

# Mikhail Katsenelson

St. Petersburg

Russia

Interviewer: Olga Egudina

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*I met Mikhail Efimovich Katsenelson in his spacious, comfortable and beautiful apartment in the city center.*

*Mikhail Efimovich Katsenelson is a handsome tall man. His age did not bend his back and did not suppress his voice.*

*Events of his life could have adorned several biographies:*

*during the war he was a pilot of battle experience;  
then an instructor of pilots and cosmonauts;  
later a writer (an author of more than 10 books).*

*Mikhail Efimovich lives an active life, he still works on his books. It is a pleasure to talk to him: he is not only a talented narrator, but he is also possessed of rare quality: he is an attentive listener.*

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## My family background

I can tell you nothing not only about my great-grandmothers and great-grandfathers, but even about my grandmothers and grandfathers. Evidently my grandmothers and grandfathers had died before I was born. I do not remember any stories or memoirs of my parents about their childhood or about their ancestors. Unfortunately I also remember not so much about my parents, but I'll tell you about it later.

I was born in 1921 in Rostov-on-Don. I do not remember the city, but I know that it is an ancient one (founded in the middle of the XVIII century). By the beginning of the XX century it was a large industrial center, an important river port and a university center.

My father worked as a drugstore manager (the drugstore was situated in one of the main streets of Rostov-on-Don). My mother worked at the same drugstore as a pharmacist though she had no special education. I do not know why, but my father was considered to be a very good expert in his sphere. Therefore when the authorities decided to reinforce rural drugstores with skilled personnel,



my father was sent there for work.

He was sent to a great sovkhos [1](#), which was called accordingly Gigant (Giant). He had to work there as a drugstore manager, too. It happened approximately in 1925. We lived there not long. I can't recall our rural life very well. We lived in a house which seemed to me to be very huge. We kept rabbits. Now I think that we also had a vegetable garden. I also have a hazy recollection of the fire which happened in the village where we lived. Soon my father was appointed a drugstore manager in Millerovo.

Millerovo was a regional center, not far from it there was Veshenskaya Cossack village, well-known because of Mikhail Sholokhov who lived there. [Mikhail Sholokhov (1905-1984) was a Russian Soviet writer, a Nobel Prize winner, an author of different novels: Tikhyy Don, Podnyataya Tselina, etc.] Millerovo was a center of Don Cossacks [2](#). At that time Cossacks stood high esteem of the authorities: they were supported in every aspect of their life, including cultural. Very often Cossack choruses visited Moscow. In Moscow they arranged their concerts on the best stages (even at the Bolshoi Theatre [3](#)).

At that time I was a very active pioneer [a member of the pioneer organization [4](#)] and attended drama studio.

By the way I played the leading role in some poetical play; unfortunately I do not remember its name. So I was among representatives of progressive youth who were entrusted with preparation of Cossacks for their trip to Moscow. But in fact we simply distributed badges among them. Their concert tour to Moscow was a success, and they celebrated it by a great booze-up in the local Dvoretz kultury in Millerovo after their return. [Dvoretz kultury in the USSR was a large club establishment, where people arranged different exhibitions, dancing parties, etc.] The booze-up turned to be so shameful that authorities decided to disperse the chorus. But Sholokhov, who was in favor at that time, took their side. So the chorus remained safe. In connection with Sholokhov I remember a funny episode: together with other boys we were playing volleyball in the yard, when a car dropped in and Sholokhov appeared with huge suitcases. We rushed to help him, because the suitcases looked very heavy.

Sholokhov told us that he had just arrived from Paris and brought 2 suitcases full of... nails. You see, at that time nails (as well as many other goods) were in short supply in our country. When I was a pupil of the 9th form (it was in 1936), my father was sent to Bronnitsy near Moscow. There he worked as a drugstore manager (as usual). We lived there (as well as in Millerovo) at a service apartment. Mum kept the house alone: we had no assistants. We had not many books: possibly due to our frequent moves from one place to another. I liked to read, but had not enough time for it, because in addition to school studies I was engaged in music: I learned to play violin. I did it with pleasure, and gave it up with pleasure, too. But my delicate ear for music turned to be very useful to me in the army. You know, the war was a great tragedy for all people, it was an arduous trial, and people seemed to think about nothing except the war. But it lasted 4 long years, and for the most part its participants were young people. Therefore it was desirable to while sorrow sometimes: they arranged contests of amateur art activities. [Amateur art activities included dancing, singing, etc. in collectives or individually] I participated in one of such contests. Together with other participants we were brought to Moscow by planes. I was the leading singer. We sang the popular song Ty Odessit, Mishka! (You Are From Odessa, Mike!).

There in Bronnitsy I finished my school. My school was very good. I was always very interested in studying. Our teachers were very good, too. I had got good friends: we were friends all life long. At present nobody of them is alive. I was always interested in exact science, though the humanities were always deep in my soul. I guess that's why late in my life I became a fiction writer.

I already mentioned my parents several times, and now I'll tell you about them in more detail. I wish to do it right now because I am going to pass to the next part of my narration when my parents were not with me. I feel sad to note that I remember not much about them. You see, all my prewar life has faded from my mind. I guess astonishing events I had to participate in later were at the bottom of it.

My parents' names were Sara Pavlovna (nee Manevich) and Efim Natanovich Katsenelson (Belarusian by birth). I do not remember where exactly they were born. They were born in 1890s. All their life long my parents worked at different drugstores. One might say that I was born in a drugstore: my parents occupied a service apartment near to the drugstore. I know neither how they met nor how they got married. I already mentioned that I do not know my father's education level. I think he graduated from a University or a Medical College, because he was considered to be a pharmacist of the highest qualification. My father was a gentle and easy-tempered person. But my Mum was hot-blooded. I already mentioned that she got no special education (she only finished a school), but living together with my father she acquired knowledge and skill and always worked as a pharmacist in the drugstores my father was the head of. Our parents were not authoritarian, but rather respectful to me and my brother. Our family observed no traditions; the family was absolutely not religious. To tell the truth, our family was absolutely not Jewish.

I do not remember my parents talking about politics. I guess that they were the so called real Soviet people. I remember almost nothing about brothers and sisters of my parents: I only remember that my father's brother and sister lived in the center of Moscow. I visited them when I studied in Moscow. I used to come to them on holidays to watch military parades on the Red Square. I have a faint idea of my Mum's brother: he was a well-known intelligence officer Manevich. [Manevich Lev Efimovich (1898-1945), an intelligence officer, a Hero of the Soviet Union (1965, posthumously). Most probably the interviewee is mistaken, because patronymics of Manevich and the interviewee's mother do not coincide.] During the war my father was again sent to a new place of work: to Dedovsk near Moscow. Parents lived there for some time and died in the beginning of 1950s.

In our boyhood days we were good friends with my brother Naum. He held me in respect as his elder brother. He became a professional soldier, too. He served in Ukraine, but he was no conjurer and rose only to the rank of captain. When we grew up we became completely alienated and I blame his wife for it. Naum died in 1980s. He had got a daughter and a grandson, but they turned their back on me.

In 1938 I entered the Moscow Power Economy College named after Molotov [5](#). By the way, Polina Zhemchuzhina, his wife was the director of the College. I left the parents' house because it was too far to go to Moscow for everyday studies. So I settled in a hostel. [Hostel is a specially constructed apartment house for residing of students, workers or other citizens during their work or study.] When a first year student, I got seriously ill with chronic malaria. Therefore I had to repeat my first year course.

## During the war

In 1939 I started my studies again as a first-year student, when a sudden government decree ordered to take all first-year students away in the army. People were told that students were taken for a year term. All of us moved to Ukraine by freight cars. We came to Zhitomir and started studying military science. I got to the school for gunners and radio operators. They taught us how to handle a machine gun and a radio set. In spite of the fact that radio studies were much more difficult, it was rather easy for me. You see, people with tuneful ear were able to learn Morse code easily, and I was one of them. I studied very well; therefore I finished the School before the appointed time. Together with several soldiers we were sent to a military unit.

There I was given the rank of first sergeant and started my service at the aircraft garrison near Zhitomir. Taking into account my successful studies at School, they appointed me the lead aircraft radio operator. But suddenly a great trouble came upon me: I suffered from air sickness! So I was sent to health examination. There I was examined thoroughly and the results were not encouraging: I was certified as unfit for flights. I became a radio operator at the airdrome. As our military unit was in the process of regimentation, we lacked airplanes and specialists. Therefore sometimes it was necessary to replace my comrades. Sometimes I served as a rigger. During that period of time I took advantage of the situation and made my first parachute jump. It happened to be not very successful, and received a scolding.

Early in the morning of June 22, 1941 we were alarmed [6](#). While running out of barracks I asked my comrade Lenya Minz 'Lenya, what happened?' And he answered 'Mikhail, war burst out.' A little bit later we were standing near a loud-speaker and listening to Molotov's speech. He finished his speech with the following words: 'Our enemy will be defeated. We will celebrate victory.' During the first hours of war we came across manifestations of panic. People informed us that German troops had landed in the forest near our airdrome. We immediately sent soldiers to search in the forest, but they found nobody. On the second day of the war our regiment first saw fire: we assisted our armies defending Ukraine. We began digging entrenchments and preparing our planes for fighting missions.

Right after the beginning of war I was chosen the Komsomol leader of the regiment [7](#). It is necessary to say that in every military unit there were political officers [8](#). Besides there was a secretary of the local Communist Party Organization and a Komsomol leader. So having no war experience, I became one of those leaders. According to the regiment hierarchy I became the sixth person in it, while my rank was only a first sergeant.

Before the war we fulfilled flights only in the daytime. But during the war we had to do it at nights. Once it was necessary for me to check some radio equipment in the air. It couldn't be helped, and I started. And (what a miracle!) it appeared that at night I could fly without any unpleasant feelings. Since that time I started flying. You remember that I was a gunner. A lot of gunners were killed by that time, therefore I was ashamed for not participating in fighting missions. Besides I kept in mind that I was a Jew. I did not want somebody to say 'Of course, a Jew will never risk his life.' To tell the truth, I have to tell you that nobody reminded me about my nationality, but for some reason I felt greater responsibility. I always realized that war time demanded people of different specialties: some of them probably never held weapon, they had to support the huge mechanism of war. I am far from considering their contribution to victory to be insignificant, but for me it was important to

fight in the right way holding weapon in hands.

At the end of October 1941 our regiment shifted its base to Lipetsk near Moscow. It was hard time. Germans were spoiling for a fight. It was terrible to think about it, but sometimes it seemed that they would manage to capture Moscow. German army moved along the road from Orel to Tula and we had to attack them from air. We succeeded in it: that road became a burial place of thousands of fascist soldiers, who tried to get to Moscow from the south. At the same time a lot of our military units had to fall back.

In December 1941 there came a long-awaited turning point at the front. Enemies were stopped and their running fight started from Moscow. Contribution of our regiment in it was great. Our activities could be compared with emergency department work. Day and night we appeared where it was the most necessary for us to be at that moment. We waited for the order to start being already on boards our planes combat-ready.

I'll never forget my first fighting mission. I was a member of Stepan Kharchenko's crew. The flight was low-level. On the earth we saw a column of motor vehicles and a column of soldiers on the move. The commander ordered 'Fire!' The plane shook when I started firing. We saw our bullets tearing German lorries into pieces. My heart beat with joy: from that day on I was able not only to fly, but also to fight! Since that day they started calling me the Fighting Komsomol Leader of the Regiment. I was proud of it. I am somewhat previous telling you that during the war time I participated in 37 fighting starts. To tell the truth, it was not very easy: I used to be above the target, Germans fired at me from the earth, I used to lie face downwards behind a machine gun and fired back. Our machine guns were worse than that of Germans. Later our plane was equipped with a gun, but it was not me who operated it (it was a radio operator who did it). As for me, I had to hit planes (so to say, to wound them), and he used to bring them down using the new gun.

Right at the beginning of the war state of Soviet army affairs was extremely distressing. Our regiment attacked objectives in rear of Germans. We participated in the raid to Königsberg [now Kaliningrad]. We also bombed Lithuania and Belarus occupied by Germans. We dreamed of bombing Berlin, but it was impossible: our airplane could take maximal amount of fuel, but it was not enough for such a flight. We urgently constructed additional tanks 350 litres each. Pilots had to be at the controls for more than 10 hours. The most part of the flight path was above the sea. I participated in one of such flights. Our bombardment of Berlin came for Germans as a surprise. It was a success, but we were very nervous, because we were very far from home! After Berlin we bombed Budapest (Hungary was an ally of Germany).

In February 1942 we received new planes from Khabarovsk. It came in very handy: in our regiment there remained only 10 planes. Those planes were constructed with financial support of Komsomol members at the Far East.

In March 1942 there appeared a new air-unit: long-range aircraft. Our regiment became its part. Our air-unit had an opportunity to implement fast moves from one front to another.

Here I'd like to say that in spite of the fact that I participated in military actions, I went on working as a regiment Komsomol leader. I don't like high-sounding words, but I really inspired soldiers, convinced them, and explained the situation. People trusted me and asked my advice. I guess that if I did not fly (and the majority of Komsomol leaders did not fly) I would not be able to act that

way. It was impossible to meet soldiers' eyes if you knew that in some minutes they would risk their lives and you were a featherbed soldier!

Before each fighting start we used to hold a meeting not to explain the mission, but to inspire fighters. At every meeting we approved a letter to Stalin with our oaths to do soldier's duty. Usually it was me who wrote and read out those letters.

Since September 1942 our regiment participated in Stalingrad Battle [9](#). We fulfilled military missions day and night, rain or shine. Often we made low-level flights. We bombed the city streets. Frequently our armies were on the one side of the street, and our enemies were on the other one. I took part in fighting starts till February 1943, until German army was encircled and smashed. Our regiment fulfilled thousands of fighting starts. Fights were uneasy: we had to oppose German planes of the latest design. Those modern pursuit planes used to hunt for our planes during landing, when we became apparent to the naked eye in the light of landing searchlights. A lot of times I had to defend our plane by shooting in such situation.

After Stalingrad our regiment shifted its base toward the West. Germans were going to gain revenge for the defeat in Stalingrad. They wanted to do it near Kursk in summer of 1943 [10](#). They were going to encircle and smash a plenty of our armies. So our targets were Kursk, Belgorod, and Orel. Till now I remember the battle scenes I watched from the cabin of our plane: star shells slowly going down on parachutes, lighting up the earth; hundreds of soldiers moving here and there; and explosions surrounding our plane (Germans fired at us).

In summer of 1943 we were moved to an airdrome near Kalinin [now Tver]. We had to take part in defense of Leningrad which was besieged almost from the very beginning of the war [11](#). We had to bomb enemy positions in Leningrad region. There we used a thousand-kilogram bomb for the first time. Once we were attacked by an enemy pursuit plane, our radio operator was wounded, shell fragments damaged the fuselage of our plane. Nevertheless we were lucky: the plane did not catch fire and we managed to land safely.

During the battle of Leningrad air force of Germans was very active, especially at nights. During one of the fighting starts I felt it on my own back. For me it was very difficult to distinguish the lights of a pursuit plane from headlights of lorries moving along the road. In that case I had to remember that lights of the plane could be turned on only for a short time. If I noticed it, I fired a shot. It was difficult to aim at night time. My machine gun was situated in the tail-end of the plane, therefore my field of view was not large. However I managed to hit the light of the German plane. After that our second gunner smashed it using the gun (the gun was always very helpful!).

During the intervals I used to watch the blacked out Leningrad. There dominated the dark block of St. Isaac's Cathedral. [St. Isaac's Cathedral in St. Petersburg was built in the beginning of the XIX century by the architect August Montferrand.] I'll never forget barrage balloons which protected the city from bombs (air-raid precautions). Many times I was fighting in the air over large cities and capitals of different countries, but I never saw that kind of protection system.

Fights over Leningrad lasted the whole month. During that period of time we fulfilled more than 500 fighting starts.



At the end of 1943 we were ordered to bomb military objectives near Helsinki, because Finland was an ally of fascist Germany.

In the beginning of 1944 we got new targets in the Gulf of Finland. After that all summer long we fought liberating Sevastopol, Crimea, Western Ukraine, Moldova, Romania and Hungary.

In winter and spring of 1945 our regiment took part in the liberation of Poland.

At that time we bombed Königsberg for the 2nd time during the war [12](#). The task was more complicated for us, because German emplacements had been fortified with a great number of anti-aircraft guns which fired at our planes. We suffered heavy losses, but in the beginning of April Königsberg was taken.

It was clear that that period of war was all-important. Our regiment shifted its base: we moved to Poland. We were 600 kilometers far from Berlin: for us it was a stone's throw. On April 10 we bombed enemy ships in the Baltic Sea ports. Our mission was not to permit German armies to land, because those armies were going to assist the Berlin garrison. On April 17 we bombed the fortified zone on the left bank of Oder River. About 100 searchlights were turned on simultaneously and highlighted the zone. German disposition became clearly visible. And on April 20 we fulfilled one of the fiercest bombing attacks at Berlin. At the end of April we again bombed German armies in the encircled Berlin. I participated in those last fighting starts. The last bomb was dropped on Berlin on April 28, 1945.

At last the long-awaited victory came. I'll never forget the scene of people cheering the news that victory had come. Our regiment was at the front line all the war long. We destroyed 243 planes on enemy airdromes and 48 ones in air fights. In our regiment 29 persons were decorated with the Gold Star medal of the Hero of the Soviet Union; and one person received the award twice.

Here I'll tell you about my awards, do not consider me a boaster. For my service in battle I was awarded 2 Orders of the Red Star, medals For the Defense of Moscow, For the Defense of Leningrad, and For the Defense of Stalingrad [13](#).

During my army service since 1939 and till the victory day I did not come across any manifestations of anti-Semitism (there were even no hints at it). Not being afraid to seem stilted, I should say that we were members of the friendly multinational family. By the way, it is necessary to note that the regiment secretary of the local Party organization was Anatoly Yukelson, and the political leader of the 2nd regiment of our division was Ilya Gherson. As you already know, I was the regiment Komsomol leader (Katsenelson!). Therefore soldiers used to say as a joke that political work in our division was based on 3 "sons". So anti-Semitism was out of the question!

## **After the war**

So the war was won, and the process of demobilization was started. I started thinking about my future life. On the one hand, I had an opportunity to return to the College where I was called up from. On the other hand, my friends told me that there was an opportunity to stay in the army, become an officer and enter a military academy. The chief of our political department persuaded me to go for studies to the Military Political Academy. He also suggested me to remain at him, to become his assistant in Komsomol work. Of course that was the way to rise very rapidly, but it was

a political way. In that case I would immediately become a major and get large salary. But I did not want to make such a career. You see, during my service I did my best to avoid advances in rank: I was afraid that it would delay my demobilization. Since my childhood I was interested in technology. Therefore I turned down the proposal of the political department leader and persuaded my chiefs to let me off for studies at the Military Academy named after Zhukovsky at the radio engineering faculty. [Air Force Academy named after Zhukovsky is the largest center of aviation science and preparation of engineering, scientific, and pedagogical staff.] As military academies admitted only officers, I was quickly advanced in rank and became lieutenant. But in spite of the fact that the regiment command gave me official permission, they were very dissatisfied with my forthcoming departure, therefore I was afraid that they could change their mind. My documents had been already sent to the Academy, it was necessary to hasten. So on the day of departure I even did not go to say goodbye to the regiment political leader (by the way, my overcoat remained in his study and I never got it back!).

It is necessary to say that during the war I got an occasion to be in Moscow on business trip. There I went to the Academy to learn about entrance rules and to form my own opinion about the situation. Wandering about, I saw through the huge glass door that a person in rank of senior lieutenant was washing the floor in the hall. I thought 'And what shall I (a first sergeant!) be obliged to do here?' And I left the Academy thinking that I would never be back.

But after the end of the war I was given a courteous reception. Few of entrants had military awards. I passed through the entrance examinations for access course at the radio engineering faculty. But on the bulletin board I saw my name in the list of not accepted with a postscript to come to the Academy direction for an interview. I polished my boots (for some reason it seemed to me very important) and went to the Academy chief. He was very kind to me and said that he considered me to be quite ready to become a first-year student. I said that I came directly from an earth-house at the airdrome. He answered 'Get back to your military unit and come next year to study at the first course'. I told him about various tricks I had to resort to, about my overcoat in the study of our political leader, etc. He said 'Don't worry about it, I'll put a call-letter for the next year in your documents.'

He did it. I knew that every document went through the Staff of Long-Range Aviation before we received it. The staff was situated next door and I went there. They listened to me attentively and suggested to take my documents and enter the Leningrad Air Force Academy named after Mozhaysky. [The Leningrad Air Force Academy named after Mozhaysky was founded on March 27, 1941.] That suited me fine. Besides my brother Naum lived in Leningrad (he was a student of the Leningrad Military Engineering School). Our last meeting took place before the war and I was looking forward to seeing him.

In the Leningrad Academy they already started studying. I passed in my documents. They asked me to wait, and a teacher of mathematics came up to me. He came to examine me. Till now I remember his question: 'What is logarithm?' I gave a correct answer and became a student of the access course (they lodged me in the hostel).

There were 63 students at our course. Almost all teachers were Jews. I was chosen to be the Komsomol leader of the course, and later - a secretary of the local Party organization. Sorry, I forgot to tell you that I became a Communist Party member in 1942 at the front line.



There we studied one year (most time was devoted to reviewing of the school program). Besides that we had a lot of work introducing order in the city: we cleared away blockages, cleaned streets (in fact by that time Leningrad still did not get rid of the blockade traces). In 1946 I became a first-year student of the radio engineering faculty of the Academy. Our teachers were remarkable persons. Almost all of them were outstanding scientists and experienced teachers. Later, when I became a teacher myself, I tried to copy teaching manners of my favorite teachers.

I really appreciate knowledge that I received in the Academy. Nevertheless I ought to tell you about shameful events which took place in it during the so-called Doctors' Plot [14](#). Babin, a local political leader was the initiator of Jew-baiting. Certainly he only implemented government decrees, but he did it with undisguised pleasure. So he started searching something to begin with. At last he found it: filling in the entrance form, one of the students Mikhail Stanovsky wrote down that he was a Ukrainian, while at a single glance at him it became clear that he was a real Jew. The main claim was why he had kept his nationality from people.

But Mikhail did not plan to keep it from anybody. He grew up at a children's home in Ukraine, where they wrote down in his documents that he was a Ukrainian.

Besides that one day Mikhail missed a local Communist Party meeting, because he left for a regularly scheduled checkers tournament (he was a USSR champion in checkers). He was blamed for changing the Communist Party for game of checkers and was administered a rebuke. But that sort of crime demanded not a simple reprimand, but a severe one. And it was me (the secretary of the local Communist Party organization) who was guilty for that. As a result they dismissed me from the secretary position and I got ticked off (they even tried to check if I had kept my real name [Moissey] from people). By the way, few of us knew that during the war Stanovsky was an attack plane pilot and fulfilled 30 fighting starts. He was the only one at the Academy who was decorated with the highest military award: Order of the Combat Red Banner [15](#). But at the meeting of the Academy communist members Stanovsky was eliminated from the CPSU. [CPSU (the Communist Party of the Soviet Union) was the only political party in the USSR from the middle of 1920s till 1991.]

He was expelled from the Academy and kicked out from the army. Then he left for Odessa, his native city [16](#). Here I'd like to tell you that many years later I met Mikhail Stanovsky in Israel, where he came to see his son. He told me that after his return to Odessa, he found job at a scientific research institute and soon sent a complaint to Moscow about his illegal expulsion from the Communist Party. Only after Stalin's death he received a notice that his complaint would be considered. Soon they sent a special plane to bring him to Moscow. There he was reinstated in his former position in the Communist Party and was suggested to return to army. But he preferred to refuse.

At the end of 1940s one of my fellow-students invited me to his friend. There I saw a large young crew and noticed a girl whom I saw home that night. Her name was Ludmila Berezovskaya. Soon she became my wife. Ludmila graduated from the Leningrad Technological College, she is an electrical engineer.

Ludmila was born in Leningrad. During the war her father was at the front line, and she together with the mother Fira Lazarevna had to stay in the besieged Leningrad. Fira Lazarevna worked at a

factory (she spent 2 hours and a half to get to her factory). Ludmila with other girls and women watched city roofs to put out German fire-bombs. She used to draw water from the Neva River through an ice-hole. She saw people falling down dead from starvation in the streets.

In 1952 I graduated from the Academy and went to serve to Lipetsk. I was already married and had a one-year-old child. That place was familiar to me, because during the war our regiment was located there some time. But at that time we spent all our time at the airdrome and did not manage to see the sights of the city: in the daytime we prepared our planes for fighting starts and at nights we fulfilled those starts. That winter was very snowy: if it was necessary to reach the city, we used sledge.

Now I was going to live in that city with my family. I liked the city. There is a beautiful river Voronezh in it. The city is ancient: it was founded on the place where people mined iron ore in the XVIII century. I was going to deliver lectures at the Higher Educational Tactical Air Courses. My subject was called Martial Art of Use of Radio-Electronic Equipment. I'll never forget my first lecture. I entered the lecture hall and listened to the report of officer in charge. He was in the rank of colonel, and I was only a senior lieutenant. I was very nervous. I came up to the table and opened the class-book. I looked at the students and could scarcely believe my eyes: I saw 33 colonels sitting in front of me! But I was carefully prepared for the lecture (I read that lecture at home for imaginary audience!). So everything was fine.

It was always very interesting for me to teach. I understood very well what kind of people I trained. Almost all of them were fighting pilots of high class, most of them overcame all stresses of war. Besides I knew that knowledge gained from my lectures they would use during flights on the planes of the latest design (if it would be necessary, they would use it during fighting starts). Soon together with my colleague Kostakov we wrote a textbook Navigation and Sighting Devices. The textbook appeared to be very useful, and it proved to be true absolutely unexpectedly.

Soon after the textbook was published, a group of cadets arrived at our Academy for flying practice. I was introduced to them as the author of their textbook. One of them said 'Do you know where we keep your book?' - 'So where?' - 'We use to sit on it.' And I understood that it was a compliment: if they left the textbook on a table, someone was able to grab and take it for his own.

In the middle of 1960s pilots from the cosmonauts group often came to our Academy. They studied to fly using aircraft technique of the latest design. Flights on modern airplanes trained cosmonauts to be extremely attentive and to take decisions very quickly. You see, a pilot on board an airplane experiences much greater overload than on board a spaceship. One day Gherman Titov (a USSR cosmonaut #2) visited us. [Gherman Titov was a pilot and a cosmonaut of the USSR, Hero of the Soviet Union and lieutenant-general. He was born in 1935. His first space flight happened in 1961.] We liked Gherman Titov very much: he was modest, competent, and charming. We took a photograph of our group to keep as a souvenir.

Once at the end of 1960s we had to carry out a very serious mission: to show new aviation technics to the top management of the countries of the Warsaw Pact. [The Warsaw Pact or Warsaw Treaty Organization, officially named the Treaty of Friendship, Co-operation and Mutual Assistance was an organization of Central and Eastern European communist states. It was established in 1955 in Warsaw, Poland to counter the alleged threat from the NATO alliance.] I had to give them a report on our planes which they were going to buy (to show them to advantage!). So I gave an hour's talk

on new opportunities of the radio-electronic equipment in modern airplanes. I managed. They asked a lot of questions, and after the end of my report there was a public dinner.

My service was very interesting. Time slid by. I served in Lipetsk more than 20 years: I arrived there in the rank of senior lieutenant and was demobilized as a colonel. In Moscow they took into consideration my age and sent us an order about my pensioning off. For a long time (about 2 years) my chiefs concealed me from the supervising services. They needed me working and it was a great pleasure for me. At last in 1975 there came another order about pensioning off, and my name was listed. So I had to say goodbye to my friends and students and leave Lipetsk.

From Lipetsk we moved to Leningrad, where my wife was born. At first we lived in a communal apartment near Fontanka River [17](#). One day I was walking along the Fontanka River and saw the name of the organization: Research Institute of Steel. You see, in Lipetsk there was a branch of the Moscow Institute of Steel and they invited me there to deliver lectures. They even suggested me to accept a post at them, but my wife wanted to move to Leningrad. So I went to the institute and said that I wanted to work for them. They were happy to take me and immediately decided to send me on business trip to Yerevan. In Yerevan they arranged output of computers, and our aim was to examine them and make a decision about purchase. I was appointed to be in charge. At that moment I recollected that I had forgotten to pay party dues and asked if it was possible to do it at my new place of work. They agreed and the secretary of the local communist party organization asked my surname and took the money. Meanwhile the Institute director ordered to buy tickets to Yerevan urgently.

I went home quickly to let my wife know about the situation. I had scarcely entered the room when the telephone rang. My new chief (a Jew, by the way!) called me to say 'I am sorry, but we cannot give you job.' It was the first manifestation of anti-Semitism I came across, besides the episode in the Academy connected with Doctors' Plot. So I lost my work having no opportunity to start. Then I went to a regional military registration and enlistment office. [Military registration and enlistment offices in the USSR and in Russia are special institutions that implement call-up plans.] They sent me to work as a chief of the civil defence staff at a building organization. [Civil defense is an effort to prepare civilians for military attack. It uses the principles of emergency operations: prevention, mitigation, preparation, response, or emergency evacuation, and recovery.]

A little bit later I became the chief of the civil defence staff at Glavleningradstroy, the leading building organization of the city. It was a great organization: there were about 200,000 employees. They kept under control all construction projects in the city. I worked honestly (as I always did!), but I was not into it. Very often they required only formal actions and neutral reports. And I was accustomed to implement more serious tasks, I wanted my job to captivate me entirely. I started searching for something else and became an active lecturer of the Znanie society. [Znanie (Knowledge), the All-Union society for propagation of political and scientific knowledge was created in July 1947.]

Lecturers of that society delivered lectures at different places: factories, building sites, research institutes. The main topic of my lectures was world situation. I even became a well-known lecturer in the city. People said that I used to give interesting and bright information. When they asked for a lecture, they often asked to send me. Sometimes they said 'Send us please a lecturer who is very much like Levitan.' [Yury Levitan (1914-1983) was the most famous soviet radio announcer. During

the Great Patriotic War he read reports from fronts. It was he who declared: 'Great Patriotic War against fascist aggressors was victoriously finished!' Levitan's voice was an integral part of the war atmosphere.] Indeed, my voice sounded very well, nobody could fall asleep during my lectures.

So I worked at Glavleningradstroy 7 or 8 years. I was able to go on working, my coworkers put high value on my work, I liked my work.

But at that time my daughter, her husband and their little child left for Israel. They both were doctors, and in Israel they had to pass through examination to confirm their professional status. They were having a hard time, therefore we together with my wife decided to go there and help them at home. As it was clear that we were leaving for a long time, I had to leave my service.

We went to Israel on December 27, 1990. We were afraid to be caught by the war in Persian Gulf. [The Persian Gulf War was a conflict between Iraq and a coalition of 34 countries led by the United States. It followed Iraqi capture of Kuwait in August 1990.] And it happened. The first thing we saw in our daughter's apartment (in the hall) in Jerusalem was a gas mask. In the room there was a special cabin of anti-gas protection for our grandson. State of emergency was declared. We heard air-raid warnings many times a day. An official from the Soviet Consulate called us and suggested to come back home by special flight. Of course we refused and stayed with our children. Rocket bombardments of Israel became frequent.

We helped our children as we could: my wife cooked, I went for a walk with our grandson and put out the rubbish. We were short of money. We did not starve, but could not afford buying local newspapers. One day in the garbage can I saw accumulation of papers in Russian. I took them home and read with great interest. The most interesting for me was to read about Israeli civil defence actions during that war. I participated in those actions: used my gas mask, placed my grandson into the cabin of anti-gas protection, etc. I realized that my personal experience in that war and everything I read about it in newspapers would be interesting to people in Russia. Having come back home, I wrote about it. Later I decided to write about Israel as a country.

So my next book was called First-Hand Report on Israel. It was published, they printed 10,000 copies. The book was quickly sold out. Later I wrote more books about Israel and one about Spain. I'd like to tell you that my first trip to Israel changed my life. Due to my new hobby (writing books) my life became rich and interesting. Total number of copies of my books is about 25,000. They all were sold out. I'd prefer to say the same another way: they all were bought, and I hope they all were read by people.

Regarding my first book: in 1993 I went to Israel for the 2nd time and took some copies with me. One of them I sent to the ambassador of Russia in Israel Alexander Bovin. [Alexander Bovin (1930-2004), a famous journalist, diplomat and politician was an ambassador of Russia in Israel (1991-1997).]

He was well-known in Russia as a journalist and political correspondent. During hard times Bovin managed to tell people some sort of the truth, and many people in Russia are grateful to him for that. Bovin thanked me for the book and said that he had read it with interest. He put spirit into me.

Here I'd like to tell you about my children in more detail. My wife and I are proud of them.

My son Boris was born in 1951 in Leningrad, and my daughter Alla was born in 1956 in Lipetsk. My wife always worked (in contrast to many other wives of professional soldiers), therefore my children attended kindergarten.

Later in Lipetsk they studied at a mathematical school. They both were excellent pupils and finished school with gold medals. Being schoolchildren, they were twice awarded with permits to pioneer camp Artek and Orlenok. [Artek was the All-Union and international Young Pioneer camp in the Soviet Union. It was established in 1925 near the Black Sea in Crimea. Destination Artek was considered to be an honorable award for Soviet children as well as internationally.]

Having finished her school, Alla entered the 1st Leningrad Medical College. She successfully graduated from it and became a doctor. In 1990 together with her family she left for Israel.

Boris decided to follow in my footsteps and entered the same military academy which I had graduated from many years ago. But he chose a profession which we knew nothing about in our time: a cyberneticist. After graduation he became an officer, a cyberneticist in the army (military-space troops). He served near Ussuriisk. Six years later he was sent to a military unit near Leningrad. In 1990s he was demobilized. At present he is a businessman.

When Stalin died, our family was in deep mourning. My wife sobbed violently, and I also was close to despair: I thought that our life was over.

I interpreted Hungarian and Czechoslovakian events [18, 19] like all other Soviet people, i.e. like we were ordered to interpret it. I supported Perestroika [20](#), because it was initiated by Gorbachev, the CPSU Secretary General [21](#). I can tell you that I always supported authorities, I never was their opponent. Till now I consider some events of that time to be positive. I'll never reconcile myself to paid education and paid medicine (I guess we are going to have both). Besides I am oppressed with increasing influence of religion in our state which is secular according to Constitution. And I do not like the so called freedom of debauch. In the streets I hate advertising of the American film Sex in the City. Sometimes I see terrible magazines and I am afraid that they can fall into children's hands. I hold our President in high respect. [Vladimir Putin is the President of Russia.] But it seems to me that he should pay more attention to the army. You see, a boy (a son of my acquaintances) graduated from my Academy, arrived at his destination (in Urals) and got a poor salary of 8,000 rubles (about \$320).

I visit Hesed Avraham Welfare Center [22](#) only when my wife receives food packages there (I am a porter). As for me, I refused to receive food packages there: I guess there are a lot of needy. But I often visit the Veterans Organization [Petersburg Organization of Jews - war veterans, disabled soldiers, former ghetto prisoners, partisans and citizens of the besieged Leningrad]. Sometimes I celebrate Sabbath there.

## **Glossary:**

### **[1](#) Sovkhoz**

state-run agricultural enterprise. The first sovkhoz yards were created in the USSR in 1918. According to the law the sovkhoz property was owned by the state, but it was assigned to the

sovkhos which handled it based on the right of business maintenance.

## **2 Cossacks**

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

## **3 Bolshoi Theater**

World famous national theater in Moscow, built in 1776. The first Russian and foreign opera and ballet performances were staged in this building.

## **4 All-Union pioneer organization**

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

## **5 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.

## **6 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.

## **7 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.

## **8 Political officer**

These "commissars," as they were first called, exercised specific official and unofficial control functions over their military command counterparts. The political officers also served to further Party interests with the masses of drafted soldiery of the USSR by indoctrination in Marxist-Leninism. The 'zampolit', or political officers, appeared at the regimental level in the army, as well as in the navy and air force, and at higher and lower levels, they had similar duties and functions. The chast (regiment) of the Soviet Army numbered 2000-3000 personnel, and was the lowest level of military command that doctrinally combined all arms (infantry, armor, artillery, and supporting services) and was capable of independent military missions. The regiment was commanded by a colonel, or lieutenant colonel, with a lieutenant or major as his zampolit, officially titled "deputy commander for political affairs."

## **9 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.

## **10 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.

## **11 Blockade of Leningrad**

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

## **12 Königsberg offensive**

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

## **13 Medal for the Defense of Stalingrad**

established by the decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR as of 22nd December 1942. 750,000 people were conferred with that medal.

## **14 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.

## **15 Order of the Combat Red Banner**

Established in 1924, it was awarded for bravery and courage in the defense of the Homeland.

## **16 Odessa**

The Jewish community of Odessa was the second biggest Jewish community in Russia. According to the census of 1897 there were 138,935 Jews in Odessa, which was 34,41% of the local population. There were 7 big synagogues and 49 prayer houses in Odessa. There were heders in 19 prayer houses.

## **17 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.

## **18 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.

## **19 Provisional Government**

Russian government formed after the February Revolution of 1917. The majority of its members were originally liberal deputies of the State Duma. The Provisional Government also had some socialist members, and after a series of political crises the number of socialist ministers increased. The goal of the Provisional Government was to turn Russia into a parliamentary democracy, with broad political liberties, general and equal elections, a multi-party system and equal rights for all citizens. The Provisional Government, however, was unable to solve the country's key problems, namely the withdrawal from World War I, agricultural and food problems and national issues. It was overthrown by the Bolsheviks in November 1917.

## **20 Perestroika (Russian for restructuring)**

Soviet economic and social policy of the late 1980s, associated with the name of Soviet politician Mikhail Gorbachev. The term designated the attempts to transform the stagnant, inefficient command economy of the Soviet Union into a decentralized, market-oriented economy. Industrial managers and local government and party officials were granted greater autonomy, and open elections were introduced in an attempt to democratize the Communist Party organization. By 1991, perestroika was declining and was soon eclipsed by the dissolution of the USSR.

## **21 Gorbachev, Mikhail (1931- )**

Soviet political leader. Gorbachev joined the Communist Party in 1952 and gradually moved up in the party hierarchy. In 1970 he was elected to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, where he remained until 1990. In 1980 he joined the politburo, and in 1985 he was appointed general secretary of the party. In 1986 he embarked on a comprehensive program of political, economic, and social liberalization under the slogans of glasnost (openness) and perestroika (restructuring). The government released political prisoners, allowed increased emigration, attacked corruption, and encouraged the critical reexamination of Soviet history. The Congress of People's Deputies, founded in 1989, voted to end the Communist Party's control over the government and elected Gorbachev executive president. Gorbachev dissolved the Communist Party and granted the Baltic

states independence. Following the establishment of the Commonwealth of Independent States in 1991, he resigned as president. Since 1992, Gorbachev has headed international organizations.

## **22 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.