

Semyon Vilenskiy

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Semyon Vilenskiy is a lively and active man of average height. He is very sociable, easy-going and friendly. He is fond of his book publishing job. During the interview his phone kept ringing all the time. His friends, colleagues and acquaintances wanted to talk to him, and he always had time for them. Many people seek his advice that he willingly gives to them, as well as offers whatever support that can help them. He lives in a small two-bedroom apartment in a 1960s house in the northern part of Moscow. He has many books, and a number of manuscripts of his own and his friends – former prisoners of the Gulag. He intends to publish them all.

[My family background](#)

[Growing up](#)

[During the war](#)

[After the war](#)

[Glossary](#)

My family background

My father's ancestors came from Pochep, Bryansk region in Russia [150 km from Moscow]. My paternal great grandfather Fikelman had four sons. To avoid service in the army [single sons in families were not subject to the army service] the rabbi registered his sons as children of his distant childless relatives. Therefore, there were members of the family with different surnames - Vilenskiy, Khazanov, Kopperschmidt - in my great grandfather's family. I have no information about them, but in this manner my grandfather's name became Solomon Vilenskiy. He and my paternal grandmother, whose name I don't know died during an epidemic in 1920. They had five children: daughter Luba and four sons. They were Yosif, the oldest son, Mark, Moisey and my father Samuel, the youngest. They were born and spent their childhood in Pochep. I remember my uncles and my aunt well. They visited us in Moscow.

My father's older brother Yosif Vilenskiy was business manager of a big forestry estate. During the revolution of 1917 [1](#) he became chief of a forestry organization. He lived in Sharya Kostroma region [about 200 km from Moscow] where he was director of the forestry. Uncle Yosif was born in 1889 and died in 1959. His wife Rosa was very religious and his family observed all Jewish traditions. Even during the period of anti-Semitic demonstrations they baked their own matzah and celebrated Saturday. There was no synagogue or a rabbi in Sharya, and other Jews celebrated all holidays and conducted rituals in my uncle's house secretly from outsiders. They had two children: daughter Vera and son Samuel, born in the 1920s. Their parents taught them to not mention anything about

their home at school: this was the period of official struggle against religion [2](#). They had prayer books and a Torah scroll, which they kept in a suitcase. There was a mezuzah on their door.

We hardly ever met with my father's other brothers. They lived in different towns. My father's brothers and my father finished a cheder. My father studied in cheder, when Lazar Kaganovich [3](#) also studied there. Their teacher taught the boys to be courageous. He made them lie on the floor, covered them with a bed sheet, drew the curtains and told them scary stories saying: 'Now you are dead!' Lazar Kaganovich was the only one of them, who failed the test. Though my father did not get a higher education, he was a very talented person having an exclusive memory and great organizational skills.

My father reached the biggest success in the forestry business. None of the Vilenskiy family ever joined the communist party. After the Civil War [4](#) my father was manager of the office responsible for restoration of the Eastern Siberian Railroad in Khabarovsk [about 6200 km east of Moscow]. My father worked in field offices moving from one location to another. My father often traveled to Moscow. When my father was young, he was friends with Khomutov, who came from a noble family. The Khomutov family moved to America. During the first five-year plan period [5](#) Khomutov, inspired by the ideas of communism and suffering from nostalgia returned to Russia. He found my father and they went to work at the construction of a big chemical plant in Voznesensk near Moscow. I was only about 5 years old. I remember from what my mother told me that papa and Khomutov came to Moscow once a month and went to the Bolshoy Theater [6](#) with their wives. When in 1934 at the very start of arrests [Great Terror] [7](#) they were invited to Moscow to receive their awards, but both of them were taken to the Lubyanka [8](#) prison for the charges of sabotage. My father had a relative, who was his second uncle Dubinskiy - I don't remember his name. Before the revolution this uncle was probably one Jewish forester in Russia working for a count. Dubinskiy gave shelter to young communists Molotov [9](#), Kaganovich and others in his woods. Dubinskiy faced great risks. The czarist police hunted for these people and giving them shelter might mean death sentence. Dubinskiy also got infatuated by communist ideas. After the revolution those whom he had given shelter became governmental officials. They remembered their rescuer, and Dubinskiy stayed to work in this forestry that became the state property. Dubinskiy had many awards from state authorities. He was well-respected by his relatives. I remember that when he visited us, he brought me toys, I remember the lotto game [popular gambling game - one player picks cards with numbers from a bag and the others place chips on the numbers he names. The winner is the one, who covers all numbers on one of his cards] and we played it together. He always stayed with us. When he visited us that time, he found out that Samuel was in Lubyanka. He went to see his old friends and told them he was going to stay there till Samuel got out of the prison. They released Samuel, but executed Khomutov. My father's uncle could not do anything about it since he was not his relative. My father never spoke to anyone about this incident as if nothing had happened at all. In the 1930s my father worked as chief of the forestry department of the Ministry of Aviation Industry. Aircraft were manufactured from compressed wood at the time.

Papa and mama met in Moscow. Papa was a friend of mama's brother Grigoriy. Grigoriy was a financial officer during the Soviet period. Papa visited Grigoriy at his home and everybody could tell that mama fell in love with my papa, and my papa, being a decent man, married her in 1919. He liked her, but that was all, but my father believed it to be indecent conduct to refuse a woman, if she loved a man - this was what the etiquette of good manners demanded at the time. My parents

just had a civil ceremony in the registry office.

Mama came from a very poor family. Before 1913 they lived in Snovsk town Chernihov region [180 km east of Kiev]. My maternal grandfather's name was Aron Belenkiy, and my grandmother's name was Lisa. I visited them in my childhood, but I can hardly remember them. My mother said my grandfather finished a yeshivah and dedicated his life to religious activities. He had many religious books and knew Hebrew. My grandfather spent most of his time in bed, when I remember him. Some people's faces enlighten and get nobler, when they grow older. My grandfather Aron had such face. My grandmother was a housewife. I guess my mother had 7 brothers and sisters, but I only knew some of them. They got together in their parents' home. I remember those gatherings and delicious food. We visited my grandparents on Jewish holidays. I remember little about traditions, but I remember the smell of delicacies and Jewish sweets. They were a clan of a family supporting and helping each other. When my father was arrested, my mama's relatives took turns to stay with us supporting my mother.

My mother's older brother Zinoviy Belenkiy (Ziama in short) finished a gymnasium as an external student. His anti-Semitic teacher refused to give him an excellent mark in the Russian literature and language till a curator came from the district town and my uncle passed his exam with an excellent mark. My uncle entered the Philological Faculty of Moscow University in 1911 or 1912. Having all excellent marks in his school certificate he was admitted within the quota [10](#) without exams. He graduated from the Philological and Medical Faculties. Since the family could not support him he gave private classes to earn his living. He taught the son of an officer for the mayor of the town. The boy improved his knowledge and his father once called my uncle: 'Young man, I owe you a lot for helping my son - I could not handle this before. What can I do for you?' My uncle said he wanted his family to move to Moscow. This officer said he could not help them obtain a residential permit to live outside the Pale of Settlement [11](#), but they could move to Moscow without a permit and that he would make arrangements with a policeman for my uncle to pay him 3 ruble bribe per month to leave them alone. My mother's family rented a small apartment in Moscow and paid the fee to the policeman until the Pale of Settlement was cancelled after the revolution. My mother's brothers and sisters finished a gymnasium in Moscow. My uncle Zinoviy Belenkiy supported them. Then they got married and moved to various towns. I don't know the names of my mother's brothers or sisters.

During the Soviet period my uncle's professor of medicine invited him to take part in the consultation for the child of a big Soviet official and my uncle diagnosed the disease correctly. This was the beginning of his career as a private doctor. He married Rosa, whose father was an oil manufacturer from Baku [Azerbaijan]. In the 1920s their sons Lev and Naum were born. They lived in a nice apartment in the center of Moscow. When the Great Patriotic War [12](#) began, my uncle volunteered to the front. He was awfully fat. He was assigned to a cavalry kazak regiment where they made him to ride a horse for 4 hours to lose some weight. Zinoviy was a well educated man. He knew Jewish history, Hebrew and literature. He was well respected in his regiment. He was a good doctor and did his job well. He visited all locations of mass shootings of Jews: cemeteries, pits, burial locations to honor the deceased Jews. He told me about this and mentioned the names of towns. People respected him for honoring the memory of his people. My uncle Zinoviy always stressed that he was a Jew. At the end of the war he was chief doctor in the Marshal Rokossovskiy army [Rokossovskiy Konstantin Konstantinovich (1896-1968), Marshal of the Soviet Union (1944), Marshal of Poland (1949), Hero of the Soviet Union, twice (1944, 1945). Born to the family of a

railroad man in Velikiye Luki. October 1917 went to the Red army. During the Great Patriotic War he was Army Commander in Moscow battle, commander of Briansk and Donskoy fronts (Stalingrad battle), Central, Belarussian, 1st and 2nd Belarussian (Visla\Oder and Berlin operations) Fronts. In 1945-49 Chief Commander of the Northern group of armed forces. In 1949 — 56 Minister of National defense and deputy chairman of the Council of Ministers of the PRP. In 1956-57 and 1958-62 deputy minister of defense of the USSR.]. On their way back home Marshal Rokossovskiy asked my uncle: ‚Well, then, and what are you bringing your wife, Doctor?’ ‚Nothing special’, - said my uncle. Rokossovskiy ordered his aide to take my uncle to their trophy stocks and my uncle brought home some clothes. He gave me a pair of cavalry pants and I wore them. We lived on the 6th floor and there was no elevator. When my uncle visited us, it was no problem for him to walk upstairs. He continued his private practice. Then he got blind, but his former patients still came with their children and grandchildren and he examined them by touch. He died in the late 1980s and was buried in a town cemetery in Moscow.

After the gymnasium my mother finished a 2-year dentistry course, but she never worked. She got married and became a housewife. She looked after the children and papa often went on business and was rarely home. After my parents got married my father received two rooms in a 4-bedroom communal apartment [13](#) in the center of Moscow. The building was constructed in 1914. It’s still their, an old house. There was a sculpture of a knight at the entrance. Engineers and other intelligent people lived in this house. After the revolution some moved to other countries and others were executed in 1937, and the building decayed. Those, who wanted to move into this house, were offered to join the association of tenants for restoration of the house. They were to fix water supply, heating or gas supply. I was born here in 1928. In 1920 my sister Bertha was born. She became a talented mathematician. She graduated from the Engineering Mathematical Faculty of MSU and was a very talented person. Her teacher, an outstanding mathematician, used to say that women were worthless in mathematics, but Bertha Vilenskaya. After the war she was editor of the ‘Mathematical Bulletin’ journal. It was a very popular journal. In 1941 she volunteered to the front, she returned in 1945. She never got married, but in 1945 her son Yevgeniy Vilenskiy was born. He died from cancer in 1980. After the war my sister kept working for this journal. She died in 1983. We buried her in a town cemetery.

Mama was a real Jewish mama. On my way to school I had to cross the Sadovoye Koltso street and she watched my each step standing on the window sill. I grew up healthy thanks to mama. She was a great housewife. She was very fond of music, and she raised me to love songs and literature. She was a good friend. I remember, when in 1937 many of her friends’ husbands were arrested, she helped them with consolation and money.

Mama and papa had a good life before the war raising their children and meeting with friends and relatives. The family got together with grandmother and grandfather to celebrate Jewish holidays, but later, when the older generation passed away, there were rare family gatherings. My parents were far from fitting into the definition of the ‘right Soviet people’. My father told me how in 1917 he came to Alatyr in Chuvashia [about 5000 km east of Moscow] where his relatives - young communists were establishing the Soviet power. They were fervent revolutionaries and communists. When he arrived, they were partying in the house. They had already executed some people, when all of a sudden in light of general intolerance to religion and struggle against religion decided to execute the priest. My father jumped out of the window, found this priest and told him

to hide away. My father had no sympathy to these drunken party revolutionaries and he never joined the party.

My parents, their relatives and friends gave up their parents' religion and traditions. They were atheists. After the Pale of Settlement was cancelled, Jews began to move to bigger towns and to the capital. They associated their past, when they were not allowed to take part in public life, with Jewish rules, holidays and religion. Jewish young people believed this past to be dull and boring. They rejected all traditions. They already identified themselves with Russian, when all of a sudden they were brutally reminded that they were Jews. Once, when my father was an older man and had health problems, he came to see me and said he was at the synagogue. 'Are you religious now?' - I asked him. 'No, I just went there to take a look at Jews'. He was drawn to Jews, perhaps, this was the call of the blood.

My father was a brave man and had good organizational skills. At some time he was manager of the office dealing in external sales of wood: 'Les Eksport' [meaning Wood Export] in Arkhangelsk [about 1000 km north of Moscow]. In 1937 all brokers were arrested. Brokers were responsible for quality assurance of wood and support of the trade process. They needed high skills and experience to do their job well and there were not so many of them available. My father went to Moscow. He changed trains fearing an arrest. He went to see Mikoyan [Mikoyan Anastas Ivanovich (1895-1978) - Soviet party and state activist. In 1926 - Minister of Home and Foreign trade of the USSR, in 1946 deputy chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, Minister of Foreign Trade]. Mikoyan told my father to wait for him in his office and managed to have few brokers released. There were no replacements, and to avoid paying forfeits to western companies, the authorities decided to release the brokers. My father told me that he avoided arrest in Arkhangelsk thanks to me. I was 9 or 10 years old, and my father took me with him. We stayed at a hotel. All local NKVD [14](#) officers were arrested. An officer from another town came to work for NKVD. He had his son with him. Since this man had to work at night, he left his sons at the hotel and we played together. His father took us to the port on his motorcycle. My father said that if this man had somebody to watch his son, my father would have been arrested. He worked with captains of foreign ships waiting for wood loading in the port, and all of his co-workers were arrested then.

Growing up

I went to the Russian gymnasium across the street from our home. My sister studied in this gymnasium. Later it became a Russian school. There were very good teachers in it. I studied well and didn't have to work hard for it. I was fond of Russian literature and read a lot of Russian classical books. I became a young Octobrist [15](#), and a pioneer [16](#) at school. In summer my parents usually rented a dacha [countryside cottage] near Moscow where my mother, my sister and I enjoyed the quietude, the birds singing, fresh cow milk that peasant women from a neighboring village brought, and each other's company. Many other people from Moscow also rented dachas and we socialized with them. We usually made new friends in summer. We got together to play the lotto, to party. My father joined us at weekends. He brought food with him. We rode bicycles, bathed in the river and got suntanned by the end of summer. I had many friends at school. We went to the cinema and theaters, played with a ball at the school stadium and nothing betokened the gloomy years to come. Like all other children of my age I was careless and had no premonition of the upcoming war.

During the war

In 1941 my mama was seriously ill, she had a mental disorder and had to stay in hospital. My father wanted to send me away from Moscow for the summer and he sent me to his acquaintance, whose Russian [Common] name [17](#) was Polina Mikhailovna, or Perlia Mendeleyevna Cheushevskaya, this was her Jewish name, in May 1941. After my mother died she became my stepmother, but my father and she only saw each other several times. This was a kumyss [Horse milk. Steppe people grew horses to produce kumyss. There were health centers for people with stomach problems built there. This horse milk was believed to be salubrious and doctors included it in everyday ration of patients] -recreation center in the steppe near Orenburg. [about 1200 km southeast of Moscow]. She was director of this recreation center. On 22 June 1941 the war began. Mama died in a hospital in Moscow in 1942. None of us was in Moscow at the time. My sister's friend buried her. We didn't find her grave after the war.

Some time after the war my father and the Ministry of Forestry moved to Kuibyshev [about 800 km southeast of Moscow], and in 1943, after the turning point in the war, when it became clear that fascists would never come to Moscow, my father and his Ministry returned to Moscow. I stayed in the recreation center with my stepmother. I didn't go to school. She bribed some officials who issued me certificates about finishing another form at school. I lived in tents in field hospitals and transported the wounded from the railroad station. I was 13, when the war began. My stepmother was eager to please me fearing that I might run away and then my father might leave her. My father came on vacation several times. They stayed together whispering to one another till late at night and I was awfully jealous. I knew already that mama was gone. My stepmother had strong will and was not afraid of going against the law. According to instructions, she had to send her patients to the battalions for recovering military involved in the construction of fortifications, but she felt sorry for them and sent them to work in kolkhozes where they worked 2-3 months having better food than in battalions. Once she was almost subject to the tribunal trial, but the district commander helped her. She also kept livestock in the center. There were 50 horses in it. In 1943 she was made responsible for organizing an evacuation hospital. It was slowly moving to the west till it joined the combat forces. She perished at the end of the war dragging a wounded military from a battlefield. In 1943, when this hospital moved to the front line, I went back to Moscow. According to the documents I had finished the 5th form, but I didn't spend more than two months at the school desk through this whole period. In Moscow I finished the remaining years at school in two years as an external student. I also joined Komsomol [18](#) then. My former school girlfriend worked in the district Komsomol committee and she issued me a Komsomol membership card, which was illegal. The official procedure took too much time while there were just few weeks left before the entrance exams. I was neither willing nor had time to submit an official request and then wait for an official interview and worry about this interview in the district Komsomol committee. And besides all, I only needed this to enter the University. I needed to join Komsomol. I decided to enter the University and this would hardly happen had I not been a Komsomol member. When I was arrested, I feared that this might come up and she would have huge problems, but my interrogation officers never asked for my Komsomol membership card. All young people were Komosomol members then.

After the war

In 1945 I passed exams to the Russian Philological Faculty of Moscow State University. The competition was 25 applicants per one student's position. The war was over and many young people wanted to become writers. Then they publicized the results of the composition: there were two marks given, one for the content and one for literacy. I had '5' for the content and '2' for the literacy. I decided I failed and turned to leave the building, when they announced that the applicants with such marks as I had could be admitted as external students. Permanent students were to receive bread cards [the card system was introduced to directly regulate food supplies to the population by food and industrial product rates. During and after the great Patriotic War there were cards for workers, non-manual employees and dependents in the USSR. The biggest rates were on workers' cards: 400 grams of bread per day], but external students were not given this privilege. Besides, we had to pay 100 rubles per exam - this was the price of one loaf of bread at that time and 25 rubles for one credit. If external students finished the 1st year successfully, they were to be admitted to the stationary department. I became an external student in summer 1945. I made friends with my fellow students. Many of them had at the front. Many graduates of the Philological Faculty, who entered the university in 1945, became good writers, poets and literary critics. Once my co-students and I went out of the city. It was a beautiful spot, green groves and a lovely day. We talked and philosophized. We discussed recent exams and history of the USSR. We were taught that a society consisted of workers and peasants. As for intelligentsia, it was not granted belonging to a class, but just an interlayer. All in all, the word interlayer was rather abusive, besides, we could not understand this. If there were more educated people, the other classes were to reduce in number and the interlayer was to become more numerous. I sang four lines with the tune of the Polish national anthem:

The intelligents
Have become rougher
They are agents all around,
And the first of them is Stalin.

This verse cost me a lot. I don't know which of my comrades reported on me since the main informer was not with us that time. I was followed, though it wasn't done openly. After the war our knowledge of the fascist genocide awakened the Jewish self-identification in me and my Jewish comrades. The press published information about the genocide, but they didn't mention that native residents of the occupied areas had their part in it. Actually, we didn't know the Jewish language, Jewish history. There were people of the Russian culture in my surrounding: the future philologists, writers and historians. This self-identification revealed itself within the Russian language and literature. There were poems, in which those, who arrested us discovered nationalistic motives. This was described in protocols and this was identified as a criminal action. The Jews, who did not know the Jewish language [Yiddish], found refuge in the brilliant Jewish theater in Moscow with its leader Mikhoels [19](#). They staged their performances in Yiddish. My cousin brother Zinoviy Vilenskiy wife's sister attended a studio in this theater. My friends and I often went to the theater. When she did not play on the stage, she often sat beside us translating for us and our neighbors shushed at us: 'Be quiet!' - many Jews at that time knew the language. Later, after I was released, I went to Jewish concerts and performances with her. She translated for me and the others yelled: 'Louder, louder!' This was a different generation that didn't know the language. This happened just within 15 years.

In 1945 my friend Lev Malkin and few other University students were arrested. I would have been arrested at the same time, only I rarely met with my friends. Perhaps, for this reason I was arrested

later. The trial took place in the town court. They were charged under article 58 (anti-Soviet activities). The court sitting were closed. One of my friends and Gulag fellow prisoners Gasteyev described the trial in detail in his book 'The lives of destitute sybarites' published in Russian in America. Gasteyev moved to USA. HE died in Boston. At that time he was also arrested later. I came to the court, when he was under trial. I saw my friend, when he was escorted in the corridor. The visitors, including me, were allowed to come into the court room, when his sentence was announced. I sat beside academician Williams [Williams, Vasiliy Robertovich (1863— 1939), Soviet Academician, founder and first chief of the department 'Basics of farming and plant cultivation', a genius of the Russian scientific school of soil scientists and agronomists], whose son was under trial. When the sentence was announced, he dropped his hat on the floor. These actually youngsters were accused of anti-Soviet agitation, espionage for capitalist countries, corruption and disorientation of Soviet students and God knows what nonsense. My friend was sentenced to 5 years in prison. Later this sentence was changed to 3.5 years, but even this sentence was enough for him to never return and perish in the camp, stay there for good. He wrote in one letter from the camp: 'Philosopher Kant got up at 6 am and his work day ended, after dark. He lived over 80 years. I don't think I will live 20 years considering the way of life and food here'. There was evidence collected about these guys and of course, my name was mentioned there. My friend said at interrogations that we were childhood friends, but I was hopelessly behind him, that I was dull, and he or his friends never discussed life or politics with me. They must have been interested in dull people as well. They photographed those, who came to the trial. Since 1945 they showed interest in me. My external co-student Vsevolod Kolesnikov was my friend and I introduced him to my university fellow students. He never invited any of us to his home. After school he offered me to enter the Military College of Foreign languages. He said he knew director of this college, who promised to admit him and me. When we came to this college, I saw its students marching and refused to go there. I said that the army and drilling were not for me. I entered the university, but we kept meeting. I recited my poems to him and talked about my vision of intelligentsia and classes. He replied that these brilliant thoughts should be kept for the history and put them down. I was flattered. I didn't suspect anything. Only later I found out that his father was a KGB [20](#) general. During investigation my interrogators wanted me to confront him hoping that I would confess then, but this confrontation never happened. My interrogation officer said he broke his leg, but I just think he probably feared to look into my eyes. He also betrayed my other friends without any afterthoughts. When I returned to Moscow after I was released and the issue of my rehabilitation was under review, I went to this man's home trying to see him. His mother was at home, but I never saw him again in my life.

I finished the 1st year successfully, but the university authorities offered us to choose any other university in the Soviet Union instead making us stationary students as they had promised. I tried other universities till I found the Lvov [Ukraine, about 1200 km southeast of Moscow] University. They admitted me to the 1st year again due to my lack of the Ukrainian language. Rector of this university sent me to Moscow to search necessary books for him in libraries. Again, I didn't have a chance to attend classes in the university like I didn't at school. I often traveled to Moscow selecting books for Lvov University, and the Lvov University also sent books to Moscow University as a gift. During occupation of Lvov Germans made a toilet in the storage of the university library. Many valuable volumes in Greek and Latin were destroyed. There was a military order in Lvov. This was the period of desperate struggle of the new Soviet regime [21](#) with Ukrainian Bandera nationalists [22](#). I felt myself a Jew particularly acutely in Lvov in 1946. At first I stayed in a hostel

where my co-tenants were the Hutsul [native mountain Ukrainians, resided in Western Ukraine and Subcarpathia [23](#) students, most of them banderovtsy, from various towns of western Ukraine and Subcarpathia. One night I woke up and saw a Hutsul guy sitting beside me. He said he was watching me so that the others did not kill me. They hated Russians and believed them to be invaders, particularly those from Moscow, and Jews, who they thought kept the steering wheel of the Soviet power, particularly that I was a Komsomol member. There were only 5 Komsomol members in the University. It was not safe to stay in the hostel. One night banderovtsy hanged 1 Komsomol member at the stadium. I left the hostel, my co-student and I slept on the desks in the library for some time. Later we rented a room for three. There was brutal anti-Semitism that became common for few generations.

One day I went to the human resource department of the university to obtain some documents that I needed. The HR manager told me to come by later. When I came back at the time she appointed, she invited me to her office where only registered personnel was allowed, closed the door tightly and showed me a letter from the KGB where they requested information about my contacts, activities and attached a detailed questionnaire. I read it and gave it back to her without saying a word. She indicated to me that I was followed while she believed this was unfair particularly in view of the situation, when one of us was hanged. Seeing this paper, an experienced person would have tried to get lost in the big countries, like my father did at his time, but I went back to Moscow. I decided to try to stay in Moscow University, when it was impossible in Lvov. I stayed with my father, my sister and her son for about a month. I went to the university, but they didn't tell me anything certain. I was crossing a highway in Moscow and stopped in the middle. A man with some weird face was crossing the street in the opposite direction. Without turning to me he said while walking: 'Don't choke with a fish bone. You are followed'. I saw some shadows in the entrance ways, but I was young and didn't remember such things. I didn't want to disturb my father about such small things and didn't tell him anything. Once, when my father was away on business and my sister and I were at home, the door bell gave a demanding ring. I asked my sister to open the door. Few men swiftly proceeded into the room pushing her aside. 'Don't move. Do you have weapons?' They took me with them and there was a search at home that lasted till next morning. They found letters, poems, notebooks, everything they could find. They found gunpowder on the entresol. My neighbor's friend was a forester, perhaps, this was his gunpowder, but they added it to the evidence. There was a ready case: a poem against Stalin, wanted to kill him, prepared gunpowder, etc. I was taken to the Lubianka prison. They took away my boot laces, my belt, badges, everything made of metal. He first thing a man feels there is that he has to hold his trousers. They replaced metal nails in the boot soles with wooden ones and locked me in a box cell. Next morning I was taken to another cell with 6 other men in it. There were spacious cells with parquet floors in the prison. Every detail was taken into consideration to exhaust, scare and humiliate a person. For meals we had cooked buckwheat, but with peas. We were allowed to go to the toilet twice in 24 hours. There was a toilet in the cell, but we could not use it in front of everybody else. My fellow prisoners told me that Zuskin, the leading actor of the Mikhoels' Theater, and his friend were in this cell. There was a tale about him. One day, when he was escorted to his cell from another interrogation, Zuskin dashed forward and hit his head against the window sill hoping to kill himself, but it didn't happen and he was taken to the sanitary cell. Later he was executed. I was taken to interrogation on the first day. My fellow prisoners managed to explain that on the first interrogation officers imitate the particular seriousness of charges. There were few interrogation officers waiting for me in the interrogation office as if the whole Moscow only

discussed my arrest. There were phone calls, and some men came in and out with weapons. Though I was warned about it, I was still stupefied by these activities. They were not rude during interrogation, but they spoke with an anti-Semitic hint, as if they meant that Christian people would not dare to speak so deprecatingly about the people of power, whom one owns everything in the world. They asked questions about my friends and provoked me to report on my acquaintances. The Lubianka officers were the most mature anti-Semites I ever faced. There is no surprise that in 1952, when Jewish doctors were arrested, [24](#) those anti-Semites arrested and brutally beat their chief prosecutor Doron, a Jewish man. There was an investigation and he was to be killed, when Stalin died and he was released. It should be mentioned that Stalin and the KGB office dealing with the so-called anti-Soviet elements, looked at Jews as oppositionists since there were many Jews in the Trotsky [25](#) opposition. For some time I was called to interrogations at night. They decided to behave correctly with me at first. They said that my relative Zinoviy Vilenskiy was here. He cooperated with the power and was only sentenced to 5 years. This was my cousin brother imprisoned for refusal to report on others. Later it turned out he didn't cooperate with them. They had no evidence against him. After 5 years in prison he returned without his teeth. My interrogation officers demanded that I signed the paper confirming that I told jokes. I didn't sign anything and refused to admit that I was the author of these lines about Stalin. I thought that if they identified that I was the author they would shoot me, but they had no written proof of it. They didn't beat me. This was a short period, when they did not beat prisoners. So they could not handle this situation, when they intended to undo an anti-Soviet organization, of which I was sort of a member, but I never said a word about anyone and never mentioned one name. One day they told me to pack and follow them. There was a truck with the 'meat' inscription on it in the yard. Inside it was divided into cages with other people in them, but we could not see each other. At first I heard the noises of streets in Moscow, but then it became quiet. We were moving out of town for about half an hour. The truck stopped. There were birds singing and I heard the breechblocks clicking. I thought they were going to shoot us. It was scary, but the truck moved on. It stopped by Sukhanovskaya prison, right where the nuns had their cells. This was a nunnery before 1935. They forced residents of few nearby villages to move out, chased away some nuns and killed the others and converted the nunnery into a prison. On 18 August 1948 I was taken to Sukhanovskaya prison. I was just 20 years of age. I got to know that this was the Sukhanovskaya prison only after 1953. I was taken to a small cell with cement floor. The stool and the table were fixed to the floor, and the berth was fixed to the wall. There was a transom window with blurred glass and wire bars and a narrow window sill. It hardly let any light in. I stumbled all the time and had bruises on my knees - I called it 'a nose walk'. I knew, when the warden opened the peep hole to look in, and then I jumped onto the sill to breathe in some air. They never took me out for walks. In 100 days I was outside only once, when they took me to a mental hospital for examination. Some prisoners lost their sanity in this prison. They screamed and howled at night, particularly women. I was not called for interrogation. I demanded a prosecutor. They sent me an investigation officer. I didn't need him since he only demanded that I signed the paper that I wanted to kill Stalin. The warden didn't allow me to sleep during a day. The cell was damp and cold. I was covered with furuncles. There were so worn out sheets and blankets in the Sukhanovskaya prison that it was impossible to tie them together to hang oneself on them. The cells were kept damp and cold on purpose. The meals consisted of 2 lumps of sugar and about 400 grams of bread ration. I cannot tell whether it was good or bad. It was damp. There was also undercooked pearl barley in the morning. I was young and hungry and ate this ration of cereal and then I suffered from terrible stomach pains. 100%

gastritis for the rest of your life. Terrible condition. You can do nothing, you cannot talk to anybody, you are not allowed to read or write. My poems saved me. In these 100 days I wrote the biggest number of poems. I had to repeat them to learn them by heart. I worked with inspiration. I worked as hard as I worked never after. I remember all of these poems.

My sad abode, tell me why you need me?

Why do these bars divide the integral world into quadrates?

Why soldiers? Why wail of these innocent victims?

That I curse my every day and long for the salutary night,

There are ghosts here, and the hostile shade

It's not the devil, but so much like it.

There were 3 doctors in the prison. They made the rounds of cell in the morning escorted by an officer and two wardens. One doctor demonstratively wore an order of Lenin [26](#). He had empty eyes and an indifferent look. He applied ichthyol ointment on my furuncles. It didn't help, but the cell smelled of it. The smell in this prison was unbearable. Another doctor had the eyes of a morphine infatuated man. He was young and black haired, a sadist. He applied the ointment, but also squeezed the out – it hurt. The third doctor was a woman. She had a good face. She appeared later. Once we had a talk and I wrote a poem about it. It was like a ray of light – a living human face in the midst of this nightmare.

Where do I start? I start from what it happened before.

Have you ever been in a damp cell, so comfortable and tight as a grave,

A bulb in bars above your head?

My days were still like in backwater, the light came in through the blurred glass.

And the wheels – no they didn't spin, but unwound the base of days dropping the fibers.

And I begged without calling the name of God, I begged not with words, but with my being,

For have someone to walk beside me on my last path at least for an instant and be human.

Once upon a time, was it autumn or winter

The door opened and a woman came in. Beautiful and alive, from the free world

She looked into my eyes and understood.

He asked me quietly whether my heart bothered me or did I have headaches in the evenings?

She told me to take off my shirt. The warden in the doorframe like an owl.

The escort and an officer in the corridor, registering each word.

And the woman said with a humble smile: 'Don't worry. It will pass'.

I went on a hunger strike refusing from sugar and bread in the morning. They put my food on the window sill. I didn't eat. They didn't care. The longer it lasted the more excited I became. I began to talk loudly, sing and yell. I cannot tell how many days it lasted till finally the chief warden came in. He said: 'Stay quiet'. I replied: 'I will not'. I was taken to an isolation ward downstairs. I fainted. I recovered my senses, when they dragged me to the chief warden. He told me to stay quiet in my cell. I refused and they dragged me back to the isolation ward. There was a big barrel by the isolation ward and I thought it was a toilet for gigantic prisoners. As it turned out they filled this barrel with boiling or ice cold water and put people inside. However, I can witness that there was no need to torture prisoners. Making them stay a little in isolation ward was sufficient, it was like torturing with electric current. At least after tortures prisoners could have some quiet, but here there was no quiet, all nerves were tense, women were screaming and one couldn't tell what they did to them. He state of madness. Death everywhere. I understood that they were bringing prisoners to the condition, when they agreed to sign under all accusations, and individual tortures

were to become a 2nd phase. I recovered my consciousness in the cell. There was daylight, I was lying and this woman doctor bent over me. She must have given me something to smell. She said: 'Start eating'. At first I could only have boiling water. I felt that she was asking me. I was taken to another cell, a dryer and warmer one. 2 or 3 days later this doctor came in again. She said: 'You'll be taken to a different place. I have to examine you for injuries'. When she left, I saw a white handkerchief. It smelled of women's perfume. I understood she dropped it for me. Was taken to the Institute of forensic psychiatry named after Serbskiy. They were to identify whether I was sane. They didn't keep me long there before they took me back to Lubianka. A thorough search and a shower. The warden decided to play a joke on me. He turned on cold water and boiling hot water from the pipe at the bottom. I pressed myself to the wall screaming. He laughed: 'Mistake'. During the search he found the woman's handkerchief and sensed the smell of perfume. He looked at me, this inveterate scoundrel and then gave me back this handkerchief, a man to a man deed. He didn't ask where I got it. He thought is I managed to save the smell of perfume, it gave me credit. This was early winter 1948. During the 1st interrogation the investigation officer read the statement issued by the Serbskiy Institute: 'Sane. He is in the state of extreme nervous and physical exhaustion'. He said this meant I was not to be interrogated at night time. The investigation intended to complete this case. During a short period in 1948 they followed the rules. They were trying for a long time to make me accept their accusations. In May 1949 I was taken to Butyrskaya prison. They announced the verdict of the Special council of NKVD USSR [extrajudicial punitive body in NKVD authorized to issue sentences without a trial or attorney.], written on a thin sheet of cigarette paper. 'Sentence under articles 58-8/19 (intention to execute a terrorist attack) and 58-10 (anti-Soviet agitation) to 10 years in special camps'. The investigation officer, who was not the worst person among other investigation officers, said at the last interrogation: 'I only did what my bosses ordered me. You will go to the camp within our system'. At this time they were establishing special camps [1948 special GULAG camps for political prisoners: Norilsk - Gorny camp, Gorlag, Kolyma - Berlag, etc.]. Special camps were created for prisoners to stay in the area they were assigned to after they were released. These people had to obtain special permits from the commandant to leave the area, or they were sentenced to 20 years of penal servitude for desertion, if they left the area without such permit. The Butyrskaya prison was like a resting house against the former prison. There were many prisoners from Moscow, their relatives sent them parcels delivered to the cells on big carts. Every day prisoners were allowed 30 minute walks. There was a wide yard with high fence walls. There were about 100 prisoners in my cell. We were to be transported to exile all together.

When I was arrested, the management of aviation industry where my father was working, called him offering that he signed up a disavowal from his son. This was to be a pure formality, and my father could keep his job they said. My father asked for some time. He went to see his friends in the Ministry of Forest Industry and asked them to send him to the most distant and backward forestry. They sent him to Shakhunia in the very wilderness of Kostroma region, 500 km from Moscow where he became director. My father worked there till I returned to Moscow.

I was taken to a halting place in Kuibyshev [about 900 km east of Moscow] where they were forming groups of convicts. We were assigned to be deported to the farthest East Siberian exile. We were transported in a cattle freight train. There were criminals in other carriages, but our carriage was for political convicts. The rest of convicts were cursing, but the ones in our carriage spoke the human language. We arrived at the Vanino port [about 8000 km east of Moscow] From

there we were to be taken to Magadan [about 8500 km east of Moscow] across the sea. There was a huge halting camp in Vanino. I walked across all zones there. This was dangerous. There were political convicts in one part of it, criminals – in another, and there was a zone where ‘suka’ [bitch, a curse in Russian, in this case rapists and murderers, rascals and traitors, people, who came down – the most dangerous and despised category of prisoners, these prisoners who refused to follow the rules of the camp served its management and reported on everything happening in the camp] inmates. Emotions were boiling. Life was worth nothing. There were boards with posers on them by the barbed wire fence, separating the zone from the rest of the world: ‘Honest labor is the road to release before term’, ‘You can be released before term in Kolyma’. We were taken to the ‘bathroom’ barrack. There was little water there. From the ‘bathroom’ we went to the ‘barber’s’ where the ‘suka’ inmates worked. They had such blunt tools that they seemed to be cutting off the scalp rather than making a haircut. I remember an old rabbi with madman’s eyes. He grabbed his red hair beard with his both hands trying to protect it, but he suffered the same fate. Deportation... We were taken to the pier. Convoy wardens and dogs by the ship’s ladder and on board. Run, run, to the plank beds in the hold hole. Three-tier plank beds. I happened to have the lower one. When the hold hole was full, the wardens battened down the hatch. Criminal groups started taking away things from other prisoners. Screaming, yelling, cursing... My fellow inmate hit one thief on his face breaking his nose. They left, but promised to be back to kill all of us. Then the others came by telling my Lithuanian fellow prisoner to follow them. He had a talk with other thieves – ‘authority thieves’. He happened to be a former captain of this ship. At that time hardly any prisoners returned from Kolyma. The road to the ice land was visioned as death road. These thieves wanted to capture the ship, kill the wardens and change the route. The former captain said this was not possible. There was a submarine following the boat. It was to torpedo the boat in case it changed the route. At that time the criminals broke the partial to the part where women were kept. The wardens captured few dozen criminals from there and took them to the punishment hold hole, but the wardens themselves stayed outside, when capturing the criminals. The reason was that the toilets were not cleaned and filled the hold hole with terrible stench unbearable for outsiders to come in. We arrived in Magadan and were taken to a halting point. We washed in the public bathroom and our clothes were treated with heat against lice. We were given prisoner uniforms: a cotton shirt and trousers, a jacket, boots and feet wraps instead of socks. I didn’t wrap mine properly and when we came out of the bathroom they unwrapped and the others kept stepping on those black bands and I stumbled all over. I was assigned to the camp on Dneprovskiy gold mine, 200 km from Magadan, where I was kept for almost 5 years since 1949. The camp administration told the criminal inmates that they were expecting enemies of people [27](#), fascists, who were to be taught how to change. Political prisoners of the 1930s were literally stupefied by what was happening. Any resistance to the camp administration was out of the question, but the situation in Kolyma was different after the war. These convicts were sentenced to 25 years – the limit sentence. They had seen death and hardships of the war. The prisoners of war, who had been in military camps, but who did not become traitors, partisans and chasteners, Bandera people. There were also old camp prisoners (most of them invalids), students, teachers and other newcomers in the early 1950s, cosmopolites [28](#). There were also Polish, German, Czech and Japanese prisoners at one time. In 1954 they were sent back to their countries. Winter 1949 was hard for us since this was our first acquaintance with Kolyma. We were freezing, the food was horrible. The best food was cabbage. Sovkhozes [29](#) grew it in Kolyma. Dirty upper leaves were removed, placed in pans and women compacted them wearing dirty rubber boots. We ate the so-called ‘black borsch’ made with

these leaves. This was sort of 'vitamin-enriched' food. They also added some fish bones and cereal in there. The inmates dreamed at night that they would be lucky to have the bread heel, since it was under baked inside. Once we were sent to work at the officers' storage facility where I stole a pack of butter and ate it. I got so sick afterward!

In autumn 1949, when we arrived at the Dneprovskiy camp, we had to build our own barracks. We lived in tents, when it was -30 °C outside. There was a steel barrel where fuel was previously kept in the middle of the tent and one inmate was constantly watching the fire burning inside through the night. The head was freezing to the tarpaulin and the heels were burning hot. On Saturday all prisoners were taken to the nearest mounds to make wood stocks. There was fire in the taiga and we were to pull up the burnt trunks (the roots were not deep due to the cold climate) and drag them to the camp. When we marched out of the camp the orchestra of other inmates played some merry tunes, but there was no music, when we came back. We were searched before going back to our barracks and the search took a lot of time. Prisoners had to unbutton their cotton wool jackets with freezing hands. Prisoners could not manage it and wardens usually tore off the buttons in a jerk. We had to sew on new wooden buttons each time after a search. Once I happened to be coming in with the last five inmate line of prisoners. The wardens ordered me to remove the snow from the right corner of the gate to the left one. Then another prisoner from another crew was ordered to remove this snow from the left to the right corner. Another time they made me wash the floors at the warden shack. The warden shack was a 10-12 square meter house where few soldiers and chief warden stayed. At the Dneprovskiy gold mine we were to pan out gold from gold sand and other metals. When water freezes in Kolyma in winter, this work cannot be done, but that winter in 1949 the management decided to have bonuses for exceeding quantities of metal and made us pan out frozen sands. We melted snow and then we worked our scrapers in this ice cold water. Our skin got blue and cracked. Hungry and freezing, we tried to stay closer to fire and our upper jackets and valenki boots [warm Russian felt boots] were burnt through. If somebody failed to do the standard quantity they were made to stay there for days. Once after such double or triple shift I came back to the camp, when our crew was ordered to fetch water from a small river nearby. Two inmates carried big ice-covered barrels on their shoulders, with the stick put through its bails. I was exhausted and refused to go waiting for a warden to kill me. One inmate – an engineer and inventor decided to help me. He had access to chief warden of the camp and he told him that there was a young writer, who could write a novel to glorify the camp and its chief warden. I was taken to the office of the chief warden. He gave me 'chifir' – black strong tea. A pack of tea was boiled in a tin. When the tea chips came up in the tin, the tea was ready. This was the 'first portion', then water was added again to this same tea and boil it again. This was the second portion. When the water gets no color, it is poured out, and the leftovers are given to the weakest inmates to eat it. I got the 'first portion'. Few sips, and my heart began to beat like crazy. Unnatural courage and strength, stolen from my future days. I agreed to write a novel. They gave me a table lamp and numbered sheets of paper. I was transferred into the 30th crew. It consisted of the inmates, who provided services to the camp management. There were artists making pictures for officers and wardens, the Hutsul inmates, making nice snuff boxes and cigarette holders incrustated with pearl buttons. There were inmates from the Baltic republics, whose relatives sent them money. They paid to be assigned to the 30th crew. There were many informers in this crew. We were to clean the streets in the village, fetch wood to officers and wash floors. This was easier work than any other in the camp. It didn't last long for me. The chief warden had big problems for allowing me to write a book and I was sent to the wood cutting site.

This site also belonged to the camp, but it was completely closed from the rest of the world. We were to stock wood and before shipping it we were to clean up the roadway, 20 km long, so no inspectors could arrive here suddenly. Common nature for Kolyma: the snow covered valley, a river that one can hardly see, hills. Two barracks on one mound. One for wardens, about 15 of them and another one – for inmates, about 30 of us. A guard tower between the barracks. The site was in about 5 km from the barrack. We went to work at dawn and returned by the end of the day. Each carried a thick 2 m log on his shoulder. It was severe winter and we needed a lot of wood. There were mostly Ukrainian inmates, the Hutsuls. They were called ‘westerners’ in the camp. There was an assistant doctor over 60 years old. He was to give each inmate one table spoon cod-liver oil in the evening. We had standard quantities to do, but they were impossible to follow. However, to try to do, one needed special skills to pile the logs. The pile had to be stable, though it was to contain much less wood than the measurement would show. This was a deceit pile. A log was cut into pieces that were added to the pile and covered with beams on the sides. So we filled the pile to meet the quantity requirements. We also did the following work, clean and safe: we cut the snow in quadrates removing it to the sides of the road with a wide plywood shovel. I assisted the crew leader with filling up the work orders to show that the norm was fulfilled. 6 months later a former engineer (he was a rate setter in the camp) said that ‘if one was to believe these work orders, you’ve cleaned the road as far as Moscow from snow’. The boundaries of our site were marked with flags in the taiga. It was not allowed to cross them and we were afraid of even coming closer to the flags. Older inmates told us that it happened so that wardens called prisoners to come nearer and killed them, if they crossed the line.

Soon we became exhausted. I fell from fatigue coming back from work. The assistant doctor wanted to help me I don’t know why. He took the risk of sending me back to the main camp with the diagnosis of jaundice. They didn’t take me to hospital since I had no disease, but was exhausted. Since I was weak, I was assigned to the crew working at the mining and processing factory. This was hard work. Besides, we worked in the open air. Besides, our crew leader did not like me. He was a thin wicked man with red cockroach-like moustache. He literally maltreated me. We worked near the forge by the river. One of my fellow inmates offered me to have a smoke. I stepped aside from my work place, when the crew leader ran to me and began to throttle me. At this time blacksmiths were going to fetch some water. They dropped their barrel and began to beat this crew leader. For them I was just a youngster, whom another man was beating. Spring... We were marching to work under the convoy. Inmates always tried to march inside the column or at its beginning to avoid being seen by the wardens. On that day I was marching at the end of the column. I marched alone. I marched according to the rules with my hands behind my back, but the wardens didn’t like the way I marched: with my back straight and holding my head high. One warden with a dog approached me close so that I could hear his dog breathing. The dog bit me on my gauntlet. I turned my head asking the warden to take away the dog, but this only stirred him up. The line already knew that the warden was tethering me, and the crew leader also knew it. When he loosened his dog and I said loudly ‘Move off!’ the line sort of stumbled and stopped. I heard the crew leader saying: ‘Take away the dog’. ‘Quick march!’, but the line didn’t move till a captain came up to march beside the warden.

Before March 1953 I was a common inmate and was not distinguished among others. Prisoners were allowed to write complaints. Soon I became a connoisseur of this business. Different inmates asked me to do this for them. This was a good school of literature. Some of inmates were heroes of

the war, but none of them was released after sending complaints. Most of them were addressed to Stalin, but only few complaints were really sent to Moscow. The camp administration did not appreciate writing claims where they described their cases under which they were sentenced to imprisonment, but they did not forbid writing them either. But it was different, when prisoners dared to complain of the camp administration – then they were merciless. I was also known for telling ‘novels’. I just told them the content of the books I knew. When one prisoner heard that Jesus Christ was a Jew, he interrupted me and asked a criminal inmate whether this was true. The prisoner replied unwillingly: ‘True’. Next morning one of us, who was the first to go to the toilet, saw a neck cross in it. Once a year there was ‘commissioning’ in the camp. Chief of the sanitary unit and officers were sitting at the table covered with a white bed sheet and undressed prisoners walked past the table. Coming to the middle of the table, the prisoners were to tell his number and turn his back to the commission. Based on the extent of his exhaustion the commission was to determine whether he was fit to do physical work. There were three categories: one for the inmates, who could do hard physical work (blacksmiths and drillers,); the second category - the rest of inmates and the third category was given in exceptional cases, when an inmate, as other prisoners joked, could be looked through. In 1952 during this commissioning I was assigned to the 2nd category with a minus, and the work setter was to send me to the mining and processing factory. The factory operated round the clock. Two crews of over 100 inmates in each worked there. The shift lasted 12 hours. It took 15 hours including the time it took to get to work: the factory was in 3 km from the camp beyond the camp zone. I was assigned to the crew of Budnikov, an old camp inmate, who survived by some miracle. He was convicted in 1936 for political conspiracy and anti-Soviet activities. From the first days he began to teach me to be a crew leader. When he had to stay in the camp due to his health condition, he authorized me to take the crew to work. I refused many times, but he was insistent. Most of the members of his crew came from western areas, ‘poisoned with capitalism’ while I came from Moscow and above all, was a Komsomol member. He wanted to share his experience with me. I was to watch him setting the tasks. He sent some to do the hardest work, and the others – to easier work tasks. He had inkling about who could cope with hard work and who needed a little rest to carry on. When we returned to the camp from the factory, we went to the long wooden dining barrack with two rows of tables for 12 inmates. Budnikov told me to stay by the distribution window. Usually a crew received few additional bowls of skilly soup. Some crew leaders had these bowls on their tables allowing their stooges to eat the food, but Budnikov always gave this soup to those who needed it at the most. One day, when I took the crew to the factory and he was not there, an unforeseen incident happened. The inmates worked in the damp shop and at the end of the shift they hurried to the guard shack to not let the others wait for them in the frost. That day one old Estonian man fell asleep at his work place. I couldn’t find him. When he woke up, he rushed to join the others. It took me some time to release him from the furious crowd of prisoners. Later Budnikov reproached me for being unable to pull myself together and cut off the mess, when necessary. Once Tiazhev, an agent provocateur was sent to the camp. He openly called to a strike. Only later we found out that he had come from a women’s camp where he provoked a strike and many prisoners were killed. Some prisoners heard this from camp doctors and told the others. His tasks was to provoke other prisoners to confront each other. There was a direction to shoot prisoners at fault immediately. After Stalin died in 1953 and Beriya [30](#) was executed, the camp administration faced ‘rainy’ days. Professional KGB officers were thinking what was to happen to them. Perhaps, some officials from Magadan were trying to prove to the government that there were mortal enemies of the state kept

in these camps and hard measures were quite justifiable there. A country needs jailers. So the officers were trying to provoke prisoners to violation to strengthen their power. Someone had to take the lead over Tiazhev and stand against him. The fate willed that this someone was to be me. And I managed to handle this. 5-6 crew leaders left 2-3 members of their crews in the camp one day having authority to do so at their discretion. They were strong Russian, Ukrainian and Tatar guys. On that day Tiazhev didn't go to work. We armed ourselves with sticks and went into his barrack. There were about 10 of us. I was the first to come in there. For the first time in my life I was to tell a person that he was a provoker and rascal looking into his eyes. And I said this. Someone threw a log into Tiazhev. He ran out of the barrack and ran to the guard shack. We were following him yelling: 'Warden, take your man back!' Tiazhev ran into the shack and nobody saw him in the camp again. Shortly afterward all of us, who chased Tiazhev away, were taken to jail. We didn't know what our jailers were up to, but we had a bad premonition. We were kept in a gloomy stinking cell. We were not allowed walks outside. There was a cement floor and a wooden plank on the window. All of a sudden it occurred to me what we had to do. We argued for few days. At first only few inmates agreed with me, but then all of them believed this was the only opportunity for us to get out of here. On Saturday evening, when all crews were on their way back to the camp after their daytime shift, when villagers were going to the cinema, we broke the wooden plank on the little barred window and shouted as loudly as we could: 'Beriya stooges have tortured us!' The stone mounds spread our voices far away and everybody could hear our screams. The crews of prisoners refused to go into the camp. Inmates in the camp came out of their barracks and ran to the isolation building. There was a crowd gathering in front of it. The chief of the gold mine called the chief of the camp: 'What are you doing to the people? If they don't stop shouting, I will call Magadan'. This couldn't happen, if Beriya had not been executed. If it happened at a different time, nobody would call the chief of the camp or approached the camp, and we would have lost our lives. We were released. This day, when we were released from the isolation ward, was the brightest day in my life. Shortly afterward we were deported farther to the north, 400 km from Magadan to the Sosuman mine department. From then on the Kolyma chiefs began to transfer me from one camp to another. I went to the Chelbanya gold mine recovering gold dust. They have the narrowest pass ways in mines. From Chelbanya we were transported to the mine named after Lazo. There were two big parts in the camp. One was at the mine and another one - at the processing factory. I worked sorting out the protore, and worked the night shift at the timber storage. I had furuncles and high fever. I could not go to work. Before spring few inmates and I moved to the factory camp in the valley. I hadn't recovered and looked miserable. I was assigned to be night watch at the electric shop. There was nothing to watch there, and it was quiet and warm. It took me few evenings to recall all my poems and wrote down the first lines. This was sufficient to recover all poems 10 years later. Shortly afterward few prisoners and I were deported to the Sosuman halting camp and from there - to the lime camp - there were lime quarries nearby, and the camp got this name. This was a rotten place with swamps around it, not even a tractor could pass them in summer. This was a camp for the most violent infringers of the camp rules. A group of prisoners from Norilsk was transported to this camp. They were sent here as participants of a strike. In Norilsk wardens shot at prisoners provoking troubles. Once prisoners there refused to go to work demanding that representatives of the government came to Norilsk. Administration of Norilsk did not want to inform Moscow about what happened and brought in military units. The prisoners repelled their attack. They were all deported to the lime camp where they continued their strike. We had nothing to do, but support the prisoners from Norilsk. We refused to go to work. Each day

the situation became more concerning. They said there were military units brought to our camp and that it would all end up in shooting. Almost all management of the department of Kolyma camps arrived from Magadan. Later a commission from Moscow arrived. They talked to me among others. I was trying to make them answer why all other convicts and former policemen had no convoy while I was kept under the strengthened convoy. When they saw that they could not reach an agreement with us, they sent me and few other prisoners to the remote camps in Kolyma. They sent us to the camp for thieves and then – to the camp of ‘suka’ prisoners. They made attempts to kill us, but we survived by miracle. After Beriya’s execution I was hoping that I and many other convicts would be released. I had less than a year to be kept in prison. At that time my case was under review in Moscow. Erenburg [31](#) solicited for my release. My civil colleague took my poems out of the zone and sent them to Erenburg, who read my poems, wrote a letter to the Prosecutor’s office and another letter to my father. I also managed to send my father a letter from the lime camp through my fellow inmate, who was released. This was the first time I managed to inform my family that I was still living. In my letter I wrote that I had been taken here to be killed and if my father didn’t help nobody else would. My father managed to talk with the GULAG chief. That day they sent a special representative to Kolyma... I don’t know what they investigated there, but 4 months later, in autumn 1954 I was released. I was released after my term of sentence expired. Hardly any political prisoners were released then. They only released criminal convicts. I was one of the first ones. I received a parcel from my father. He sent me his suit: I was as tall as him.

The camp department gave me 530 rubles to buy tickets and food. A ticket to Moscow cost about 3000 rubles. My father sent me some money and my fellow inmates gathered quite a big amount of money. 1000 inmates gave me 3, 5 rubles each. They were nice to me. I hailed a truck to Magadan. On our way I asked the driver to stop the car. He shut off the engine and we plunged into the quiet. There was the taiga around – almost all trees were cut down, but it was still a taiga and it was as quiet as it can be in the north. I bid farewell to Kolyma. In Magadan I stayed overnight in Yuri Strizhevskiy home. He was my friend from Dneprovskoye. His wife had joined him 6 months before. She arrived there from Moscow. They lived in a small room in a barrack: there was a narrow passage between the wall and the bed. They came from noble families that lived in Arbat [Moscow promenade] in Moscow. I fell ill. They gave me their bed and slept on the floor. They gave me chicken to eat. I hadn’t seen normal food for 7 years. I stayed few days in Magadan. They helped me to get a ticket to Sovetskaya Gavan, and I became a 1st class passenger on the ‘Felix Dzerzhinskiy’ boat. Recently this boat transported prisoners. Almost all passengers were former convicts from Kolyma. Many of them were in common camps sentenced for domestic crimes. Chiefs hardly ever came out of their 1st class wards fearing these people. They told me ugly stories about prisoners, but I kept silent. They understood that I was a former convict on the 2nd day and got confused. I remember playing chess with a KGB officer on deck. There were people crowding around. They didn’t care about the game, but about who would win. They shouted for me. I won. I walked along the streets in Sovetskaya Gavan for quite a while. This was a new town. I never again looked at apartment buildings with such eagerness. I bought a light-weight suit and threw my old wooden suit into the sea.

I didn’t have the right to live in Moscow and was sent to Sharya town, Kostroma region, 700 km from Moscow, where my uncle Yosif Vilenskiy was director of a timber industry enterprise. I knew that my cousin brother Yonia Vilenskiy, my father brother Mark Vilenskiy’s son, lived in Blagoveschensk [about 680 km east of Moscow]. He was older than me. He was the tallest of all

Vilenskis. He was a good sportsman, when he was young. I liked him, when I was a child. Without giving it much thought I bought a train ticket to Blagoveschensk. Blagoveschensk was a frontier town [on the Chinese border] and I was not allowed to go there. My co-passenger, a frontier lieutenant colonel helped me. He said to the military checking documents giving his words much significance: 'This comrade is with me'. My brother met me in Blagoveschensk. We came to his home, but we went to walk along the Amur embankment. Then my father called me and said: 'Come back immediately'. It turned out that my case was reviewed by Chief military prosecution office and the officer responsible for my case wanted to see me. My father took every effort to expedite my rehabilitation. I went to Moscow and told them about my case. A year later my case was reviewed and I obtained a certificate of rehabilitation in late 1956.

When I returned, I stayed with my uncle in Sharya. He fed me as if I was a child. He was nice and didn't allow me to go to work. After rehabilitation [32](#) I went back to Moscow before the new 1957 Year. Soon I began to publish my works. I could not have my poems published since their themes did not fit the Soviet publication rules. I translated poems by national authors having line by line translation and wrote reviews. My university friends taught me this job and published the poems under their names since not a single Soviet publication would dare to publish the author, who had been in jail 8 years under a political conviction. They gave me money for these publications. Some time later I learned to translate poems as skillfully as they did it. The 'Soviet writer' publishing house sent me to Nalchik in the Caucasus. The Balkarian people were returning from exile [33](#). My friend Golubkov and I translated the book 'Balkarian poets'. This was the period in my life, when I earned my living by translating poems and writing review. Georgiy Sviridov [Russian Soviet composer, one of the most outstanding vocal composers.] wrote few songs on my poems. This was some moral support for me. I didn't feel like being published any longer. After rehabilitation they resumed my University status. I finished 5 years, but I didn't defend my diploma. I didn't feel I needed this. By that time I was already a literature professional. I wasn't going to do teaching ever. Being a member of the trade union of literature workers, I did not have to be a staff employee and authorities could not blame me of being a parasite. This enabled me to walk across Russia and stay in remote villages. This became a way of my life. I met people and gained great life experience. Before the GULAG I was a very cheerful young man, but I lost a lot of this joyousness. On the other hand, I gained the experience and knowledge of people that I needed as a writer and a human being. I was 20, when I was arrested, but I was the youngest in the special camp. My imprisonment did not allow me to hold higher positions in my future career, but I didn't want a career. I didn't need it. I was still shadowed. I wrote to party and state bodies that I was squeezed out of the country. They dismissed me joking, but the shadowing went on. I felt on the edge of arrest, but God was merciful to me.

In Moscow I returned to my former apartment, but when I got married, I moved in with my wife. She lived in an old apartment building for professors. It was a communal apartment, but we had 4 rooms and it was in the center of Moscow. My wife Raisa Gordon was a Jew. She was born in 1924. There were 4 generations of doctors in her family. She was a doctor, too. Her great grandfather and grandfather were doctors in the czarist army. They studied in Berlin. Her father, professor Gordon, was chief of the therapeutic department of the clinic of therapeutic food. My wife kept her surname of hereditary doctors. Her father was not arrested during the 'doctors' plot' [Doctors' Plot] period. When the people arrested under this conviction were released, they came to see him. He supported their families giving them money and treated their children. He told me why he was not

arrested. Director of the Institute of Food invited him to her office and said: 'Osip Lvovich, there is nothing I can do to help you. You will be arrested, but you will be the last one, if it happens'. However, Stalin died before they arrested him. Vovsi, Rappoport, all other doctors convicted under this case were his friends. Osip Gordon was a very thorough and nice person. My wife was a kidney doctor. She started serious nephrology in Russia. My father-in-law died few years later. My wife had a small salary. My wife died from the Alzheimer disease in 1993. She was ill for a long time before she died. She was buried at the town cemetery where her father had been buried.

My daughter Maria was born in 1958. She was a good kid. She studied well. She finished Moscow Oil College and got married. She has two children: Rebecca and David. Rebecca is 12 and David is 5 years old. Maria moved to America 12 years ago. She has a good life there. She actually wasn't going to move there. She happened to have the nephropathy of pregnant women. Women usually die from this disease. Since she came from a family of medical workers, the most outstanding reanimation specialist in Russia watched her closely. Academician Sakharov [34](#) and his wife Bonner made arrangements for an American doctor to visit here twice. This doctor said it would be better for her to move to America or Europe to survive. She had numerous blood transfusions and for 60 days she was kept on artificial respiration. In 1991 her family moved to. She wanted me to join them, but I refused. It's hard to change life, habits and languages at my age.

In 1963 I established the historical and literary society 'Return'. It was illegal in those years. Its members were former Kolyma prisoners of the 1920s, 1930s, authors of memoirs, literature works, historical researches proving the crimes of the Soviet regime, and also, participants of the European resistance - prisoners of Nazi camps. The objective of our society is to preserve the historical memory and spread true information about the recent history of the country. We were supporting current prisoners (people were arrested again for political reasons), dissidents, their families; we published manuscripts and distributed them. At this time it was not safe to keep manuscripts at home. I hid them in remote villages. In 1988 I brought them to Moscow and in 1989 the first book about the GULAG 'Still overbearing' was issued in 100000 copies by the 'Soviet writer' publishing house. These are memories of 23 female prisoners of the Gulag. People lined up to buy it very early in the morning. It was translated into English and published in America, England and France. I wrote a foreword for it. Establishment of the society that had no official approval of state authorities or colossal archives of manuscripts about the Gulag was punishable at the time. I didn't get actively involved in the dissidents' movement, though I didn't stay aside from them either. Another difference of the 'Return' is that we refused from any support from the outside. Western funds support many such organizations, but nobody gives us money. However, we have estate on the Volga - the 'House of a prisoner of the totalitarian systems', the only one of its kind in Russia. The children of former convicts provide some assistance to us. They help us to publish books and fix our equipment. Many members of our society moved abroad and their parents joined them there. The latter sent us their pensions and we could publish books on this money. We are the only specialized publishing house in Russia publishing exclusively books about the totalitarian systems. I have published over 80 books by date. The society published a reading book about the history of the Gulag in 26 000 copies for senior schoolchildren. The current textbooks in history actually have nothing about the Gulag and schoolchildren can study it by our books.

I've prepared an anthology of the poets of the Gulag, it will be published in a series. Alexandr Yakovlev publishes a multivolume history of Russia in the documents of the 20th century. He asked my opinion about which documents of the Gulag I believe to be the most important - 'Letters?' I said - no, letters were subject to censorship. 'Investigation files?' 'No, evidence was given under pressure and tortures'. 'What then?' he asked. I said - poems of prisoners, they are the documents. We published over 1000 pages, 315 authors. There are Jewish authors among them, and there is high poetry.

This is all I've accomplished. Our society conducts conferences 'Resistance in the Gulag'. There were strikes and uprisings in the camps. We worked on this subject and organized international meetings and conferences since 1992. There were 4 in total, the latest one in 2002. Up to 300 people attended it. There were also former Nazi prisoners, members of the European resistance and Jews. There were German anti-fascists. Participants of these conferences were trying to warn the coming generations of repetition of the past. Germans arranged a similar conference in Germany before the 50th anniversary of the war. It took place in an old camp for prisoners of war near Muldenberg town. It was unforgettable. The camp existed since 1940. There were French prisoners, American pilots, British pilots and then Soviet prisoners kept in it. When the Soviet troops liberated this camp, they turned it into the camp for German prisoners of war. Many prisoners died there. There was a cross installed in the memory of all. The ceremony dedicated to the end of the war took place in the hangar where the ecumenical service was conducted. The procession to the burial location of Soviet prisoners of war was headed by three people: a former French prisoner of the camp, a German pilot, who made a mine under the Berlin wall and was arrested, and me.

I assisted with shooting the film 'Stolen Years'. It's a documentary. [Producer, camera operator and director: Vladimir Klimenko.] The film was produced in Moscow in 1994: at my home former prisoners of the GULAG tell the story of their drudgery and imprisonment. Besides, we traveled to Kolyma to shoot at the camp cemetery. I've never watched this film again, it was not shown in Russia and this is all information I have about it. It was produced in America. The film was made in Kolyma and at my home. It was made by American. The presentation took place in Washington University in Seattle. The script was written by my comrade Vladimir Klemenko.

I was invited to Washington to the 1st congress of prisoners of the Chinese GULAG - Laoguy. My friend Albert Lion, professor, translator of Oregon University, a great connoisseur of the Russian literature, art and language. He told the Chinese about me. I was the only representative from Russia there. The Chinese eagerly listened to what was happening in Russia, particularly that many of the studied in Russia in the 1950s. They sang Russian songs in Chinese restaurants. This was the part of the Chinese intelligentsia deeply attached to the Russian culture and Russia. This was in 1999.

Once I met an interesting person. She was Bronislava Bubchina, a philologist. My communication with her played an important role in my understanding of the Jewry and my attitude toward Jews. She told me about her youth during the war. A Ukrainian family rescued her from death. This happened in a small town near Bershad [about km south of Moscow]. There were small Jewish towns there [shtetl]. In 1937 she visited her aunt there on summer vacation. She arrived there from Arkhangelsk. At that time her parents were arrested and she stayed in this town. In 1941 she

finished school and fell in love with a Ukrainian guy. Some time after invasion he already served in the police and was escorting her aunt and her to the shooting place. The girl managed to escape. She took hiding in a cemetery and then at her friend's home, but her friend's, who was also a policeman told her to go away or else he would take her to the police. Later her friend's relatives gave her shelter. This happened in Transnistria [35](#). There are no books about Transnistria in the Soviet literature. I decided to go there and interview the survivors. I traveled to villages and met with Jews. This was the only location in Ukraine where there happened to be Jewish survivors. I put down many amazing stories about the life of Jews, their rescue, sometimes they were unbelievable stories. I also collected materials about the underground. When I returned to Moscow, though, I realized time had come to tell people about the Kolyma. This was in 1988. I placed all materials about Transnistria in the archives of our publishing house. I haven't got time to work on them as yet. I've always been devoted to the topic of the GULAG. Actually, it has been with me through my life, in memory of my friends, who perished there. My own poems and memories have not been published yet. Only a little Xerox copied book. There are also my poems in the collection of romances by Sviridov issued. I have prepared my memoirs and poems for publication. They are translated into French and will be translated into English. They will be published in autumn 2003. Besides, my poems are issued in the anthology of poets – former prisoners of the GULAG, and there is also my foreword in there about the camp poetry. I've just returned from Geneva where I read the lecture 'The literature of the GULAG as it's seen by a camp prisoner of Kolyma' in their university. I think the topic of the GULAG needs to be studied as they study the Holocaust now. This is history of the 20th century. 50 Russian secondary schools study the Holocaust now while there are just few lines about the GULAG in textbooks, and the study of the GULAG depends on teachers' personal initiative. In Germany private schools may lose their license, if they fail to take their students to the memorial in a former concentration camp, but we don't have anything like this.

I have a positive attitude toward perestroika [36](#), naturally. The totalitarian regime was the rule in Russia. A totalitarian state and anti-Semitism are integral since in such state it is easy to blame Jews in all failures and thefts. Therefore, democratization and perestroika of the state eliminate state anti-Semitism. It is known that Stalin was preparing the deportation of Jews. God removed him on time. We don't know what this deportation might end up with. Unfortunately, perestroika has basically failed. Actually, perestroika happened to be hard and painful for the people in Russia. Besides, it was implemented by the party and Komsomol bosses, who had Soviet psychology and experiences. In my opinion, American authorities are also to blame. Seeing that Russia was falling apart, they decided that the most important thing was to weaken Russia. The best method to do it was to support colossal segregation in Russia. They've succeeded in breaking up Russia, they share a great deal of guilt. Now it turns out that a whole institute developed reforms for Russia. When I visited America, I told them that we live in one world and our people are very close, don't make them enemies. I think they compromised the idea of perestroika and the idea of democracy.

I've always identified myself as a Jew, but I am a person of the Russian culture. Everything I've done in my life has been tied to Russia. I think Russia is a conglomerate of peoples. I believe the Russian culture and the Russian religious idea in their deep demonstrations to be exclusive phenomena. Jews have made a valuable contribution into the Russian culture. Jews have been always beaten and Jews do feel themselves Jews in the Russian culture, Russian business and Russian science. I believe that the mission laid upon this nation – and this has historical grounds – is to ferment societies in many countries. If all Jews lived in Israel, nothing good would come out of

it. It's wrong to demand that Jews in Diaspora were citizens of Israel. This would only raise anger and distrust of the people among which they live. The line of Israel is very wrong, in my opinion. Each Jew is proud of the Army of defense of Israel, that girls serve in it, that for the first time in history this nation is as heroic as others. For each Jew, wherever he lives, this is a balsam for his heart since he identifies himself with this nation. The Jew identifying himself as a Jew, but his roots are in Russia, at some moment identifies himself with these people. He shouts from a Russian football team and identifies himself as Russian at this moment. There are also more serious things. Or when he reads Russian classics, this person perceives it closely and deeply, and his way of thinking is Russian at this instant, and he understands the characters, which is not like a native Israeli would understand it. I think that in any case after the Holocaust only some kind of degenerates would not acknowledge their Jewish identity or conceal their Jewish origin. If you are a Jew in basic things, what kind of Russian patriotism would you be talking about. I know Mexican Jews, who visited here. Hey are big patriots of Mexico, and this is probably the right thing.

Glossary

1 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.

2 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.

3 Kaganovich, Lazar (1893-1991)

Soviet Communist leader. A Jewish shoemaker and labor organizer, he joined the Communist Party in 1911. He rose quickly through the party ranks and by 1930 he had become Moscow party secretary-general and a member of the Politburo. He was an influential proponent of forced collectivization and played a role in the purges of 1936-38. He was known for his ruthless and merciless personality. He became commissar for transportation (1935) and after the purges was responsible for heavy industrial policy in the Soviet Union. In 1957, he joined in an unsuccessful attempt to oust Khrushchev and was stripped of all his posts.

4 Civil War (1918-1920)

The Civil War between the Reds (the Bolsheviks) and the Whites (the anti-Bolsheviks), which broke out in early 1918, ravaged Russia until 1920. The Whites represented all shades of anti-communist groups - Russian army units from World War I, led by anti-Bolshevik officers, by anti-Bolshevik volunteers and some Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries. Several of their leaders favored setting up a military dictatorship, but few were outspoken tsarists. Atrocities were committed

throughout the Civil War by both sides. The Civil War ended with Bolshevik military victory, thanks to the lack of cooperation among the various White commanders and to the reorganization of the Red forces after Trotsky became commissar for war. It was won, however, only at the price of immense sacrifice; by 1920 Russia was ruined and devastated. In 1920 industrial production was reduced to 14% and agriculture to 50% as compared to 1913.

5 Five-year plan

five-year plans of social and industrial development in the USSR an element of directive centralized planning, introduced into economy in 1928. There were twelve five-year periods between 1929-90.

6 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.

7 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.

8 Lubyanka

one of the aristocratic districts in the center of Moscow. In 1919 representatives of the Soviet special service, i.e. Moscow Extraordinary Commission for struggle against counter revolution moved into a small building on Lubyanka Square in the center of this district. The prison for dissidents, known as 'Lubyanka' prison, was located in the courtyard of the building since 1920. In the 1930s the building was reconstructed significantly adding four floors to the building. Throughout the Soviet rule between 800,000 to 1,500,000 prisoners served their sentence or were executed there. The prison was closed in the 1960s. It houses a canteen now.

9 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.

10 Five percent quota

In tsarist Russia the number of Jews in higher educational institutions could not exceed 5% of the total number of students

11 Jewish Pale of Settlement

Certain provinces in the Russian Empire were designated for permanent Jewish residence and the Jewish population was only allowed to live in these areas. The Pale was first established by a decree by Catherine II in 1791. The regulation was in force until the Russian Revolution of 1917, although the limits of the Pale were modified several times. The Pale stretched from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea, and 94% of the total Jewish population of Russia, almost 5 million people, lived there. The overwhelming majority of the Jews lived in the towns and shtetls of the Pale. Certain privileged groups of Jews, such as certain merchants, university graduates and craftsmen working in certain branches, were granted to live outside the borders of the Pale of Settlement permanently.

12 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.

13 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.

14 NKVD

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

15 Young Octobrist

In Russian Oktyabrenok, or 'pre-pioneer', designates Soviet children of seven years or over preparing for entry into the pioneer organization.

16 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.

17 Common name

Russified or Russian first names used by Jews in everyday life and adopted in official documents. The Russification of first names was one of the manifestations of the assimilation of Russian Jews at the turn of the 19th and 20th century. In some cases only the spelling and pronunciation of Jewish names was russified (e.g. Isaac instead of Yitskhak; Boris instead of Borukh), while in other cases traditional Jewish names were replaced by similarly sounding Russian names (e.g. Eugenia instead of Ghita; Yury instead of Yuda). When state anti-Semitism intensified in the USSR at the end of the 1940s, most Jewish parents stopped giving their children traditional Jewish names to avoid discrimination.

18 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.

19 Mikhoels, Solomon (1890-1948) (born Vovsi)

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

20 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.

21 Annexation of Eastern Poland: According to a secret clause in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact defining Soviet and German territorial spheres of influence in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union occupied Eastern Poland in September 1939. In early November the newly annexed lands were divided up between the Ukrainian and the Belarusian Soviet Republics.

22 Bandera, Stepan (1919-1959): Politician and ideologue of the Ukrainian nationalist movement, who fought for the Ukrainian cause against both Poland and the Soviet Union. He attained high positions in the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN): he was chief of propaganda (1931) and, later, head of the national executive in Galicia (1933). He was hoping to establish an independent Ukrainian state with Nazi backing. After Germany attacked the Soviet Union, the OUN announced the establishment of an independent government of Ukraine in Lvov on 30th June 1941. About one week later the Germans disbanded this government and arrested the members.

Bandera was taken to Sachsenhausen prison where he remained until the end of the war. He was assassinated by a Soviet agent in Munich in 1959.

23 Subcarpathia (also known as Ruthenia, Russian and Ukrainian name Zakarpatie): Region situated on the border of the Carpathian Mountains with the Middle Danube lowland. The regional capitals are Uzhhorod, Berehovo, Mukachevo, Khust. It belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy until World War I; and the Saint-Germain convention declared its annexation to Czechoslovakia in 1919. It is impossible to give exact historical statistics of the language and ethnic groups living in this geographical unit: the largest groups in the interwar period were Hungarians, Rusyns, Russians, Ukrainians, Czech and Slovaks. In addition there was also a considerable Jewish and Gypsy population. In accordance with the first Vienna Decision of 1938, the area of Subcarpathia mainly inhabited by Hungarians was ceded to Hungary. The rest of the region, was proclaimed a new state called Carpathian Ukraine in 1939, with Khust as its capital, but it only existed for four and a half months, and was occupied by Hungary in March 1939. Subcarpathia was taken over by Soviet troops and local guerrillas in 1944. In 1945, Czechoslovakia ceded the area to the USSR and it gained the name Carpatho-Ukraine. The region became part of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1945. When Ukraine became independent in 1991, the region became an administrative region under the name of Transcarpathia.

24 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.

25 Trotsky, Lev Davidovich (born Bronshtein) (1879-1940): Russian revolutionary, one of the leaders of the October Revolution of 1917, an outstanding figure of the communist movement and a theorist of Marxism. Trotsky participated in the social-democratic movement from 1894 and supported the idea of the unification of Bolsheviks and Mensheviks from 1906. In 1905 he developed the idea of the 'permanent revolution'. He was one of the leaders of the October Revolution and a founder of the Red Army. He widely applied repressive measures to support the discipline and 'bring everything into revolutionary.

26 Order of Lenin: Established in 1930, the Order of Lenin is the highest Soviet award. It was awarded for outstanding services in the revolutionary movement, labor activity, defense of the Homeland, and strengthening peace between peoples. It has been awarded over 400,000 times.

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

28 Campaign against 'cosmopolitans'

The campaign against 'cosmopolitans', i.e. Jews, was initiated in articles in the central organs of the Communist Party in 1949. The campaign was directed primarily at the Jewish intelligentsia and it was the first public attack on Soviet Jews as Jews. 'Cosmopolitans' writers were accused of hating the Russian people, of supporting Zionism, etc. Many Yiddish writers as well as the leaders of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee were arrested in November 1948 on charges that they maintained ties with Zionism and with American 'imperialism'. They were executed secretly in 1952. The anti-Semitic Doctors' Plot was launched in January 1953. A wave of anti-Semitism spread through the USSR. Jews were removed from their positions, and rumors of an imminent mass deportation of

Jews to the eastern part of the USSR began to spread. Stalin's death in March 1953 put an end to the campaign against 'cosmopolitans'.

29 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 sovkhoz which handled it based on the right of business maintenance.

30 Beriia, L

P. (1899-1953): Communist politician, one of the main organizers of the mass arrests and political persecution between the 1930s and the early 1950s. Minister of Internal Affairs, 1938-1953. In 1953 he was expelled from the Communist Party and sentenced to death by the Supreme Court of the USSR.

31 Erenburg, Ilya Grigorievich (1891-1967)

Famous Russian Jewish novelist, poet and journalist who spent his early years in France. His first important novel, *The Extraordinary Adventures of Julio Jurento* (1922) is a satire on modern European civilization. His other novels include *The Thaw* (1955), a forthright piece about Stalin's régime which gave its name to the period of relaxation of censorship after Stalin's death.

32 Rehabilitation in the Soviet Union

Many people who had been arrested, disappeared or killed during the Stalinist era were rehabilitated after the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956, where Khrushchev publicly debunked the cult of Stalin and lifted the veil of secrecy from what had happened in the USSR during Stalin's leadership. It was only after the official rehabilitation that people learnt for the first time what had happened to their relatives as information on arrested people had not been disclosed before.

33 Forced deportation to Siberia

Stalin introduced the deportation of Middle Asian people, like the Crimean Tatars and the Chechens, to Siberia. Without warning, people were thrown out of their houses and into vehicles at night. The majority of them died on the way of starvation, cold and illnesses.

34 Sakharov, Andrey Dimitrievich (1921-1989)

Soviet nuclear physicist, academician and human rights advocate; the first Soviet citizen to receive the Nobel Peace Prize (1975). He was part of the team constructing the Soviet hydrogen bomb and received the prize 'Hero of the Socialist Labor' three times. In the 1960s and 70s he grew to be the leader of human rights fights in the Soviet Union. In 1980 he was expelled and sent to Gorkiy from where he was allowed to return to Moscow in 1986, after Gorbachev's rise to power. He remained a leading spokesman for human rights and political and economic reform until his death in 1989.

35 Transnistria

Area situated between the Bug and Dniester rivers and the Black Sea. The term is derived from the Romanian name for the Dniester (Nistru) and was coined after the occupation of the area by German and Romanian troops in World War II. After its occupation Transnistria became a place for deported Romanian Jews. Systematic deportations began in September 1941. In the course of the next two months, all surviving Jews of Bessarabia and Bukovina and a small part of the Jewish population of Old Romania were dispatched across the Dniester. This first wave of deportations reached almost 120,000 by mid-November 1941 when it was halted by Ion Antonescu, the Romanian dictator, upon intervention of the Council of Romanian Jewish Communities. Deportations resumed at the beginning of the summer of 1942, affecting close to 5,000 Jews. A third series of deportations from Old Romania took place in July 1942, affecting Jews who had evaded forced labor decrees, as well as their families, communist sympathizers and Bessarabian Jews who had been in Old Romania and Transylvania during the Soviet occupation. The most feared Transnistrian camps were Vapniarka, Ribnita, Berezovka, Tulcin and Iampol. Most of the Jews deported to camps in Transnistria died between 1941-1943 because of horrible living conditions, diseases and lack of food.

36 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.