romanians. In general, I never chose friends according to their nationality and always paid no attention to it.

I always said about myself that I was a twaddler. I liked to prattle with my friends since my childhood. I can formulate it differently: most of all I appreciate discoursing.

Sometimes we went to suburbs: Romanian nature is very beautiful. We seldom gathered mushrooms: at home they said that it was no good for Jews to eat mushrooms. I used to get so much homework that practically I had no days off.

We never left for holidays or vacations when I was a boy. Nobody from our family was engaged in any political or cultural activities.

It never came to our mind to have dinner at a restaurant. I guess Mum would have been surprised and felt hurt: 'Don't waste money! Don't I cook well enough?'

Il do not remember when I went by train or by automobile for the first time in my life. I guess my first trip by train was from Bulgaria to Romania. At that time I was 2 years old. Do you agree that it is possible to be forgotten?

Running a few steps forward, I can tell you that in 1960s I bought a car, and since then it became my lifestyle. I repaired it myself, I practically lived in my garage. I used to take my sons there with me. Till recently I used to be a skilled driver. But now, certainly, I am a little bit oldish for it.

In our family there were 4 children. My sister was the eldest, we called her Koka, but her real name was Rachel. I was the next one. My brother Nachum-Leyb was the third one. And my sister Frieda-Miriam was the youngest. We called her Dussya. I know that my elder sister was born in Bulgaria, and both my second sister and my brother were born in Romania in Tulcea (it is a city on Danube, near the Black sea).

In spite of the fact that my father was a rabbi (and probably just therefore) our family was not very religious, to my mind. But many traditions were observed strictly. Special dishes for Pesach, keeping the fasts - we followed these traditions for sure. Till now Sabbath remains a kind and warm memoir of my childhood. Warm light of candles, white purity of cloths, tasty meal, and (the most important!) we all together at the table. Each time I thought 'This is what people call a real family.' We never ate pork, but observed kashrut not strictly. When I was treated by somebody to a good dinner with pork, I ate it with pleasure. It seems to me that I was born not religious. We celebrated all holidays for sure. And my favorite holiday was Purim: Mum cooked a lot of tasty meals for Purim! I remember a nut pie... There was no flour, only ground nuts. I never ate anything of that kind.

Father taught me to read, together with him we visited synagogue to celebrate Sabbath. All I know about Judaism I got from my father. Of course, his both sons were circumcised, he arranged bar mitzvah for us. I remember my bar mitzvah very well. It was arranged in the synagogue, it was very solemnly. After it I repeated proudly: 'I am adult.'

I finished the lyceum at the age of 17, it was already in 1938. For a short period of time I worked at a photo studio, where I showed films and printed photos. And I was thinking what to do next. The international situation was so disturbing that it was difficult to make plans for future.

• **During the War**

There came 1939 year, Hitler conquered Poland: it was the beginning of the World War II. I already told you that in Romania anti-Semitism always flourished. But there were no great Jewish pogroms. Supposedly Romanian people did not permit murders of innocent people, even Jews. And by 1939 anti-Semitism reared its head. The Iron Guard already began marching with torches along the central street. As soon as I saw it, I understood that it would be impossible for us to survive. This event forced me to leave Romania illegally. Our family council advised me to leave the country, and nobody knew what would happen after it. I intended to settle in the new place, take a look-see round the place, and call for my family. If only I could make a look to the future!

At that time people moved from Moldavia to Romania and back. I took advantage of that strange period of misunderstanding and crossed the river Prut, leaving Romania. So I found myself in Bessarabia [2](#) and later in Ukraine. 2 or 3 months after that I ran from Romania through Moldova to Ukraine on foot. Bessarabia was annexed [3](#), and the border between Romania and Moldavia was closed. We were separated, but at that time I did not know yet that it was for ever. During first months I still received letters from home.

Now I can not understand the way they reached me. Once I received a letter from my dear brother. It was absolutely neutral, about nothing. And at the foot of the page it was written: 'Recollect our games.' I thought and thought and finally understood that when we were boys we wrote each other confidential letters using citric juice, which it was necessary to hold above a lamp to see letters. I took the received text above the fire and managed to read between its lines: 'If you have a photo of our father, take care of it.' I understood that our father had already died. I have no photos of him! And you see, I was his favorite son...

And the text I read in that letter further (it was written the same confidential way), doesn't let me rest during dozens of years. In Romania I studied in the so-called prewar course. Once a week I had to put on some sort of a military uniform and go to the suburb of Bucharest. There together with young men of my age we were trained by a private first class.

And so, when I escaped, representatives of that military center came to our place and asked why I had stopped my training sessions. My relatives told them that I went abroad. And I am afraid that they killed my father for that. Possibly they tormented him to death, trying to discover where I had disappeared. I heard about many murders of Jews in Romania. It means that I caused the death of my father. And I saw nobody from my family any more.

My life turned round so sharply that if I read my story in a book, I would never believe it was true. I can not believe that all that happened to me.

I led a nomad existence. I turned into Der ewige Jude: you know, Wandering Jew. [Wandering Jew or Ahasverus is a personage of a Christian legend, a Jew-wanderer condemned by the God for eternal life in wanderings, because he refused to help Christ to carry the cross to Golgotha.] I begged for meal, sometimes ate directly from fields. And in the meantime, Germans attacked the USSR, and the war burst out [4](#). People started digging entrenchments. When I passed by different settlements, they involved me into that work.

[During the first months of war all able to work population without fail had to dig entrenchments around their settlements.] I reached Kharkov on foot. Somewhere near Kharkov I got on a train. I did not know the train's destination point, but for that time it was normal: people strived for getting on any kind of transport, paying no attention to its destination point. I hardly squeezed myself onto the platform, next day I managed to penetrate into the car. And one day later a ticket collector handed me over to the chief of the train, and they made me get out nearly without stopping the train. And again I started to hang about. I ate something, I slept somewhere. Still I do not understand the way I survived.

Having walked through almost all Ukraine, I got into Russia. I walked and walked, eating vegetables from private gardens, spending nights somewhere. One day (it was in Ukraine) it was raining cats and dogs, and I was absolutely exhausted. On my way I found a haystack, I crept inside it and decided to die there. I could not drag my feet another step. But it turned out that a woman, a local inhabitant noticed me. She was brave enough to take me out from that hay. She brought me to her place. Half of her izba was occupied by Russian stove.

The hostess gave me food; I climbed on the stove and had been sleeping for two days. After that I went on. But, you see it became much easier for me to go, I do not know the reason: possibly my

sound sleep helped me, but most probably it was the idea that there were kind people on the face of the earth! You see, the most painful was the fact that I was a boy from a large and united family, and suddenly I found myself alone in the world. For the most time I walked alone, but sometimes some strange persons joined me.

For some time we walked together, then separated unexpectedly (the same way we had met). We could have not exchange even a couple of words. Do not forget that I knew not a word in Russian. At last I came to Kharkov. In Kharkov I got on a train. Again I knew nothing about its destination point. For me it was all the same: I was a stranger everywhere. The only thing I knew for sure was the fact that under Germans it would be bad for me, a Jew. But in fact not everyone understood it. I found out that my train was going to Rostov region. On the way I had running temperature.

One guy unknown to me gave me his coat to get warm. At a station I got out of the train to visit a first-aid post, and the train left. I ran to the station-master, started to explain him that it was necessary for me to catch that train and return a coat. They looked at me and thought I was round the twist. They even took me for a spy. As for me, during many years I was pursued by remorse, because of that coat lost by that kind guy.

In a couple of days I boarded another train and reached Bataysk, situated several kilometers far from Rostov. There I had to dig entrenchments again. One of the soldiers who supervised the process of digging, told me 'Recently there came the heads, they tried to make a decision, if they should immediately execute you by shooting or not. And they decided to leave you alive so far. Consider it to be your second birth.' Again I got on a train. Of course it was not easy to board the train: I fought for it, two days I spent on the platform, and on the 3rd one I managed to get into the car.

I do not remember how long I spent in the train, probably 10 days. At last I arrived in Penza. In every city I addressed local military registration and enlistment office. [Military registration and enlistment offices in the USSR and in Russia implemented official call-up plans.] I asked to send me to the front line. I said that I had a score to settle with Germans. But they refused to take me as I was a foreigner.

All people were surprisingly nice to me, they gave me food, sometimes gave me some money. What is the most important and impossible to understand: they did not arrest me. Probably during the war NKVD [5](#) lost a part of its basic functions (mass execution of peaceful citizens).

I'd like to tell you about one episode, which happened during my travel. Together with me in the car there traveled a family. For some reason they had a lot of meal. They were eating continuously, in contrast to me. The only thing they lacked was bread. From time to time they spoke to each other, pointing a finger at me 'Look, this guy eats nothing all the travel long!' At one of railway stations I came off the train, went to a bakery and bought 3 big warm loaves of bread (I spent my last money for it). And I managed to get back to the train in time.

One loaf I presented to a Pole (I do not know, whence he appeared there). My neighbors-gluttons asked me to sell them bread or to exchange it for meal. I refused proudly and ate my bread dry, and they flashed their envious looks at me. It is strange, really, what remains in your memory sometimes!

After Penza I got to Central Asia, to a small town 30 kilometers far from Tashkent (I do not remember its name). There I found myself among local people which did not speak Russian, just like me. By pure accident I got a textbook of German language for Uzbeks. I started learning Uzbek language and after several months of studies I already spoke it. I am sure that you will excuse me, but a mullah even taught me Arabian prays. I still remember them.

The secretary of the regional Communist Party Committee told me 'I will not let you go to the front, I need you here.' [Regional Communist Party Committee was a supervising official body - representative of the Central Communist Party Committee.] I was appointed an accountant. After all I was a competent person: my lyceum education, you know, was no jesting matter. I drew up reports like that: 'A ram fought against another one, and got badly wounded. It was slaughtered urgently to avoid spoiling of meat. The meat was distributed among collective farmers.' At that time it was the only way to provide people with at least small amount of meat.

Doschanov, the secretary of the regional Communist Party Committee suggested me to marry a local girl and stay there for ever. I remember him saying 'A lot of Russians live here for a long time knowing not a word in the Uzbek language, and you became our relative now.' At that time in Central Asia there were a lot of evacuated people. [Evacuated people came from different places of the country occupied by German army.] They lived poorly, they were treated badly. And I lived very well. When I arrived in Central Asia my weight was 53 kg, and when I left for the front line (in 1944) - 72 kg. I gained 20 kg.

Once I was almost taken. They brought us (about 600 persons) hundreds kilometers away to a recruiting center. [Recruiting center is a place where a person starts his military service.] From those 600 persons only 2 were scrapped, and I was one of them. Why did not they take me?! I wanted to go to the front! I had a score to settle with Germans: all my relatives, whom I loved, were lost (I was sure in it by that time) because of Fascism, because of Nazism. I wanted to fight. And again I was scrapped as a foreigner. 2 years more I spent in Central Asia. And at last they agreed to send me to the army.

I got to the 1st Belarus front, to the division no.69. Marshal Zhukov was the commander of the front.

I started in Poland. We were brought there via Urals.

We won back Warsaw and Berlin. I participated in the meeting with Americans on Elba. [The Meeting of the Red Army and American armies in Torgau took place on Elba in April, 1945. As a result of that meeting, Germany was split into two parts.]

I served in infantry as a submachine gunner. I was afraid of nothing: I can't say that I ignored myself, but I thought 'It's better for me to perish, than to somebody else, because nobody will cry for me.' In this connection I recollect the following tragical story. Being at the recruiting center, I saw a guy there. A very young woman (his sister or a wife) saw him off. She cried so bitterly! My heart was breaking! And later, already in Poland I suddenly saw that guy in our entrenchment (nearby and opposite to us Germans were sitting in the similar entrenchment).

Before I had time to say I was glad for him (that he was alive and fine), he got up to his full height and shouted with all his lung power: 'Hey you, Germans (round oath), I am not afraid of you!' and

fell dead at that very second. Till now I cannot forget that crying little girl at the recruiting center, even more than him. At the front it happened sometimes that people went out of their mind.

I went through the war unhurt, though that war was terrible! Imagine, from 180 soldiers of my company only 8 survived, including me.

• After the War and later life

You know, I forgot some details, but the meeting on Elba impressed me greatly (and not only me). Certainly, everyone understands that that meeting resulted in something good (German army was divided into parts, and the war ended faster). But it was not that result that stuck to my memory. All the war time they spoke that all our allies did not hurry up to open the 2nd front, etc. You know: the Soviet propagation. And there we saw those allies first-hand. We embraced, shook hands, and exchanged souvenirs.

Stars from our field caps were a great success among Americans. All of them knew one word in Russian - 'a comrade'. And we drank there a lot: vodka, whisky - it didn't matter! Before the meeting political departments and SMERSH [6](#) recommended us to follow special instruction and carry out 'friendly meetings in the spirit of revolutionary vigilance.' [Political departments were special bodies created by the Central Committee of the Communist party in the Soviet Army and Navy fleet for strengthening of political work, and mainly for realization of total shadowing.] And one more trifling thing stuck to my mind: boots of American soldiers were polished!

After the victory I started working at the strategical department in Berlin. It was our secret service and counterespionage department. All inhabitants of Leningrad, and not only of Leningrad know what the Big House is. [Big House is a building in St. Petersburg (Leningrad), where since 1932 People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs was situated. The Big House became a symbol of lawlessness and terror. According to a legend, the sense of the name is the following: 'The Big House is the highest building in the city. From its windows everyone can see Siberia.']

Here you can realize the level of nonsense: they refused to send me to the front line as a private because of my political unreliability (as they thought), and in Berlin they trusted me more than difficult affairs. To tell the truth, I fought fairly, I did not hide from bullets, never betrayed my comrades - so, I proved my reliability. Certainly, my perfect knowledge of German language was of great importance. Once again I had to thank the Bucharest lyceum. I rented an apartment, I took an officer's post. I was engaged in translations, but not only in translations.

I cannot tell you everything even now. Anyway, thanks to my work in strategical department in Berlin I became able to catch pilferers, when I began working at school. No ruses could help them! If it was necessary to find out who had broken a glass, they addressed me. Once I even managed to return a motorcycle to its owner (that motorcycle was stolen by pupils of our school). You will not believe, but I was even invited to work in militia.

But in general, I did not like that work. People ought to stand aside from such places. And I decided to start new peaceful life.

In 1946 I got demobilized. And in the USSR I had nobody and nothing. I did not know how to start the new life. I wanted to go to Leningrad. But Leningrad was a closed city: people were allowed to go there only if they had been born there or had work there. My front-line comrade helped me to get to Leningrad having sent me an invitation. His name was Alexey and I do not remember his surname. What is ridiculous: when I arrived in Leningrad, I did not find him there. His neighbors told me that he had fallen in love with a girl from Tadjikistan and had urgently left for her. He even left no address.

So I had no opportunity to thank him for his assistance. It ensured my coming to the city, which became my home very soon. You remember I thought that I would remain Wandering Jew for ever. Really, nobody waited for me, nobody was pleased with my returning. I was alone both in the city and in the whole world. I understood it, but at the same time my heart was pleased that I was alive. I fought against Hitler, I would have fought against that bastard on the side of any country. Step by step I realized that the country on which side I fought, was my native country.

So on 14th August 1946 I appeared in Leningrad. And on 16th August entrance examinations at the College of Foreign Languages began. I sent my documents to the French language department. The most difficult examination was composition. My Russian was very poor. Only regarding round oaths, I had no match. There I was worth an academic status of professor.

But unfortunately entrance examinations required different sort of knowledge. And one very beautiful girl wrote that composition for me. Don't look at me that way: you see, now I am old and bald, but 60 years ago I was rather handsome. Moreover, I was a front-line soldier! That is why she herself suggested to do it and did it. And the rest examinations I passed myself and got very good marks.

I became a student. But the College director told me 'Your knowledge of Russian language will not permit you to study in our College. I allow you to study till the first session.' Here I'd like to tell you that during years of my study in that College I got only one good mark, all the others were excellent. It is interesting that that good mark I got for military translation. Guess why: because I had to translate into Russian. It was ridiculous, taking into account that I had finished war in the rank of captain-translator.

It was very important for me to be an excellent student, because they received 25% higher stipend. And I could rely only upon myself. I lived in a hostel. My stipend (even increased one) was not enough for living. I earned money additionally: worked as a docker, helped to carry books in libraries, etc. And I was an excellent student. I had time for everything. At that time I had a feeling (more likely subconscious) that I was living not only for myself, but also for all my family members.

I graduated from the College so successfully that acquired the right of teaching not only at schools, but also in higher educational institutions. It was written down in my diploma. I was assigned 7 to Kishinev. I asked the commission about it myself, because I knew Romanian language. And Moldavian and Romanian languages are so similar that I started speaking Moldovian at once. In Kishinev I taught French language at the Pedagogical College. By that time I was already married. Please, do not be angry with me, but I'll tell nothing about my wife. There are things in my life, which concern only me. Do not ask me, I'll tell nothing. My wife went with me to Kishinev and became an inspector at the Ministry of Public Education there. We lived there 3 years. After that we

returned to Leningrad, and I started working in the school no.112. Shortly after our return to Leningrad, my elder son was born.

At first we lived together with my mother-in-law, and later they gave me (as a war participant) an apartment. At the school no.112 I worked 44 years: it was my first and the only one place of work. I worked till 1996, and retired on a pension at the age of 75. Nobody dismissed me, I could go on working, but it became already a little bit difficult for me.

In 1996 I met Bronislava Davidovna and since then we have been together with her. Her maiden name was Krifuks. She was born in Leningrad in 1925. She graduated from the Leningrad State University (department of Russian language and literature). She worked at the same school, where we worked with my first wife. She taught Russian language and literature. She was married to Vitaliy Semenovich Lurye, who died in 1994. Our families were on friendly terms. That was why when both of us lost our spouses, we paid attention to each other.

I do not remember anybody from our circle, who emigrated soon after the war. I frequently thought about leaving, but not in details. I did not want to go abroad, knowing nothing about the future: I had already knocked about the world quite enough. But my heart always belonged to Israel. Till now I am sometimes very sorry that I did not manage to visit it. It means that I was not fated to!

I have got 2 sons Mikhail and Andrey. Mikhail was born in 1952 and Andrey in 1963. Both of them were born in Leningrad. They grew as ordinary boys. They were very good friends, despite of great disparity in years. They both graduated from the Leningrad Electrotechnical College as programmers. Each of them has 2 sons. Mikhail's wife name is Irina. Their son Alexey is already married. He studies (as his father and his uncle did) in the Leningrad Electrotechnical College. His wife Ekaterina graduated from the Antique Department of the State University, she is a teacher of English language. They have a daughter Masha (my great-granddaughter).

Their second son Evgeniy graduated from the Polytechnical College and went to Holland for postgraduate course. He works there now. His wife's name is Oksana. They also have 2 sons Denis and Anton. The elder son is a 1st year student of the University of Economics and Finances. The younger brother is a schoolboy. They are good boys. Denis was the first one in my family who took great interest in Judaism. He reads books on history of Jewish people and is a member of Petersburg branch of Hillel. [Hillel is the largest International Jewish students' organization in the world, which promotes revival of Jewish life on the territory of the former Soviet Union. Hillel has its branches in 27 cities of seven countries in CIS.]

We see each other with my children and grandsons not frequently. We live far away from each other, and they are busy very much. But somebody of them gives me a telephone call almost every day to ask about my health.

When my son Andrey was going to enter the Leningrad Electrotechnical College (in 1980), we heard that they did not want Jews to become students of the Faculty of programming. And I told you already that during the war I worked at the strategical department in Berlin. I still had some acquaintances in certain spheres. I went to the department no.1 of the College and said 'Old men, I helped you, you help me now.' [Department no.1 was a special department in every soviet institution. They were organized to keep people under surveillance. As a rule, there worked

representatives of the National Security Committee.] And my son entered the College.

You know, at my work I never had problems connected with my Jewish origin. The same was during my studies and at the front, though horrible anti-Semitism flourished around us. But when I worked in Kishinev, newspapers informed people about the Doctors' Plot [8](#). In connection with it, Jews were fired out from offices right and left. I was not fired. I think the reason was not only in my front-line backward, but also in important position my wife occupied in the Ministry of Public Education. But why did she remain untouched? Sometimes they make mistakes!

In fact I made no secret of the fact that I was Jewish. By the way when I served in Berlin, I had good relations with Germans, including girls. There was one girl... I immediately honestly told her that I was a Jew. And she answered 'Well, and now what?'

Probably the point was that I never occupied important positions. To tell the truth, there was one exception in Kishinev. But I already told you about it.

I did not bring up my children as Jews. They certainly knew that we were Jews, but that was all. I did not visit synagogue, and never brought my children there. I don't think that they were especially interested in my life. They never asked about details of my life (as you did). You already know about me more, than my own children do.

After the end of the war we did not observe traditions, did not celebrate Jewish holidays, - we were not Jews in the full sense of the word. We cooked no special Jewish meals. Sometimes we bought matzah in the synagogue. We had a lot of friends, both Jews and Russians. By the way, it never came to my mind to count up the percentage of my Jewish friends among the others. And I know no Jewish families which observed traditions. Perhaps, someone observed, but they preferred to keep it in secret.

My life after 1950s did not change noticeably. Salary of teachers was always miserable. At school there worked only people who really loved their work. And I was one of them. It was very unpleasant, when school authorities forced teachers to give pupils undeserved high marks (they wanted their school to have a good reputation). Once I even spoke at a teachers' meeting against their position. I held up the Bucharest lyceum as a positive example. The director attacked me with reproaches: she blamed me for my bourgeois ideology. But I was not fired: schools always lacked teachers, and a male teacher was always worth his weight in gold. And by the way, I was a good teacher. My pupils liked me.

Here I can tell you one story, which happened recently. Being a war participant, I have the right to rent dacha in Ushkovo in summer. [Ushkovo is a settlement in Leningrad region 55 km far from St. Petersburg.] Certainly, it is much cheaper for me, than for others, but not free-of-charge. We spend there summer time year and year out.

Well, the rent grows and the conditions become worse from year to year. They make no repair: leak in the roof, the refrigerator out of order. I suffered for a long time, and then became angry and wrote an article. I sent it to a newspaper and named Payment for a Jolt of Fresh Air. The article was signed by me. The newspaper fell into the hands of my former schoolgirl (she studied in my class about 30 years ago). She was not lazy enough to make a telephone call to the newspaper editors and get my telephone number. She called me and said so many warm words, that now I have a lot

to keep in my memory!

I never had to swear fidelity. But you should take into consideration that in 1937-1938 (during the Great Terror [9](#), when employees everywhere voted for executions of enemies of the people [10](#)) I did not live in the USSR.

During the wars which were waged by Israel [11, 12], I was on the side of Israel for sure. I was very pleased with those victories, because I always considered that country to be almost my native. You should take into account that I was at war (a very serious war), and I came to know the particulars of military science and art of war. To my mind, the way Israel waged those wars was fantastically good. It seems to me that every anti-Semite should have changed his opinion of Jews during those wars.

I do not remember whether the severance of diplomatic relations with Israel influenced my life.

I have no relatives abroad. To put it more precisely, I know nothing about anybody of them.

You know, when at present some old fools (I am sorry, but I am used to call things and people by their proper names) start complaining that democrats have crushed the ideals they shed their blood for, I'd like to say the following: 'I liberated Berlin. I did it personally. Only 8 persons (including me) survived from 180 soldiers of my company. I fought fairly. I have the full right to judge, what is good for this country and what is evil for it. And I do not have a sense that they betrayed everything I fought for. I consider democratization to be a blessing for our country.'

I am connected to the life of St. Petersburg Jewish community very little. Sometimes they bring me food packages from the Hesed Welfare Center [13](#). Oh, you should see those packages! My income is enough for living, in fact I receive two pensions: an old age pension and pension of a war participant. But I understand that it is not a package, but attention that is dear to me.

I never received any financial assistance from Germany or Switzerland. It would be ridiculous, if Germans make compensatory payments to the person, who worked at the strategical department in Berlin!

Here you ask me what I felt, when Stalin died. You know, according to Stalin's plan, I should have not talked to you here now, I should have lived (or most probably, be already buried) in Birobidzhan [14](#). Certainly all these details became known rather recently. But in fact at that time even blind understood Stalin's attitude to Jews. And when people say that they knew nothing about Stalin's terror, I cannot believe them. In fact almost every family suffered from repressions. I am proud of the fact that when Stalin died I not only did not cry (as everybody did around me), but felt pleasure and a sense of relief. Many people say now 'We cried, because we were afraid to witness even worse times in the near future.' And what could be worse? It could not be worse. And I turned to be right! The doctors were released from custody, and hard as times might be later we never experienced such horror any more.

Certainly we took the Doctors' Plot hard. I told you already that at that time I worked in Kishinev. I remember how they fired Jews. I was not fired probably because I was a war participant. It was almost impossible to find job for a Jew in 1950s (before Stalin's death).

Revolution in Hungary [15](#) and the Prague spring [16](#) I took hard. I understood well that it was unfair. But even better I understood that I had to keep my own opinion to myself. From that point of view I became a real Soviet citizen quickly.

I'd like to brag a little bit. I was awarded medals For Liberation of Warsaw, For Liberation of Berlin, and an Order of the Great Patriotic War [17](#). I deserved one award more, but I do not remember which one. Probably you have noticed my disadvantage: I am a yap. Since my childhood I had a long tongue. I said too much about private life of my commander (he lived with a nurse). Somebody told him my words with pleasure and then he said 'That Askenazi has too long tongue, he will manage without award.' I took no offence at him.

I was happy to remain alive and safe. I am still alive, and I am going to live a long life (minimum 100 years). Do you know why? I do not want to let the authorities save money on my pension. They should pay! I have 2 sons, 4 grandsons, 1 great-granddaughter - all of them exist thanks to me! On my birthday my grandson (he is a pupil of the 4th form) proposed a toast to me: 'To my grandfather, our root, we all are his descendants!' My family is large, and there are no drunkards, no peculiar fools.

I am also proud of the high standard of my knowledge in languages. We can count: Romanian, Russian, French, English (I studied it in the College as the second language), Latin (from my lyceum), German, Uzbek! You'd better come with me to the market! I speak to every seller in his native language. And they give me 50% discount! Everyone is pleased to hear native language in a foreign city.

• **Glossary:**

1. Anti-Jewish laws in Romania: The first anti-Jewish laws were introduced in 1938 by the Goga-Cuza government. Further anti-Jewish laws followed in 1940 and 1941, and the situation was getting gradually worse between 1941-1944 under the Antonescu regime. According to these laws all Jews aged 18-40 living in villages were to be evacuated and concentrated in the capital town of each county. Jews from the region between the Siret and Prut Rivers were transported by wagons to the camps of Targu Jiu, Slobozia, Craiova etc. where they lived and died in misery. More than 40,000 Jews were moved. All rural Jewish property, as well as houses owned by Jews in the city, were confiscated by the state, as part of the 'Romanisation campaign'. Marriages between Jews and Romanians were forbidden from August 1940, Jews were not allowed to have Romanian names, own rural properties, be public employees, lawyers, editors or janitors in public institutions, have a career in the army, own liquor stores, etc. Jewish employees of commercial and industrial enterprises were fired, Jewish doctors could no longer practice and Jews were not allowed to own chemist shops. Jewish students were forbidden to study in Romanian schools.

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

peace treaty of 1947 confirmed their belonging to the Soviet Union. Today it is part of Moldavia.

3. Annexation of Bessarabia to the Soviet Union: At the end of June 1940 the Soviet Union demanded Romania to withdraw its troops from Bessarabia and to abandon the territory. Romania withdrew its troops and administration in the same month and between 28th June and 3rd July, the Soviets occupied the region. At the same time Romania was obliged to give up Northern Transylvania to Hungary and Southern-Dobrudja to Bulgaria. These territorial losses influenced Romanian politics during World War II to a great extent.

4. 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.

5. NKVD: People's Committee of Internal Affairs; it took over from the GPU, the state security agency, in 1934

6. SMERSH: Russian abbreviation for 'Smert Shpionam' meaning Death to Spies. It was a counterintelligence department in the Soviet Union formed during World War II, to secure the rear of the active Red Army, on the front to arrest 'traitors, deserters, spies, and criminal elements'. The full name of the entity was USSR People's Commissariat of Defense Chief Counterintelligence Directorate 'SMERSH'. This name for the counterintelligence division of the Red Army was introduced on 19th April 1943, and worked as a separate entity until 1946. It was headed by Viktor Abakumov. At the same time a SMERSH directorate within the People's Commissariat of the Soviet Navy and a SMERSH department of the NKVD were created. The main opponent of SMERSH in its counterintelligence activity was Abwehr, the German military foreign information and counterintelligence department. SMERSH activities also included 'filtering' the soldiers recovered from captivity and the population of the gained territories. It was also used to punish within the NKVD itself; allowed to investigate, arrest and torture, force to sign fake confessions, put on a show trial, and either send to the camps or shoot people. SMERSH would also often be sent out to find and kill defectors, double agents, etc.; also used to maintain military discipline in the Red Army by means of barrier forces, that were supposed to shoot down the Soviet troops in the cases of retreat. SMERSH was also used to hunt down 'enemies of the people' outside Soviet territory.

7. 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.

8. Doctors' Plot: The Doctors' Plot was an alleged conspiracy of a group of Moscow doctors to murder leading government and party officials. In January 1953, the Soviet press reported that nine doctors, six of whom were Jewish, had been arrested and confessed their guilt. As Stalin died in March 1953, the trial never took place. The official paper of the Party, the Pravda, later announced

that the charges against the doctors were false and their confessions obtained by torture. This case was one of the worst anti-Semitic incidents during Stalin's reign. In his secret speech at the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956 Khrushchev stated that Stalin wanted to use the Plot to purge the top Soviet leadership

9. 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.

10. Enemy of the people: Soviet official term; euphemism used for real or assumed political opposition.

11. 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

12. Yom Kippur War: The Arab-Israeli War of 1973, also known as the Yom Kippur War or the Ramadan War, was a war between Israel on one side and Egypt and Syria on the other side. It was the fourth major military confrontation between Israel and the Arab states. The war lasted for three weeks: it started on 6th October 1973 and ended on 22nd October on the Syrian front and on 26th October on the Egyptian front.

13. 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 FSU 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.

14. Birobidzhan: Formed in 1928 to give Soviet Jews a home territory and to increase settlement along the vulnerable borders of the Soviet Far East, the area was raised to the status of an autonomous region in 1934. Influenced by an effective propaganda campaign, and starvation in the east, 41,000 Soviet Jews relocated to the area between the late 1920s and early 1930s. But, by 1938 28,000 of them had fled the regions harsh conditions, There were Jewish schools and synagogues up until the 1940s, when there was a resurgence of religious repression after World War II. The Soviet government wanted the forced deportation of all Jews to Birobidzhan to be completed by the middle of the 1950s. But in 1953 Stalin died and the deportation was cancelled. Despite some remaining Yiddish influences - including a Yiddish newspaper - Jewish cultural activity in the region has declined enormously since Stalin's anti-cosmopolitanism campaigns and since the liberalization of Jewish emigration in the 1970s. Jews now make up less than 2% of the region's population

15. 1956: It designates the Revolution, which started on 23rd October 1956 against Soviet rule and the communists in Hungary. It was started by student and worker demonstrations in Budapest started in which Stalin's gigantic statue was destroyed. Moderate communist leader Imre Nagy was appointed as prime minister and he promised reform and democratization. The Soviet Union withdrew its troops which had been stationing in Hungary since the end of World War II, but they returned after Nagy's announcement that Hungary would pull out of the Warsaw Pact to pursue a policy of neutrality. The Soviet army put an end to the rising on 4th November and mass repression and arrests started. About 200,000 Hungarians fled from the country. Nagy, and a number of his supporters were executed. Until 1989, the fall of the communist regime, the Revolution of 1956 was officially considered a counter-revolution.

16. Prague Spring: The term Prague Spring designates the liberalization period in communist-ruled Czechoslovakia between 1967-1969. In 1967 Alexander Dubcek became the head of the Czech Communist Party and promoted ideas of 'socialism with a human face', i.e. with more personal freedom and freedom of the press, and the rehabilitation of victims of Stalinism. In August 1968 Soviet troops, along with contingents from Poland, East Germany, Hungary and Bulgaria, occupied Prague and put an end to the reforms

17. Order of the Great Patriotic War: 1st Class: established 20th May 1942, awarded to officers and enlisted men of the armed forces and security troops and to partisans, irrespective of rank, for skillful command of their units in action. 2nd Class: established 20th May 1942, awarded to officers and enlisted men of the armed forces and security troops and to partisans, irrespective of rank, for lesser personal valor in action.