

Semyon Ghendler



This is me photographed in the uniform of Soviet Navy shortly after I was recruited to the army in Vladivostok on 15 October 1945. There is a name of my cruiser 'Kalinin' on my cap.

On 22 June 1941 my friend Beba Shames and I were to go to a pioneer camp. At 12 o'clock we listened to Molotov on the radio. He said that the Great Patriotic War began. In July 1941 my mother, my sister and I and my grandfather Iegoshua and my grandmother Esther were evacuated. We arrived in Cheliabinsk in the Ural, 1500 kilometers from our home. Cheliabinsk was a big industrial town. I went to the 7th grade at school. Early in the morning I went to stand in line to buy bread. There were bread cards to get rationed bread and there was always too little of it.

I felt responsible for my mother and sister being the only man in the family. I took no interest in studies. Thought I had learned all that I needed. I wanted to go to work to support my mother. I talked with my mother and she helped me to become an apprentice of a joiner at a military plant. I was very proud to be going to work every morning. I also received a food card that was sufficient support to our family. I smoked a lot and was very glad to receive a pack of tobacco once a month like an adult man. I worked for almost a year until I went to study at the factory vocational school in 1943. I was to become an electrician. After finishing this school I received my certificate of secondary education and went to work as an electrician at the Cheliabinsk tractor plant. I also could live in a hostel. I made friends with other workers who were older than me. We used to have a drink every now and then and I began to meet with girls. My mother didn't like this at all. She still believed I was a child. We often argued and once I didn't see my mother for two or three months. It was 1944 and Zhitomir was liberated. Once I bumped into a man from Zhitomir and he was surprised to see me in Cheliabinsk. It turned out that my mother, my sister, my grandfather and grandmother had left for Zhitomir. I felt so hurt that tears came into my eyes. I still don't know why they were so cruel to me. My mother told me later that she wanted to teach me a lesson, but I still believe it was unjust. When I got to know that my family had left I left the town as well. I didn't quit officially and had no documents with me. I climbed the roof of a railcar to go to my Motherland. I didn't have a permit for reevacuation or any other document. It took me a long time to get to my town. Conductors caught me and told me to get off the train and then militia caught me as well. I ran away from militia and other militiamen helped me to get on another train when they heard my story. Then finally I arrived at Zhitomir almost three weeks later.

In late 1944 I received a subpoena to the army. I went to serve in the Navy. In early January 1945 we boarded a train to the Far East in Zhitomir. At first I was a ship's boy and then became a sailor on the 'Kalinin' cruiser. I participated in the war with Japan. In 1945 our cruiser transported Soviet landing troops to Korea. I served 7 years in the navy: this was a standard term in those years. Although service in the navy is hard I enjoy recalling this time. Firstly, I ate heartily for the first time in my life. We got sufficient food. They gave us American tinned meat. What else would a young man want: rich food and good friends. I had many friends. There was another Jewish Navy man on our boat and we never faced any prejudiced or abusive attitudes. We were all equal. In the evening we played chess, read and went on a leave together. In late 1952 I demobilized and returned to Zhitomir.