

Grigoriy Stelmakh

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Kiev

Ukraine

Interviewer: Zhanna Litinskaya

Date of interview: October 2003

Grigoriy Stel'makh is a tall stately man with his gray hair nicely done. He has a notable military bearing. Grigoriy and his wife Lubov live in a one-bedroom apartment in residential district at some distance from the center of Kiev. The apartment is clean and cozy. We are sitting in the kitchen at the table covered with a nice embroidered tablecloth and having tea with self-made cherry jam tasting quite like our Jewish grandmothers used to make it. There are pictures on the walls, and the pillows on the sofa were embroidered by the hostess of the house. Grigoriy makes himself comfortable on the sofa, and two poodles – the pets of the family, quietly settled at his feet. Lubov leaves the room to let her husband recall his life, and he begins his story fondly...

The information I have about my paternal great grandfather is that his name was Isaac and that he lived in Kovel where he had come from either Poland or Germany in the middle of the 19th century. I don't know why he moved there. I don't know what my great grandfather did for a living. However, I know that the surname of Stel'makh derived from German 'stell machen', a specialist making the wooden part of wheels. I don't know whether my great grandfather had anything to do with this craft. I have no information about my great grandmother and I don't know how many children my great grandparents had.

All I know is that my grandfather Abram Stel'makh had an older brother, born approximately in the 1870s. He lived a long life and died in Kiev in the 1950s. He lived in the Podol [1]. His older son Solomon, born in 1905, was a well-known card player in Kiev. For some reason he was called Shurka. There were two daughters: Dora, born in 1912, and Basia, born in 1915. Basia married a Polish man and moved to Poland in 1946. From there she moved to Boston, USA, and Dora also moved to America in 1977. There were no contacts with them since in the USSR contacts with relatives abroad were not allowed [2]. Solomon visited his sisters in America in the 1970s. Then he decided to move to America. At that time it was necessary to submit documents for departure to Israel and then wait for American visas in Italy. It was a long process, and Solomon died in Italy in 1977 waiting for his visa. Dora has also passed away. I have no information about Basia.

My grandfather Abram was a colorful person. He was born in Kovel, 370 km from Kiev, a small Polish and from 1939 – Ukrainian town, in 1878. He received Jewish education in a cheder, and then finished a 7-year Jewish school. He also studied music and could play the accordion. He also studied theory: solfeggio and history of music. At his young age he left his home for Warsaw where his distant relatives lived. He studied there for over a year and received the profession of accountant. Then he moved to Khmelnik, Vinnitsa region, in 300 km from Kiev. Khmelnik was a typical Jewish town with its specific way of life. The town was beautifully buried in verdure. Jews resided in the center of the town and constituted 90% of the population. Most of the Jewish families

were poor. Jews dealt in crafts: they were dealers, suppliers, tailors and shoemakers. There was Ukrainian, Polish and Russian population in Khmelnik. They mostly dealt in farming. There were rich Ukrainian and Russian landlords and merchants. They owned luxurious mansions and had servants and big plots of land. There was a market in the center of the town. Jews had their shops and stores there. There were also three synagogues, I guess, and a church in the center of the town. There was a Russian grammar school in the town, and Jewish children also studied there. Jewish and other children got along so well that Jewish children even were invited to parties in the mansion of a Russian landlord on the outskirts of the town. My grandfather moved to Khmelnik and having good education he went to work as an accountant and estate manager for landlords and timber merchants. My grandfather was a rather wealthy man and belonged to the 'beau monde' of the town, I would say.

My grandfather met my grandmother Yenta in the town. I don't know anything about her origin or her parents or her maiden name. Yenta was born in 1881. My grandmother was a slim blue-eyed beauty of a girl, and my grandfather fell head over heels in love with her. She treated him with quiet and unseen authority. My grandfather told me an episode: he was smoking some sweet scented tobacco and my grandmother mentioned that this was unpleasant. My grandfather never smoked again after getting married. I believe they had a traditional Jewish wedding, though they didn't tell me anything about it. My grandfather built a nice house. He had his horses and a carriage and this was a sign of wealth. Besides, he had red reigns to decorate the harness, and this was also a sign of wealth like a nice car nowadays.

My grandfather was religious. He wore a kippah and a nice big hat. My grandmother also covered her head. She had few wigs, lace shawls and kerchiefs. They went to the synagogue together, observed all Jewish traditions and celebrated holidays. My grandfather knew the Torah very well and read Talmud and wise books. We still have his books in the family. My grandfather was an authoritative man in the Jewish community of Khmelnik and with the Russian, Ukrainian and Polish population. My grandfather's business partners and other wealthy families often invited my grandparents to their homes and the interesting detail about it that their respect of my grandfather was so significant that the food they offered met my grandfather's religious requirements. On Purim my grandfather invited his Jewish and non-Jewish friends. Everybody had lots of fun taking part in dressing up and performing. My grandmother made 'Haman's ears', triangle cookies with poppy seeds and traditional Jewish food: gefilte fish, veal stew and many sweets. My grandfather explained that this was his demonstration of internationalism and religious tolerance. However, they celebrated religious holidays Pesach, Yom Kippur and others with the family. All the boys in the family had the ritual of brit milah, circumcision, on the eighth day after they were born. My grandfather said it was a big holidays. Jews were praying and the boy became a real Jew. Then there was a meal with guests.

There were six children in the family. Moisey was the oldest. He was born in Khmelnik in 1908. He worked as goods manager. His Jewish wife Fania, born in 1910, also came from Khmelnik. In the early 1930s Moisey's family moved to Kiev. Moisey had two children: Nikolay, born in 1930, and Adel, born in 1937. During the Great Patriotic War [3] Moisey was at the front actually from the first days of the war and Fania and their children were in evacuation. Moisey died in Kiev in 1965. After his death the family moved to Israel where Fania died in the early 1980s and Adel passed away in the early 1990s. Nikolay lives in Israel, but I have no contact with him.

The next was Adel, born in 1910. I don't know where she studied. She had a secondary professional education. She worked as an accountant. She was single. She had a hard life and a complex character. She died in Kiev in 1993.

After Adel my father Isaac was born. The next was Sarrah, born approximately in 1914. She finished the Faculty of Economics of a college in Leningrad, got married and moved to Leningrad [present St. Petersburg] where she worked as an engineer/economist at the Kirov machine building plant. Her Jewish husband Grigoriy Sribner also worked at this plant. Grigoriy was at the front and Sarrah and her son Nikolay evacuated with the plant to the Ural. After the war she returned to Leningrad. Grigoriy returned from the front. Then we lost track of this family. All I know is that Sarrah died in 1997, and Nikolay lives in St. Petersburg.

After Sarrah Musia was born in 1915. Musia went to the front during the Great Patriotic War. He never returned from the war. In 1917-1918 Lyova was born. He was the last child. He died in infancy.

Grandfather Abram was trying to teach his children the Torah following his firm convictions, but life was changing and the communist propaganda happened to be stronger than grandfather's lectures and the children grew up to be atheists. During the Great Patriotic War grandfather, grandmother and Adel were in evacuation in Uzbekistan. They lived in a kolkhoz [4] where grandfather worked as an accountant. After the war my grandparents and Adel returned to live in Kiev. From 1945 and almost to the day he died my grandfather was a representative of the Art Fund of the USSR in Kiev. He was responsible for tax payment inspection and reported to Moscow. He was valued at his work. They employed him till he turned 83! More than that: when he grew old, my grandfather began to compose music. We have a pile of his scores: he wrote quartets and romances. He studied music in his childhood. I would say, the music sounded in him. He wrote music by inspiration. He particularly got fond of music after grandmother Yenta died in 1957. He started going to the synagogue more frequently and wrote music for the synagogue. Grandfather died in 1967. He was buried in the Jewish sector of the town cemetery and an attendant from the synagogue recited a prayer. When Chairman of the Union of composers saw my grandfather in the casket, he exclaimed: 'Ah, this is Stel'makh, almost a composer'. He said it with slight humor, but this was sad humor.

My father's life story is quite interesting. He was the product of his epoch. He was born in 1912. He went to cheder like all Jewish boys and then finished a Jewish school. And then... I would say he was drawn in with the 'wheel of history'. The revolutionary outburst had its impact on children: Russian, Ukrainian, Polish and Jewish boys and girls had gatherings and marched across the town with slogans and banners in support of the soviet power and Lenin [5] calling to refuse from religion: 'Away with rabbis and priests'. There were many religious people in Khmelnik and my religious grandfather was ashamed of meeting eyes with other respectable people in the town when his son propagated such slogans. My grandfather beat my father many times for sound reasons. He was not allowed to leave the house and tied inside. These contradictions developed into a conflict between my father and religious grandfather and as a result, my father left his home at the age of 14. He headed to Kamenets-Podolskiy, 100 km west of his home where he joined Komsomol [6]. He became a Komsomol activist. Komsomol sent him to the Kiev region where he was involved in various Komsomol activities: struggle against kulaks [7], organization of kolkhozes and Komsomol units in towns. By the age of 20 he already joined the Communist Party. My father

married a Russian girl, his comrade, in Tarascha village of Kiev region in 1933. I don't know her name. He didn't even tell his parents about his marriage since his marrying a Russian girl would have been a reason for another conflict with his parents. My father's wife died at childbirth, and grandfather Abram and grandmother Yenta took little Raya to raise her forgetting their resentment. She lived with my grandparents for about a year. After my father married my mother the girl came to live with them.

My mother's father Shulim Khalfin was born to the family of a store owner in Germanovka village in about 80 km from Kiev, in 1882. There were many Jewish families in Germanovka. I don't know how many brothers or sisters my grandfather had. I only knew Dvoira, born in 1887. Dvoira married Abraam Brodskiy, a local Jewish man, [the Brodskiy family – Russian sugar manufacturers. They started sugar manufacturing business in 1840s. Organized the 1st sugar syndicate in Russia in (1887). Sponsored construction of hospitals and asylums in Kiev and other towns in Russia, including the biggest and most beautiful synagogue in Kiev], a distant relative of the renown sugar manufacturer. They lived in Vasilkov, 30 km from Kiev, before and after the war. Dvoira was a housewife and raised three children. Her daughters Yevgenia, born in 1923, and Maria, born in 1925, were single. They live together in Vasilkov now. Boris, born in 1927, became a musician. He played in a military orchestra during the Great Patriotic War. Boris is married to Lidia, a Russian woman. They live in Riga.

My grandfather Shulim studied in cheder and this was all education he got. He married when he was very young. I don't know his first wife's name. I know that she was Jewish and lived in Vasilkov. My grandfather moved to Vasilkov and took to selling essential goods: matches, candles, soap and kerosene. His wife died at childbirth giving birth to their son Matvey. Then he married Rona Patlakh, also a Jew, who was three years older than him. She didn't have any education, but she was smart and could find a way out of any situation in life better than anybody else. She spoke no Russian. She only spoke Yiddish, but everybody always understood what she was saying.

My grandmother had sisters Esther, born in 1890, and Mutsia, born in 1892. They lived in Vasilkov. Esther was married to her cousin brother Nukhim Patlakh. Nukhim was a big and strong man. Mutsia was single. She lived with them in a small house that Nukhim built. They were kolkhozniki in the Jewish kolkhoz [8], and this was a prosperous kolkhoz. The only son of Esther and Nukhim studied in an air flight school during the Great Patriotic War and then served as a radio engineer in an airfield maintenance group at the front. Esther, Nukhim and Mutsia evacuated to Uzbekistan and returned in 1944. They were growing old working in their little garden. After the war Semyon married a Russian woman from Ufa and moved to live with her. Nukhim died in 1952. In the early 1960s Semyon died, too, and few years later my grandmother's sisters passed away.

My grandfather's family was rapidly growing: he and grandmother had another son and two daughters. My grandfather worked in his store from morning till night and gradually grew wealthier. In due time he built a nice house for his family. They were very religious: my grandfather prayed with his tallit and tefillin on in the morning before going to his work. On Friday he went to the synagogue and my grandmother was preparing the house to Sabbath cleaning, washing and cooking for two days. On Saturday they went to the synagogue together. They were so kind that even in their most trying years they invited poor Jews on Sabbath: the door of their house was always open for them. During the Civil War there were pogroms [9] in Vasilkov called 'rainbow' or

'multi-colored' pogroms. The Red army was following the White Guard units [10], and then the power in the town switched to the 'greens' [11] and it happened few times a day and all of newcomers came to beat and rob Jews. My grandfather and his family found shelter in Ukrainian families. They always got along well with them. After a pogrom was over my grandfather returned to his store. Then the so-called 'zolutukha' began, when at the direction of authorities people had to give away all money and gold. We still remember a sad anecdote of this period: 'Abram was arrested and his wardens were demanding his gold. They kept him in jail for a long time and beat him, but couldn't pull anything out of him. They changed their tactics and said: 'You know, we don't need gold. We are building socialism, but we do not have enough money. If you give us your gold, it will enable us to built socialism faster'. Abram says: 'Well, this is a different story, but you see, I need to talk with Sarrah since she is the one to decide everything'. They released him and then he came back. 'So, what did your Sarrah say?' 'Sarrah says that if one doesn't have money one doesn't build things'. Like in this anecdote my grandfather got arrested, and they demanded gold from him that he never had. They kept him in jail for a long while. When they didn't get anything from him they declared him a kulak, expropriated his house and deported from Vasilkov. My grandfather and his family moved to Kiev where they settled down in an apartment in Turgenevskaya Street in the center of the city. However, my grandfather couldn't forget the offense and besides, he was desperately homesick. He left his family and moved back to Vasilkov where his acquaintances accommodated him. He was working in his small garden. In the early 1930s he returned to Kiev. He was severely ill with stomach cancer. My grandfather died in hospital in 1935. He was buried in the Lukianovskoye [12] Jewish cemetery in accordance with all Jewish traditions. In the early 1960s, when the Lukianovskoye cemetery was to be removed to build a TV center, my aunt went to the cemetery and gathered all bones from the exposed grave into a bag. They reburied the remnants in the Berkovetskoye town cemetery and moved the gravestone there.

My mother's stepbrother Matvey was born in Vasilkov in 1905. After the revolution of 1917 [13] he moved to Kiev, finished a rabfak school and worked at a plant. Matvey was not married. With his plant he evacuated to the Saratov region and stayed there after the Great Patriotic War. During the war Matvey fell ill with tuberculosis. He died from it in 1947. All I know about my mother's second brother Nukhim, born approximately in 1908, is that he perished during the Great Patriotic War.

My mother's younger sister Frania, born in 1910, worked as a shop assistant before the Great Patriotic War. During the Great Patriotic War Frania was in evacuation with our family in Shantala about 2000 km from Kiev. After returning to Kiev Frania worked as a cashier in a store and was arrested for missing cash. Frania spent few months in jail, and then the court issued her a suspended sentence. In 1946 she married Leonid Kalantyrskiy, a Jewish warden from jail. In 1948 their son Alexandr was born. Frania was a worker in a hot shop at the rubber toys factory. One day in 1967 she was going home from a night shift when she remembered that she forgot to turn off a water tap in her shop. Frania was so worried that she had a stroke and died. Shortly after she died Leonid passed away, too. Alexandr and his family reside in USA.

My mother Kreina Khalfina was born in Vasilkov in 1909. She received a Jewish education studying with a village melamed at home. Then she went to a Jewish school. My mother was very pretty, but she didn't go out with boys. She didn't support revolutionary ideas either. My mother said that when the revolution began, there were many idle young men and most of them were Jews since it was a Jewish town. They didn't want to work or study. They ran around the town yelling 'Death to

capitalism' teasing their Jewish fellow comrades who were working or studying. My mother remembered that when she was 15-16 years old, and came to dance at the club a Komsomol guy yelled to her: 'Khalfina, get out of the club!' and chased her out whistling and hooting, because she was a hostile element since her family was considered wealthy. After finishing school my mother finished a training course and worked as a secretary. In 1935 she met my father, who had become a widower a short time before. I don't know how they met. Perhaps, through matchmakers that was customary with Jews.

My mother somehow repeated grandmother Ronia's life marrying a man three years younger than her and having a child. They had a modest wedding. Sumptuous weddings were not a habit with communists. The most amazing thing about it was that my father agreed to have a Jewish wedding. Otherwise my mother's parents would have been against their marriage and my father loved my mother dearly. My parents were escorted to the synagogue separately and at the synagogue they stood under a chuppah and all guests made seven rounds around the bridegroom. Then their marriage contract was read and they exchanged rings. Then they drank wine and guests began to greet the newly weds. My grandmother and her neighbors cooked sweets for the wedding part and there was little to drink. My mother and father moved to Tarascha village of the Kiev region where my father got another Komsomol assignment. Shortly after the wedding grandfather Shulim died and grandmother Ronia moved in with my parents and were with us from then on. In 1937 my sister Shura was born in Tarascha.

I, Grigoriy Stel'makh, was born in Chernobyl town of the Kiev region on 18 July 1939. My father had another Komsomol assignment there being head of book sales. Since we often moved from one place to another, I had my birth certificate issued in Vasilkov. I was named after my great grandfather, my grandmother's father Ronia Gershl. This is the only thing I know about him. Some time later our family moved to Kiev where they received half a house in the distant outskirts of Stalinka [it's one of the central districts of the city now]. I don't know exactly what work my father did for a living, but he earned well and was prosperous. He bought a motor cycle, a film projector and a piano for the children to study music when they grew up. There were many Jewish and non-Jewish friends. Although my father was a real communist, he continued to believe in God at the bottom of his heart, I think. He didn't go to the synagogue. To go to the synagogue was like throwing away his Party membership book and an employment records book: the new regime adamantly struggled against religion [14]. However, our family always celebrated Jewish holidays, even in the late 1930s when Stalin's arrests [15] began and people could suffer a lot for their faith. Of course, those were quiet celebrations and there were no guests, but my mother cooked traditional food and there was a spirit of holidays. My mother didn't work since there were three children in the family. My mother never distinguished between her own children and adoptive Raya. Even more than that, I learned that Raya was an adoptive daughter when I was an adult in the middle 1950s.

My parents told me a lot about the first day of the Great Patriotic War. On this day of 22 June 1941 my father was going to a football match of his favorite team 'Dynamo' Kiev and my mother told him to take an umbrella since it looked like a rainstorm. My father heard about the war on his way to the stadium. He went to the military registry office with his umbrella and they recruited him to the army. He was sent to study in a flak/artillery school in Kiev. The management of his school decided to support evacuation of the families of their teachers and cadets. So we evacuated on

trucks in the middle of July moving to the east. In this mess and confusion I got on a different truck with strangers and some woman was holding me all the way to Kharkov, 450 km. I was absolutely calm, but my mother was almost 'loosing her mind'. We were accommodated in a hostel in Kharkov waiting for departure. Unfortunately, my sister Raya fell ill with scarlet fever and we were not allowed to take her to a train. We left Kharkov in early October, when Germans were near the town. I don't remember any details of our trip.

We arrived at the Shantala railway station where the families of the school employees were accommodated. From there, from Shantala, my childhood memory took its beginning. This was a station lost in the woods, somewhere at the distance of 200 km from Ulianovsk in the depths of Russia. My mother went to work in a hospital. Our Russian landlady Manya was very kind. There were six of us: my mother, my two sisters and I, my grandmother and my mother's sister Frania. We had one room in a wooden house. We, kids, slept in bed with my grandmother and my mother and her sister slept on the floor. It's hard to say anything about food: I didn't remember anything else. Everything my grandmother made tasted delicious: pancakes with some herb, soup with unknown ingredients or pies. My grandmother was very handy with making a meal from 'nothing' and other women came to learn from her. My grandmother tried to observe Jewish traditions. She boiled few casseroles to make kosher utensils. I was told that there were sweets, ice-cream, candy and oranges in life, but I took it easy like any child since I didn't know anything about them. By that time I knew that we lived in the big town of Kiev with big buildings, cars, beautiful streets and parks, and that the capital of our Motherland was Moscow and the main man lived in the Kremlin. My mother told me all this. My sister Raisa studied at school, and Alexandr and I went to kindergarten. I remember a New Year party with Santa Claus, i.e., they were trying to create some living conditions for us and I am grateful to these people. I was small and didn't know what was better and what was worse, but now I recall this with warm feelings.

Sometimes we went to see mother in hospital. She secretly brought us a cup of kissel (fruit jelly) to the front door: and this was such delicacy. Patients liked us. They put me on their lap and gave me sugarplums: those were the first sweets in my life, and they stroked my hair. I didn't understand that they were missing their children. I called each man 'papa'. I didn't remember my father. My father finished his artillery school in Gorliy town and wrote that my mother could visit him there before he went to the front. My mother went to Gorkiy from Shantala. The moment they met and hugged a terrible bombing began and my father, praying for my mother to survive, sent her back right away. My father wrote letters from the front. I remember a postman walking along the street and nobody knew what news he was bringing. Sometimes we heard wailing and screams from a house: it meant that they received a death notice. Fate guarded my father, though he was wounded several times. After hospitals he went back to the front. Once he visited us bringing some food that he managed to save. I finally saw my father: big that he was and a stranger. I enjoyed breathing in the smell of tobacco. My father stayed with us three days and went back to the front.

Finally in 1943 Kiev was liberated. My father took part in the attack with armored troops. He sent us a permit for reevacuation and we went home. I have dim memories about our return trip. We arrived in Kiev in winter. My father was with his unit somewhere near Zhytomir. I was struck to see the destitution and ruins in Kiev. Where was this beautiful town they told me about? There were other tenants in our apartment. Our neighbors took our furniture, carpets, and the piano and crystal crockery. When my mother asked them to return our belongings they replied that she had

to be happy to have survived and that she wasn't with those 'zhydy' [kike] buried in Babi Yar [16], и and closed the door before her. Then my father came to Kiev for few days. He went to see this neighbor and threatened him with a gun and they returned our belongings. However, we didn't have a place to live and we went to my mother's aunt Dvoira Brodskaya. Life was hard. There was little food and I had to stand in long lines for bread sold by coupons. I also remember delicacies: American canned meat and egg powder that my father sent us occasionally. I went to school in 1946 and we wrote on newspaper sheet margins since there were no notebooks or textbooks.

We lived so until 1947. My father reached Berlin. After the victory he got in a car accident and stayed in hospital Sharita in Berlin for almost a year. Then my father resigned from the army, but was assigned to the Soviet Military Administration of the town. In 1947 he came to take us to Berlin. We were taken to a wonderful apartment of 8 rooms. I don't know what position my father had, but we had a nice life. We had a housemaid and food supplies. We had many clothes. We went to and from school by car. The school had a nice pioneer camp on the Baltic Sea. We had our hair cut short and had forelocks and Germans recognized us immediately. They were patient about our fooling around. They didn't complain and were afraid of our administration. We were up to mischief and became insolent. We could, for example, squeeze somebody's finger with a door, when we didn't like the person who was a 'fascist' in our opinion. Once we went to an amusement park and when we came to swing attractions where there was a line, people stepped aside seeing us. Once we did something that still makes me feel ashamed. My friend Vitia Kukin and I refused to go home from school by car. We wanted a motor cycle. They sent a motor cycle for us. I remember that this motor cycle broke and the motorcyclist dropped by a garage. While waiting for him we threw stones on car doors: there were doors drying in the yard. There were at least twenty of them and we competed who broke more window glass. German workers were watching us, but nobody interfered. In the evening my father came home as black as thunder. He had a discussion with me. Of course, I was trying to blame my friend and he was trying to make me guilty. My father didn't speak to me for a long time. My father told us every evening coming to the children's room: 'remember that whoever asks you, you must say that it is better in the Soviet Union'. I was 9 years old and I kept thinking: 'How come? There are so many toys and beautiful things here. There are cakes and sausages here and there it is devastation and hunger. How come better?' But I did tell everybody that it was better at our home.

My mother got adjusted in Germany promptly. She made many friends. They were officers' wives, for the most part. We often had parties at home and my mother cooked terrific gefilte fish. I remember some officers drinking wine from her shoe: this cheap chic was in fashion! There were no Jews in our surrounding, but mother tried to observe at least some Jewish traditions. She baked challah bread before Saturday and there was always a bottle of wine for our Sabbath meal, but this was all she managed to do.

In 1948 my father became nervous: his fellow comrades Tikhonov, former secretary of the Leningrad town committee, and Epshtein were arrested. On 20 January 1949, on my way home from school I saw two men carrying things from our home: my father's camera and his hunting rifle. When we came home, we saw my mother tossing about the room that was all a mess. There was a search at home. I learned what happened to my father many years later after he returned home. State security officers came to my father's office and asked him to follow them. He didn't understand at once what it was about. Only when they asked him to take off his tie and untie and

remove his shoe laces, he understood that he was arrested. He was accused by article 58, item 10: anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda. He was taken to Spandau, a prison in Berlin. For ten months my father underwent tortures during interrogations. They tried to force him to write evidence against himself that he called to overthrow the existing regime and Stalin. My father didn't succumb. They tried all methods of NKVD: torture with hunger, when an investigation officer was eating cutlets with fried potatoes before my father who hadn't eaten for several days, night interrogation, when they didn't allow a person to fall asleep and woke him up the moment he fell asleep. Besides, my father, an inveterate smoker, suffered without cigarettes, and an interrogation officer smoked good cigarettes in front of him. In November 1949 the investigation officer said that if my father didn't sign his confession, he was to be 'acted' on the following day (in the NKVD language it meant that a person was killed and an 'act for death from a heart attack' was issued). My father was thinking all night through. He decided to sign the confession or he would die. He thought of saying that he was forced to do this in court. My father still believed that this was misinterpretation of the party policy and that the just Soviet court would know what was right. The interrogation officer said this was quite another matter. He gave my father a cigarette and somebody brought him food. Next day the investigation officer read to him that by decision of the special meeting he was sentenced to 10 years in jail. My father fainted and fell down and they brought him back to consciousness by pouring water on him. The investigation officer spoke to him in a different tone: 'Isaac Abramovich, don't be nervous, when you arrive at the camp you will write a request for review of your case'.

My mother and we stayed in Berlin few weeks after my father was arrested. My mother was trying to seek help from friends, but they all turned away from her. Only one of them advised to hurry up with our departure and helped us to get tickets and pack. My mother took some things that were left to us. She knew that we had a long and hard life without our father ahead of us.

In early March 1949 we arrived in Kiev. There was no place to live and our wanderings began. We stayed with aunt Frania in Kiev or went to Dvoira in Vasilkov. I went to school in Kiev. I don't know whether they knew about my father at school, but they never showed it. I told everybody that my father was on service in Germany. I didn't become a pioneer in Germany for some misconduct. In Kiev I lied that I was a pioneer. I didn't take part in public activities and tried to not attract attention to my personality. I didn't apply for Komsomol membership at school. I was afraid of having to indicate where my father was in the application form and they would not admit me and would know that my father was an 'enemy of the people' [17]. We had a hard life. My mother worked as a shop assistant for some time, but she was mainly selling what we had from Germany: crystal, crockery, fabrics and underwear. She took these to special stores and this was what our family was living on for some time.

In December 1949 my father was deported to the Soviet Union. There was a train full of such prisoners betrayed by the soviet power. They were ordered to put on worn German overcoats and caps so that people didn't know that they were Soviet clerks and military. People were spitting on their side thinking that they were fascist prisoners. They arrived in Komi ASSR, Kayskiy district, about 6000 km from Kiev. There were political and criminal prisoners in the camp. Criminal prisoners humiliated them and kept them in fear. They beat them losing a card game. My father worked at a wood cutting facility at first. It was hard for him, but he did his workload. He was a man of strong spirit and he managed to gain respect of political and criminal prisoners. Nobody ever

humiliated him, and the criminals called him 'zhyd', but this was not a demonstration of anti-Semitism, but, however strange it may seem, this was their demonstration of respect and even love and recognition of his superiority in some issues. My father said that they pronounced this nickname with kindness and he was always proud of this nickname. Some time later my father was assigned to a fire brigade for his outstanding performance where life was easier. In 1951 other prisoners proposed to make my father director of the bakery shop. This was a prestigious position in the camp where bread was a major product. 'My father performed his duties excellently and repaired the building of the bakery. He kept it in ideal order. In 1953, after Stalin's death, the regime in the camp became weaker. My father wrote my mother She went to see my father. It took her over a week to get to the place. People were helping her when they heard that she was going to visit a prisoner.

I remember how my surrounding reacted to Stalin's death. Even then I found this overwhelming love of all people to him artificial. We were at school when we heard about it. Our class was in the gym. Semyon Faingoltz, a pupil with excellent marks and our Komsomol leader, stepped ahead from the line and said an ardent speech: 'Stalin died, but the agents of the world imperialism are not to rejoice. Our country shall not surrender to them'. He was shedding tears when speaking. My family also cried at home worrying about what it will be like without him.

After Stalin's death those prisoners who were innocent victims of his regime began to return home. In September 1954 my father was released. He was not rehabilitated, though, but, as his certificate of release indicated, his sentence was reduced from 10 to six years, and he was released before term for good performance and behavior. My father was not allowed to live in Kiev. His residential town was to be Belaya Tserkov in 100 kilometers from Kiev. On 14 August 1956 the Military Collegium of the supreme Court of the USSR reviewed the case of Isaac Stel'makh and closed it for absence of corpus delicti. My father was rehabilitated.

When he returned in 1954, he settled down in Vasilkov. He couldn't find a job due to his sentence of imprisonment. Later he managed to get a job. After rehabilitation my father began his efforts to resume his membership in the Communist party. I was always surprised that after Stalin's prisons and camps my father was convinced through his life time that those were acts of enemies of the Soviet power, ideas of socialism and communism were the most significant for him. I even envied his moral and political firmness, though I felt sorry for him: he was a very nervous, impulsive and very vulnerable man. My father submitted his request for restoration of his membership to Kiev regional party committee. They reviewed his request and said: 'You, dear Isaac Abramovich, if you were in prison, then there must have been something about it. You go to work, and you will demonstrate what you are like and then we shall admit you to the party'. My father came home in tears. He went to Moscow where he got an appointment with Shvernik, secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, and they resumed his membership in the party and returned all his military orders. My father came home inspired. He went to work at the Knigotorg, a book selling department, and shortly afterward he managed to receive an apartment in Kiev where we moved.

It was a nice three-bedroom apartment in the center of the city. We could finally live as the family of six. My father soon became director of the catering trust and a well-respected man. My mother didn't work. My mother and father had the biggest room, my grandmother and sisters lived in

another room and I had the smallest room. My grandmother did the housekeeping till she fell ill and became bedridden. She kept the Jewish spirit at home. We had traditional Jewish food at home: gefilte fish, sweet and sour stew and strudels with jam. On Friday she cooked a festive meal, put on a white kerchief, prayed and lit candles. On Saturday my father and she went to the synagogue arm-in-arm. Although it was dangerous for a member of the party to go to the synagogue, my father said that he feared nothing any more, and he said it jokingly, it seemed to me. On Pesach he always bought matzah at the synagogue. My grandmother had special crockery and even special napkins for Pesach. During seder there were always mandatory products on the table according to haggadah: meat on a bone, eggs, ground apples with cinnamon and herbs. There was wine on the table. I often went to see my grandfather Abram and grandmother Yenta. My grandfather read extracts from the Torah to me, explained what I didn't understand and told me about the Jewish history.

My older sister Raisa entered the Engineering Construction College and Shurah studied in the school of everyday services to the population. I worked in a shop few months and then I went to the army. I served in the engineering troops and my unit was in Kiev region.

I have good memories about the army. There was no discrimination and senior comrades always supported the newcomers. We had plain, but sufficient food. There was one Jew from the Western Ukraine in my platoon. Once, during our leisure time in the barrack one guy began to provoke me telling about 'zhydy' and caricature features that people 'granted' to them. I understood that he was doing it on purpose and if I didn't react than anybody would humiliate me. I didn't think long: I approached him and hit him on his face heartily, from all Jewish people, so to say. My fellow comrades started talking: 'Good for you, you've done right'. 'However, none of them spoke in my defense till I did it myself, but it strengthened my authority in the unit.

When I returned from the army, both of my grandmothers had passed away. In 1957 grandmother Yenta and in 1959 grandmother Ronia died. They were buried in the Jewish cemetery and there were attendants from the synagogue to recite prayers at the funerals.

When in the army, I began my 'writings' that were published in the regional newspaper 'Leninskoye znamia' (The Lenin's banner'). They gave me recommendations for a college. I submitted my documents to the Faculty of Journalism at Moscow University. There was big competition. During our Russian exam - it was a composition - I saw a pretty Jewish girl nearby who was writing assiduously. The teacher approached her and told her to stand up. He opened her desk and took a textbook from there. It was closed and was near her bag, but she was ordered to leave the classroom disgracefully. I and few other Jewish applicants felt some bodily hatred toward us, anti-Semitism on the biological level. Of course, none of us was admitted. We failed at the competition. I had good marks and went to see the rector. He said: 'We shall admit you when you enter the party'. I understood that I had to give up my journalistic career and decided to go to work.

I went to work as a locksmith at the Kiev motorcycle plant. I understood that I had to work better than the rest of us to avoid any complaints about my performance. I remember that when I received my first salary the foreman demanded that I bought a bottle of alcohol for him. I bought him the drink and then he shouted that he respected me, because I was young and technically smart. I worked there for some time and then I understood that I needed higher education. I entered the Mechanical Faculty of Agricultural Academy where I studied by correspondence. I

worked at this plant all my life. I started as a locksmith and then I held many positions: controlling inspector, foreman of the Technical Control department, shop superintendent and was promoted to commercial deputy director. I was the only Jewish manager. Besides, I wasn't a party member. At first they didn't want to admit me to the party, because they were reluctant to admit Jewish engineers, but then my colleagues began to recommend me to join the party, but I didn't want to. In contrast to my father, I didn't have belief in the party.

In my young years I was an active participant of amateur performances. I met Lubov Turun from Moscow, who came here as a young specialist. When I saw the girl, I said to myself that this girl would become my wife. Lubov is Ukrainian. Her father came from the Ukrainian village of Sukhoruchiye in Polesiye and her mother came from Gomel region in Belarus. They escaped from their villages during the period of dispossession of the kulaks and worked at construction sites moving from one place to another. They came to the construction of the exhibition of achievements of the public economy in Moscow. They stayed in Moscow during the war. Their older sons Vladimir and Sergey worked as engineers in Moscow. Lubov finished Moscow Chemical Machine Building College. Lubov's family welcomed me warmly. We got married in 1968. We had a wedding party in a big restaurant in Kiev. There were about 100 guests. We lived with parents few years and then I received an apartment.

Our plant is located near Babi Yar. At the height of struggle against dissidents and during the period of terrible anti-Semitism our plant and Artyom plant arranged for volunteer teams on 29 September every year, on the anniversary of mass shootings, to be on duty in the area. There were spontaneous meetings in Babi Yar and KGB officers [18] wearing civilian clothes were watching them. Jewish members of the party were forced to join these volunteer units. They were instructed to watch the people who came to the Babi Yar to commemorate their deceased compatriots. KGB explained that we were not to bother individuals, but the groups of people, particularly the ones wearing caps (kippah) and covers (tallit) and they were lighting candles, it was required to report about them immediately to a special truck with investigation officers. They often broke up those meetings and arrested people. I am proud to say that they never offered me to join this group, although some Jews willingly participated there. In those years Yevgeniy Yevtushenko's [Yevtushenko Yevgeny - Popular Russian poet. Born in 1933. Yevtushenko's first book of poems was published in 1952. He soon became the most popular spokesman of the young generation of poets who refused to adhere to the doctrine of socialist realism. The publication in Paris of Yevtushenko's Precocious Autobiography (1963) brought him severe official censure, and he was frequently criticized by the Russian government for his nonconformist attitude. Despite this, he made several reading tours abroad during the Soviet era. He has also written novels. In addition, he is an actor, director, and Photo grapher] poem 'Babi Yar' was published. It struck with acute truth and pain. 'I can still remember every line. The world community a monument to the deceased was installed. However, there was 'to Soviet people' inscription on it and not a word about tens of thousands of Jews exterminated here, but everybody knew, anyway. Then perestroika [19] began and the Jewish community installed the mournful 'menorah'. I remember the 50th anniversary of the shooting on 29 September 1991, when in front of many people and in presence of Bill Clinton, the former US President, Leonid Kravchuk, the first President of Ukraine, expressed apologies to the Jewish people on behalf of the Ukrainian people and I believe he knew what he was apologizing for. Not only for the actual fact of this shooting, but for many years of state and everyday anti-Semitism. Therefore,

I am grateful to independent Ukraine for giving an opportunity to many nations to develop, including Jews. I always think how my father and grandfather would be happy had they lived to this time and seen the wonderful synagogues, Hased, wonderful holidays Purim and Chanukkah in the 'Ukraina' palace, the best in Ukraine, our community life and my participation in it.

My mother died in 1975. My father couldn't bear the loss for a long time and then he married a Jewish woman from Leningrad of the same age with him. Their life together failed and she left. My father lost his vigor and died in 1981.

My sister Raisa has never married. She worked as a forewoman and engineer at big construction sites. She lives in Kiev. My younger sister Shura Novitskaya was married twice. Both her husbands died. Shura still works as an accountant. Her daughter Yelena works in the Solomon University [Jewish University in Kiev, established in 1995], and her son Yuriy is an artist.

Lubov and I have two daughters: Irina, born in 1970, and Yevgenia, born in 1977. Irina finished the College of Public Economy and is an economist. She married Andrey Chepizhko, a nice Ukrainian guy. They have no children. Irina identifies herself as a Jew. She and Andrey visit us on Jewish holidays that we celebrate. We have a Chanukkiyah and my grandmother's Pesach dish that I've kept safe.

My younger daughter Yevgenia has been interested in the Jewish culture and religion since childhood. She graduated from the Law Faculty of the Solomon University and also finished the Faculty of Judaism. Yevgenia is a great connoisseur of the Jewish culture, language and traditions. She actively worked in the Jewish organizations for young people and traveled all over the CIS. In one of her trips in Minsk she met a Jewish man from the USA. He also worked for a Jewish organization for young people. His relatives left Russia in the early 20th century. They got married. Now her surname is Kaplan. She and her husband live in a small town in Atlanta, USA. I don't remember the name of the town. Yevgenia adopted 'giyur' and has the Jewish name of Aviv, which means 'spring'. She works in the Jewish community center.

I am a pensioner now. I have a lot of spare time. I read a lot and study the Jewish history and religion. However, I don't go to the synagogue. I don't think it is necessary to go somewhere to serve the God. God is inside us.

GLOSSARY:

[1] Podol: The lower section of Kiev. It has always been viewed as the Jewish region of Kiev. In tsarist Russia Jews were only allowed to live in Podol, which was the poorest part of the city. Before World War II 90% of the Jews of Kiev lived there.

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

[3] 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.

[4] Kolkhoz: In the Soviet Union the policy of gradual and voluntary collectivization of agriculture was adopted in 1927 to encourage food production while freeing labor and capital for industrial development. In 1929, with only 4% of farms in kolkhozes, Stalin ordered the confiscation of peasants' land, tools, and animals; the kolkhoz replaced the family farm.

[5] Lenin (1870-1924): Pseudonym of Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, the Russian Communist leader. A profound student of Marxism, and a revolutionary in the 1890s. He became the leader of the Bolshevik faction of the Social Democratic Party, whom he led to power in the coup d'état of 25th October 1917. Lenin became head of the Soviet state and retained this post until his death.

[6] 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.

[7] Kulaks: In the Soviet Union the majority of wealthy peasants that refused to join collective farms and give their grain and property to Soviet power were called kulaks, declared enemies of the people and exterminated in the 1930s.

[8] Jewish collective farms: Such farms were established in the Ukraine in the 1930s during the period of collectivization.

[9] 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.

[10] Whites (White Army): Counter-revolutionary armed forces that fought against the Bolsheviks during the Russian Civil War. The White forces were very heterogeneous: They included monarchists and liberals - supporters of the Constituent Assembly and the tsar. Nationalist and anti-Semitic attitude was very common among rank-and-file members of the white movement, and expressed in both their propaganda material and in the organization of pogroms against Jews. White Army slogans were patriotic. The Whites were united by hatred towards the Bolsheviks and the desire to restore a 'one and inseparable' Russia. The main forces of the White Army were defeated by the Red Army at the end of 1920.

[11] Greens: members of the gang headed by Ataman Zeleniy (his nickname means 'green' in Russian).

[12] Lukianovka Jewish cemetery: It was opened on the outskirts of Kiev in the late 1890s and functioned until 1941. Many monuments and tombs were destroyed during the German occupation of the town in 1941-1943. In 1961 the municipal authorities closed the cemetery and Jewish

families had to rebury their relatives in the Jewish sections of a new city cemetery within half a year. A TV Center was built on the site of the former Lukianovka cemetery.

[13] Russian Revolution of 1917: Revolution in which the tsarist regime was overthrown in the Russian Empire and, under Lenin, was replaced by the Bolshevik rule. The two phases of the Revolution were: February Revolution, which came about due to food and fuel shortages during World War I, and during which the tsar abdicated and a provisional government took over. The second phase took place in the form of a coup led by Lenin in October/November (October Revolution) and saw the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks.

[14] Struggle against religion: The 1930s was a time of anti-religion struggle in the USSR. In those years it was not safe to go to synagogue or to church. Places of worship, statues of saints, etc. were removed; rabbis, Orthodox and Roman Catholic priests disappeared behind KGB walls.

[15] Great Terror (1934-1938): During the Great Terror, or Great Purges, which included the notorious show trials of Stalin's former Bolshevik opponents in 1936-1938 and reached its peak in 1937 and 1938, millions of innocent Soviet citizens were sent off to labor camps or killed in prison. The major targets of the Great Terror were communists. Over half of the people who were arrested were members of the party at the time of their arrest. The armed forces, the Communist Party, and the government in general were purged of all allegedly dissident persons; the victims were generally sentenced to death or to long terms of hard labor. Much of the purge was carried out in secret, and only a few cases were tried in public 'show trials'. By the time the terror subsided in 1939, Stalin had managed to bring both the Party and the public to a state of complete submission to his rule. Soviet society was so atomized and the people so fearful of reprisals that mass arrests were no longer necessary. Stalin ruled as absolute dictator of the Soviet Union until his death in March 1953.

[16] Babi Yar: Babi Yar is the site of the first mass shooting of Jews that was carried out openly by fascists. On 29th and 30th September 1941 33,771 Jews were shot there by a special SS unit and Ukrainian militia men. During the Nazi occupation of Kiev between 1941 and 1943 over a 100,000 people were killed in Babi Yar, most of whom were Jewish. The Germans tried in vain to efface the traces of the mass grave in August 1943 and the Soviet public learnt about mass murder after World War II.

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

[18] KGB: The KGB or Committee for State Security was the main Soviet external security and intelligence agency, as well as the main secret police agency from 1954 to 1991.

[19] 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.