

# Peter Rabtsevich

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Kiev

Ukraine

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Date of Interview: August 2002

My father's parents lived in the town of Lyubeshov, which belonged to Poland before 1939. Lyubeshov was a small town on the bank of the Stokhod River. The population of Lyubeshov was Polish, Russian, Jewish, Ukrainian and Lithuanian. There were no national conflicts and people respected each other. There was a synagogue and a Christian church in town. Jews were mainly tradesmen and craftsmen. All tinsmiths, carpenters and tailors in Lyubeshov were Jewish.

I know very little about my grandfather and grandmother on my father's side. My grandfather's name was Shleima Rabinov. I don't know my grandmother's first name. Her maiden name was Fridman. My grandfather and grandmother both came from Lyubeshov. They had seven children.

One of my father's brothers moved to America at the beginning of World War I. After the war he brought his parents, one of his sisters and two brothers over to the US, too. My grandfather and grandmother lived in New York. I don't know when my grandfather died. My grandmother died in 1939. In 1933 my father's sister that also lived in Lyubeshov emigrated to Israel. Three brothers lived in Poland: Kiva, who lived in Pinsk, Israel, who lived in Lodz with his family and my father, Ruvim Rabinov. Only Israel survived the war. He was in evacuation in Kazakhstan with his wife and three daughters; later they all emigrated to America. We corresponded for some time with his daughter Godl, but later she stopped writing to us. That's all I know about Israel's family.

I only knew Kiva, my father's older brother. Kiva finished heder and school and moved to the town of Pogost-Zagorodskiy. He got married there. His wife, Hava, came from this town and was born in 1887. They had five children. The oldest, Yankel, was born in 1915. In 1917 their daughter Riva followed. Then came Zeyer in 1919 and Leizer in 1921. Their youngest daughter, Hana, was born in 1924. Kiva was a shoemaker, and his family was very religious observing all traditions and celebrating holidays. In 1941 the Germans came to Pogost-Zagorodskiy and shot my uncle's family, every single one of them.

My father was born in Lyubeshov in 1890. He and his brothers studied in heder and later finished trade school. My father was a cheese maker.

My mother's parents lived in Lyubeshov. My grandfather was born in Lyubeshov in 1866. I have no information about his family. He was a craftsman, but I don't know what he was exactly doing for a living. My grandmother's name was Bella Korzh. She was born in Lyubomir (near Lyubeshov) in 1868. I don't know how many children they had. My mother never told me how many brothers and sisters she had. They were a religious family. They observed all Jewish traditions. My mother told me that they celebrated Sabbath and Jewish holidays and followed the kashrut. My grandfather, Fishel Korzh, used to read religious books in the evening. My grandfather died in Lyubeshov in 1914; my grandmother perished in the Jewish ghetto in Pinsk on 29th October 1942.

I knew my mother's older sister Sarrah and her brother Meyer. They lived in Drogitchyn. Sarrah's family name was Popinskaya. She was a housewife. She had two daughters. I don't know what Meyer was doing for a living. I knew his daughter Bella, my cousin. They perished in the ghetto in Pinsk on 29th October 1942.

My mother, Pesia Rabinova [nee Korzh], was born in Lyubeshov in 1892. I believe my mother received religious education, because she knew Hebrew well, and Yiddish was her mother tongue. My mother finished Jewish trade school. At that time quite a few girls studied in trade school, but very few of them worked later. Most of them became housewives after they got married.

My parents got married in Lyubeshov at the very beginning of World War I. They had a traditional Jewish wedding. After the wedding the newly-weds moved into my father's parents' house. My older sister, Esther, was born in Lyubeshov in 1914 and my brother, Lev, followed in 1916. In the same year, when the Germans were retreating, they moved many families from Lyubeshov away from military operation areas. My family moved to the town of Drogitchyn. My sister Riva was born in Drogitchyn in 1921, I followed on 25th May 1923. I was named Erukhim-Fishel at birth, after my mother's father Fishel. We lived in Drogitchyn until 1924. In 1924 my father was employed by a landlord called Orgi to work on his estate in Mokraya Dubrova, Brest province. My father was a Swiss cheese maker. My younger brothers were born in Mokraya Dubrova: David in 1925 and Aron in 1927.

We were the only Jewish family on the estate. Our family observed all Jewish traditions. Once a week my parents went to the market in Pinsk to buy kosher food and stored it in a box with ice in the cellar. There was no Jewish school nearby. We had a teacher of Hebrew, religion and Jewish history and culture. My older brother completed 8 years of grammar school in Pinsk. My sister Esther also studied at the grammar school in Pinsk for 8 years.

When I was growing up the financial situation in our family got worse. My parents couldn't afford to send me and my younger brothers to grammar school. But we needed to get education somewhere. There was no school on the estate. My parents rented a room from a Jewish family in the town of Logishyn [5 km from the estate], and my brothers and I went to a (7-year) Polish school. Our landlady cooked for us and looked after us. We went to school five days a week. Jewish schoolchildren had a separate teacher of Hebrew, Jewish culture and geography of Palestine. We had these classes on Sundays. There were classes on Saturday, but my brothers and I didn't attend them. We spent Saturdays in the synagogue and had Jewish classes in our school on Sunday. Our parents wanted us to study Hebrew to be able to read the Torah, the Talmud and other sources of Jewish culture. There were about 200 Jewish families in Logishyn. There were three synagogues there, and the local Jews followed all Jewish traditions, including kashrut. There were two shochetim in town.

My parents spent all holidays in Logishyn, because the synagogue there was the closest to their house. So, we spent Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Pesach, Sukkot and Purim together. On Saturdays in summer we walked to our parents' home, on Saturdays in winter our parents visited us. My sisters and my older brother stayed at home on these days. My mother used to bring stuffed fish, challah and chicken, and we celebrated Sabbath in Logishyn. My mother lit two Sabbath candles, we said a prayer and after the prayer we welcomed 'Queen Saturday'. We left the door open to let Saturday in. We sat at the table and enjoyed the meals prepared by our mother. I

remember Pesach celebrations in Logishyn. My mother came in advance to cook traditional food. We bought a lot of matzah in the synagogue. All breadcrumbs were removed from the house and burnt. My mother bought special Pesach dishes that we kept in Logishyn. We kept them in the attic, and our mother used to take them from there before Pesach. My mother cooked stuffed fish on holidays and whenever she visited us. She always took chickens to the shochet at the market in Logishyn not far from our house. She made clear soup with dumplings and stuffed chicken necks with chicken liver and fried flour. They were delicious. She also made potato and matzah puddings, sponge cakes and strudels from matzah flour.

My brother and I fasted on Yom Kippur. The children in our family began to fast when they were 5 years old. Before Sukkot our landlords' family made a sukkah in their yard, and our family also could have meals there. My mother and father came and cooked traditional food, and we had meals together with our landlord in the sukkah. At Purim my mother made hamantashen, triangle pies with poppy seeds. All children walked around with wooden rattles. Their sound was supposed to scare away the evil-doer Haman. People disguised themselves in costumes of the Purim-shpil characters: Mordecai, King Ahasuerus, Queen Esther and evil-doer Haman, of course. They walked into every Jewish house where they got small treats: sweets and some change.

I finished school in 1936 and went to study at the Jewish trade school in the town of Pinsk. Our parents rented a room for us from a Jewish family. I studied at trade school, and my brothers, David and Aron, were studying at the Sniftarbut Jewish school (this school got its name from the owner of the school, a Jew called Sniftarbut). Our older sister, Esther, moved in with us. Esther did the cooking and laundry. We kept observing all Jewish traditions that we had learned from our parents.

Jews constituted about 75% of the population in Pinsk. There were 29,000 Jews and 7,000 Christians in town. People had a peaceful life. Once members of some gangs [1](#) arrived at the railway station in Pinsk. Their intention must have been to make a pogrom. The local cab drivers - there were Jewish, Russian and Polish people among them - didn't let them leave the station, and they had to retreat. The police didn't interfere. There were quite a few Jewish secondary schools in Pinsk. There were also two Jewish grammar schools: the Sniftarbut and the Chechik grammar school, named after its owner and director. In the Sniftarbut all subjects were taught in Hebrew - Polish was taught as a foreign language. In the Chechik grammar school all subjects were taught in Polish. It was convenient for Jewish students who wanted to continue their education in Polish universities, but there were special seats for Jewish students in Polish universities. Sitting separately from other students was disgraceful. Besides, it was very difficult for a Jew to enter university - very few Jews were admitted to higher educational institutions at the time. There was a yeshivah in Pinsk. Students had to complete their education in a higher theological school in Vilno to become rabbis. Therefore, Jews went to study abroad, either to Austria or Hungary. But only wealthier people could afford to send their children abroad.

There were a few synagogues in Pinsk. On Saturday and Jewish holidays we went to the smaller synagogue near our house. There were also a few Jewish cinemas where we could watch movies in Yiddish. I remember two movies. One of them, *Der Dibuk* [2](#) was based on religious motives. The other one, *Mamele* [3](#) was about events that happened during World War I.

My older brother, Lev, went to the army in 1934. He was recruited to a cavalry unit, but he had secondary education, so he was sent to study at a medical school. After finishing it he returned to

the army and became a doctor in a cavalry unit. He stayed there until the end of his service term. My sister Riva finished a Polish lower secondary school. She didn't want to continue her studies and stayed with our parents in Mokraya Dubrova to help our mother about the house.

In 1938 landlord Orga sold his estate to farmers. There were 32 families of support staff on his estate, and they were all fired. They lost their jobs, because the new owners didn't need any support staff. Our father was among those that lost their jobs. My parents moved to Pinsk and rented a two- bedroom apartment. Riva found a job as a shop assistant at the Feldman store in the Schmidt house, the biggest store in town. My mother found a job as a seamstress. My father couldn't find a job. My mother and sister earned enough money to pay the rent and buy food for the family. I had to pay 10 zlotys monthly for my studies in the trade school, and this was a big amount for us, about one third of the family budget. My parents couldn't afford to pay for it. The Custodial Council of the school exempted me from payment of this fee because I studied very well. I had to work at the school shop during vacations in return.

In 1937 Lev returned from the army. He couldn't find a job as an assistant doctor. There were no vacancies at the medical institutions in Pinsk. He went to work at the Luriye plywood factory. He got married in 1938. His wife Haya [nee Levzina] came from Pinsk. She was a Jewish woman and a couple of years younger than Lev. She owned a small food store at the Luriye factory. They had a traditional Jewish wedding. They rented a canteen at the factory for their wedding party. They had a crew of cooks that made kosher food for the party and many guests. There was a chuppah at the wedding and a rabbi.

In 1938 my sister Esther married Abraham Warshavskiy from Pinsk. He owned a garment store. They had a traditional Jewish wedding party in a café that lasted a few days. There was a chuppah, a rabbi and klezmer musicians. There were many guests at the wedding: relatives and friends. Abram had a small apartment in the same building where he had his store, and the newly- weds moved in there. Abram worked at the store, Esther was a housewife.

There were Jewish youth Zionist organizations in Pinsk, Hashomer Haolami, Hashomer Hatzair and the Bund [4](#). There was one more organization, but I don't remember its name. We attended the Haolami club - it was a leftist movement. We usually attended this club on Saturday afternoons. In this club we were lectured on Jewish history. The foundation of a Jewish state was our dream. We studied and communicated in Yiddish. There was no anti- Semitism in Poland during the rule of [Jozef] Pilsudzki, the head of country, who died in 1935. There were Jewish students in all Polish schools. In 1935 two anti-Semitic organizations, Moda Polska and Ozone, were founded or probably they had existed before as underground organizations. Members of these organizations boycotted Jewish stores and Jewish institutions.

In 1938, upon the Anschluss [5](#), Hitler demanded the annexation of Danzig [6](#), and it became clear to us that war was close. In March 1939 the first mobilization to the army in Poland was announced. My older brother Lev was recruited to the army.

I finished trade school in 1939. I became an electrician. I couldn't find a job and began to assist my father in the orchard (growing apples, pears, plums and cherries). My father took care of the orchard paying a purely symbolic rental fee. We often went there on hot days to rest in the cool shade of fruit trees. My younger brothers, David and Aron, finished school. David became a shop assistant in Abraham Warshavskiy's store. We were all very concerned. The Polish authorities

requested assistance from the population: contributions for the purchase of ammunition for the army, especially for air defense purposes. People began to make shelters in their gardens.

After the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact [7](#) between Germany and the Soviet Union in 1939, the war in Poland began. In early December trains with the wounded began to arrive in Pinsk. A hospital was arranged in the Jesuit church. Our father and we went to look for our brother in this hospital. We just thought he might happen to be among the wounded, or we just hoped to get word of him from those that might have met him at the front. Many refugees were coming to Pinsk from other districts of Poland. On 17th September 1939 the Soviet army crossed the Polish-Soviet border and on 20th September they were in Pinsk. The Polish power was suppressed. Soon all synagogues and Jewish schools, public and private, were closed. The Jewish population was happier to have the Soviet army in power than the Germans. We were aware of the German attitude towards Jews.

In November 1939 I went to work at the Western River Transport Agency. I got a job as a communications mechanic. Riva became an accountant at the Food Trade Agency. My younger brothers went to the Jewish school. They studied Yiddish as well as Russian and Belarus.

We didn't know anything about our brother Lev. He came home in 1940. He had escaped from German captivity and walked as far as Brest. He was kept in the Brest fortress for over a month while the Soviet military collected all necessary information about him. They released him and he came home. His wife, Haya, gave birth to their daughter Dina shortly afterwards. Lev went to work at the town hospital and studied at the Medical College in Pinsk.

In 1941 the Soviet authorities began to deport wealthier families to Siberia [8](#). Refugees from Poland were also 'hostile elements' and deported to Siberia in their majority. By 21st June 1941, 900 families of refugees remained in Pinsk.

The last time our family was together was on 22nd June 1941 [9](#). This was the first day of the war. On this day only the husband of Abraham's sister was away. He was summoned to the military training course at the Brest fortress. Riva came to visit us on this day. She worked as a planner on the field aerodrome construction site. Lev was summoned to the military registration office, Riva went back to work and so did I. There was no certainty about what was going to happen. Panic started in town on the night of 24th June. It was caused by the explosion of the gunpowder storage facilities of the former Polish Infantry Regiment 84. People started running across the bridge to the right bank of the Pina River in the direction of David-Gorodok. My brothers and I also left town. On the 3rd day we reached the former Soviet-Polish border, but we didn't have pass permits and the Soviet military didn't let us cross it. We returned to Pinsk. I went back to work. The management left Pinsk on a truck on 24th June. The commandant of the Dnieper Fleet was the only authority left in town.

The Germans entered Pinsk and their major goal was to exterminate all Jews. 30 Jewish men were shot in Pinsk on the first day of occupation. One of them was a barber from Logishyn. He fell in the pit and the Germans thought he was dead. After the Germans left he got out of the pit and returned home. In 1942, when this man was in the ghetto, a German policeman found a piece of bread that he had with him, when returning to the ghetto from work, and shot him.

On 9th August 1941, 10,000 Jewish men were shot in Pinsk. The youngest were 6 year-old boys. My brothers David and Aron were among the ones shot on this day. I survived, because when the

Germans came to our house I was in the toilet in the yard. My father also survived hiding in the attic. He was hiding because on 7th August the German commandant of Pinsk issued an order saying that all unemployed Jews had to come to the railway station to be sent to work. On 8th August a few hundred men went to the station. They were taken to a potato field and shot. A few people survived and returned to town. The news spread very fast, and on 9th August nobody went to the railway station. The Germans swooped on the town, and captives were shot in the woods near the village of Kozliakovichi. On the same day the Germans demanded that Jews turn in their gold, silver and copper. They stated that if they didn't do it the result would be a second round of shooting.

When the Germans arrived in town I was offered to resume my former job. They probably didn't have a replacement. I continued working as a communications mechanic at the River Transport Agency. Our manager, Malinovskiy, employed three more Jews called Botvinnik, Epshtein and Radkevich. The four of us survived the shooting on 9th August 1941. In September the town council in Pinsk issued yellow German identity cards, with a stamp reading 'Jew' on the front page, to all Jews.

Jewish people could stay in their apartments, but they weren't allowed to walk on pavements, talk to non-Jewish men or go to the market. On 1st May 1942 we were taken to the fenced ghetto. Zavalnaya, Logishynskaya, Gorky and Sovietskaya streets formed the borderline of this ghetto, fencing about 250 buildings within the ghetto. The Jewish cemetery was also within the ghetto. Our family lived in a 6 square meter room in the ghetto. There were six of us: my father, my mother, my sister Esther, her husband Abraham Warshavskiy, their daughter, who was born in 1939, and I. Abraham had escaped from German captivity in Czechoslovakia and returned to Pinsk in December 1941.

Conditions in the ghetto were terrible. Those who worked were allowed to leave the ghetto and they could exchange their clothing for food. It was forbidden to bring food into the ghetto. If the policemen found any food at the entrance gate they shot people immediately. It wasn't allowed to walk in the ghetto before 7am. If somebody went out to fetch some water from the pump before 7am he was shot. People in the ghetto ate anything they could find and many of them, especially older people and children, were dying from dysentery, dystrophy and other diseases. Initially there were about 28,000 people in the ghetto. Many Jews came to Pinsk from surrounding towns and villages trying to escape from shootings and thus increasing the number of the Jewish population.

There were weekly supplies of bread to the ghetto. Employed Jews received 200 grams, children 120 grams, and those who didn't go to work 80 grams of bread. But anyway, the bread they supplied was only sufficient for 150-200 families, and there were over 3,000 families there.

In May 1942 a new manager was appointed at the Department of River Transport in Pinsk. His name was Gunter Krull. My supervisor sent me to his office to do some work. All inmates in the ghetto were wearing round yellow cloth sewn on the front and back of our clothes. We had the stamps of our offices on these yellow pieces that served as our identity cards. I came to Krull's office, and he told me to remove the yellow pieces. He said I wasn't to be humiliated by wearing them. I explained to him that it was my identity card, and that I couldn't remove it because I might be shot. Then Krull told me to take off my over-clothes while working in his office. He also asked me about my family. I told him about our life conditions; that we were paid 50% of what we were

earning at work and that we weren't allowed to go to the canteen. On the following day Botvinnik, Radkevich and I received coupons for meals at the canteen. Once a week a German soldier escorted us to the ghetto so that we could take some food there. It was nice of Gunter Krull to help us.

In August 1942 rumors about the extermination of the Jewish population spread. Krull told me that he wanted to rescue us, but that he didn't yet know how to do it. He told me about his family. His father was a surgeon in Berlin, and his brother was a surgeon in the German army. Krull told me that he helped his two Jewish friends to leave Berlin and that he wished he could rescue all Jews, but that it was impossible.

In September 1942 Corporal Friooff brought his maintenance crew to Pinsk from Kiev. Krull asked Friooff to pull strings for me and ask communication manager Shtoide to employ me in Kiev. Friooff knew that I was a Jew. Our company, Field Department of Water Transport, could send us to do work in smaller towns, but Krull thought that I would have better chances to 'get lost' in a bigger town.

It was so hard to tell my mother that Krull was going to rescue me, that I had an opportunity to survive. At last, when I mustered the courage to ask my mother what she thought about this possibility she said, 'We are clutching at straws. Go for it. If you survive you have to tell the others what these rascals did to us'. My mother packed a few photographs, some underwear, a towel and a spoon. I took this package to work. Every night the Germans took 300 hostages. They also shot a whole family and all hostages, if one member of the family didn't return from work to the ghetto. Therefore, I couldn't leave Pinsk. There was a synagogue in the ghetto where we celebrated Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Nobody went to work on these days. We all prayed because we knew that this was probably our last holiday together.

Krull issued me a night-shift permit to enable me to leave the ghetto at night. I had an excuse to work night-shift. Power was turned on at night, and my responsibility was to charge the electric power accumulator. I worked about ten night shifts. Throughout this period I returned home in the morning and said farewell to my family every night before going to work. At about 5am, on the morning of 29th October, I heard gunshots and dogs barking. The ghetto was located about 800 meters from where I worked. Krull took me to his home.

I stayed in Krull's house from 29th October till 22nd November. On 22nd November we received a letter from the Field Department of River Transport No. 2 requesting me to come to work there. Krull gave me an identity card, which had the name Peter Rabtsevich and a different place of birth on it. I also had my business certificate saying that I had to go to Kiev to see Shtoide. Krull told me to go in a carriage for Germans and stay at waiting rooms for Germans at the railway stations. I wasn't supposed to ask the way to my office in Kiev. And what was most important - I wasn't to avoid the police. My life was in his hands now. He told me that the ghetto in Pinsk had been eliminated on 29th October. All inmates were taken to the village of Galevo [5 km from Pinsk] and shot. My mother, my father, my sister Esther, her husband Abraham and their daughter Gita, my brother Lev's wife Haya and their daughter Dina were killed on that day. My family, my acquaintances and my life perished along with them.

In the evening of 22nd November 1942 Krull saw me off to the railway station, and I boarded a train to Brest. I arrived in Kiev on 28th November and spent my first night at the railway station.

The police first didn't allow me to stay in the waiting room for Germans. I addressed the gendarmerie showing them my identity card, and they allowed me to stay in the waiting room. In the morning I went to the office of my company. The guard showed me into Shtoide's office. Shtoide allowed me to come in and sit on the sofa. I fell asleep right away because I hadn't slept for six nights.

Shtoide, Krull's acquaintance, woke me up at 9am and took me to the staff administration of Field Department No. 2 in Podol [10](#). I went to the human resources office to have my employment documentation processed. The human resources manager said that it was bad that they were sending employees in the Eastern direction when they were supposed to be sending them to the West. I told her that I came where my job assignment was and if she needed further clarification she should address Mr. Shtoide. I obtained my identity card and was told to go to the employment office to obtain my work certificate. Officials there started asking me questions about me being sent to the East. I addressed a German man. I spoke German with no accent. I also had fluent Polish and Russian. I didn't look like a Jew either. The German ordered them to issue my work certificate. This work certificate served as a permit to stay in town. Every Saturday they stamped it, and if the police stopped somebody to check his work certificate and there was no stamp for the previous week this person was subject to go to work in Germany.

I settled down in a hostel. I needed to have a passport to obtain my residence permit. Krull had foreseen this and said that he had my passport in the office in Pinsk and would mail it, if necessary, but I knew that my passport had been burnt in Krull's stove. The authorities in Kiev sent a request for my passport to be mailed. Krull wrote them a letter saying that he had done that already. After a month I received a certificate at work saying that my passport had been lost. On the basis of this certificate and the documents that Krull gave me in Pinsk, I received a passport under the name of Peter Romanovich Rabtsevich, nationality Russian, at the Podol Department.

In May 1943 I turned 20. Young people of this age were to be sent to work in Germany. The problem was that I had to undergo a medical check-up. I was circumcised and just couldn't have them find out that I was a Jew. I spent a few hours at the employment office and noticed that quite a few young people told the commission that they had no health problems and volunteered to go to Germany. I decided to do the same. They told me to show my hands and feet, checked my eyes and issued all necessary documents for me to go to Germany. This was all I needed. These documents were a permit to stay in Kiev, because my work at Field Department No. 2 released me from the obligation to go to Germany. Krull supported me in Kiev in 1943. Corporal Frioiff once brought me a pack of matches; I could exchange one box of matches for half a loaf of bread. In 1943 Krull came to Kiev and we saw each other in a place where nobody would notice us. We saw each other from a distance standing on the opposite sites of a street.

I only had winter clothes when I came to Kiev. When summer approached Frioiff bought me shoes for 400 karbovantsy. It was a lot of money for me. My salary was 700 karbovantsy. I received a meal at the canteen six days a week. I also received one loaf of bread made from millet bran a week. It was impossible to eat this bread when it turned stale.

In August 1943, along with the retreat of the Germans, Field Department No. 2 evacuated from Kiev. They offered me to evacuate with them. There was panic in the city. I was captured during a German raid on the way from the hostel to work. All captives were escorted to the railway station



to be sent to Germany. I stayed at the railway station overnight, and in the morning I showed my documents to a German military telling him where I worked and that I was going to evacuate with my company. They let me go. I came to work, but there was nobody left - everybody had evacuated.

In August 1943 I went around the surrounding villages looking for work and food. On 6th November 1943 Kiev was liberated. I returned to the city and went to work at the Dneprovskoye Military Water Transport Department. I had to submit my CV and questionnaire to get employed. I wrote my true story and told the human resources manager that I wanted to get my real name back. His name was Rodman, and he was a Jew. He said that he understood and sympathized with me, but that he couldn't do anything about it. He told me to address the prosecutor's office or the militia. I went to the Water Transport prosecutor's office. They told me that if I changed my name at that time it would mean that I wanted to conceal my past and that I might be arrested. In November I was to be recruited to the army, but my work in the transport system released me from my service duty.

In 1944 Pinsk was liberated. I wrote a letter to our acquaintances in Kovnyatin village. My brother Lev also wrote a letter to this village from the army. He served at the 2nd Belarus front. We found each other and felt better from a moral point of view. We wrote to each other. My brother was wounded on his lung and sent to a hospital in Moscow. There he met a nurse that was looking after him. Her name was Tamara. She came from Moscow and was half-Russian, half-Georgian. They got married. In 1959 Tamara gave birth to a girl. After the war Lev graduated from the Moscow Medical Institute and worked as a doctor. He was a surgeon in Balashyha. He died in March 2001. His daughter and her family live in Balashyha.

Tamara had relatives in Kiev. In 1944 she came to Kiev to meet me, and when she saw me she insisted that I moved in with her relatives. I stayed with them over five years until I got married. I got married on 31st December 1949. I met my future wife, Evgenia Siderman, at work. She was a Jew and worked as an accountant. Evgenia was born in Kiev in 1926. She finished lower secondary school and an accounting school. Her father came from Rzhyshev. His father died before the revolution when my wife's father was in his teens. He became a clerk at the Crystal store. Evgenia's mother came from Mogilyov. Evgenia's grandfather died when she was a child, and her grandmother gave her children to her relatives. My mother-in-law happened to live at her aunt's in Kiev. She finished Jewish trade school. My wife's parents got married when they were young. They had three children. Their older son Ilia perished in the Babi Yar [11](#). His wife was Polish and she convinced him to stay at home rather than run away. The Germans shot them both. My wife's older sister moved to Israel with her family in the 1990s. Evgenia and her parents were in evacuation in Kazakhstan during the war. They returned to Kiev in August 1944. Evgenia was a Komsomol [12](#) activist and secretary of the Komsomol unit. Later she was elected chairman of the audit commission of the Podolsk district Komsomol committee.

We didn't have a wedding party - life was too hard at the time. I moved in with my wife. Later I received a room in a communal apartment. There were two other families living there, Russians, but we got along very well. Our daughter, Polina, was born in 1952. We named her after my mother. In 1959 I received a two-bedroom apartment. There were two rooms, a kitchen and a shower, located in the kitchen. Our son, Ilia, was born in this apartment in 1959. He was named after my wife's brother who was killed at the Babi Yar. After our daughter was born my wife quit her

job. When our youngest child went to school she went to work as an accountant at the kindergarten department of the river port.

From 1944 there was only one synagogue left in Podol. Almost all Jews came to the synagogue to pray on holidays. They crowded in the street at Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. There was a radio installed in the synagogue and people outside could hear the singing and praying. In 1946 the authorities closed this radio office, but people still crowded near the synagogue. Many people didn't have prayer books, but they wanted to pay tribute to the past and remember that they were Jews.

There were no Jewish schools after the war. The only place where Hebrew was taught was the Christian theological school in St. Andrew's Church. Its students studied Hebrew to be able to read holy books in the original language. There was a group of students officially studying Hebrew at the university. It wasn't allowed to study Hebrew or Yiddish at home. If somebody at work or educational institutions had found out anything about it, it might have resulted in problems, including firing. The only magazine issued in Yiddish was the Birobidyan Heymland, the Land of Birobidjan [13](#), that described the happy life of the Jews in the USSR. I read this magazine throughout all those years just to remember the language. Jewish theaters were closed. There was a Jewish singer, Tamara Hanum, but she vanished later. In 1950 I went to the concert of Alexandrovich, a Lithuanian Jew. He sang Jewish songs. The media called him a cantor and propagandist of Zionism.

There were many Jews in our navigation office. Zhelezniak, a Jew, was first deputy director of our office until the fight against cosmopolites [14](#) began. He was appointed by the Moscow management, but the Ukrainian central committee never approved the position. About ten other supervisors in our office were Jewish.

In 1948 the struggle against cosmopolites began. It was similar to German nazism to me. Many Jews lost their managing positions, but they stayed at their workplaces as deputy managers or got lower positions. Many writers and artists took pseudonyms because they were Jews. There were publications in newspapers revealing their actual names and stating that they were doing a lot of harm to the Soviet state by working under pseudonyms. In 1953 the Doctors' Plot [15](#) began. The wife of the Minister of Health at the time was a Jewish woman, and he lost his job because he didn't want to denounce and leave her.

Our human resources manager, Platonov, had a Jewish wife, too. He told me that he was summoned to the party committee. They told him to divorce his wife if he wanted to keep his position. He refused to leave his family and was fired. He moved to Novosibirsk and worked as a lecturer at the River Institute. Later he became Rector, and then Dean at the Leningrad Institute of Water-Transport Engineers. This was the third time I faced anti-Semitism in my life: the first time was polonization and open anti-Semitism, the second time was the public extermination of Jews by the Germans, and the third time was Soviet anti-Semitism.

Children of our friends and acquaintances had studied well at school, but they were not admitted to higher educational institutions. The nationality in my passport was 'Russian' until 1959, but I never concealed the fact that I was a Jew. In my birth certificate that was reissued I legalized the name of Rabtsevich because this name saved my life. In my passport I have the name of Peter Ruvinovich Rabtsevich, a Jew.

In March 1953 Stalin died. People were crying, because their 'father' had passed away. They were feeling confused and uncertain about their future. But life became easier. While Stalin was alive all managers had to stay late at work. Meetings sometimes lasted until 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning. But Khrushchev [16](#) changed this procedure and fixed an 8-hour working day. After Stalin died doctors were rehabilitated. The rehabilitation of political prisoners also began. Khrushchev denounced the cult of Stalin at the 20th Party Congress [17](#).

I have always valued my past. I have never forgotten that I'm a Jew. I have always celebrated Jewish holidays, although they were always working days, and it was impossible to go to the synagogue in the afternoon. I always went to the synagogue in the evening after work. On the Jahzeit of the death of my family I went to the synagogue before work to order mourning prayers. There were 33 members in my family. And there are only three survivors: my brother Lev, my sister Riva and I.

After the war I worked as a technician, then I became a site manager, and later I was promoted to the position of a leading engineer. I studied at the Communications Faculty of the Kiev Institute of Water-Transport Engineers by correspondence. I graduated in 1959 and received my diploma. I developed some technical ideas, and my work was displayed at the Exhibition of Achievements of Public Economy in Moscow and Kiev. I developed a radio facility that allowed contacting any telephone from a boat. Other improvements were related to automated telephone stations and long distance communication lines. I had a high salary and regular bonuses. Besides, I didn't have to buy clothes because I wore a military uniform at work.

The attitude towards those that were under occupation during the war was prejudiced. It was particularly difficult for Jews because people believed that if a Jew survived it was because he cooperated with the fascists. The first question people often asked was: 'How did you survive?'. I faced this attitude many times, especially from my supervisors. I didn't try to explain how I survived. I was a highly qualified employee and paid no attention to any abuse. When Pinsk was liberated I sent a request to the management for my transfer to Pinsk, but they declined.

My brother and I found our sister Riva in 1950. She lived in Priluki, Chernigov region. During the war Riva was a combat engineer. She was in Berlin at the end of the war, and after the war her military unit was transferred to Novocherkassk in the Caucasus. After the war Riva took part in the mine clearing of the Black Sea coast. While in the army Riva married her fellow military Kotov, a Russian man. Upon demobilization her husband got a job assignment with the district party committee in Priluki, and Riva became a controller at the local bank in town. She studied at the Belostok Business College by correspondence and became an accountant. Her husband went on business to Moscow and got Lev's address in the military party archives. He met Lev, and my brother informed me by cable that Riva had been found. My wife and I went to Priluki. My sister had two sons and four grandchildren. She died in February 2002. Her older son died in 2000. Her younger son is a retired colonel and lives in Krasnoyarsk.

My daughter, Polina, graduated from the Electric Engineering Faculty at the Institute of Water-Transport Engineers. She is an engineer at the Glavrechflot design office. My son, Ilia, finished the Kiev River School and works at the navigation agency. My children weren't raised Jewish, but they identify themselves as Jews and feel proud of it. I worked in the river transport for over 50 years and my wife for over 30 years. I retired in 1990, my wife retired a few years before.

My son and daughter are married. My son has four children: two sons and two daughters. My older grandson is 22. He is married and has a daughter. My daughter has two sons: Vladislav and Vladimir Khmelnitskiy. Her older son cannot find a job. Vladimir studies at the Design Faculty of the Light Industry Academy. He's a good artist.

In recent years Jewish life has revived. We celebrate Jewish holidays in our family. Of course, it's different from how our parents celebrated them. It's difficult to buy kosher food. Besides, we are getting old, but we try to have traditional celebrations. I go to the synagogue, but it's difficult for me to walk. Hesed helps us a lot. I like to read Jewish newspapers and magazines.

Every year we go to Pinsk, where our dear ones are buried. Our children and grandchildren know the history of our family. I told them about the man that rescued me. My son goes to Pinsk every year. I couldn't go there last year due to my illness, and he went alone. There are graves of three families related to us.

I have always tried to find my rescuer. I even wrote to the Embassy of Germany, but there were no results. I was trying to find Krull, Friooff and Shtoide but the officials replied that Germans had never rescued Jews, and our officials told me that it was 'politically incorrect' to be looking for a German friend.

In 1996 inmates from ghettos in Warsaw and Krakow invited Jewish ghetto and camp inmates from Kiev to visit their towns. This visit was sponsored by the Maximilian Kolbe Werk. [This is a German charity organization supporting former concentration camp prisoners and trying to bring about reconciliation.] I was in one of the groups. In Warsaw we were met by the representatives of the Polish ghetto inmates and Margaret and Werner Muller, a German couple from Cologne. I talked to the Mullers about my rescuer and asked them if they could help me find him or his relatives. I also told them that there were two more rescuers that had helped me. It was difficult to speak German. I hadn't spoken it for 54 years, and the German I spoke was closer to Yiddish.

On 14th November 1996 the Mullers called me from Cologne and said that they had received some information from the military archives. Krull died at the age of 62 in 1979. Shtoide was missing. Krull's wife Christine and their daughter Janine knew that Krull had rescued a certain Rabinov in the ghetto in Pinsk and wanted to meet with me. Margaret and Werner Muller sponsored my wife's and my trip to Germany. We stayed with the Mullers in Cologne, and they paid all our expenses. We visited the grave of Krull in Dusseldorf, and his wife Christine Krull. We met Krull's daughter Janine in Dusseldorf. I told her about the children of the ghetto who knew that they were going to die. We both cried. In 1997 my story was placed in the Yad Vashem museum [18](#) in Jerusalem. On 10th January 1999 my German rescuer, Gunter Krull, was awarded the title of the Righteous Among the Nations' [19](#) posthumously. On 3rd February 2002 Werner Muller found Hans-Joachim Shtoide, who had supported me in Kiev at the request of Gunter Krull. I talked with him on the phone. The first thing he said was how glad he was that I survived.

Muller wrote a book about my rescuers. It was published in German and Belarus. [The German version of the book was published by the Dittrich Verlag, Cologne, under the title *Aus dem Feuer gerissen. Die Geschichte des Pjotr Ruwinowitsch Rabzewitsch aus Pinsk* in 2001.] I think that this book is a monument to my family and to all Jews of Pinsk exterminated in the ghetto, a condemnation of fascism and a monument to Gunter Krull, Mr. Shtoide, corporal Friooff and to my dear friends Margaret and Werner Muller, who dedicated five years of their lives to find my

rescuers.

Regretfully, I haven't been in Israel, but I do hope to have a chance to go to this holy land. I hope that politicians will be wise enough to put an end to fighting and establish peace in this country.

Glossary

## **1 Gangs**

During the civil war in 1918-1920 there were all kinds of gangs in the Ukraine. Their members came from all the classes of former Russia, but most of them were peasants. Their leaders used political slogans to dress their criminal acts. These gangs were anti-Soviet and anti-Semitic.

## **2 Der Dibuk (The Dybbuk, 1937)**

The play was written during the turbulent years of 1912-1917; Polish director Waszynski's 1937 film was made during another period of pre-war unease. It was shot on location in rural Poland, and captures a rich folk heritage. Considered by some to be the greatest of Yiddish films, it was certainly the boldest undertaking, requiring special sets and unusual lighting. In *Der Dibuk*, the past has a magnetic pull on the present, and the dead are as alluring as the living. Jewish mysticism links with expressionism, and as in *Nosferatu*, man is an insubstantial presence in the cinematic ether.

## **3 Mamele (Little Mother, 1938)**

Shot in Lodz, Poland, director Joseph Green's hometown, and edited just in time for its makers to leave Warsaw for friendlier ground, *Mamele* embraces prewar Polish-Jewish life in all its diversity, including tenements, unemployment, nightclubs, Jewish gangsters, and religious Jews at Sukkot.

## **4 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 Menshevist 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.

## **5 Anschluss**

The annexation of Austria to Germany. The 1919 peace treaty of St. Germain prohibited the Anschluss, to prevent a resurgence of a strong Germany. On 12th March 1938 Hitler occupied Austria, and, to popular approval, annexed it as the province of Ostmark. In April 1945 Austria regained independence legalizing it with the Austrian State Treaty in 1955.

## **6 Danzig annexation**

In preparation for war with Poland, in the spring of 1939 Hitler demanded the annexation of the Free City of Danzig [today called Gdansk] to Germany and extraterritorial rail access for Germany across the 'Polish Corridor', the Polish frontier to East Prussia. Germany invaded Poland on 1st September, 1939. Britain and France declared war on Germany on 3rd September. Within weeks the Poles surrendered. Germany annexed most of western Poland and Danzig.

## **7 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact**

Non-aggression pact between Germany and the Soviet Union, which became known under the name of Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Engaged in a border war with Japan in the Far East and fearing the German advance in the west, the Soviet government began secret negotiations for a non-aggression pact with Germany in 1939. In August 1939 it suddenly announced the conclusion of a Soviet-German agreement of friendship and non-aggression. The Pact contained a secret clause providing for the partition of Poland and for Soviet and German spheres of influence in Eastern Europe.

## **8 Forced deportation to Siberia**

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

## **9 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.

## **10 Podol**

The lower section of Kiev. In tsarist Russia Jews were only allowed to live in Podol, which was the poorest part of the city. Before World War II 90% of the Jews of Kiev lived there, which is why it was known as the Jewish part of Kiev.

## **11 Babi Yar**

Babi Yar is the site of the first mass shooting of Jews that was carried out openly by fascists on 29th and 30th September 1941, in Kiev. During three years of occupation (1941-1943) fascists were killing thousands of people at Babi Yar every day: communists, partisans, and prisoners of war. They were people of different nationalities.

## **12 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.

## **13 Birobidjan**

In the 1930s Stalin's government established a Jewish autonomous region in Birobidjan, in a desert with terrible climate in the Far East of Russia. The conditions were appalling. There was no water, power supply, houses or transportation. The Soviet government hoped that educated people would populate this area and make it a civilized republic. People were in no hurry to leave their jobs, homes and urban comforts to move to the middle of nowhere. The Soviet government wanted the forced deportation of all Jews to Birobidjan to be completed by the middle of the 1950s. But in 1953 Stalin died and the deportation was cancelled.

#### **14 Fight against the cosmopolites**

Anti-Semitic campaign initiated by Stalin in the 1940s against intellectuals: teachers, doctors and scientists.

#### **15 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.

#### **16 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.

#### **17 20th Party Congress**

At the 20th 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.

#### **18 Yad Vashem museum**

The Yad Vashem museum in Israel, founded in 1953, honors both Holocaust martyrs and 'the Righteous Among the Nations', non-Jewish rescuers who have been recognized for their 'compassion, courage and morality'.

#### **19 the Righteous Among the Nations',**

Non-Jews who rescued Jews during the Holocaust.