

# Grigory Gendler

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St. Petersburg

Russia

Interviewer: Vera Postavinskaya

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*Grigory Haimovich Gendler is a vivid personality.*

*He is 86 years old, but remembers well the smallest details of his colorful biography and speaks about himself and about his family with pleasure.*

*He articulates distinctly, his voice is a clear voice of professional lecturer. It seems that he carefully threads time-ordered details of his narration.*

*When you listen to him, you realize that it is not simply a story of a person about his life, but a well-edited work of fiction.*

*Grigory Haimovich lives in a large apartment in one of the new districts of St. Petersburg.*

*His family is large: he has a daughter, a son-in-law (husband of his daughter), a granddaughter and another son-in-law (husband of his granddaughter).*

*In the room of Grigory Haimovich there are a lot of shelves with books on economics and a big writing-table at the window.*

*Grigory Haimovich still works: he supervises research activities of postgraduate students.*

*Memory of Grigory Gendler keeps a lot of information not only about pre-war time and military operations, but also about present-day realities.*

*He is a very good company.*

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- **My family background**



I know nothing about my great-grandparents. My paternal grandfather was born in the middle of the 19th century; I do not remember the exact date of his birth. His name was Shaye. I remember him to be rather strong man. Before the revolution of 1917 he lived in Kiev [capital of Ukraine]. My parents lived there, too. There (in Kiev) I was born in 1921. My grandfather owned a wood-store in Kiev and was well-to-do, in contrast to the family of my parents: they were rather poor. In Kiev we lived in the same street. Sometimes my grandfather rendered me assistance: he gave me presents. In the 1920s grandfather decided to leave his wood-store (as time went on, things began to change and he understood it) and managed to master the profession of bookbinder. As far as I remember, he was a success and performed a lot of orders for binding books. In 1927 our family moved from Kiev to Moscow, but when I visited Kiev, I always came to see my grandfather. He loved me very much, and I loved him, too.

My grandfather had got several sons and daughters. One of his sons was a very handsome young man (a little bit older than me); under the Soviet regime he managed a shop in Kiev. We were good friends. He liked to court ladies (I often watched him doing it). My grandfather reached a great age (he died at the age of 90 in 1970s). I cannot tell much about my paternal grandmother: she died early in life (before the war). I do not remember her name. After her death grandfather married another woman and I remember her face better.

Among the children of my paternal grandfather I remember his daughter Klara, the youngest child. Klara became a widow early in her life. Her daughter Tanya is still alive. When after the end of the war we appeared in Leningrad, we invited her to live with us. She lived in our apartment for 6 years as a student at the Refrigeration College. After graduation, she left for Kiev.

Her first marriage was unhappy: she fell in love with a very handsome man, an athlete, but his mental faculties were much worse than his physical ones. Therefore she parted from him and got married for the second time. Later she left for America together with her mother Klara. It happened about 15 years ago, after the Chernobyl disaster. [The Chernobyl disaster was a major accident at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant on April 26, 1986. An explosion at the plant was followed by radioactive contamination of the surrounding geographic area.] I don't know where they are now. I think Tanya works as an engineer of refrigerating equipment.

My paternal grandfather and my father were religious people, they observed all traditions. In Kiev on the opposite side of the street there was a synagogue. They visited it sometimes. I remember Jews in the synagogue dancing with greenish velvet Torah scrolls and singing. Most probably it was Simchat Torah. I do not remember, but I guess my grandfather prayed. He attended the synagogue. He finished cheder and taught children arithmetic at a Jewish school. In our family we spoke mostly Russian, and sometimes Yiddish. My Yiddish is poor.

I remember appearance of my maternal grandmother and grandfather. They also lived in Kiev. Sorry, I do not remember their names. Probably my maternal grandfather's name was Hirsh, because my mother's patronymic was Georgievna. My maternal grandfather was an employee: he worked in a large firm engaged in manufacture and sales of leather products; he was a great expert in that sphere. Mom had got 5 sisters, no brothers. After the end of the war (for the most part after Chernobyl disaster) some of her sisters moved to America and Canada. We were close friends with Rachel, mother's younger sister who was married to an interesting person. His surname was Byuk, he was an expert in communication service. Vova Byuk, their son and my

cousin was my friend: we were brought up together. At present Vova Byuk lives in Israel.

In Kiev we lived in the stone house; synagogue was situated across the street. I remember a large room on the 2nd or the 3rd floor. My parents took care of me: I was their only child.

My father Haim Shayevich (Efim Issaevich) Gendler was born in 1897 in Ukraine (in Korosten of Kiev province, 200 km from Kiev). He moved to Kiev approximately in 1920, there he worked as a math teacher. Later he became a handicraftman. He had got a knitting machine, and knitted caps. Later he lost his job, and in 1926 parents moved from Kiev to Moscow searching for work.

My Mom Berta Georgievna Smyk was born in 1903 in Korets (in Poland) and in 1920s she moved to Kiev. Mom was afraid to talk about the place where she was born. She was very nervous, because she suffered much. Mom told me that when she was young and not married, she lived on the 2nd floor of a wooden house in Kiev, near a monastery. During the Civil War [1](#) gangs under the command of Petliura [2](#) occupied Kiev and arranged pogroms [3](#). They tried to catch my mother, therefore she was forced to jump down from the 2nd floor, escaping from Petliura's soldiers. Unfortunately it affected her mind detrimentally.

### • Growing up

In Kiev she did not work, at that time I was a baby. Parents observed Tradition partly: they were not deeply religious and did not observe kashrut.

In 1927 our family moved to Moscow. At first we rented a small room in Lossinoostrovsk (suburb of Moscow). I remember that in Lossinoostrovsk our samovar fell down accidentally and burned my leg. Parents took me to a doctor in a sledge.

Later we moved to the center of Moscow. Our room was situated in a cellar. Father worked as an accountant, later he became a bookkeeper, and his last 20 years he worked as a warehouse manager at the Ministry of Chemical Industry. During the war father was in evacuation with his warehouse in Kirovochepetsk (a city in Kirov region). A chemical industrial complex was situated there. Father died in 1961 in Moscow. Mom helped Daddy at his warehouse and worked there as a packer. Later (after the end of the war) she sold newspapers in a kiosk in the center of Moscow. Later we moved to a room on the 3rd floor (12 square meters) near the Kiev railway station.

At school I had got a friend Tolya Myagkich, later he became an actor. His father was a member of the Moscow CPSU committee. But soon he was expelled from the CPSU, and worked as a roofer.

Mom's brother Tsale Smyk lived in Vinnitsa (Ukraine). In 1916 Tsale was a CPSU member, worked as an economic manager. He frequently visited us in Moscow, and economics occupied my attention.

In 1937 Tsale was arrested and declared a Polish spy. He was sentenced to 10 years of imprisonment with confiscation and exile (it was equivalent to execution). His wife and his son were deported to Kazakhstan. During the war his son perished in the Battle of Stalingrad [4](#), and his wife Sonya was rehabilitated in 1953.

My parents read much, but never subscribed to newspapers. In Moscow my parents often visited

the Jewish theatre of Mikhoels [5](#). Parents were not CPSU members. Their wedding ceremony was carried out according Tradition.

In 1939 I finished my school. I usually spent summer vacations in Moscow, and sometimes went to pioneer summer camps in suburbs of Moscow. Before the school I did not attend kindergarten.

At school I came across no manifestations of anti-Semitism and till the 8th class did not know my nationality. My parents never spoke about it. I was an excellent pupil; I liked to study very much. Every subject was easy for me: literature, mathematics, etc. I used to take part in different contests for schoolchildren. I remember that one day my teacher of Russian language Antonina Ivanovna said that in her opinion I should become a professor in the future. Our teacher of physics was a very interesting person, he was elegant in dress. I remember that our teacher of biology Bella (I do not remember her patronymic), a Jewess pronounced the word myasso (meat) in a very funny manner. In my early childhood when we got to Moscow, my parents bought a violin for me, but my studies lasted not long: my family could not afford my lessons. I remember that in 1930 (when people suffered from starvation) my parents sold their wedding rings and bought tasty meals in Torgsin store [6](#).

During my school years I was engaged in amateur art activities, an actor Yemelyanov from the Vakhtangov theatre taught us. We put on the stage "Gypsies" by Pushkin [7](#). I read the narrator's text, and my friend Tolya played the role of the old gipsy. I also recited the poem To The Sea by Pushkin, and got a diploma for it.

When I was a pupil of the 8th and 9th form, I studied at a glider school. There I learned to make short climbs, but did not fly. I remember the opening ceremony of the Palace of Pioneers in 1937 or 1938. N. Khrushchev [8](#) was present at it (at that time he was a secretary of the Moscow CPSU committee). I was an active pioneer.

I visited Yumashev [Andrey Yumashev was a test pilot, a member of the Gromov's crew - participant of the flight over the North Pole in 1937] and Krestinsky [Nikolay Krestinsky was a Soviet CPSU and statesman, in 1930-1938 he was a USSR deputy people's commissar of foreign affairs] to invite them to our school. Yumashev did not come, and Krestinsky came and gave us a lecture.

In my childhood I was lucky to see Chkalov [9](#) and his son in Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. I heard that his son said to him 'Daddy, look! Here is your portrait'.

At school I was the chairman of the group pioneer organization. Kanina, our school director was an Honored Worker of Education; she was always nice to me. I had got a schoolmate Boris Goldin, who became an outstanding architect later.

After school (in 1939) I entered college without entrance examinations (because my school leaving certificate was full of excellent marks). My parents did not interfere and I chose the Moscow College of Philosophy, History and Literature named after Chernyshevsky (philosophical faculty). I studied 3 months and a half, and was called up for military service. Later my parents helped me to transfer to the correspondence department of the Moscow State University (by the way, during the war the Moscow College of Philosophy, History and Literature was liquidated).

From the recruiting center they took us somewhere by train (in a heated goods van) and made us get off at Shepetovka (a town in Khmelnytsky region of Ukraine) railway station. There I studied at a special training platoon; they prepared me to become an anti-aircraft gunner. There I studied 9 months, and then we were moved to Stanislav (now Ivano-Frankivsk, a city in Ukraine) to the 15th tank division under command of general Feklenko. There they decided to appoint me a political worker, because I was a student of the College of Philosophy. So I started writing articles for the division newspaper The Soviet Patriot. I wrote much, and they invited me to become an instructor. I lived in barracks. Arkady Raskov, the former correspondent of Pravda newspaper and Yastreb, an assistant of Katukov worked together with me. Later I remained alone, visited different military units and described soldier's life. Twice they let me go to Moscow to pass through the next in turn examinations at my college.

At the Moscow College of Philosophy, History and Literature named after Chernyshevsky there were well-known teachers, outstanding representatives of philosophical science, higher mathematics, physics, and biology. Among them there were professor Avdeev and academician Zavadsky. I often attended meetings of poetry fans at the Polytechnical Museum. I was present at performances of Sergey Mikhalkov and Nikolay Osseev (they were well-known Soviet poets), listened to public debate on Mayakovsky's poetry.

I remember that in 1941 I came to Moscow to pass through exams. I took a taxi and I remember that the taxi driver did not switch on the taximeter. After the trip he demanded more money than it was necessary.

At that time I spent 2 days at home: 2 first days of the war. Together with other people I listened to Molotov's speech [10](#) on the radio.

### • **During the War**

Having learned about the beginning of the war, I hastened to the Kiev railway station. When I arrived to Kiev, I met there my cousin Sasha Feldbeim (later he became an outstanding architect) in the break between my trains. We had a talk with Sasha, and I left for Ivano-Frankivsk [Ivano-Frankivsk at present, a city in south-western Ukraine]. There at my editorial office I got to know that everybody left for Chernovtsy (a city in Ukraine). In Chernovtsy I got up to the 15th tank division and my office. Fascists bombed the division and gradually encircled it. We were divided into 2 parts: tanks fought their way towards Kiev, and trucks under command of colonel Ryabov moved through woods towards railway station Peryatin, where we joined the rest of tank battalions.

It was in July 1941 when we got aboard the train and moved to the East for re-formation. We stopped near Stalingrad. Commission from the General Staff arrived there and selected 2 tank brigades. I got into the 4th Tank Brigade. Later it became known as the 1st Guards Tank Brigade. As the newspaper had been liquidated by that time, I asked for permission to serve in the anti-aircraft division, but Ivan Derevyankin, the chief of our political department suggested me to edit a local tabloid (for the 4th Tank Brigade). So I was sent to Stalingrad to take equipment for printing. I managed to bring not only the equipment, but also several water-melons from a melon plantation.

In September 1941 Colonel Katukov became the commander of the 4th Tank Brigade. He was a skilled officer, later he became a Tank Marshal. Our Brigade moved to the western front by train

(towards Moscow). Our tanks were detained at Kubinka railway station. At that time high-powered tank armada of fascists under the command of well-known general Heinz Guderian moved towards Tula [a city to the south of Moscow]. That armada contained 2 mechanized and 1 tank division, a lot of artillery, mortars, infantry, etc. Our Brigade had to stop that tank group of enemies on their way to Tula and Moscow. Therefore immediately from Kubinka advanced divisions of our brigade were brought into action near Orel [a city to the south of Tula], which was occupied by German divisions on October 1, 1941. Near Orel they gave a great battle. In that battle our brigade followed interesting tactical scheme: tanks took their places along the front line, blocking the way of German tanks. Our tanks waited in ambushes together with motorized infantry. Tanks were positioned 100-150 meters apart within the range of vision and hearing. Germans tried to cut their way through in different directions, but they met our tanks everywhere.

Germans had several times more tanks: they brought a tank army against 1 tank brigade (we had got only 70 tanks and 1,000 soldiers). During the fights near Orel I had to collect information about feats of arms of tankmen, infantrymen and other soldiers of our brigade, so that they could exchange fighting experience and morally support each other. I had to do it on the firing line: I crept from one tank ambush to another, talked to tankmen, and watched the battle episodes near Orel. Having collected necessary information for the newspaper, I came back to our place and together with my comrades Roskov, Yastreb and Shumilov we used to run off several hundreds copies on a mimeograph. After that I took that pile of copies and went back to the firing line to distribute them among soldiers.

It happened in the beginning of October 1941. We took part in defensive actions near Orel and Mzensk [a town near Orel], getting over from one firing line to another, and blunting attacks of superior forces of Germans. In our tabloid we described Ivan Lyubushkin's feat in details. He became the first hero of the USSR in our Brigade. Ivan blew up 9 tanks. Later central newspapers wrote about it, and the whole country got to know about his feat. Of course our moving to tank ambushes and back was noticed by Germans. But during those actions we (reporters) did not have to shoot, because our tankmen operated skillfully and handled enemies roughly. About 2 weeks our Brigade blunted the attack of the tank army and provided conditions for approach of additional forces.

So we successfully accomplished a difficult task, our losses were not heavy. Unexpectedly for us, we received the order signed by comrade Stalin, the National Commissioner of Defense, about renaming of our 4th Tank Brigade. We were named the 1st Guards Tank Brigade. Colonel Katukov, our commander was given the rank of major-general of tank armies. Actions near Orel (Russian territory from time immemorial) inspired soldiers of our brigade.

After the actions near Orel and Mzensk I addressed the command with a request to transfer me to a fighting unit: I was tired of describing feats of my comrades and wanted to take part in fights myself. By that time there appeared a vacant place of a Komsomol [11](#) leader of antiaircraft battalion. My drill was connected with antiaircraft artillery, therefore I became an officer. Before that I was in the rank of sergeant-major. I understood that it was a great danger for a Jew to be a political worker in the army, therefore for me it served as an additional stimulus never to yield myself prisoner. We knew that among captured soldiers Germans chose and shot commissars and Jews first of all.



Commander of the battalion captain Afanassenko met me suspiciously. In order to try my abilities he sent me together with Korsakov, a senior sergeant on the scout. Our task was to reconnoiter the firing line, to plot firing points of enemies and give a report. We both crossed the front line and got deeper towards the Germans. Between 2 firing lines we found small deserted villages. Passing an izba [a traditional Russian log house], we heard a girl cry. We got in and saw a wounded girl lying there. Her leg was bleeding. We took her with us, carrying her on our shoulders.

When we were coming back, we got under blanketing fire of our Katyushas. [Katyusha was an informal name of the Soviet rocket launchers which played very important role during military operations in 1941-1945.] We waited through bombardment in entrenchments, and then got back to the brigade. We carried the girl to our medical and sanitary battalion and gave a report on our results. After that raid, Afanassenko changed his attitude to me and the battalion commander immediately included me into the merit list (to give me the first officer rank of lieutenant).

The battalion fought defensive actions: Germans tried to cut their way through to Moscow from Volokolamsk. On their way there were infantry and tank units, including our brigade. Near to our position there stood on the defensive a division of General Panfilov (that was the time when 28 guardsmen of that division accomplished their well-known feat) [On November 11, 1941 28 General Panfilov's guardsmen went into action near Volokolamsk defending Moscow. During 4 hours they knocked out 18 German tanks. Most of them were killed in that action, but they managed to stand the enemy off.] The mounted detachment of general Dovator was also near to our brigade.

I especially remembered our fight in October 1941. Germans tried to burst through and came across the battery of our anti-aircraft battalion. We took part in repulsing of tank attacks. We used tracer shells which made great impression on Germans (terribly frightened them), especially at night. Germans suspected us to have invented some new variant of Katyusha. One of our batteries we even had to bring the anti-tank grenades into play, because Germans came too near.

Germans managed to push aside our units in Volokolamsk direction and approached Moscow. We stopped in Kriukovo settlement near Moscow (32 km from Moscow). There we stood several days. It was a lull in the fighting and I was sent to Moscow to Lenin's museum, because I was asked to bring the facts about feats of arms of tankmen. At the Lenin's museum I met the former rector of my college where I studied before the war. Her surname was Karpova; she was an old Bolshevik [12](#). By that time our College was affiliated to the Moscow State University and she became a director of the Lenin's museum. She gave me a warm welcome.

Naturally I found a minute and came to the house of my parents in Dragomilovskaya Street. I entered the four-storied stone house, went up the stairs to the 3rd floor, but unfortunately nobody opened the door: the apartment was empty. On the stairs I met a neighbor, who told me that my parents had been evacuated somewhere to the Urals region. So I bowed low to the house and went back to my brigade. Later in autumn of 1941, I got to know that my parents were evacuated to Kirovochepetsk, where father worked at the chemical industrial complex. He also was sent to do tree cutting. There in Kirovochepetsk they received my first postcard and got to know that I was in the brigade of Katukov. It was possible for them to keep their eye on my moving in Europe according to information from newspapers. Since that time we kept in touch with my parents by correspondence. I still keep some letters from them.

In the beginning of December the Western front under the command of Zhukov [13](#) (including our brigade) began counterattack. We liberated Istra and moved towards Volokolamsk. On December 19, 1941 our brigade entered Volokolamsk by force, having made good execution to Germans. After the recapture of Volokolamsk we spent a quiet night in the basement of the local school. There we found a gramophone record with Klavdiya Shulzhenko's song Zapiska (Note). We listened to it times without number.

In the central square of the city we found 8 local Komsomol members hanged by fascists. Two years later during the Kursk campaign there happened the following episode: actors arrived, and among them there was Klavdiya Shulzhenko [a popular Soviet singer]. It was a great concert for the whole tank army. During the concert I sent to Klavdiya Shulzhenko a note with the request to sing a song Note. I also described in short that unforgettable night when we listened to her song in Volokolamsk. Unfortunately my note did not reach Shulzhenko or possibly she had different plans. So till now I consider her to be a debtor to me! After the end of the war being present at concerts of wartime songs, I always asked to sing a song Note. At one concert they asked me about the reason and I told them about that night episode with the gramophone record in Volokolamsk.

The territory we liberated (Istra, the Novoierusalimsky monastery - places near Moscow) looked very sad: a great number of dead German soldiers, broken German cars, ashes, big fires, smell of putrefaction, people wandering around, exhausted women meeting us in liberated settlements and cities. Our brigade was the first to rush into Volokolamsk. We saw terrible scenes of our infantrymen tearing off fingers of dead German soldiers together with their rings. It was very unpleasant, but it took place really. Near Volokolamsk I saw dead German soldiers bolted up in blocks as logs: terrible sight.

We left Volokolamsk and during 2 months tried to break further, to overcome the Volokolamsk firing line. But there were several hills we could not force. Infantrymen attacked in the very old manner and we had a task only to support them (we had no self-dependent tasks). Therefore both infantrymen and our brigade suffered heavy losses during those frontal attacks. Till now I remember Gudina hill covered with dead infantrymen (not only ours, but also marines from Siberia).

After the end of the war veterans-marines recollected at the meetings that they were about 500, and only a few dozens survived. You see, in the beginning of the war we lost enormous number of soldiers because of lack of skill: we did not know how to fight.

After all, in March 1942 we managed to step forward. I also remember that in March there happened another joyful event: trucks equipped with shower-baths appeared in our brigade and we managed at last to take a bath, because we were full of lice (it was terrible!). During the first 6 months of war all of us had lice. We tried to make fun of it, but that was no help. That shower was a real help. It was served by special sanitary detachment, which moved from one military unit to another.

Since that time we moved to the West, dislodging enemies. Our full-scale offensive was slowed down after defeat of Germans near Moscow. Many Germans were taken prisoners. At last in April our brigade was taken out from the front line for re-forming to Zheltikovo village near Kalinin (now Tver). There we had a rest, received new tanks and fresh forces, prepared for new actions. We



spent there about a month and a half. Germans reached us by air raids there, too.

In the summer of 1942 we were moved to the Bryansk front. At that time German armies assumed the offensive: broke our line through near Rostov and moved towards Stalingrad. In order to draw Germans from Stalingrad, our brigade (together with others) was sent to strengthen the Bryansk front. There we immediately went into action near Voronezh. Fights were very tough. On our way there near Livny about 100 German bombers attacked and bombed us, they even dived down on our positions. It was terrible, but I had got a flasket with diluted alcohol with me for distressing.

Ivan Shelushkin, the first hero of the Soviet Union perished during those actions (he destroyed 8 German tanks near Orel). At that time I was appointed a Komsomol assistant to the chief political department. It meant for me the following military rank: a captain. I was a captain up to the end of the war, except the last months when I was appointed an instructor of the political department.

Step by step I got used to tanks: I mastered driving tanks, firing a gun and tank machine gun. Step by step I became an anti-aircraft tankman.

I remember the following episode. In 1942 near Voronezh I walked from one place to another and a Messerschmitt aircraft noticed me and chose to be his target for some reason. It went down periodically and fired at me from its machine gun. I tried to dash right and left to avoid its fire. It repeated attempts several times, but fortunately I managed to reach a ravine safe. I remember that very well, because it was June 30 - my birthday. As a matter of fact that day I felt a new man.

At the end of 1942 we got to Kalininsky front. We participated in actions near Rzhev. We had a task to break through towards Leningrad front and participate in break of blockade of Leningrad. But unfortunately we did not manage, because tanks sank in the very deep snow of that region. We had to dig into the snow to sleep. Sometimes we slept in trucks, where it was warmer. Sometimes we spent nights in dugouts equipped with stoves. We did not manage to meet soldiers of the Leningrad front. We were very close (near the Ilmen Lake), but had to turn back.

At that time headquarters formed large tank units, and basing upon our brigade they created the 8th mechanized corps under the command of Katukov, our brigade commander. Later it was transformed into the 1st Guards Tank Army. The army was moved to Kursk region (near Belgorod). It happened in summer of 1943. First of all near Kursk we mastered new technical equipment (new advanced tanks with longer guns). We lived in villages nearby.

At that time reporters from Moscow arrived to our brigade. Among them there were 2 photographers and a well-known sportscaster and reporter Vadim Sinyavsky. During the war he often came to front lines (for instance he was in Sevastopol during its defense, where he was wounded). I was ordered to assist Vadim Sinyavsky in searching for participants of actions near Moscow and recording stories of tankmen about their fights. He recorded the story of Katukov about actions near Orel. Sinyavsky brought special equipment for recording; he had got everything necessary for that work. He wanted to record stories of tankmen accompanied by singing of famous Kursk nightingales. I found a small shady grove, where I supposed nightingales would sing at night and at dawn. So we went there early in the morning and managed to hear and record energetic singing of nightingales.

I was asked to read the soldier's oath. Our tankmen lined up repeated the words and Sinyavsky recorded it. Later I asked him to record my message to my parents, but unfortunately they did not receive it for unknown reason. And another message I sent to Moscow to my schoolmate Olga Pashuk (she is still alive). She received the record, but later lost it. Many years later I got a letter from my brother-soldier Guryev, where he informed me that he knew about 75 extant sound recordings with my voice reading the Guards oath. Those records were stored in a Moscow archive. The archive workers got in touch with me and I told them about that episode of my biography in details.

In the beginning of July 1943 Germans passed to the offensive near Belgorod. The peak of approach of Germans was on July 3 and 4, 1943. At that time Orel was in hands of Germans, and we were to the north of it. Germans were going to smash our armies near Kursk and make another attempt to occupy Moscow. For that purpose Germans moved several armies from the Western front to Kursk region. Our tanks occupied positions in tank ambushes according to our favorite tactics. Of course soldiers were different (during 2 years of actions the brigade suffered heavy losses), but our people were perfect, they were chosen. It was me who told new soldiers about our actions, traditions, about heroes of our Brigade. I also told them about weak spots of new German tanks Tigers and Ferdinands. You see, I was a Komsomol leader!

On July 5 or 6 we went into action. I was at the observation post of the brigade commander Gorelov, a Hero of the Soviet Union. Together with him and his tank crew I fought near Kursk. After the battle of Kursk [14](#) he put me forward for a decoration. Unfortunately, he was killed because of an accidental discharge: a drunken ratfink from infantry fired a shot. Our observation post served as a communication center. Our tanks were 300-400 meters away from it. The post was camouflaged with rye ears.

The soldiers, who already participated in the Battle of Stalingrad, said that the Battle of Kursk was much more stern. We fought day and night. At night German bombers dropped parachute flares highlighting battlefield: battle did not stop. It lasted 3 days and 3 nights. Then we fell back several kilometers and occupied new positions. 2 weeks we fought losing our tanks and destroying German ones. When our tanks became few in number, the brigade was moved away for reforming.

Later there happened the famous tank battle of Prokhorovka where 800 German and Soviet tanks met in an end-on collision. We did not participate in it, because we were down to our last tanks. By the way, several years ago Prokhorovka collective-farm field was bought by Elena Baturina, the wife of the Mayor of Moscow Yuri Luzhkov. Probably she decided to exploit iron ore or to be engaged in agribusiness. I got to know about it from newspapers.

Our brigade was often visited by well-known journalists, photographers, and actors. For example, we met Yury Zhukov [a Soviet journalist from the Pravda newspaper] and Levitan [a famous radio announcer and the only newsreader in 1941-1945].

After the crushing defeat of Germans near Kursk we went forward and participated in liberating of several cities and villages of the Kharkov, Belgorod, and Sumy regions. We crossed the border of Ukraine in July 1943 during the full-scale offensive. I moved together with Gorelov's observation post on our tanks. One day in the morning we rushed into Lutovka village. German garrison soldiers ran every which way and left a German airplane.

We moved to the West, crossed the Dnieper River. By that time the Dnieper had been already recaptured. In November Kiev was liberated, but without us: we were moved to Vinnitsa and Zhitomir regions. There fights were not so stern, but nevertheless Germans stood up. By the end of 1943 we passed by Korosten, a town where my father was born.

In Kazatin we found a German warehouse full of chocolate. I liked chocolate very much, and there I saw lots and lots of chocolate bars. So I filled my suitcase with it and put it in the tank. Till now my relatives played a joke on me saying that my diabetes came from Kazatin.

Later we moved towards Ternopol and then to the South (to the Dniester River). In spring of 1944 we participated in forced crossing of the Dniester. Our tanks waded the river. Then we liberated Chertkov town, and our Brigade was named after it.

Some days we spent in Chertkov, fighting not only with Germans, but also with Hungarians. We forced them back to foothills of Carpathian Mountains. We participated in liberation of many cities: Nadvirno, Ivano-Frankovsk, the most beautiful small town Kolomya on the Dniester River. It was in April 1944. Approximately in May we crossed the border of the Soviet Union.

Later we took part in liberation of Lvov. Then we moved towards Poland and recaptured Sandomirsky jumping-off place. In the beginning of 1945 Soviet armies started its full-scale offensive in Poland. We had a task to occupy vodka distilleries and warehouses so that infantrymen could not get drunk. Infantrymen were inclined to get drunk.

We found Poland to be not as ruinous as Istra. Later we moved towards Warsaw (from the South). There we crossed the Vistula River.

One day I was walking together with a group of transport trucks, motor-infantry and artillery. Suddenly several armored troop-carriers rushed out from the forest and fired at our column. Immediately we turned our guns and fired back. Germans jumped off the troop-carriers, we caught them and took prisoners. It turned out that there I was the superior officer (a captain) and they brought prisoners to me. One of them was from SS troops. I got to know about it from his documents. I took his documents, medals and photos. He took those photos in Krasnogvardeysk (now Gatchina near St. Petersburg).

Later we approached the Oder River near Frankfurt-on-Oder. We crossed the border of Germany, moved to Berlin, and then came to the Baltic Sea near Rostok. Later we joined the Rokossovsky front near Gdynia (Gdansk, or Danzig). After that we turned back to Oder and approached Berlin.

Boyko and Boyarsky were my commanders. Our Brigade operated in reserve of the army. The most serious fights fell to the share of the 1st Guards Tank Brigade under the command of Abram Temnik, the Hero of the Soviet Union, a Jew by nationality. On our way to Berlin there were a lot of field fortification, but by the end of April we managed to cross the Spree River and appeared in the streets of the city. Every brigade got its own direction towards the center of Berlin.

Infantrymen moved first and cleared neighboring buildings. After that tanks moved forward. On the 2nd of May actions in Berlin were finished, Germans capitulated. We ran to Reichstag: took photographs and left inscriptions on its walls. We watched the destroyed Berlin. I was encharged with a task to read the text of victorious communiqué: I read it standing on the truck. Later we

moved to Dresden region and formed a part of occupational armies.

During the capture of Berlin Abram Temnik was killed by a shell splinter. We walked much around Berlin, one night I spent in the American Commandant's office. It happened because I wasted time visiting markets where Americans sold their watches. Americans differed much from our soldiers in appearance: they all were tall and well-nourished.

### • **After the War and later life**

I started peaceful life, though in the army. We studied military equipment and communicated with Germans. Staff of the Katukov's army was situated in Dresden. I served in Germany till November 1945. And then there came an order to send soldiers for studies at the Leningrad Military Pedagogical College named after Kalinin.

Here an episode came to my mind. After liberation of Chertkov we also received a similar order and the chief of our political department offered to send me, because I wanted to study and was at war from the very beginning. I went to the front staff to collect documents, but the political department asked me to wait for their decision. 20 minutes later they informed me that they did not permit me to leave for studies and ordered to get back to my military unit. I did not ask about the reason, because I had nothing against military career. Later I got to know that there was an order not to permit Jews - political workers to leave front lines. I guess it was a manifestation of anti-Semitism.

So I got a permission to study in Leningrad only in November 1945. It was possible to choose a faculty. When I arrived in Leningrad, they took into consideration my pre-war study at the Moscow College of Philosophy, History and Literature named after Chernyshevsky. Therefore I became a student of the 2nd course (economic faculty) without entrance exams. That college prepared teachers of social sciences, philosophy, political economy, etc for military academies. By the way, at the end of the 1950s that college was liquidated. Major-general Afanassyev was the college chief. He was present at my interview and liked my answers. It was him who made the decision to invite me to the 2nd course, but at that moment the personnel manager asked me about my subjected to repression uncle. I flew into a passion, and Afanassyev said 'Stop bothering the front-line soldier!' So I became a student and graduated with honors in 1949. At the College I was promoted to the rank of major. In 1947 (being a student) I got married.

My friend Vigdorchik Boris (he also arrived from Germany) acquainted me with my future wife. He married a beautiful girl Mipha and introduced me to her friend. It happened at the dancing session (at the Marble Hall of the Palace of Culture named after Kirov). I started courting her. Her name was Rebecca Mironovna Slavina. She was born in 1925. She studied at the Pediatric College. Later I was introduced to her parents and they agreed to our marrying. By that time my parents returned from evacuation and agreed, too. I visited them in Moscow several times before marriage.

Having arrived from Germany, I visited my parents first of all. Before my departure from Germany I visited them in June of 1945: I got a leave for the victory in shooting (TT pistol) competition. Parents lived in the same room, wherefrom I was called up for military service (near the hotel UKRAINE).

My son Semen was born in 1950. He entered the College of Mines (evening faculty of thermophysics). At the same time he worked as a selector of stones. He studied perfectly and was transferred to the day time faculty. He graduated and passed through the kandidat nauk [15](#) exams (under my pressure). But he refused to enter the postgraduate course: he learned his lesson during the entrance examinations, when they did not permit him to become a day time student. I guess it happened because of his nationality.

In 1949 I graduated from the College and was assigned to Pushkin (to Radio-locating School), where I taught political economy for five years. Then I was transferred to the Leningrad advanced training courses for political workers of tank armies. There I taught political economy and other subjects for about ten years. Then the courses were liquidated. I decided to defend my kandidat nauk dissertation. I did it at my former Military Pedagogical College in 1956. My topic was Forms of Wages in the Industry of the USSR. When I tried to become a postgraduate student (in 1949), I was explained that people of my nationality could not become postgraduate students.

My former co-worker became a faculty head at the Military Academy named after Mozhaysky. He invited me to teach political economy at his Academy. For that purpose it was necessary to be demobilized urgently. I managed. At that time I was 35 years old. They gave me a small retiring pension (my time-in-service was 23 years, including years of war counted 1 for 3). So I came to the Academy as a civilian person. And later (as you know) I defended my kandidat nauk dissertation in 1956.

At the Academy I worked 17 years, everybody was nice to me. There I became an assistant professor, then full professor (I got a doctor's degree). Lieutenant-general Vassilyev, the Academy chief did not hate Jews. He used to send me on business trips to different secret establishments, entrusted me with secret research topics. I wrote books and articles. When I brought my doctor's certificate to Vassilyev, he suggested me to move to a new apartment (from our communal one [16](#)). That was the 1st separate apartment in our life (it happened in 1980). Later (when my children grew up and got their own families) I aimed at buying a large cooperative apartment.

I managed and we moved to that new apartment together with my wife and the family of my daughter.

In 1975 I started working at the Financial and Economic College. I worked both at the Academy and at the College. It was hard and could not last long. I decided to leave the Academy. So by now I have been working at the Financial and Economic College more than 30 years. I am a professor of the faculty of Personnel Management. My daughter works at the faculty of Sociology and Personnel Management. My granddaughter refused to become a college teacher and works at a bank.

I am a member of the Jewish Organization of War Veterans, headed by Zhuravin. There are about 3,000 members. Several times I was elected their council member. Several years ago I was entrusted to head the scientific conference devoted to the 60th anniversary of the Victory in WWII. We invited foreign guests from Jewish organizations from Ukraine, Georgia, Belarus, and France. At that conference I was a key speaker and gave a report on the role of Jews in the Great Patriotic War. My report was a great success, theses were published in Israel. Zhuravin has got the text of my report.

Unfortunately my sight is failing gradually, therefore I visit that Jewish organization rarely. But I consider its activities to be very useful. To tell the truth, religious events are alien to me, because I was brought up in the atheistic environment.

At the end of 1980s my life changed, because I became older and my health became worse. Perestroika did not affect my life.

My daughter married a Jew, and my son's wife is Russian. His wife did not change her Russian surname and my granddaughter's nationality is registered Russian. My granddaughter is a gynecologist; she works in a maternity hospital.

I guess if I were not Jewish, my position would have been much higher: I could become a faculty head. My Jewish origin disfigured my career. My father died in 1961, and Mom died 20 years ago. Father is buried in Moscow on the Jewish cemetery. And mother is buried on the Jewish cemetery here in St. Petersburg.

In 2004 according to the decree of the President I was awarded the honorary title of the Honored Worker of the Higher School of Russian Federation. I was also awarded an Israeli medal (as a WWII participant). But I've never been to Israel.

- **Glossary:**

**1** Civil War (1918-1920): The Civil War between the Reds (the Bolsheviks) and the Whites (the anti-Bolsheviks), which broke out in early 1918, ravaged Russia until 1920. The Whites represented all shades of anti-communist groups – Russian army units from World War I, led by anti-Bolshevik officers, by anti-Bolshevik volunteers and some Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries. Several of their leaders favored setting up a military dictatorship, but few were outspoken tsarists. Atrocities were committed throughout the Civil War by both sides. The Civil War ended with Bolshevik military victory, thanks to the lack of cooperation among the various White commanders and to the reorganization of the Red forces after Trotsky became commissar for war. It was won, however, only at the price of immense sacrifice; by 1920 Russia was ruined and devastated. In 1920 industrial production was reduced to 14% and agriculture to 50% as compared to 1913.

**2** Petliura, Simon (1879-1926): Ukrainian politician, member of the Ukrainian Social Democratic Working Party, one of the leaders of Centralnaya Rada (Central Council), the national government of Ukraine (1917-1918). Military units under his command killed Jews during the Civil War in Ukraine. In the Soviet-Polish war he was on the side of Poland; in 1920 he emigrated. He was killed in Paris by the Jewish nationalist Schwarzbard in revenge for the pogroms against Jews in Ukraine.

**3** Pogroms in Ukraine: In the 1920s there were many anti-Semitic gangs in Ukraine. They killed Jews and burnt their houses, they robbed their houses, raped women and killed children.

**4** Stalingrad Battle: 17th July 1942 – 2nd February 1943. The South-Western and Don Fronts stopped the advance of German armies in the vicinity of Stalingrad. On 19th and 20th November 1942 the Soviet troops undertook an offensive and encircled 22 German divisions (330,000 people) and eliminated them. On 31st January 1943 the remains of the 6th German army headed by General Field Marshal Paulus surrendered (91,000 people). The victory in the Stalingrad battle was



of huge political, strategic and international significance.

**5** Mikhoels, Solomon (1890-1948) (born Vovsi): Great Soviet actor, producer and pedagogue. He worked in the Moscow State Jewish Theater (and was its art director from 1929). He directed philosophical, vivid and monumental works. Mikhoels was murdered by order of the State Security Ministry

**6** Torgsin stores: Special retail stores, which were established in larger Russian cities in the 1920s with the purpose of selling goods to foreigners. Torgsins sold commodities that were in short supply for hard currency or exchanged them for gold and jewelry, accepting old coins as well. The real aim of this economic experiment that lasted for two years was to swindle out all gold and valuables from the population for the industrial development of the country.

**7** Pushkin, Alexandr (1799-1837): Russian poet and prose writer, among the foremost figures in Russian literature. Pushkin established the modern poetic language of Russia, using Russian history for the basis of many of his works. His masterpiece is Eugene Onegin, a novel in verse about mutually rejected love. The work also contains witty and perceptive descriptions of Russian society of the period. Pushkin died in a duel.

**8** 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.

**9** Chkalov, Valery (1904-1938): Russian test pilot, and hero of the Soviet Union. He developed several advanced aerobatic moves. In 1936-37 he conducted continuous, no-land flights between Moscow and Udd island (the Far East) and Moscow - North Pole - Vancouver (US). His plane crashed during a test flight.

**10** Molotov, V. P. (1890-1986): Statesman and member of the Communist Party leadership. From 1939, Minister of Foreign Affairs. On June 22, 1941 he announced the German attack on the USSR on the radio. He and Eden also worked out the percentages agreement after the war, about Soviet and western spheres of influence in the new Europe.

**11** 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.

**12** 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.

**13** Zhukov, Georgy (1896-1974): Soviet Commander, Marshal of the Soviet Union, Hero of the Soviet Union. Georgy Zhukov was the most important Soviet military commander during World War II.

**14** Kursk battle: The greatest tank battle in the history of World War II, which began on 5th July 1943 and ended eight days later. The biggest tank fight, involving almost 1,200 tanks and mobile cannon units on both sides, took place in Prokhorovka on 12th July and ended with the defeat of the German tank unit.

**15** Soviet/Russian doctorate degrees: Graduate school in the Soviet Union (aspirantura, or ordinatura for medical students), which usually took about 3 years and resulted in a dissertation. Students who passed were awarded a 'kandidat nauk' (lit. candidate of sciences) degree. If a person wanted to proceed with his or her research, the next step would be to apply for a doctorate degree (doktorantura). To be awarded a doctorate degree, the person had to be involved in the academia, publish consistently, and write an original dissertation. In the end he/she would be awarded a 'doctor nauk' (lit. doctor of sciences) degree.

**16** 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.