

# Semyon Goldwar

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Odessa

Ukraine

Natalia Fomina

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*Semyon Mironovich Goldwar is a thin and slim man. He is a wonderful storyteller. He is expressive and when he gets to emotional events his eyes fill with tears. Semyon Mironovich likes to recall the time when he was young. Semyon lives in a two-room apartment. He has a nicely furnished living room: there is a sofa, armchairs, a cupboard with china, bookshelves with art albums and few water colors on the walls.*



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## **My family background**

My maternal great grandfather Simkha Rabinovich had died long before I was born. I was named after him. I don't know what he did for a living. But I know that both of my great grandparents were born in Odessa. I remember my great grandmother Khona, the mother of my maternal grandfather Isaiya Rabinovich. My great grandmother didn't wear a wig or a shawl from what I remember. On an old photograph she has a nice hairdo. She lived with her daughter Revekka Dvorkina in a two-storied building, their apartment was on the 2nd floor. My great grandmother loved me dearly and spoiled me a lot. She brought me candy when she was visiting us. During the Great Patriotic War [1](#) she was over 80 and couldn't evacuate and was left in care of her neighbors and my grandmother Bertha. I don't know how she perished.

My grandfather on my mother's side Isay Rabinovich was born in Odessa in the 1860s. I don't know what kind of education he got, but I am sure that he finished a grammar school. Before the revolution of 1917 my grandfather supplied leather to Odessa leather factory. He purchased leather in Nizhniy Novgorod, Leipzig and Dresden. My grandfather could speak foreign languages. He wore business suits and was very elegant. He had a beard and moustache. My grandfather died in 1929 when I was 5. He was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Odessa. In 1948 I found his gravestone - a flat marble slab heightened at the head.

My grandmother Bertha Rabinovich, nee Bronshtein, was born in Odessa in the late 1860s. She was a housewife. My mother told me that they had a cook, but my grandmother made delicious Jewish food by herself. My grandmother was an intelligent and educated woman. She finished grammar school and had fluent French. She held herself straight and always looked very elegant. She didn't wear a wig or a shawl. My mother never told me whether they observed Jewish traditions in her family. They spoke Russian at home. After my grandfather died my grandmother lived in the family of her daughter Clara. She helped her daughter to raise her children. My grandmother had hypertension. There were no special medications at that time and she used leeches to reduce her blood pressure. During the Great Patriotic War my grandmother stayed in Odessa. She perished in the ghetto in 1942 along with her daughter Clara and her three grandchildren. I don't know where they were buried, but in 1985 I placed a gravestone with their names beside the graves of my mother and father at the Jewish cemetery in Slobodka. [Slobodka is a neighborhood on the outskirts of Odessa.]

My grandparents had four children: two boys and two girls. They received a good education: they had music classes and private teachers at home. My mother's older brother Grigoriy Rabinovich was born in Odessa around 1892. He was a brilliant and purposeful man. My mother recalled that he decided to learn to play the horn in his teens. It was too loud and all neighbors were unhappy about it, but he learned to play the horn. He finished grammar school in Odessa with honors and entered Physics and Mathematic Faculty at Moscow University before the revolution of 1917. After the revolution he lectured at the same university Uncle Grigoriy didn't have children of his own. He was married for the second time. His wife Ania had two sons of 11 and 12 years of age. Later he divorced Ania and married again. He had a son - Alik. In 1937 [2](#) uncle Grigoriy was arrested. He was accused of an attempted encroachment on Stalin. He went on hunger strike in jail of which he died. We found out the details of Grigoriy's death only after Stalin died. His son Alik had a weird phobia - he went out only at nighttime and was afraid of people. I used to call Alik on the phone when I came to Moscow on business, but now I don't keep in touch with him.

Misha (Moisey) the other brother, one year younger than my father, was born in Odessa in 1898. Misha finished Realschule [3](#) at the same time as my father did. He was as talented as Grigoriy, but he had a different character - he liked entertainment and was easy-going. He played the piano and sang. He was very handsome. My father liked to tell me the story of how Misha introduced him in 1919 to Vera Kholodnaya, a Russian mute film star that lived in Odessa. My father was a provincial man and felt very shy in her presence while Misha was quite at ease. Misha invited my father to his house where he met his sister Raissa, my mother. After finishing school Misha entered a shipbuilding institute in Nikolaev. Upon finishing the institute he began to work at the shipyard in Nikolaev. Misha made a career - he became construction manager at the plant. This position was higher than the position of the director of the plant in a way. Construction manager could directly contact the minister of heavy machine building of the USSR. Uncle Misha had to be a party member to hold such high position. His older brother's arrest didn't have an impact on his career. He must have been a highly valued employee at his work and nobody dared to do any harm to him. One of big torpedo boats made under his supervision was called the Tashkent - it became the best ship of the Black Sea Navy. I remember uncle Misha coming to Odessa to attend the testing of this ship. During the Great Patriotic War this torpedo boat participated in the defense of Sevastopol and Odessa. It was destroyed by a German submarine and sank. During the Great Patriotic War uncle Misha and his family evacuated to the Urals where all defense enterprises were evacuated. After

the war he continued his work at the defense plant. Uncle Misha died from stomach ulcer in 1962. His son Emmanuil born in 1928 also graduated from the shipbuilding institute. In 1990 he moved to Israel with his children.

My mother's sister Clara, born in Odessa in 1911, was the youngest in the family and my favorite. She was only 13 years older than me. She was very pretty. Clara finished school and got married. Her husband was land surveyor and his last name was Elentukh. He used to work with my father and my father introduced him to Clara. In 1930 their twins Shura and Genia were born. In 1940 her daughter Jeanne was born. Before the war the family lived near the town park in the center of Odessa where they moved in 1935 from Slobodka. When the war began in 1941 Clara's husband went to the front. Clara, her three children and her mother, my grandmother Bertha refused to evacuate. Clara believed that the Germans were harmless and were not to last over two or three months. She didn't want to move with the children to strange places, so she stayed. She was last seen with her mother and children in the march of Jews along Koblevskaya Street to the ghetto in Slobodka in January 1942. We don't know how they perished, but we know that it must have been an excruciatingly tormenting death.

My grandfather on my father's side Avrum-Leizer Goldwarg was born in Berezovka town, Kherson province [90 km from Odessa] in 1845. At that time Berezovka had Jewish and German population. The Germans were called 'dachi' - probably a derivative of 'deutsch'. People communicated in German and Yiddish. At home my grandmother and grandfather spoke Yiddish, but they also knew Russian that they used with my mother and me. My grandfather was a religious man and attended the synagogue - he was a gabbai, a warden in the synagogue. [The interviewee means a shammash and not a community representative, what gabbai really means.] This was an elective position and the Jews usually elected the most decent and honest man. My grandfather was a horse dealer. He went to Odessa and other towns to buy the weakest and most miserable horses that he cured in his own stables and sold at a higher price. This was how he made a living. His family was wealthy for its time. They had a 3-hectare plot of land and two houses. They leased the smaller house and lived in the bigger two-storied house: my grandfather, grandmother and their younger son Isaac and his family. We also stayed there when we visited Berezovka They had a big orchard and a big barn with grain.

In the late 1920s my grandparents moved to Odessa to join their children there. They lived with their son Isaac's family. I remember visiting my uncle. There was a mezzanine in their apartment where my grandfather used to pray and I peeped into the keyhole. He put leather cubes on his hands and forehead and put on a thallith and prayed swinging. He died from pneumonia in 1931 at the age of 87. He was buried according to the Jewish tradition. He was put on a white sheet on the floor and there were candles burning. Then he was taken to the main synagogue in Rishelievskaya street on the corner of the Jewish Street. This was my first time in synagogue. It was a beautiful building with columns of the Corinthian Order, benches for men in the lower tier and women's area in the upper tier. My grandfather was covered with a black cloth with a hexahedral star on it. My grandfather was a very respectable man and he was carried by people in their hands from the synagogue to Jewish cemetery- the distance of about 3 km. Many people came to his funeral. I remember the ride in a horse-driven cart where elderly Jews were sitting, since they couldn't walk such a long distance. The community installed a gravestone on my grandfather's grave. I can't remember where exactly his grave was. I tried to find his grave in 1948, but I failed. I found the

grave of my other grandfather, though.

My grandmother on my father's side Rivka Goldwarg, nee Grinshtein, was born in Berezovka in 1861. My grandmother was a housewife: she did everything about the house and kept livestock; chickens, ducks and a cow that she milked twice a day. She made traditional Jewish food: Gefilte fish, stew, sweet and sour meat, meat with prunes and stuffed chicken neck with chicken liver or semolina. She baked delicious pastries and made jam. There was a Russian stove in the kitchen and my grandmother baked bread once a week. She took some grain from the barn to the German baker to grind it to flour and made rich and big bread. This was the most delicious bread I ever had in my life. We lived in Berezovka when I was 4 and my mother watched my grandmother cooking to learn things from her. My grandmother wore dark skirts and a kerchief on her head. She was religious and went to synagogue on Saturday and on holidays. A Ukrainian woman came to do the housework on Saturday. After my grandfather died my grandmother lived with her son Isaac and went to evacuation in Tashkent during the war. In 1944 they returned to Odessa. My grandmother died in Odessa in 1952

As far as I remember she had 5 children, they were born in Berezovka town, Kherson province. Lyova, the oldest in the family, was born in early 1880s. He died when he was two. The next one Matvey was born in 1889. He was the first one of my grandparents' children to move to Odessa. He was a pharmacist at the Weinshtein pharmacy. My father told me that during the imperialist war Matvey was to be mobilized in the army. [By imperialist war the interviewee means WWI.] My grandmother took him to a doctor that made an injection and his forefinger stopped functioning. He wasn't drafted, but his hand got inflamed after this injection and had to be amputated. It resulted in a general inflammation of which he died in the 1920s. Sophia was the next child. All I know about her is that she died from tuberculosis when she was young. My father's brother Isaac was born in 1900. He also moved to Odessa. He had lower secondary education. He was director of a food products storehouse. He was married. His daughter Raya was born in the 1930s. In the late 1920s my grandfather and grandmother moved to Isaac's place. During the war he and his family evacuated to Taskent. After the war they came back to Odessa where they lived in their old apartment. Uncle Isaac died in the early 1970s. His daughter Raya lives in Germany.

My father's sister Etia (she was called Tyusha at home) was born in 1903. Etia finished a secondary school and studied in Odessa University. When she was a third year student she married her fellow student. Later she got ill. As a result of this illness she began to pull her leg. She turned into an invalid from a beautiful girl. She divorced her husband and quit the university. She became very nervous and closed. She finished an accounting school and learned typing. She often left Odessa for Soviet construction sites, but then she returned and her father or uncle Isaac helped her to find a job. In some time she left again. She was like a curse of our kinship. In late 1960s she moved to Israel. I don't know anything else about her.

My father Miron Goldwar was born in Berezovka, Kherson province, in 1897. He was not called Goldwarg because he asked the last letter to be deleted in his last name when he received his passport. He might have studied in cheder in Berezovka. He came to Odessa when he was a young boy. His older brother Matvey lived in Odessa. Matvey helped him to get an employment in the Yung's pharmacy. My father was a courier - he delivered medications that he stored in a basket. He entered a Realschule. He studied well and was ambitious. He gained much from meeting the

Rabinovich family – not just because he met my mother. My father was struck by their way of life. He came from a small and poor family in a village. And all of a sudden he joined the society of educated and wealthy people. He was planning to work hard to gain such way of life, but the total confusion in the country connected with the revolution of 1917 and Civil War broke his plans.

My mother Raissa Rabinovich was born in Odessa in 1900. She was a beautiful woman and always looked younger than her age and when she got her passport she changed her birth date to 1904. My mother enjoyed recalling her life in her father's home. She was an only daughter in the family for a long time and her parents and brothers loved and petted her. My mother finished a grammar school. She enjoyed studying at school. She knew French and played the piano. She had many friends and admirers. After finishing grammar school in the age of 17 my mother lived with her parents and didn't work. My mother met my father when she was rather young. My father was a classmate of Misha, my mother's brother. My father often visited the Rabinovich family and fell in love with the young schoolgirl.

My parents got married in the early 1920s. My father courted my mother for a long time before marrying her. I didn't ask my parents about their wedding, I didn't even know anything about a traditional Jewish wedding. At that time my father was taken by the authorities to do land surveying. My father was the supervisor of a team of land surveyors – they traveled across the south of Ukraine, measuring plots of land for farmers and later – for collective farms during the period of collectivization <sup>4</sup>. My father didn't quite enjoy traveling because he wanted to study. He was planning to continue his education. My mother followed him in his trips. My mother had asthma since childhood. She had attacks, especially at night. There were no medications and my mother inhaled some herbs to improve her breathing. She had a poor heart and my father sent her to the resort in Kislovodsk once every second year during the 1930s. [Kislovodsk is a balneal resort in Stavropol region and it is located at the foothills of the Caucasus at the height of 720 -1060 meters.] He saved up money for my mother. When she went there for the first time she stayed in bed for two weeks – it took her this long to get adjusted to the new climatic conditions. She got much better – this resort was very good for her and improved her condition significantly every time she went there. She didn't have any asthma attacks for a whole year.

## **Growing up**

I was born in my grandmother's house on 7 April 1924. But I don't remember anything about the house. My grandmother Bertha insisted that my mother gave birth to her baby in Odessa. A midwife came to attend to my mother during her labor. I was the first grandson in the Rabinovich family. I was the only baby and everybody paid their attention to me, especially my mother's 13-year-old sister Clara. We lived with my grandparents for about a year. Later we traveled all over Ukraine with my father. We lived in Proskurov and Berezovka and then with my grandfather Avrum-Leizer in Kherson. My mother was a housewife. I learned to read when I was 5. I remember that my mother was reading to me *The White Poodle* by Kuprin. [Kuprin was a Russian writer who emigrated to Paris in 1919 but returned to the Soviet Union in 1937.] I was so moved by the story of this dog that I even cried over the story. I learned letters from this book and my mother said to me once: 'That's it, now you read it by yourself.' So, I began to read this book. This book inspired me to read books. We had many books. Most of them were fiction in Russian. I was especially fond of historical novels, such as *Napoleon* by Evgeny Tarle. [Tarle was a Soviet historian and writer of Jewish origin.] My parents also read a lot.

In the summer of 1931 when I was 7 I went to Moscow with my grandmother Bertha. We went to see uncle Grigoriy. Grigoriy suggested that I stayed with him and went to the first form at school in Moscow, since my father had to travel and we usually followed him. We lived in my uncle's summerhouse in Malakhovka near Moscow. My grandmother didn't get along with Grigoriy's wife. I was bored and I was a spoiled boy – I must have been tactless at times. Uncle Grigoriy had a crude character and he beat me few times. Basically, we didn't get along and uncle Grigoriy sent me back to my parents

In 1931 or 1932 we moved from Kherson to Odessa. In 1932 my father quit his job and entered Odessa Construction Institute. We rented the 2nd floor of a small two-storied house near the market across the street from the church in Slobodka. We lived in one room. I cannot remember how it was furnished. My mother's sister Clara, her family and grandmother Bertha occupied two other rooms. We had a common kitchen and a toilet. There was running water and electricity in the house, but the stove was wood stake. I was allowed to play with the other children in the yard and to this day I do not know of what nationality they were; it was not important. We lived there for too short time and my parents did not make friends with anybody. There was plenty of snow in winter. My father made me wooden skates that I tied to my winter boots to skate.

1932-1933 were years of famine [5](#). My father worked at a construction site in the daytime and studied at the Institute in the evening. My father took empty containers to the Institute where he received a free meal that he took home. There was some mixture for the first course called 'green borsch'. My mother added some water and carrots to it to make it eatable. And there was some cereal for the second course. My mother worked at the Torgsin [6](#) at the New Market. My mother received her salary in rubles and a portion of it was calculated in hard currency, only they couldn't have it, but could receive butter or sugar for it. My parents also received tram tickets at work – 30-60 tickets that I used to sell 15 kopecks each at a tram stop to make some money. My parents walked to work. Tram 15 that commuted from Slobodka to the center of the town stopped near the Duke's Garden where all passengers got off the tram to walk uphill and the tram climbed the hill empty. The tram was not powerful enough to go up the hill with the passengers on. On top of the hill all passengers got in to continue on their way. I also remember when my father bought a box of cigarette paper he and my mother stuffed them with tobacco and I went to sell them at the market. I was selling them humming the tune: 'Kupite, koyft di papirosn'. [This is the first line of a well-known Yiddish song.] My mother and I were trying to do our best to help my father provide for the family.

My father worked as foreman after he finished the Institute. He worked on a number of construction sites in Odessa and I often came to see him at work. He wanted me to become an architect and shared his experiences with me. He climbed the scaffold on the construction site of Pedagogical Institute where a 3rd floor was added to the first one to show me the way beams were installed.

I remember the Odessa of my childhood with paved street. There were several tram lines – one of them commuted to Luzanovka, a popular beach in the outskirts of Odessa, another 17 commuted to Arkadia [a beach in town]. Trams were always overcrowded and people were hanging from the doors. On Sunday my mother, father and I went to the beach in Luzanovka – our tickets cost 60 kopecks. We got on with a basket full of food for a day. We spent the whole day on the beach. In 1937 my father and a group of engineers from the construction department received a little plot of

land near the sea. Six of them built three houses and each family received half a house into their disposal: two rooms, a small kitchen and a big verandah. There was a cellar under the kitchen. and a shower, electricity and running water in the house. We planted an orchard. Since 1937 we moved there in May after the school ended and staid till the fall when it got cold in this summerhouse. The father went to work from there. I used to walk barefoot there. I spent all my time on the beach. I swam and dived well.

I went to the first class of the Ukrainian higher secondary school near our house in 1932. Our first teacher was a fat rough woman. She slapped us on our cheeks. I was a naughty and lively boy and suffered the most. Once I gathered together a group of my classmates and led them to director's office to complain. The situation was scandalous and the teacher was hfired. We liked a lot our next teacher Vera Ivanovna. I don't know what nationalities were in my class. We didn't focus on the issue of any national origin. I got along well with all children. At Christmas our teacher staged an anti-religious play The Pope and the Barometer. It was about a draught when farmers asked a priest to pray for rain. The priest said that they were sinners and didn't deserve to be prayed for. But then one day he said to the farmers: 'All right, I don't want your children to be hungry - let's go to the field and I shall pray.' They went into the field and the moment the priest began to say his prayer it began to rain. However, the reason was that the priest had a barometer at home and knew when it would rain. I read the author's lines - and our performance deserved a storm of applause. But when I came out of the school some boys in the street called me 'zhyd' [Jew]. I heard the word zhyd for the first time. When I came home I began to ask my parents what the word zhyd meant and they had to calm me down.

When I finished the second class in 1934 year we moved to the center of the town. My mother had a friend, Sopha Pekelis, who lived on the second floor of a house in the very best part of Odessa. The 1st floor of their house was a confectionery store that belonged to her father during the NEP [7](#) and later was confiscated by the Soviet power. The Pekelis family moved to Kislovodsk in 1934 and we moved into their apartment. I went to a Russian secondary school. Before we moved I gave my photograph to my favorite teacher Vera Ivanovna to show my love. We had very good teachers at the new school. I studied successfully and was fond of geography, natural history and anatomy. Elizabeth Grigorievna Garun, our teacher of natural sciences, gave me a 5+ for my knowledge of natural sciences. [The highest grade is 5.] I went to the municipal public library to read books on anatomy and made reports on the circulation of blood and the nervous system in class and made presentation materials for her. I also remember the Russian teacher. I read a lot and she advised me on the books to read. As for Ukrainian language and literature, our teacher Olga Moiseevna Khmel'nitskaya made us learn many Ukrainian poems by heart and taught us Ukrainian traditions and rituals. I can still remember many Ukrainian poems. She spoke only Ukrainian to us. I remember visiting the school after the war, still wearing my military uniform - how happy I was to see my old teachers! I asked where Olga Moiseevna was and our teacher of physics, said: 'Don't you know? She perished in the ghetto.' So, she was a Jew - it really never occurred to me. I believed she was Ukrainian. Her husband and son perished along with her.

At 15 I joined the Komsomol [8](#) league. I looked forward to this day. I believed in all the communist ideas. The first step was the School Komsomol Committee. The final decision was taken by the District Committee. There you solemnly received your Komsomol card. I took an active part in public life: I was the editor of our wall newspaper. I liked all Soviet holidays: the October Revolution

Day [9](#) and the 1st of May. On these days we went in a march with red flags and communist slogans on banners. I had many friends and never thought about their nationality. My father didn't share my enthusiasm and was hostile to the Soviet regime, especially when the arrests began in 1937. My mother always tried to smoothen down my father's moods. They began to be particularly concerned after uncle Grigoriy was arrested in Moscow in 1937. My father never wanted to join the Communist Party, but he never interfered in my Komsomol activities. Our family was entirely secular and had nothing to do with Jewish tradition.

## **During the War**

I remember the beginning of the Great Patriotic War. It was Sunday and I was going on a visit to my favorite aunt Clara. I went across the town park when I saw a group of people listening to Molotov's [10](#) speech. He announced that the night before Hitler attacked the USSR without declaration of the war. On the first days of the war the young people were full of enthusiasm to win a victory within about a month.

My father was mobilized to the army on the first days of the war. He was on a construction site in Novosibirsk [3,700 km from Odessa] to construct facilities for the factories evacuated from Ukraine. Later he was sent to the Leningrad front where he was throughout the period of the blockade [11](#). After Leningrad was liberated he worked at the restoration of ruined buildings in Leningrad and was demobilized in 1945.

Odessa was bombed for the first time on 22 July – a month after the war began. The first bomb was dropped in Gogol Street. The house was destroyed and for a long time there was a piano half-hanging on the third floor. My friend Tamara Agalarova perished during one of the first bombings. Our enthusiasm was over and was replaced by fear. My mother and I moved to our summer house where it seemed to be safer. I insisted that we evacuated. I didn't believe that Germans were cultured people. We needed a special permit for evacuation. The logistics department of the army occupied one of our two rooms for some time. After the evacuation began one of the officers named Gankevich obtained a permit for my mother – he told the authorities that she was his wife and I was his son, and we managed to leave Odessa.

On 8 October 1941 we boarded a ship called Armenia and on 16 October Odessa was left to the Germans. Near the cape Tarkhankut [south-east of the Crimean peninsula] the boat was stranded in the night. The boat was overcrowded – there were over 3 thousand people including wounded military. In the morning two trawlers pulled us off the strand. My mother and I got off in Tuapse [port on the Black Sea shore]. My mother's friend Sopha Pikelis lived in Kislovodsk [1,200 km from Odessa]. We got to Kislovodsk by train. I entered an artillery school there. We studied general subjects and some artillery subjects. I lived in a barrack.

In 1942 the front was close to Kislovodsk and I convinced my mother to go on to Djambul, Kazakhstan [3,200 km from Odessa]. I was to enter the army in August 1942. After my mother left and till the end of the war my mother and I corresponded. My mother has kept my letters. In the summer of 1942 I was transferred to the Rostov Artillery College. The Germans were near Bataysk, Rostov region, the tank army of Kleist was proceeding to the East. Our College was retreating together with the Red Army and had no provisions and very few weapons. I had a bottle of kerosene with a match and fuse sticking out of it. I was supposed to strike a match, throw the bottle on a tank and run away. But I had no opportunity to carry this out, thanks God. We were



retreating through the Salskiye steppes near Stalingrad covered with fine dust few dozen centimeters deep. We had this dust in the mouth in the hair – everywhere. We were black covered with this dust, hungry and thirsty. We caught stray sheep, slaughtered them and I made borsch for the whole battery. We reached Ordjonikidze [Vladikavkaz at present] and moved along the Military Georgian Road [12](#), across the Caucasus mountains to Tbilisi. I remember a Chechen settlement Lars. The Chechens didn't give us water. We came to the Krestovy pass when a snowstorm began. We crossed the pass and began our descent. There was a beautiful view in front of us - the blooming valley of the Aragvi River in Georgia. The Georgians were happy to help us: they gave us food and water and shared their clothing with us. In Tbilisi I got to the artillery school where I studied for 8 months. I was a success with my studies and helped other cadets – my group mates came from villages for a most part. I didn't face any anti-Semitism. In May 1943 I finished the school in the rank of lieutenant. I was sent to the First Ukrainian front. My first big action that I took part in was liberation of Kiev in November 1943. Our battery was taken to the right bank of the Dnieper River and we were to distract attention of the enemy. It was a miracle that we survived. I was commanding officer of a howitzer battery. My howitzer cannon weighed 3 tons and was pulled by ten horses. I remember battle near Proskurov [town in Ukraine]. We didn't have enough shells. A Churchill tank (an assistance from Great Britain) was near my battery and I begged him to pull my howitzer, since my horses were killed. Later I participated in the battles near the Dnestr. I was only twenty years old, but I was already a first lieutenant. I was wounded in the autumn 1944 in Germany, where I went with the offensive army, shell-shocked. One splinter injured my eye and another one hit my right side where it got stuck in my bag with papers. The bag saved my life. I kept that splinter for memory for a long time. I was put in the front hospital till the end of 1944. My eye injury resulted in blindness. I was hysterical being afraid of life-long blindness. The doctor assured me that I would see in two months. When a nurse removed my bandage I screamed 'Light!'

At the end of 1944 I returned to my regiment. At first I was deputy regiment commander for reconnaissance. Then I became commanding officer of a battery. At the beginning of 1945 in Germany I became a member of the party. It was quite a natural step for me, a Komsomol member. I made a little pocket on the inner side of my shirt to keep my party membership card. We were heading for Berlin, but later we were ordered to turn to Prague, where an uprising [13](#) began. We covered 90 km per day. We sat on the cannons which were drawn by horses, this is how we traveled. We reached Prague after our tanks entered it – it happened on 9 May – Victory Day [14](#). We were so happy and rejoiced in our happiness. We laid a table – about one hundred meters long. Commander of our regiment appointed me to be on duty to take care of drunken officers just in case, since I didn't drink. I returned home from Prague in 1945. I served in Berdichev [Zhytomir region, 500 km from Odessa] where I was Chief of headquarters of anti-tank.

## **After the War**

My mother returned from evacuation in 1945. She found our apartment occupied by a militiaman – major Urbanskiy. She even went to see the commandant of the town, but it didn't work. Then I came to Odessa for ten days. I gathered my friends and we came to my home. I told him to move out before the following day or, I said, I would throw him out of the window. The major moved out and I helped my mother to move in. My father was reconstructing a big plant in Leningrad where he was deputy director and returned home. When he returned home, my father went to work as

foreman at a construction site. By the way, he participated in reconstruction of Annunciation cathedral. Since my father was a Jew from the point of ethical standards it was awkward for him to be working there since it was a Russian Orthodox church. Formally the Ukrainian Vassily Filippenko, father's close friend was on the lists of the staff there and my father did the work. Vassily Filippenko lived in the Moldavanka [15](#) neighborhood, he spoke fluent Yiddish from his childhood. He was a nice man. I don't remember my father ever going on vacation. He stayed at work and received compensation for his vacation period. My father retired in the early 1960s.

I demobilized from the army on 26 August 1946. I returned to Odessa and went to see the rector of the Construction Institute – he was also a war veteran. He ordered his subordinate to enroll me on the lists of students. That was how I became a student of the faculty of architecture at the Construction Institute. There were 11 veterans of war at my institute. We had wonderful lecturers. Many of them were Jews: professor Zeiliger, director of the Museum of Western and Oriental Art, Zametchik – correspondent member of the Academy of Science, and Gotlib, graduate of the Academy of Architecture in Paris. When we were 3rd year students the campaign of the struggle against cosmopolitanism [16](#) began. I remember a meeting of our faculty attended by second secretary of the town committee of the Communist Party. Galia Golota that was at the front near Sevastopol took the floor and said: 'Bortnik has just told me to vote for the resolution of the Party or I would be expelled from the Institute.' We, veterans of the war did speak our mind regardless of the party politics. At the meeting we argued and talked a lot, but, alas, professors Zeiliger and Zametchik were fired from the Institute.

I graduated from the Institute in 1951. I got a job assignment at the design department in Nikolaev. I went there with my friend Grinberg that lives in Los Angeles now. There was another architect from Kiev working there and the three of us received a 3-room apartment in the main street of the town. I was among developers of the design for the Palace of Shipbuilders, a cinema theater and few residential buildings. I traveled to Odessa every weekend. I was married at that time and had a son.

I met my wife at a friend's party when I came on leave to Odessa to help my mother get back our apartment in 1945. There were dressed up young people at the party and I felt out of place in my military uniform. I was sitting in a corner of the room when I noticed a nice lovely girl. Her name was Musia Dalskaya. I took her home and when we were saying good bye to one another she said: 'Senia, I feel shy, but I can't help telling you that I like you much. I am telling you this, because that's the way I feel.' Well, it was almost a declaration of love. It was a surprise. I told her that I liked her and she was a nice girl, but that I had to leave. I went back to Berdichev. When I demobilized she was already married and had a son. When her son Robert turned 6 months old she divorced her husband. We began to see each other. My family was against our meetings – they thought I was too good for Musia, a divorced woman with a child. However, we got married. I did not care about her nationality, just as it is not an important issue for me today.

My wife's father Motele Dalskiy came from Bobruysk in Byelorussia [750 km from Odessa]. He didn't know his father or mother or date of birth. His parents must have perished during the Civil War. When Motele showed up at the market in Bobruysk all vendors tried to hide their goods, he was a notorious thief. He was imprisoned in a camp for underage criminals. He finished secondary school in this camp. When he was in the camp he took the last name of a popular Russian actor Mamont Dalskiy. My father-in-law was a very handsome man. Before the Great Patriotic War he

was director of the film studio in Odessa. He was a member of the Communist Party. During the war he was at the front in the Crimea where he was head of the political department of a division. He was wounded. After the war he established a network of photo shops in Odessa called the Ukrphoto. Later he was Chairman of the Regional Council of trade unions of milk and meat industry. He died in the 1970s. My wife's mother Anna Solomonovna was a housewife. She died in 1983. As far as I know they never kept any Jewish traditions.

My wife was born in Odessa in 1925. She graduated from secondary school. She was a photographer when we met, but later I helped her to get a job at a design institute where she was a registrar. She worked there until she retired. After the wedding I went to see Robert's father that lived in Moscow. I told him that I wanted to adopt the boy and that he couldn't have two fathers - one that lives with him and one that comes to see him every now and then. We went to the district municipal agency to have the adoption processed. Robert got to know that I was his adoptive father when he turned twenty. Or neighbor told him after she had an argument with us. Robert came to ask me whether it was true and I told him. I also said that he could call me by my first and patronymic names if he thought it necessary. My son hugged me saying 'father, how can you think so?' In 1952 our second son Alexandr was born. Our sons got along well. Robert felt responsible for Alexandr.

Both of our sons were raised the way all Soviet children were at the time. We taught them to love their family, and to be honest and industrious people. They got their share of the communist ideas in school. There was no religious influence from their grandparents on any side. They had both Jewish and non-Jewish friends and they never noticed any difference. I do not recall that they ever experiences any anti-Semitism in school. New Year's Eve was the common and much loved family holiday in those times. Of course, we celebrated everybody's birthday in the family -- with holiday pie and nice gifts.

Robert finished Navy School and sailed on ships as electrician. He was married to a Jew, but they had no children. Robert died of a heart attack at the age of 36, in 1982. Alexandr entered the Faculty of Sanitary Engineering at the Odessa Construction Institute. He studied 3 years there and then worked as a foreman at a construction site. He got married to a Jew also, but he divorced his wife and emigrated to the US in 1989. He lives in Los Angeles and works in the service sector. He calls us from time to time but we have not seen each other since he left.

In 1952 during the period of the Doctors' Plot [17](#) I didn't believe the official propaganda any longer. I had become disillusioned back when I saw the struggle against the cosmopolites in my own institute. I don't think many people believed Stalin during that period. Persecutions didn't touch our family - there were no doctors, but this was an anti-Semitic campaign that made establishment of the Jewish state in 1948 even more important. During the war I was aware of the anti-Semitic attitude towards the Jews both within the USSR and in other countries. So, when the country that defeated fascism declared anti-Semitism as its state policy it was like a blow for me. Israel is like the promised land for me. This is the land of Jews. I am an atheist and I wasn't raised religious, but I've read the Bible. During the Soviet period I took an interest in the history of Judaism since I wished I could understand where the roots of anti-Semitism grew from. I took Stalin's death in 1953 easy. I don't wish evil to anyone, but here I was glad that he died. All I was concerned about was what was going to happen next. But I was fully engaged in my professional activities and had nothing to do with politics.

In the summer of 1953 I returned to Odessa and got a job at Giprograd [State Institute of Town Planning]. I was an architect and then chief project architect. On 17 August 2003 it will be 50th anniversary of my work at this organization. Forty five years I was Chief architect of the project. I've designed many buildings in Odessa. I worked at the department of industrial planning for ten years. I designed hydrolysis factories in Belgorod-Dnestrovsk, Svaliava [Zakarpathiye region], Zaporozhiye, tyre repair plant in Odessa. I also designed residential buildings. I worked with nice intellectual people. There were a number of Jews among us but there was no 'Jewish question', we valued each other for their professional qualities. Somewhere in 1960 I took part in development of design for a school building in Illichevsk. [Illichevsk is a port on the Black Sea in 25 km from Odessa, which became a town in 1973.] This school was a beginning of my career as chief of general development of Illichevsk. A town with about 70 thousand inhabitants was built within 40 years. It's a beautiful modern town with schools, shops and gyms. I developed a design for the Palace of Sports. I like Illichevsk a lot. When I travel there I gain energy for the rest of the year.

In 1969 my mother died in pain. Her asthma was getting worse and my mother was afraid that with age it would become even worse. We kept an oxygen pillow at home. My father watched my mother very closely. Once my father went to the pharmacy and wasn't home for 20 minutes. When he returned my mother had a dark blue color and was on the floor trying to reach to the oxygen pillow. She died and we buried her at the Jewish cemetery in Slobodka. My father didn't remarry, although there were candidates to become his wife. He kept saying 'I loved my wife'. He cooked for himself and went to the town beach in Langeron every day. He lived in my family in his last years and died in 1983. He was buried at the Jewish cemetery beside my mother's grave.

My wife Musia died on 12 January 1992. In 1996 I married Lidia Musatova. I met her during a cruise on the Volga River in 1980s. She visited us in Odessa several times. Lidia lectured on the Russian literature at the pedagogical Institute in Nikolaev. When Musia died she supported and helped me. Then it took me 3 years to convince her to get married. We lived together seven happy years. She died of cancer six months ago.

In 2000 the director of Giprograd called me for a meeting with the representatives of the association of the former inmates of concentration camps and the ghettos of the Odessa region. He was not Jewish but he knew that I was and realized that the subject was a concern to me. They offered me to take part in a very interesting project: the development of the design for a memorial complex dedicated to the Jews who perished in Odessa in the course of its history: the victims of pogroms and the victims of the Holocaust. It was to be installed in the former place of the 2nd Jewish cemetery, which was removed back in the 1960s. I gave my consent and began to work. There already was a memorial to victims of 1905 pogroms at the cemetery when about 400 Jews perished: women, elderly people and children. 14 granite slabs were on this common grave. There were names of over thirty people on each slab. There are missing names as well. When the cemetery was to be removed the town architect inscribed numbers on these slabs and they were transported to Jewish cemetery in Slobodka. They are still there – many of them were stolen or decayed, but there are quite a few left. I did my land survey and did some additional work about granite. The memorial based on my projects shall be erected in its place. Minkus, a well-known architect from Odessa, developed a project for this memorial and I took part in the development. We followed the design of Minkus for two portals and the temple wall and my design was based on an old photograph. During the Great Patriotic War about two hundred thousand Jews perished in

Odessa and Odessa region. The second memorial of the Memorial Complex shall be dedicated to the victims of Holocaust. There will be the monument called 'The Righteous Woman Among the Nations' holding a Jewish baby in the kippah. [The Righteous Among the Nations were the non-Jews who rescued Jews during the Holocaust.] I spend all my time doing this very interesting work. Public Jewish organizations and mayor's office provide all necessary assistance to us. My work with the Jewish Memorial is very important for the Jewish community in Odessa.

## **Glossary**

### **1 Great Patriotic War**

On 22 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.

### **2 Arrested in the 1930s**

In the mid-1930s Stalin launched a major campaign of political terror. The purges, arrests, and deportations to labor camps affected virtually every family. Untold numbers of party, industrial, and military leaders disappeared during the "Great Terror". Indeed, between 1934 and 1938, two-thirds of the members of the 1934 Central Committee were sentenced and executed.

### **3 Realschule**

Secondary school for boys in Russia before the revolution of 1917. They studied mathematics, physics, natural history, foreign languages and drawing. After finishing this school the students could enter higher industrial and agricultural educational institutions.

### **4 Collectivization**

In the late 1920s - early 1930s private farms were liquidated and collective farms established by force on a mass scale in the USSR. Many peasants were arrested during this process. As a result of the collectivization, the number of farmers and the amount of agricultural production was greatly reduced and famine struck in the Ukraine, the Northern Caucasus, the Volga and other regions in 1932-33.

### **5 Famine in Ukraine**

In 1920 a deliberate famine was introduced in the Ukraine causing the death of millions of people. It was arranged in order to suppress those protesting peasants who did not want to join the collective farms. There was another dreadful deliberate famine in 1930-1934 in the Ukraine. The authorities took away the last food products from the peasants. People were dying in the streets, whole villages became deserted. The authorities arranged this specifically to suppress the rebellious peasants who did not want to accept Soviet power and join collective farms.

### **6 Torgsin stores**

These shops were created in the 1920s to support commerce with foreigners. One could buy good quality food products and clothing in exchange for gold and antiques in such shops.

## **7 NEP**

The so-called New Economic Policy of the Soviet authorities was launched by Lenin in 1921. It meant that private business was allowed on a small scale in order to save the country ruined by the October Revolution and the Civil War. They allowed priority development of private capital and entrepreneurship. The NEP was gradually abandoned in the 1920s with the introduction of the planned economy.

## **8 Komsomol**

Communist youth organization created by the Communist Party to make sure that the state would be in control of the ideological upbringing and spiritual development of young people until they were almost 30.

## **9 October Revolution Day**

October 25 (according to the old calendar), 1917 went down in history as victory day for the Great October Socialist Revolution in Russia. This day is the most significant date in the history of the USSR. Today the anniversary is celebrated as 'Day of Accord and Reconciliation' on November 7.

## **10 Molotov, V**

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

## **11 Blockade of Leningrad**

On September 8, 1941 the Germans fully encircled Leningrad and its siege began. It lasted for about 900 days until January 27, 1944. The blockade meant incredible hardships and privations for the population of the town, they suffered from hunger and cold and had to endure artillery shelling and air raids for almost 900 days.

## **12 Military Georgian Road**

the 208 km long highway between Ordjonikidze and Tbilisi which crosses the main Caucasian ridge (Cross pass) built by the Russian army at the end of 18th century.

## **13 Uprising in Prague**

Antifascist national liberation uprising on 5-9 May 1945.

## **14 9 May, Victory Day**

the official date of the victory in the USSR over the Nazi Germany

### **15 Moldavanka**

Poor Jewish neighborhood on the outskirts of Odessa.

### **16 Fight against the cosmopolites**

Anti-Semitic campaign initiated by Stalin against intellectuals: teachers, doctors and scientists.

### **17 Doctors' Plot**

The so-called Doctors' Plot was a set of accusations deliberately forged by Stalin's government and the KGB against Jewish doctors in the Kremlin hospital charging them with the murder of outstanding Bolsheviks. The Plot was started in 1952, but was never finished because Stalin died in 1953.