

# Max Shykler

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Chernovtsy

Ukraine

Interviewer: Ella Levitskaya

Date of interview: August 2002

I've met Max Shykler several times. He is a short, thin man with thick gray hair. He is astonishingly vivid considering he is 83 years old. I visited Chernovtsy in summer, and Max spent a few hours a day in the mountains and woods. He has always liked hiking and walks 20 kilometers every day. Many people in town know him. Since the early 1950s he has been chairman of the hikers' club in Chernovtsy. He took schoolchildren on hiking tours in Bukovina. Now their grandchildren go hiking with him. Max is a very intelligent and smart man. There is one thing he told me, and that is that he 'erases' unnecessary information from his memory to keep it perceptive for anything new. He remembers very few names. There are gaps in his life- story due to that. He took me on a very interesting tour of the town. He knows every building in Chernovtsy and its history. He is a very interesting storyteller.



My father's parents lived in the town of Putila in Chernovtsy province, about 35-40 kilometers from Chernovtsy. Putila is located on the foothills of the mountains and surrounded by woods. Bukovina belonged to the Austro- Hungarian Monarchy until 1918, then it became part of Romania. There were many Jews in this town. They got along well with the Ukrainian and Romanian population. Jews were involved in all kinds of activities in Putila. Besides being involved in traditional trades they were farmers, timber dealers and even woodcutters.

Jews evacuated from Putila during World War I. There were Kazak units deployed in Putila. Kazaks used to drink a lot and behaved nastily towards Jews. There were pogroms [1](#), burglaries, rape and murder almost every day. Every now and then they would kill a whole family including older people and children. The local Jews evacuated to the Czech Republic and Austria. Germans behaved properly and were friendly in Bukovina. When the war was over the Jews returned from evacuation. This positive experience with the Germans had its negative impact during World War II when Jews believed they had to beware of the Russians rather than the Germans. They paid a bitter price for their trustfulness.

My grandfather on my father's side, Meyer Shykler, was born in Putila in the 1850s. I didn't know my grandfather. My father told me about him. I was named after my grandfather Meyer. He inherited plots of land covered with woods and was involved in cattle breeding. They bred cattle for sale. Timber dealers were considerate about their successors. Each timber dealer understood that his children and grandchildren would have to work for a more farsighted employer. Timber dealers were very careful about cutting wood. They always planted 2 or 3 young trees in return for one that

they cut in their woods, so that their children could cut those and plant new ones for their grandchildren. That was how it worked. The woods were growing and generations were changing, and everyone had enough space for living: Jews and non-Jews.

I don't remember my grandmother's first name. I only know that it started with an M. My sister Milia was named after my grandmother. I believe my grandmother was the same age as my grandfather. She was a housewife. Putila was a patriarchal town. Women didn't work there. Married Jewish women could only be housewives.

My grandfather's family was wealthy. They had a house, owned woods and bred cattle. They had many children, but I don't remember anything about them. My father, Shai Shykler, was born in 1894.

My father's parents were religious. At that time religiosity was a common rule. On Saturdays and holidays they went to the synagogue to pray. They celebrated Sabbath and all Jewish holidays. All Jewish boys studied at cheder. My father and his brothers went to cheder. After finishing cheder my father and his brothers studied at the Jewish lower secondary school for 7 years. Girls were taught at home as a rule. It was more important for a girl to become a good housewife and mother to her children. The girls helped their mother about the house and looked after their younger sisters and brothers. The boys helped their father. My father's family spoke Yiddish like all other Jewish families. They spoke German and Russian with their neighbors. Most of the Ukrainians spoke fluent Yiddish. My grandfather died in 1915 and my grandmother in 1919.

The family of my mother, Leya Shykler [nee Kronefeld] lived in Vizhnitsa. Vizhnitsa was a small town on the bank of the Prut River, 50 kilometers from Chernovtsy. The Prut is a mountainous river with a strong current. Vizhnitsa was a town of woodcutters. They cut wood on the foothills of the mountains, tied it in rafts and floated logs down the river to Vizhnitsa. The whole population was involved in the timber business in one way or another. There were sawmills, drying facilities and storage facilities. Merchants and experts came to Vizhnitsa to purchase timber from the storage facilities. The timber floaters were Ukrainians, and Jews and Romanians were involved in all the other working processes. Jews were the best timber specialists. My grandfather Kronefeld was a timber expert, too. He was away on business very often, but his work paid well. My grandmother was a housewife. They were a wealthy family.

I don't remember the first names of my mother's parents. They had 14 children. My mother was born in 1897. Some of the children died in infancy. I knew a few of my mother's brothers and sisters. I remember that one of my mother's brothers lived in Vizhnitsa and owned a store. My mother's younger brother lived in Putila. He was a cattle breeder. He had six children.

It goes without saying that my grandparents' family was religious. They lived a traditional Jewish life. Perhaps, not all of them were fanatic believers, but going to the synagogue on holidays and Sabbath was mandatory. Their children grew up religious. My mother brought into our family what she had been used to since her childhood. All children in the family got religious education. The boys went to cheder and the girls were educated at home. Besides, all their children finished the Jewish lower secondary school in Vizhnitsa.

My grandfather Kronefeld died in 1927 and my grandmother in 1930. They were buried in the Jewish cemetery in Vizhnitsa.

I don't know how my parents met. I believe they must have been introduced to one another by a shadkhan, which was a traditional way of arranging marriages at the time. They had a traditional Jewish wedding in my mother's hometown. I know that my parents got married before 1918. There was a rabbi at the wedding, and the bride and bridegroom stood under the chuppah. The newly-weds moved to Putila and had another wedding party. I have seen a traditional Jewish wedding in Bukovina. There were Jewish weddings even after the war. Many Jews only had a religious wedding and didn't have any civil ceremonies

I saw many wedding ceremonies and parties before 1939. There were Jewish weddings even after the war. Many Jews only had a religious wedding and no civil ceremony. I have seen a traditional Jewish wedding in Bukovina. There was a chuppah installed in an elevated area. It was a crimson brocade chuppah held by four poles. Lions, flowers and Stars of David were woven on the brocade. There was a fringe with tassels on the sides. The bride and bridegroom The bride and bridegroom were standing underneath the chuppah during the wedding ceremony. The bridegroom was escorted to the chuppah by the two fathers, and the bride was brought in there by the two mothers. The rabbi said his blessings, they exchanged the rings and drank a glass of red wine. Then they wrapped the wine glass in a tissue with embroidered quotations from the Torah on it, threw it on the floor and the bridegroom stepped on it. The wine glass was supposed to break. I know that it symbolized the destruction of the Jerusalem temple that one always had to remember. This was the end of the ritual and then the actual party began.

Klezmer musicians played at the wedding. There was traditional food at a wedding: chicken, stuffed fish, stuffed chicken necks and pitcha - a spicy chicken neck and giblet snack with garlic and vinegar. There was a great deal of pastries. There were sponge cakes and strudels with jam, raisins and nuts. Maina had a meat stuffing and was served with clear chicken soup. The guests ate a lot and drank little. There were up to a hundred guests. Such weddings took place in big halls in bigger towns and in taverns or at home in smaller towns. Special wedding cooks [sarvern in Yiddish] were invited to cook. They worked in crews, and each of them specialized in one dish.

The bride and bridegroom danced the first wedding dance to a Jewish tune. They usually danced sher, a Jewish dance. The guests joined them, and the wedding party lasted all night long. After the first dance the bride poured wine into glasses to take it to the klezmer musicians, and her mother brought them a tray with food. In the morning the klezmer musicians received their money and some food left over from the wedding party.

After the wedding My parents moved settled down in toPutila. I remember their house. My family lived in it until the beginning of the Great Patriotic War [2](#) in 1941. My father had bought this house for his future family before the wedding. The house was removed after the war. There were three rooms, a hallway and a kitchen. There was an orchard and a flower garden in front of the house. There was also a kitchen garden, sheds and pastures near the house.

My parents had four children. We were all born in Putila. I was born on 14th October 1919. My brother Mothe followed in 1921, and my younger sister, Milia, was born in 1923.

My parents were religious people, but they weren't fanatically religious. They celebrated all Jewish holidays and Sabbath. My mother always cooked Saturday meals on Friday. She left the food in the stove to keep it warm for Saturday. It wasn't allowed for Jews to light a fire on Saturday to warm up the food. It wasn't even allowed to have a fire to heat the room in the winter. However, my parents

asked our Ukrainian neighbor to come in and light the fire in the stove and the lamp. On Fridays we said a prayer, my mother lit candles and we began Sabbath. On Saturdays our whole family went to the synagogue. When we returned, my father used to read the chapter of the Torah which is read on Saturday. Then we sat down at the table. In the evening we conducted HAavdalah, the separation of Saturday from weekdays. All Jews went to the synagogue to avoid being condemned by the community.

My mother strictly followed the laws of kashrut. There was kosher and non-kosher meat in every food store; it was the same price. Jews only bought kosher meat, of course. They sinned every now and then and ate non-kosher meat, but in general, Jews followed the kashrut. There was no market in the village. There were suppliers, who delivered products to each family.

We spoke Yiddish and German at home. Even after Bukovina joined Romania in 1919 German was more frequently spoken than Romanian.

My parents celebrated all Jewish holidays. We had traditional Pesach. On the eve of Pesach all children were looking for chametz at home. We conducted our search with a candle, a chicken feather and a paper bag, into which we put all breadcrumbs or pieces of bread that we found. Later we burnt it all. The family always bought enough matzah to last for all days of the holiday. We had a big family. My mother did all the cooking herself, although we had a housemaid. She made chicken, goose, and geese cracklings. We had stuffed fish on every holiday. Mother also made keyzl. She also made pastries from matzah flour. She crashed matzah through a sieve. She used fine flour to make pastries and made pancakes, latkes and dumplings for chicken broth from what was left in the sieve.

On the first day of Pesach the whole family went to the synagogue. In the evening we all sat down at the table for a family dinner. My mother had a special tablecloth for Pesach that she had embroidered before she got married. It was a white tablecloth with embroidered quotations from the Torah. We had high silver wine glasses that were part of my mother's dowry. On the first day of Pesach we all drank Pesach wine, even the children. There was one extra glass of wine on the table, but nobody drank from it. [This was the glass for the prophet Elijah.] I, and later my younger brother asked our father a question [the mah nishtanah] in Hebrew. Our father replied in Hebrew. Father read the Haggadah out loud. The whole seder was conducted as it was written.

Jews in Putila also celebrated Sukkot. They made a sukkah near each house. It was a small booth made of branches where they had their meals during the whole period of the holiday. There was no special food on Sukkot, just traditional Jewish food.

We all fasted at Yom Kippur. The ritual of kapores was to be conducted before fasting on Yom Kippur. First a prayer was said, and then men took a rooster and women had a hen in their right hand. They turned them slowly above their head saying, 'May this be my atonement'. Then these chickens were given to the poor. We all fasted on Yom Kippur. It was also a tradition to fast on Tisha be-Av, on the 9th Aav and the Fast of Gedalia in September (on 3rd Tishri). The majority of Jews observed these three fasts. Children and sick people didn't have to fast, but in our family children began fasting when they reached the age of 5. The ritual of Kapores was to be conducted before fasting at Yom Kippur. First a prayer was said and then men took a rooster and women had a hen in their right hand. They turned them slowly above their head saying "may this be my atonement". Then these chickens were given to the poor.

Of course I remember Chanukkah when all children received Chanukkah gelt. All children were to play with a spinning top. We had new tops for every Chanukkah. They produced a sound while spinning, and we scared away the wicked Haman. Purim was the merriest holiday, I guess. All young people wore Purimshpil masks going from one Jewish house to another. People treated them with some food or gave them some change. Every family made hamantashen, strudels and fluden stuffed with raisins, nuts and prunes on Purim.

My father took me to the synagogue when I turned 7. There were two wooden synagogues in Putila. One of them was bigger, the other one smaller. There was a Jewish population in all villages along the highway, and every village had a synagogue. When the Romanians came here in 1941 they burnt them down. The Romanians and the local population burnt down most of the synagogues in Bukovina.

My father had his tallit and tefillin. I had tefillin after I had my bar mitzvah at the age of 13. Tallit were for married men only. At the age of 13 I lived in Vizhnitsa, but I came home for the bar mitzvah. My mother made a festive dinner. There was no rabbi in Putila, so the shochet performed his duties instead. He conducted the bar mitzvah.

My brother and I went to cheder when we turned 6. We were taught by a melamed. We first studied aleph and- bet [the Jewish alphabet] and began to study more complicated things afterwards. Those who finished cheder could continue their studies in a yeshivah. There were big yeshivot in Vilnius and other towns. One could become a rabbi upon finishing yeshivah, but it wasn't mandatory. We studied ancient Hebrew at cheder. It's different from modern Hebrew [Ivrit]. It's the Hebrew of the Torah. At the age of 8 I started to go to the Jewish elementary school in Putila. I finished 4 classes. There was no grammar school in Putila, so there was no chance for me to continue my education.

In 1931 I moved to Vizhnitsa and went to the grammar school there. My parents, my brother and my sister stayed in Putila. I lived with my mother's cousin. Her husband was manager of the orchestra of klezmer musicians in Vizhnitsa. They played at all weddings in Vizhnitsa and the surrounding areas. He left for Israel later and lived there until the age of 100.

There was a fee to pay for education at the grammar school. However, only a few students paid. When a student submitted a certificate issued by the village council saying that his family was poor, he was exempt from payment. Almost all students obtained such certificates. This was a Romanian grammar school. All subjects were taught in Romanian. Romanian was the official language of the state, and we all spoke it. All teaching was in Romanian since 1918. We studied foreign languages: German, French and Latin. We had classes in general subjects such as physics, chemistry, literature, history and geography. We also had religious classes: Jewish and Christian children studied separately. There were many Jewish children at school, as there were quite a few Jewish families in Vizhnitsa and the surrounding villages. I also continued to study Jewish traditions, prayers, Hebrew and Yiddish, and the Talmud at cheder.

I finished grammar school in Vizhnitsa in 1934. I wanted to complete my lower secondary education at grammar school. I moved to Chernovtsy and went to grammar school there. I lived with my mother's sister. I forgot her first name, but her married name was Gaber. They had a small house in the center of town. My aunt and her husband had four children: two sons and two daughters. They were all 5-10 years older than me. By the time I came to Chernovtsy they were

adults, had left their parents' home and had their own families. Only one of my cousins was still living with her parents, but she got married and moved out soon. They had a brick house with three rooms and a kitchen. There was a small yard, but they didn't keep any livestock. They had no gas. There was running water and a toilet in the house. My aunt's family celebrated all Jewish holidays and Sabbath.

The population of Chernovtsy was 105,000 people; about 65,000 of them were Jews. There were about 60 synagogues in Chernovtsy. All Jews went to synagogue regardless of their level of religiosity. Purim was a real carnival in Chernovtsy. Everybody wore a mask and people laughed, danced and enjoyed themselves. There were Purimshpils in Chernovtsy organized by the Jewish theater. On this day the whole town became a stage. People installed stages in the streets and in the squares, and everywhere professional and amateur actors performed Purimshpil performances.

Teaching at the Romanian grammar school was in Romanian. I studied there 4 years, from the 5th to the 8th grade. The majority of students at this grammar school was Jewish. The attitude towards Jews was very good. There was no national segregation in those years. However, there was anti-Semitism at higher educational institutions. Officially Jews were admitted to these institutions, but all Romanian students were members of the fascist and anti-Semitic organization, the Iron Guard [3](#). They persecuted their Jewish co-students. Therefore, Jews couldn't study at higher educational institutions in the late 1930s. Better off families could send their children to study in Vienna or Prague. But gradually fascists came to power in those cities, and Jews couldn't hardly get a higher education from the late 1930s. But everyday life was all right until the Romanians came to power in 1941. There were individual demonstrations of anti-Semitism: A student was murdered in Chernovtsy once and some Jews were beaten, but these were rare demonstrations of anti-Semitism.

I had many Ukrainian, Romanian and German friends at grammar school. However, in 1935 the Germans stopped socializing with us, even the ones who had been good friends before. They stopped greeting us, and so on. Romanians behaved in a normal way until the beginning of the war. The Germans lived in Roshia, in the outskirts of Chernovtsy. After 1935 Jews didn't go to Roshia in the evening because they were afraid to be abused.

During my studies at grammar school I joined a Jewish youth organization, the Betar [4](#). It was a right-wing Zionist organization. There was strong Zionist propaganda at that period. They said Jews had to live in Palestine, sing Jewish songs and have military training.

Senior members of the Betar wanted to go to Palestine. Those who wanted to move there had to work for a landlord for about a year to learn farming. Upon completion of this course they obtained a certificate and could move to Israel. The British Embassy issued those certificates. It was their requirement to have this certificate attached to the package of submittals. However, this was just another requirement to restrict entrance to Palestine. They actually wanted to turn Palestine into their colony. The borders of Arabian countries were open, and Jewish capitalist entrepreneurs went to Palestine creating new jobs. Arabs were free to go to Palestine, but Jews had restrictions. We can witness the consequences of this policy now. It's the fault of the English. The League of Nations issued the mandate to England to found a Jewish state, but it failed to perform this task.

One could go to Palestine from the age of 18. Some of my acquaintances from Betar left. I don't remember their names, though. There was a haksharah center in Chernovtsy, up the street from

the Town Council. Those, who intended to move to Palestine, got registered there and waited for a permit because only a restricted number of people could go to Palestine. There were many people willing to go there, but only few obtained permission. I didn't want to leave my family and friends and my country. Our friends from Palestine wrote about their hard life and work, the difficult climate, malaria, the lack of water and the simplest comforts. But they came to like this country and were enthusiastic about changing their lives for the better.

I finished grammar school in 1938. I was 19 years old. I became an apprentice at the Chernovtsy stocking factory. I still lived with my aunt's family. Later I became a professional knitter. In the evenings I met up with my former co-students. We went to a youth club. We also went on tours, hiking in the woods and in the mountains, and we met up with girls.

In 1940 Stalin threatened the Romanian government to start a war if Romania didn't transfer its western regions, Moldavia, Bessarabia [5](#), the Carpathian Mountains and Bukovina, to the USSR. Romania agreed and all these areas joined the USSR. I was on vacation visiting my parents in Putila when the 'liberators' came to town. The Romanian army had just left and the Soviet army was expected at any moment. Within a day the Soviet tanks came to Bukovina, and it became part of the Soviet territory. The locals, who supported the Soviet power, were appointed as heads of village and town councils.

There were many communists among the Jews. They believed in the communist ideals of equal rights for everybody, a happy future for their children and the possibility to study. However strange it may sound, there were communists even among richer Jews. There was a very rich Jew in our town. He owned a soap factory and was a communist. During the Soviet power he became the director of the soap factory. It was strange that wealthy Jews became communists, but that's what happened.

There were different views on the Soviet power. The Jews believed it was their liberation from the Romanians. Jews accepted the Soviet power hoping for a better life because the Soviet propaganda was very strong before the war. Although the Communist Party was officially banned, the communists became members of the Social Democratic Party, the Bund [6](#). The Bund was practically a disguise for communists.

There was a rich Jewish attorney named Grayev, who lived in the center of Putila. He was a communist and looked forward to the establishment of the Soviet power. I helped him to make a poster reading, 'Long live the Red Army'. He put it on his house. The following events were horrific. In 1941, ten days before the war, a bigger part of the - not only - Jewish population of Bukovina was deported to the North of Siberia on Stalin's orders. Wealthy and rich people were deported, including attorneys, lawyers and doctors. They also deported Grayev and his family. After the war somebody told me that he and his wife hanged themselves in the railcar on the way into exile. Another case was the story of a doctor in Putila, Gary Winkler, a Jew. When the Romanians were in power he spent 4 or 5 years in prison for his communist views. The Soviet authorities released all political prisoners, and Gary went to visit his father in Putila. He even held a greeting speech in the central square of the town in honor of the Soviet army. His father was an attorney. He was deported and so was Gary. Somebody told me later that he was in Aktyubinsk in the North during the war and managed to reach Austria after the war.

There were many weird things happening at that time. But the weirdest thing was that it all happened within ten days before the war. There was a feeling of war in the air, but Stalin was adamant about his policies. My parents, my brother and my sister were also deported. I wasn't aware of it. I visited my family in May 1941 and returned to work in Chernovtsy. My family was accused of being wealthy cattle dealers, and that was sufficient for the deportation to Siberia. I learned about it after the war.

All hopes for a better life under the Soviet power failed. The deportation of people was a brutal act. The people that had lived under the Soviet power since 1917 knew more about it, but to us it was a shock. A huge number of people was deported from Bukovina in one night.

I was in Chernovtsy in June 1941. We heard about the beginning of the war on the radio. A German fighter was shot on the first day of the war, but then things became quiet. There were rumors that the Soviet armies had occupied Warsaw, Sophia and Bucharest, but then we heard that the Soviet forces were retreating. This was at the beginning of July 1941. I worked at the stocking factory and was on a night shift. I went into the yard and saw our director getting into the car, ready to move. I asked him, 'What shall we do?'. He said, 'You have to escape'. He gave me 500 rubles. He left and took all money from the factory with him.

Young people of the stocking and knitwear factories gathered for a meeting the following morning. The majority of the employees were Jews. There were about a hundred of us. We decided to escape. It was impossible to get on the train. It was a hot summer, and we decided to walk. We left wearing shorts and summer shoes. We walked as far as Kamenets-Podolsk, about 150 kilometers from Chernovtsy. We saw trains that were heading for the front. One officer, a Jew, called us and asked whether we were from Chernovtsy. We were surprised and asked him how he could tell. He said that idiots, who were stupid enough to evacuate in their shorts and speak Yiddish on the way, could only come from Chernovtsy. He said that we were on the territory of Ukraine where nobody wore shorts. [Editor's note: such clothing was believed to be immoral, and nobody in the USSR wore these kind of clothes.] He said that the locals could take us for Germans and even kill us. We were lucky. He gave us trousers, and we proceeded on our way. We didn't have any luggage, only some money. We didn't need money, though, because villagers gave us food for free. We walked for about 15 days avoiding the main roads. The Germans were bombing the main roads. We walked as far as Uman, 350 kilometers from Kamenets-Podolsk. In Uman men were recruited to the army. I don't know where the girls went.

Regretfully, people that had met Germans during World War I remembered them as being very friendly towards Jews. These people were sure that the Germans weren't going to hurt them. On our way from Chernovtsy to Uman we passed smaller towns where the majority of the population was Jewish. At that time the Germans concentrated on areas in the direction to Moscow, and Ukrainian Jews had every opportunity to evacuate. Wherever we spoke with someone we told them to hurry up, but they replied that they remembered the attitude of Germans towards Jews during World War I. The Jews hoped to open their stores and synagogues and return to their habitual way of life when the Germans came. We were trying to explain that those were different Germans. We had heard from refugees from Germany and Poland about how the Germans treated the Jews, but people didn't believe what we were saying. They stayed and so many of them perished.



We were sent to the military unit in Zolotonosha near Uman. We stayed there for a short while when Stalin issued an order to release those that came from the Western areas from the front-line forces. Stalin didn't trust people that had lived under the Soviet power for less than a year. We were sent to the construction units; every one of us to a different one, just in case. We were upset, but other officers were telling us that Stalin was rescuing our life by sending us to the rear. Of course, it wasn't his goal to save our lives - the authorities were concerned about desertion and betrayal on our part. I was sent to the construction unit in Kamyshin, Saratov region, and from there to Saratov in Russia. We didn't have anything to do in this construction unit. There were military men of various nationalities from different parts of the USSR, but we were all 'not to be trusted and not worthy of the trust of the most fair Soviet power'. There were the former camp prisoners, political prisoners and young people from the parts of the country that had recently joined the USSR. First sergeants stole our food, and we stole from collective farms. The locals mockingly called us 'defenders of the motherland'.

There was a doctor with the military unit, Mergenier, a Jew from Chernovtsy. He was also transferred to this unit from the front. He called me once and said, 'There are only two of us from Chernovtsy in this unit: you and I. You make trenches here, but nobody needs them. So, let them do it, but lets say you will have dysentery the whole winter'. I stayed in his field hospital the whole winter. I could read and sleep as much as I wanted. In the spring the chairman of the local collective farm requested a few soldiers to help him during the seeding period. The doctor submitted his report to the commander of the regiment informing him that I could be sent to the collective farm. I became a water carrier at the collective farm. We had sufficient food there. I stayed at the collective farm until 1944.

When Chernovtsy was liberated in 1944, I was recruited to the front-line forces. I was sent to Verkhovetskiy training camp in Gorky region. Soldiers were sent to front-line forces from this camp. We lived in earth-houses. There were huge fleas, and the conditions were awfully unhealthy. Many young people were sent to the front. I went to the battalion commanding officer to ask him to send me to the front. I said to him that fleas had almost eaten me, but he replied in Yiddish, 'I'd rather fleas eat you here than worms there. When I hear that somebody needs a translator I will send you to them'. I spoke fluent German and Romanian, and he was going to find me a position as a translator somewhere with the headquarters of the army. But then the war was over in 1945, and we were sent to Termez at the border with Afghanistan. The military had to take their assignments and fulfill orders. I served there until 1946 when I demobilized.

I returned to Chernovtsy and got my former job at the stocking factory. I worked there until I retired in 1989. I was living with my aunt. She and her husband returned from a camp in Transnistria [7](#). The majority of Jews were taken to camps during the war, but the mayor of Chernovtsy, Marian Popovich, a Romanian, managed to rescue 16,000 Jews from Chernovtsy. He issued work permits to them, which were their official permission to stay in Chernovtsy. Those that were in the camps were starving to death and suffering from diseases. I don't know the exact number of survivors. Romanians didn't arrange mass shootings, but they created conditions under which people were dying anyway. There were mass shootings arranged by Germans, who didn't stay long and were replaced by Romanians, in Chernovtsy at the beginning of the war. 900 Jews were shot. This year a monument was erected in their memory and was inaugurated by Doctor Mark, the rabbi. My cousin, the son of my father's sister, was among those that were to be shot,

but he managed to escape. I got to know that my family had been deported in June 1941. I didn't hear from my family for a long time.

Life was very difficult after the war. There was an awful famine in 1947, but then life began to improve. When I returned to Chernovtsy there were only a few synagogues operating. They were gradually closed, except for the one in Kobylitsa Street, which is still there. I sometimes went there on holidays.

In 1948 the campaign against cosmopolitans [8](#) began. The Jewish theater and school in Chernovtsy were closed. The official broadcasting stations told incredible stories about the cosmopolitans, who wanted to overthrow the Soviet regime. I can't remember any examples, I just know that it was terrible. The majority of the people didn't believe the official propaganda. People listened to foreign radio stations. The authorities were jamming radio broadcasts in Ukrainian and Russian, but many people knew German and could listen to those stations without obstruction. People shared the news they heard. So we were aware that anti-Semitism was Stalin's policy and that he was planning to deport Jews to Siberia. There were rumors that Stalin's daughter wanted to marry a Jewish man and that this was the reason for the persecution of all Jews, but it's hard to say whether this was true or not. Then the Kremlin Doctors' Plot [9](#) began. Nobody believed a word of this lie. The local population knew that Jews were the best doctors, and nobody believed this slander about Jewish doctors. There was no anti-Semitism at the factory, and I didn't face any.

In March 1953 Stalin died. Although he was a brutal man almost all people in Chernovtsy cried. I couldn't understand why they were crying when he had caused so much evil. People were aware of the truth, but they just didn't know how to carry on living after the 'father of all people' died and they had become 'orphans'. They were afraid of chaos after his death. Many of my acquaintances were in grief, which surprised me.

Krushchev's [10](#) speech at the Twentieth Congress [11](#) of the Communist Party, in which he denounced the cult of Stalin, wasn't a surprise to me. I already knew a lot of what he said. However, I believed it wasn't sincere what he said because if he had been a real democrat he would have said it when Stalin was still alive. He was aware of the true situation before but he kept silent. There is a Latin saying, 'One can only say good things or nothing about the deceased'. I believed that it made no sense to talk about Stalin like this after his death, but the Twentieth Congress was as a revelation to many people and helped them to get to know the truth.

In 1954 all members of my family were completely rehabilitated [12](#) and returned home. I didn't have any information about them before. I didn't get any responses to my requests about them. They believed I had perished. Besides, they weren't allowed to write letters. They lived in a remote location in Siberia, worked hard and starved. Only my father perished in exile in 1944; my mother, my brother and sister returned home. During the war their house in Putila was destroyed. We all rented an apartment in Chernovtsy. My brother found a job as a driver at the town council. I worked at the stocking factory and earned well. Later my sister and brother got married and moved to Israel. I visited them in 1994.

My mother and I stayed in the apartment. Later I received an apartment from the factory, and my mother and I moved in there. After the war we continued to celebrate Jewish holidays. There was only one synagogue open in town. There were too many people that wanted to pray, and many of them remained outside the synagogue, but they could still pray there. People bought matzah for

Pesach at the synagogue.

After the Jewish theater was closed in 1948 Jewish actors from other towns came to Chernovtsy on tours. The local actors gave concerts. A well-known Jewish actress and singer, Sidi Tahl, was a favorite of the public. She often gave concerts, sang Jewish songs and read extracts from books of Jewish writers and poets. At the beginning of the war she went on tours all over the Soviet Union throughout the period of occupation. After the war she returned to Chernovtsy.

We had religious books and fiction in Yiddish at home. My mother and I read them, but my brother and sister couldn't read in Yiddish.

When I was in the army party members suggested that I became a member of the Party. I refused and told them I would do it after demobilization. Then party members at work recommended me to enter the Party, but I couldn't. It wasn't for me. So I never became a party member.

I got married after I turned 40. It wasn't a happy marriage. My wife and my in-laws were too quarrelsome. We got divorced within a year's time. My wife and her parents moved to Israel later. That's all I can say about my marriage. It was my first and last effort.

When Jews began to move to Israel in the early 1970s, I believed that they were making the right choice and that this country would have a good future. Unfortunately the latest events prove different. I was considering moving to Israel. But then, I didn't want to go with my ex-wife and her parents. I stayed and delayed my departure over and over again. Then I grew older and quit thinking about it. I visited Israel in 1994 and admired the country. I felt at home there. But again, I didn't want to move to this country as a pensioner and receive all its welfare and not be able to do anything in return.

There were meetings at work condemning the people that wanted to leave. This was an official act, performed on the orders of the management. After such meetings people used to say, 'He is doing the right thing' about those that were leaving. Party unit leaders were ordered to conduct such meetings, and they couldn't ignore the orders. Regional and town party committees issued texts for mandatory speeches to be made at the meetings.

There was actually no Jewish life in Chernovtsy after the Jewish theater and school were closed. My generation of Jews was becoming less and less religious. Celebration of holidays became just a matter of habit.

My mother died in 1985. I buried her in the Jewish cemetery in Chernovtsy. It was still open. I buried her according to the Jewish tradition, with no coffin, wrapped into a white shroud - takhrikhim. There was a rabbi at the funeral. I recited the Kaddish over her grave. Soon after the funeral the cemetery was closed. It's in decay now.

By the way, Adolf Hitler was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Chernovtsy. I'm not joking, it's true. Adolf Hitler was the name of a tailor in Chernovtsy, who was very popular before the war. My cousin's wife used to be a seamstress in his shop in Glavnaya Street. Unfortunately, somebody stole the bronze gravestone from his grave with his name in German and dates of birth and death. His grave was one of places of interest in Chernovtsy.

The cemetery was founded by the Jewish community, and its chairman at that time, Doctor Shtrauher. When Shtrauher built the community house, he was blamed for wasting the community money. [Editor's note: At that time it was customary that every Jewish family contributed 5% of their income to the Jewish community, regardless of their wealth. The community always had some money available in case of emergency and every member of the community could count on their assistance.] He said, 'Did I build the Jewish hospital for myself? No, it's for all of you. And the cemetery? That's also for all of you.'

In 1991 Ukraine became independent and Jewish life has revived since then. There is Hased, a Jewish cultural center and library. There are concerts and exhibitions. But Jewish culture is still far from being completely restored. Jewish life will not be as active as it used to be before the war. There were 65,000 Jews in Chernovtsy before the war, and now there are only about 3,000. Many young people leave because they see no perspectives here, and there are no jobs for them. I remember Chernovtsy in the past: an orchestra playing in every square in summer and beautifully dressed Jews walking along Glavnaya Street. They believed in their future. The past will never come back, but we need to save and keep every memory of it.

Glossary

### **1 Pogroms in Ukraine**

In the 1920s there were many anti-Semitic gangs in Ukraine. They killed Jews and burnt their houses, they robbed their houses, raped women and killed children.

### **2 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.

### **3 Iron Guard**

Extreme right wing political organization in Romania between 1930-1941, led by C. Z. Codreanu. The Iron Guard propagated nationalist, Christian-mystical and anti-Semitic views. It was banned for its terrorist activities (e.g. the murder of Romanian prime minister I. Gh. Duca) in 1933. In 1935 it was re-established as a party named 'Everything for the Fatherland', but it was banned again in 1938. It was part of the government in the first period of the Antonescu regime, but it was then banned and dissolved as a result of the unsuccessful coup d'état of January 1941. Its leaders escaped abroad to the Third Reich.

### **4 Betar**

Founded in Riga, Latvia, in 1923, Betar is a Zionist youth movement, named after Joseph

Trumpeldor. It taught Hebrew culture and self-defense in eastern Europe and formed the core groups of later settlements in Palestine. Most European branches were lost in the Holocaust.

## **5 Bessarabia**

Historical area between the Prut and Dneestr rivers, in the southern part of Odessa region. Bessarabia was part of Russia until the Revolution of 1917. In 1918 it declared itself an independent republic, and later it united with Romania. The Treaty of Paris (1920) recognized the union but the Soviet Union never accepted this. In 1940 Romania was forced to cede Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina to the USSR. The two provinces had almost 4 million inhabitants, mostly Romanians. Although Romania reoccupied part of the territory during World War II the Romanian peace treaty of 1947 confirmed their belonging to the Soviet Union. Today it is part of Moldavia.

## **6 Bund**

The short name of the General Jewish Union of Working People in Lithuania, Poland and Russia, Bund means Union in Yiddish). The Bund was a social democratic organization representing Jewish craftsmen from the Western areas of the Russian Empire. It was founded in Vilnius in 1897. In 1906 it joined the autonomous fraction of the Russian Social Democratic Working Party and took up a Menshevik position. After the Great October Socialist Revolution the organization split: one part was anti-Soviet power, while the other remained in the Bolsheviks' Russian Communist Party. In 1921 the Bund dissolved itself in the USSR, but continued to exist in other countries.

## **7 Transnistria**

Area between the Dneestr and Bug Rivers and the Black Sea. The word Transnistria derived from the Romanian name of the Dneestr River - Nistru. The territory was controlled by Gheorghe Alexianu, governor appointed by Ion Antonescu. Several labor camps were established on this territory, onto which Romanian Jews were deported from Bessarabia and Bukovina in 1941-1942. The most feared camps were Vapniarka, Ribnita, Berezovka, Tulcin and Iampol. Most of the Jews died between 1941-1943 because of horrible living conditions, diseases, and lack of food.

## **8 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'.

## **9 Doctors' Plot**

The Doctors' Plot was an alleged conspiracy of a group of Moscow doctors to murder leading government and party officials. In January 1953, the Soviet press reported that nine doctors, six of whom were Jewish, had been arrested and confessed their guilt. As Stalin died in March 1953, the trial never took place. The official paper of the party, the Pravda, later announced that the charges against the doctors were false and their confessions obtained by torture. This case was one of the worst anti-Semitic incidents during Stalin's reign. In his secret speech at the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956 Khrushchev stated that Stalin wanted to use the Plot to purge the top Soviet leadership.

### **10 Khrushchev, Nikita (1894-1971)**

Soviet communist leader. After Stalin's death in 1953, he became first secretary of the Central Committee, in effect the head of the Communist Party of the USSR. In 1956, during the 20th Party Congress, Khrushchev took an unprecedented step and denounced Stalin and his methods. He was deposed as premier and party head in October 1964. In 1966 he was dropped from the Party's Central Committee.

### **11 Twentieth Party Congress**

At the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956 Khrushchev publicly debunked the cult of Stalin and lifted the veil of secrecy from what had happened in the USSR during Stalin's leadership.

### **12 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.