

# Yakov Driz

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Kiev

Ukraine

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## My family background

I was born in the town of Tomashpol, in the Vinnitsa region of Ukraine, on 3 July 1937. I was given the name Shloima-Yankel, in honor of both my grandfathers. The origin of our family name Driz is as follows: In the 1700s my great grandfather was to enlist in a 25-year term of service in the tsarist army. Such military service was very difficult, and so to spare him this hardship, his family decided to hide him somewhere far away from Tomashpol. Since he had no education and could barely write out Gaisinskiy, his last name, they decided to give him a new last name. They just made one up, and all his descendants were called by this new family name - Driz.

Shloima Driz, my father's father, was born in 1860. All I know about him is what my parents told me, as he died before I was born. My grandfather was an educated man for his time. He could play the violin, he loved music, and he read a lot. He owned a store that sold all kinds of merchandise - from food products to fabrics and shoes. My father worked as a clerk in my grandfather's store. From time to time my grandfather took business trips abroad. He usually traveled to Poland, where he purchased fabrics. In 1920 the Soviet power expropriated my grandfather's store. My grandfather couldn't overcome this shock. He contracted tuberculosis and died in 1921.

My grandmother Eheived (this was her real name, and she was also called Eva), born Averbuch, was a modest, religious woman. The family lived in Tomashpol, one of many Jewish towns in the Vinnitsa region. My grandmother was born the same year as my grandfather. My grandmother Eheived starved to death in 1933 during the famine in the Ukraine<sup>1</sup>. Like

my grandfather, she was buried at the Jewish cemetery in accordance with all Jewish traditions. She gave birth to ten children, eight of which survived. My father, Abram Driz, born in 1884, was the oldest. The youngest was Boris (Borukh) Driz, born in 1904. The difference between their ages was 20 years. I can't remember all of my father's brothers and sisters, but I can tell briefly about those I knew. One of his brothers, Nuhim, was an active revolutionary and a Komsomol activist<sup>2</sup>. In 1919 he was killed in Kiev while trying to escape from prison. He may have been killed by a Denikin gang<sup>3</sup>. Another brother, Shmul or Samuel, was a poet. He and two sisters who were dentists moved to the United States of America in 1919 or 1920. My father was not able to move to America with his brother and his sisters, because as the oldest of the children, he had to support his family by working, and did not have the opportunity to continue his education. My father had only a primary school religious education. There were two other brothers - I can't remember their names. One of the brothers lived in Odessa. I don't know what he did to earn a living. In 1941 he and his family - his wife Rieva and his daughter Tsylia perished in the Odessa ghetto. His second brother - I don't remember his name - lived in Privokzalnaya Street in Vinnitsa. Like my father, he was uneducated, and worked as loader and carrier at the market to support his wife and two children. They were killed by the Germans in 1941. Boris, my father's younger brother, served in the Soviet army and then resumed his agricultural studies, graduating from Moscow's Academy of Agriculture. He enjoyed farming. Later, he became director of the first vehicle and tractor maintenance facility in the Ukraine, located in the Odessa region. When the war began he went to the front. In 1945 he served in the Soviet army in Eastern Prussia. From there he was transferred to the Japanese front. Later, the Ministry of Agriculture requested his return, as he was an experienced specialist. He became director of the selection facility for grain crops. He became Chief Agriculture Specialist in the Ulianovsk region. Boris spent his last years in Ulianovsk, where he died in the 1960s.

Yiddish was spoken in my father's family, which was religious. They always celebrated Sabbath and Jewish holidays and strictly observed all Jewish traditions. My grandmother, Eheived, followed the kashruth and often went to the synagogue. My father told me that they had beautiful Pesach dishes in the house.

My parents married in 1917. My mother's name was Tsypa; her family name was Zeltser. She was born in the Jewish town of Miastkovka - now Gorodovka - not far from Vinnitsa, in 1893. The only thing I know about my mother's parents is that her father's name was Yankel. After their wedding my parents moved to Tomashpol. My mother's parents died before I was born. My mother often told me that she was a granddaughter of the Miastkovka rabbi, even at that time when it was dangerous to mention such facts. They

had three daughters in the family. My mother was the youngest. Their oldest daughter, Haika, born in 1890 moved to the village of Velikays Kostnitsa near Bessarabia, in the Vinnitsa region, on the Dnestr River. My aunt's husband worked at the local mill. They had no children. At the beginning of the war Aunt Haika's husband went to the front. There, he fell in love with a nurse and never returned to my aunt after the war. She moved to Tomashpol and lived there with my parents until she died. The second sister was born in 1892. I don't remember her name. She and her husband David Krivoviaz died during some epidemic. They had a daughter named Manya. My parents took Manya to live with us, and she stayed until she got married. We spoke Yiddish in our family. The daughters were educated at home, and didn't go to school, but had private teachers teach them to read and write, as well as the rules of conduct in society, good manners and foreign languages - German, French.

My mother was very well educated for her time, she could read, write, and even knew Latin. She worked at the drugstore before she got married. She had beautiful handwriting. My mother learned to play the guitar before she got married. When I was small Mama liked to sing a certain song in Yiddish, accompanying herself on her guitar. This song was played at her wedding. I remember some rhymes from this song in Yiddish: "Der shnei ist geyongen drai Teig der Hanond", which means "It snowed 3 days in a row...", etc. Later this guitar lay broken in our attic, but my mother couldn't bring herself to throw it away. My mother didn't have a perfect voice, but she was very musical.

My parents met in a very typical manner for their time. My mother was living in Miastkovka and my father lived in Tomashpol. At that time, there were people called "shathen" in Yiddish, who were engaged in matching couples. They told my father's parents about a girl from a good family who was of age to get married. My parents were introduced to each other and soon married. They had a traditional Jewish wedding with a huppah. My father was a shy, hard-working man. My mother told me that she liked him at once. After the wedding, my father worked at grandfather's store for some time. Later, after the store was expropriated, he went to work as a laborer at the Tomashpol sugar factory. My parents had no children for almost ten years. I was born on 3 July 1927 when my father was 43. In two years' time, on 25 June 1929, my sister Polia was born.

## Growing up

I remember my town, Tomashpol, since about 1933, when I was six. My grandmother died at this time and this was during the period of famine in the Ukraine. I remember seeing in the streets people swollen from starvation. Some were still alive, but couldn't get up, and others were already dead. All corpses were put on a horse-driven cart and taken away. We were very poor. I remember my mother going to the market on

Sundays. She used to buy one glass of sour cream. We spread it on slices of bread in very thin layers. But that sour cream didn't last long, and too quickly, my sister and I found ourselves looking forward to the next Sunday. My father continued working at the sugar factory. I knew the way to the factory, so almost every day, mother sent me out to bring lunch to my father. With spades, father and the other laborers packaged sugar in bags, sealed them and loaded them on racks. At night, to earn some extra money, my father worked as a night watchman.

In 1932, to save the family from starving to death, my parents had to move to a village in the Kryzhopol district. There they got a job at the mill. Father was paid with grain and this saved our family from starvation. My sister and I stayed behind with grandmother and grandfather in Tomashpol. My grandfather left us a house. There were three rooms and a cellar where we kept food products and wood. It was a solid, warm wooden house. My grandfather also left us some furniture. I remember a huge cupboard with bunches of grapes carved on the doors. There was a shed in the yard. During the occupation, when we were moved to the ghetto, our houses remained empty, and people from neighboring villages removed windows and doors and everything that was left in the houses. Later, the remains of our house were removed to serve as firewood for heating the German and Rumanian commandant's offices. It turned out that they sent people from the ghetto to do this work, and I was among those who were sent to remove our house. We were to take the wood to the gendarmerie. Chopping this wood was a very difficult job. The house was made of hard oak beams and we had only blunt saws with which to chop the beams into firewood.

My parents were religious. They went to the synagogue once a week, on Friday. I remember there were two synagogues in Tomashpol. The big one was called "Bes midrash". When I was five or six years old the authorities closed and then removed this synagogue. But people kept coming to this place like to the Wailing Wall to pray. The other synagogue was smaller and was near our house. It was a long, one-story building with a basement. On holidays they took the Torah out of this basement. Children carried the Torah on holidays. My father had a thales and a tefillin at home. When I reached the age of thirteen, my parents arranged a Bar Mitzwvahu for me, and the rabbi conducted the ritual. We had many people at home on this day - many friends and relatives came to the party. My mother lit candles every Friday to pray. My father also prayed. We also had ceders, everything that a traditional Jewish family would have. I asked my father four traditional questions. I remember them until now.

We observed all Jewish holidays at home. I especially remember Pesach and Hanukkah. Pesach was a very festive holiday. When we were small they took special dishes from the attic for Pesah festivities and we always looked forward to these days. We got used to our dishes in the course of

the year and it was so exciting to view patterns on our Pesach dishes. A few days before Pesach my parents and I went to buy flour - one and a half pounds (one pound - 16 kg). We took this flour to the house where they baked Matzoh. Jewish women worked there. They made dough and baked Matzoh in big ovens. We always looked forward to eating Matzoh. We took a big bag of Matzoh from the bakery home. During Pesach we helped our mother to make flour from this Matzoh. Later, Mama made delicious biscuits, cookies, and pancakes that were called latkes from this flour. My mother cooked traditional Pesach dishes: stuffed fish, clear chicken soup with dumplings made from Matzoh and eggs, chicken neck stuffed with liver, and strudels with nuts and raisins. We also had seder dinners at Pesach, everything that a traditional Jewish family would have. I asked my father the four traditional questions<sup>4</sup>. I remember them even now.

I also remember Hanukkah - my sister and I got some change from our relatives on this day. We could buy some ice cream or toys with this money. We always looked forward to Hanukkah, because, as I said, we were poor. And some small change to buy an ice cream or a ticket to the cinema was a quite an amount for us.

About 80% of the population in Tomashpol was Jewish. There were Ukrainian villages near Tomashpol: Tomashpilka and Belye. We children went to one and the same school. Many Ukrainian children from the neighboring families and my classmates knew Yiddish. They often came to our house and we talked in Yiddish. There were no Jews left in Tomashpol after the Great Patriotic War. Many of them were killed, the rest of them left, but many people living there still speak fluent Yiddish and remember Yiddish songs. We cared not about the nationality in those years. I mean, we were aware that we were Jews and they were Ukrainian Christians and there were gypsies nearby, but we never focused on it.

## School years

In 1934, when I was seven, I went to the Jewish school. Children were supposed to start school at eight, but I was eager to study. My cousin Manya decided to help me. Manya was older than I and she studied at school. She took me to the director and said that my mother had typhoid and had asked her to accept me into the first grade. Of course, this was a lie but Manya told me to keep silent about it. Manya said that I was eight years old already, but that we couldn't bring my birth certificate as it was under my mother's pillow. The director didn't want to see my birth certificate after she heard that my mother had typhoid. So I went to school. I was the youngest in my class, but I did well in all subjects. All subjects were taught in Yiddish. We even read the books of Russian writers translated into Yiddish. However, we didn't have any subjects related to Jewish tradition or history. We studied all the typical subjects taught at any other Soviet school. Our school was the best in the neighborhood.

Teachers paid much attention to our involvement in after-class activities. We had three orchestras, a choir that had Jewish and Ukrainian songs in its repertoire, and a theatrical studio. We had a club where we had concerts and performances. There were two Ukrainian schools in Tomashpol - secondary and primary. Schoolchildren from these schools often came to our club. There was no national segregation.

I studied for four years in the Jewish school. Unfortunately, in 1937 my parents transferred me to the Ukrainian school. The majority of children from our school went there, too. There were no schools where we could continue our education in Yiddish. After finishing Jewish school one had to enter a Ukrainian or Russian institution for higher education. At that time we didn't quite realize that it was the policy of our state to destroy nationalistic priorities. I was successful at my Ukrainian school as well. All pupils from the Jewish school spoke fluent Yiddish and Ukrainian. We had a benevolent reception at our new Ukrainian school. Half of the schoolchildren in our class were Jewish and the rest of them were Ukrainian, from Tomashpol and the surrounding villages. I had both Jewish and Ukrainian boys as friends. I still have a Ukrainian friend from my childhood - Tolya Pokynchereda, who now lives in Chernigov.

I was eager to become a Pioneer. I didn't become a Pioneer while attending the Jewish school, but when I went to the Ukrainian school I put on a red necktie and from then on I acted like a Pioneer.

My mother was a rabbi's granddaughter and she wanted me to become a rabbi's pupil, to study Hebrew and prayers. Rabbi Yankl came to our house two days at week to teach me. I knew Yiddish and there is some resemblance between Yiddish and Hebrew. I learned to read and then the rabbi began to teach me to translate. I was learning some prayers by heart. I still remember them. It lasted until I bumped into an astronomy textbook for senior students, where I learned more about the world, and where what I learned didn't quite agree with what the rabbi was telling me. I believed that God created the world in six days but I also knew that there were other planets besides the Earth, and other galaxies. The rabbi wasn't always happy with what I was learning, but he continued to visit us until he grew too old. Thus, we terminated our classes in 1936.

In 1936 disaster came to our family. I mentioned already that we were very poor. Once Mama said that they would be selling the cheapest black cotton in our store. We were standing in line the whole night taking turns. A few hours after the store opened my mother came home, bringing 10 meters of this cotton, with which she intended to make some clothing for us. In a month's time someone suggested that my mother should sell this cotton for 20 kopecks more per meter than she had bought it. We needed money, and so she sold the cotton. But someone informed the local authorities, and my mother was arrested and taken to court. It was an open court, to show



others what punishment people would be subject to. For selling 10 meters of cotton, my mother was sentenced to five years at the camp in Kem in the Kolskiy peninsula in the North of the Soviet Union. I was in the second grade then. My sister Polya didn't go to school yet. Aunt Haika, my mother's older sister, took Polya into her family. I stayed with my father and my cousin Manya. Then a new judge was appointed. His name was Fedyuk. Manya arranged an appointment with him and told him that my mother had been sentenced for nothing, actually, and that my father was left alone to take care of two children. My father could hardly earn enough money to feed us. The judge came to our home to see how we lived. He asked me whether I could write. I told him that I was in the second grade and could write. Then the judge said that we should write a letter to Stalin. He dictated the letter, and I wrote "Dear Mr. Stalin ...." I wrote that my mother was sentenced to five years in prison for selling some fabric, and that our father was raising two children, and told him how poor we were, etc. At the end of this letter I was asking Stalin to release my mother. A few months passed and my mother returned home. She had spent about nine months in the camp. She was very thin and took to smoking. We were happy to have our mother back. However, my sister was living with her Aunt, and liked it there, and stayed. Until 1940 there were four of us: my father, my mother, Manya and I. In 1940 Manya married a young Jewish man from Tomashpol and moved in with him. Then before the war my sister Polya joined us at home.

We heard on the radio and read in newspapers that Hitler had come to power in 1933. The Jewish population of Tomashpol, especially the intellectuals -people who remembered pre-Revolutionary Germany - were continuously saying that they didn't believe that Germans could kill people and that they were cultured people. We learned about what was happening in Germany from radio programs and newspapers. Later we watched movies. I remember "The Swamp Soldiers" and "Professor Mumlock". These movies described Hitler coming to power, the attitude towards Jews in Germany, and the pogroms. The radio mentioned the "Crystal night" in Germany and the massive riots against Jews.

The year 1937 is known for the arrests and obliteration of the best representatives of the intellectuals<sup>5</sup>. Some of our acquaintances were repressed, too. Judge Fedyuk, the judge who helped me to write the letter to Stalin was arrested. He was a very nice and kind person, and he helped many people. I was in the 6th grade then, and I remember my classmates crying at school in the morning because their fathers had been arrested the previous night. We believed that their parents were enemies of the people - that was what we were told to believe - so we didn't sympathize with our classmates.

At school, I was fond of painting. I liked to paint portraits. I made portraits of great physicists: Galileo, Ohm, Volt and others. I made

drawings because my parents couldn't afford to buy paints. Once in 1940 I was awarded a prize for my drawings. My mother wanted me to study music but we couldn't afford it as we were poor.

### During the war

In 1939 the war with Finland began. I saw people who returned from the war to our town Tomashpol. There were many Jews among them. Among them were victims of frostbite, others that had been wounded, and some who had lost legs or arms. I remember this war. I also remember our army "liberating" the Western Ukraine and Byelorusse. Of course, the official version was that we were liberating our land in Western Ukraine and Western Byelorusse. The population was enthusiastic about it. There were posters everywhere with our Soviet soldier in hardhat embracing a Western Ukrainian peasant. When Germans occupied Poland, we had a feeling of the inevitability of war. We felt it, but we couldn't quite imagine the upcoming war. We watched such Soviet movies as "If there is a war tomorrow..." and others, and all of them stated that if the enemy attacked us we would put an end to him promptly and on his territory. We were convinced that we were strong and that nobody could defeat us. I remember a song from this period "If there is a war tomorrow and if we have to leave tomorrow - you must be prepared today!" Then they executed a Non-Aggression Pact with Germany<sup>6</sup>. Ribbentrop, Germany's Minister of Foreign Affairs, visited our country and we read about it in the newspapers. We were all happy that there would be no war and Germans would not advance further than Poland.

On 20 June 1941 I passed my last exam at school. I finished the 7th grade and was 14 years old. 22 June<sup>7</sup> was Sunday. Our house was near the market and many people passed by our house. One of the passersby said, "Did you hear on the radio the announcement about the war? The Germans bombed Kiev and attacked the Soviet Union". It came as a complete surprise to us. Then Molotov<sup>8</sup> spoke on the radio at noon. However, nothing changed in Tomashpol in the first days. Then we heard that they were going to evacuate the sugar factory. The Party and administrative authorities were gradually leaving town. However, in Tomashpol common and religious Jews were the majority. We were waiting until our turn came to evacuate. The Germans were advancing rapidly. After all the officials had left Tomashpol, we got horse-driven carts and prepared to leave on them. Several families were supposed to leave on each cart, so we couldn't take a lot luggage with us. This was the middle of July. All these carts headed to the east in the direction of Vinnitsa. We were about 15 km away when the bombing began. The planes dropped two bombs. Nobody was injured. We moved on. We met a group of military motorcyclists. They stopped and asked us where we were going. Someone in the head cart replied that we were evacuating in the direction of Vinnitsa. Then the man who had asked this question told him that Vinnitsa was already occupied by the Germans. So we had to return to



Tomashpol. On 20 July 1941 Germans quietly entered Tomashpol. We saw their troops on motorcycles, horses, cars and bicycles. They were the front troops and they didn't touch the population. A German soldier came to our house and asked my mother to give him some water. She did. He drank the water and said to my mother that he wanted to give her a present. He took his wallet out of his pocket and showed my mother a picture of a young woman standing beside a rose bush. The German soldier told my mother that this woman was his wife. Then he took out a dried rose wrapped in paper and said that his wife gave him this rose for good luck and that he wanted to give it to my mother. He also wrote down his address and invited us to visit him after the war. His name was Alfred Klemmer. After he left, my mother said that those people that warned that Germans would do us no harm were probably right.

In 3 days Paraska Shpileiko, our Ukrainian acquaintance living in the neighboring village came to see us. Her family were friends of my parent's. She told us to hide because Germans were killing the Jews. It turned out that the front troops were followed by other military troops that were grabbing Jews in the streets and from their houses. They got over 120 people and chased them to the Jewish cemetery in the outskirts of Tomashpol. They forced them to dig up a grave and shot them all. My classmate Fira Shwartz, Tomashpol Shoihet and many others perished there. In the 1980s a monument was installed at this location. There is an engraving on the obelisk on the common grave, which reads, "To the citizens of Tomashpol, brutally shot by fascist occupants on 4 August 1941". We escaped, firstly, because our house was in the outskirts of town, and secondly, because Paraska let us know in advance. We hid in the cellar, locked up our house and stayed in our shelter for two days. The Germans left in two days, and they appointed my classmate's father, Slobodianyuk, to be a village warden.

At the end of July this warden came for my father. My father told us later that he and several other men were sent to bury the corpses of the Jews that were shot. The corpses decomposed during all this time so that they were unrecognizable. My father smelled so much of putrefaction that it was hard to wash that smell out.

The shops and the market were closed. We were able to get some food from local peasants in exchange for some clothing. At the beginning of August people elected the Jewish council that was responsible for sending Jews to do work at the direction of the village warden. It consisted of older people. Young people all went to the front.

After the Germans, the Rumanians came to the town. There were two Germans left to give orders to the Rumanians. The Jews were ordered to wear bands with David's hexagonal star. In two weeks they cancelled this order, because the policemen also wore white armbands and it was unclear from some

distance whether one was a policeman or a Jew. With one day's notice, we were then ordered to sew a yellow hexagonal star on the black background on our clothes. We had some black fabric at home, but no yellow cloth. Our neighbors had a yellow undershirt and they tore it to pieces and shared them with all neighbors. Two weeks passed and we were ordered to move to the ghetto. They fenced one street and all Jews from Tomashpol and the surrounding villages were moving there. There were several families living in each house. Our family got accommodation in the basement of a wooden house. This basement was formerly used to store coal and wood. We moved beds from our house and took apart wardrobes for wooden planks to install on the ground floor. My parents, my sister Polia, a distant relative from Yampol, Manya and I lived in this basement. There were over one thousand people in the ghetto. Half of them starved to death or died from diseases. On 19 May 1941 Manya gave birth to two twin girls: Polia and Dora. Manya's husband and his two brothers went to the war where they perished. Manya and her children lived in this ghetto for two years and eight months. We lived behind the barbed wire fencing with no money or food. It was so hard to raise these baby girls. Manya died in 2001 and her girls are still living. Of course, the years they spent in the ghetto had an effect on them; they are sickly, but they are still alive.

Before the war, I learned from our neighbor, a tinsmith, how to make buckets and other tin goods. This helped us to survive in the ghetto. Every day we went to work chopping wood or carrying water to the commandant's office. In the evenings I made buckets and my mother and sister gave them to peasants in exchange for food. Once a week they opened a gate to the ghetto. Rumanians with guns and dogs and policemen were posted at the gate to the ghetto. The inmates of the ghetto were allowed to go out to the nearby market for one hour. We had only this one hour to buy or exchange something and come back. We didn't need to be watched. We had yellow stars on our clothing and couldn't run away. There was no place to run. We thought of the ghetto as our last shelter. We tried to be back on time. If somebody was late Rumanian gendarmes beat him or her with whips, as they were not trusted enough to be given guns, at least, at that time. On our way back we tried to get a potato or a beet, or to pick an apple to put in our pocket. This supplemented our food supply. Tomashpol's Ukrainian population sympathized with us. When the policemen turned away, the Ukrainians tried to give us food. Paraska, the woman who told us to hide when the Germans were approaching, came to the ghetto on Sunday and waited for Mama and my sister to give them some food.

We did all kinds of work. We shoveled snow in winter. When Germans occupied our town they ordered me to take off my boots. I was 14 years old then. After I finished the 7th grade my mother had bought me new boots. This was quite an occasion in our family. But that German ordered me to take them off, so I did. I didn't have any shoes until our liberation in

March 1944. In summer I walked barefoot and in winter I wrapped my feet in rags tying them with a rope or even with wire. I came back from work starving and frozen. We didn't get any food while we were at work. I still have rheumatic pains in my feet at night. I also got abscesses on my legs. We had no medications to treat them. No iodine or bandages, and no medical facility in the ghetto. However, there were doctors and nurses among the inmates of the ghetto. We tried to hide our ailments from the administration of the ghetto, especially when the diseases were infectious. My former schoolmate Tolia Pokynchereda sent some iodine to me in the ghetto.

I collected tin to make buckets near the houses. The tin was old and rusted and this rust seeped into my sores when I was busy making the buckets. Soon I couldn't walk at all. At that period they stopped sending me to work. However, previously I was sent to work almost every day and we had to work promptly. If somebody fell the supervisors beat him or her with a whip. Often, my mother could not go to work. She was not young and often felt ill. Women did all kinds of work: they peeled potatoes, washed the floors, cleaned up, and carried wood. When I couldn't walk any more my father replaced me at work. Rumanians rarely came to the ghetto. The policemen and the Jewish council were in charge there. The Rumanians were afraid to enter the ghetto due to the terrible sanitary conditions. They were afraid of catching infection. Many people in the ghetto got ill and died.

The policemen raped girls, but the girls' parents tried to hide this. And every day somebody would say that he knew for sure that the next day we would be all shot. So we were living with the fear that every day was to be our last day. Members of the Jewish council often came to pick up some valuables to bribe the Rumanian gendarmes.

We didn't hear any news from the outside world. Later, Boria Slobodanyuk, my former schoolmate and the son of the Tomashpol warden started sending me newspapers, and we could read about the war, but this was towards the end of 1943.

There was a rabbi in the ghetto. Religious people got together in secret to pray. My father also went to some house of prayers to pray. They got together a minian<sup>9</sup> of at least 10 people.

Young people were falling in love. Life was going on even under such difficult conditions. We celebrated Pesach, although we couldn't have any Matzoh.

In the fall of 1942 we learned that the administration was planning to get all Jews between 16 and 55 years old. I was 15 and my father was 59, so we were relatively calm about it. I was not on the list, but just in case, I decided to hide in the attic of an empty house. My sister Polia knew

where I was hiding. The Jewish officials announced that people had to take enough food to last for three days, and some warm clothes, although it was still warm outside. On this day, policemen came to our basement to enquire about my whereabouts. My parents said they didn't know where I was, and the policemen beat them up with their whips. They threatened to shoot them if they didn't inform them where I was. Polia ran to find me to tell me the whole story and I went home. As soon as I entered, the policemen whipped me so hard that I fainted. My mother got me some food to take with me: a few apples, some bread, cereal and a bar of soap. And she gave me my jacket and a hat to take along with me. My father gave me his old boots. They were sewn up with wooden pegs that hurt when I put on the boots. Nobody knew where we were heading from the ghetto. I was waiting for our departure when all of a sudden a Rumanian soldier called me to the exit door. My father was there and he took my bag from me and went in. I went home. The soldiers put all the people onto a truck and drove away. At home they told me that my parents asked some Jews from Bukovina who spoke Rumanian to talk to the Rumanian soldiers about replacing me with my father. My parents were afraid of what was awaiting me. Besides, I could make buckets and provide for the family, but my father couldn't earn anything.

Half a year passed, and we didn't know where my father was, or whether he was still alive. Then we heard a rumor that those that couldn't work any more were coming back. And they did. They were in terrible condition. Previously healthy men looked like old people, so exhausted were they. They told us that they had been working in the Nikolaev region. Germans were building a strategic bridge across the Bug and the construction itself was performed by Jews and captives. The Jews lived on the bank of the Bug. They dug holes in the ground and put in some hay to sleep on it. By the way, the father of my sister Polia's future husband was also there with my father. He died there because fleas ate away his eyes. My father told us later that the hay was stirred up by fleas. My father said that they got potatoes that were boiled, unwashed and dirty for meals. Many people were dying but my father survived. Later a commission arrived to inspect the progress of the construction. German engineers were in no hurry to complete the construction. They felt more comfortable in the rear. When the commission asked what the reason for the delays was, the engineers blamed the Jews, saying that they were lazy and didn't want to work. The commission then gave the order to hang ten people from each crew. All Jews were lined up outside, and asked which of them wanted to go home. A few people stepped forward. Soldiers took them away, and the following day carpenters installed gallows in the square. Ten people were brought back in front of the line of Jews. Jews from the crowd were to put nooses around the necks of the sentenced and push the boxes they stood on out from under their feet. If somebody refused he was hanged as well. If somebody approached the barbed wire fencing, the Germans shot them, too, and their corpses were hung on the wire for several days.

My father was also supposed to return home with the first group of people, but he was not among them. We thought he must have died on the way. But my father had gotten off the train to go to the toilet and fainted there from exhaustion. Only on the following day did the cleaning women find him. My father was sent to prison in the Balta Odessa region. He shared a cell with a communist who was later hung. He gave my father his leather belt and my father brought it home to me. He was getting some food in prison and his condition improved. When he was released from prison, he went home. He got on the train that headed for Yampol instead of Tomashpol. The Rumanian commandant sent my father to the "Pechora" camp 2 km from Tomashpol. This was a horrific death camp. About 10,000 people starved to death there. This was already 1944. Kiev had been liberated, but we were still under the occupation. The security guard in the camp was loosened and people could go out at night to get something to eat in the surrounding villages. In this way, my father survived.

I remember our army coming to the village. The Germans and Rumanians were running away in retreat. We saw two tanks with young men sitting on top of them. They asked us where the Germans and Rumanians were and suggested that I go with them to show them the way. I grabbed a German rifle - there were weapons all around - and charged it. I was showing them the way. It was on 16 March 1944. The regular Soviet army was at the Vapniarka station then. These tanks were an investigation group. They shot at the retreating Germans. I also took a few shots. Later, our army and partisans entered Tomashpol. One of the partisans was a young Jewish girl riding a horse. I asked her, "Have you and the Soviet army come here forever?" and she answered, "Yes". I felt sad because my father wasn't with us and we thought that he had perished in the camp.

One particularly horrible event occurred during the liberation of Tomashpol. A young man, one year older than I, a blacksmith's son and a blacksmith himself, fell in love with a very pretty girl in the ghetto. She loved him, too. When all of us came out to meet our armies, this young couple was also out there. A cavalryman saw them together and cried out "What?! You are strolling around when we are going to war?!" and he shot the young man, who had survived all the horrors of the ghetto and occupation, only to be killed by a Soviet soldier. I don't know what happened to the young girl afterwards.

We temporarily settled down in an empty house. My mother asked the military to sell her a pair of boots, as I had nothing to protect my feet. And they gave me yellow American boots as a present. We were living all together: my parents, my sister Polia, Manya and her twin daughters. A little later my mother's sister Haika also moved in with us. In 1944 I went to the army. Later my parents rented a room. They never had their own apartment and lived a very poor life. They didn't have any furniture, just

some boxes they used as furniture.

My father returned home before I went into the army. Our neighbor's daughter came to tell me that my father was coming home. I didn't believe her, but went out anyway, and saw an old, old man, exhausted, in some gray clothing, barefoot, though there was still snow on the ground, and carrying a stick. It's difficult to express what I felt when I knew that the man was my father. As I said his clothing looked gray, but it was gray from the fleas that it was covered with. This was horrible. We took off all his clothes and burnt them. My father was ill for a long time afterwards.

After Tomashpol was liberated, the mobilization of young people over 17 to the front began. Young people under 17 were mobilized to the so-called fighter battalion. We had trophy rifles and bullets and were helping the military to guard the captives or transport them. Once we even were ordered to look for parachute forces in the woods.

I also went to school and studied in the 8th grade before I was recruited to the army. We went to the military registration office in Vinnitsa, from where I was sent to the Far East. This was in the winter of 1944. We traveled across Siberia for 43 days. In the Far East I was sent to the Pacific Ocean Navy. I participated in the war with Japan.<sup>10</sup> After the war we stayed in Port Arthur in China. We were liberating China, Korea and Manchuria from the Japanese. We stayed to serve there after the war. My service lasted six years. Later, this Pacific Ocean fleet separated into two fleets - number 5 and number 7. My service was in fleet number 5, which spread from Vladivostok to Port Arthur. . Photo # 7 I had friends there and still meet with them annually. They are Jews, Russians, Ukrainians, Tatars and members of many other nationalities. Ivan Khometsky, a Ukrainian, was my closest friend then. We spent time together talking about our plans for the future and about our lives.

## Post-war

Those were difficult years. I remember the famine of 1947. I was in the service then and I didn't suffer hunger - we were getting our meals and life was not as bad as it was for civilians. But I knew that my parents were suffering a lot. My father's body swelled from starvation.

Fortunately, his younger brother Boris took him to Ulianovsk. My mother and sister survived this famine of 1947. In 1948 I came home on vacation. As a gift, I brought my parents half a pound of rice (8 kg) - this was all I could get.

My father and mother were still religious after the war. But there was no synagogue and minians got together in private prayer houses. My father always went to pray. The rabbi died in the ghetto. One man who knew the prayers well led the minians for many years. Old people got together in this way and the authorities didn't persecute them.



The struggle against cosmopolites that started in 1948 had an impact on our family. Ovsey Driz, the son of my father's cousin and a famous Jewish poet, wrote his poems in Yiddish. They were translated into Russian by the famous Russian poets Mikhalkov and Marshak. In the early 1930s when Ovsey Driz was beginning to write, a very famous Jewish poet, Lev Kvitko, was helping him. Many of Ovsey's books were published before the war. After the war no books in Yiddish were published. Ovsey's Russian was excellent but when I asked him why he didn't write his poems in Russian he said that he could, but then they wouldn't be his poems. When the struggle against the cosmopolites began Ovsey couldn't provide for his family. His books were not published and he was about to be expelled from the Association of Writers of the USSR. Ovsey turned to the Soviet poet Marshak for help, but he couldn't do anything for him. When I went to Moscow I often stayed at Ovsey's home and was the first to hear his poems. Ovsey died in 1971 .

By that time, my sister had married our neighbor Abram Gedrich, a Jew. She studied for seven years at school and then took a course in accounting. She worked as an accountant in the Tomashpol hospital until her departure to Ber-Sheva in Israel in the early 1990s. In 1962 Elena, the daughter of Polia and Abram, was born. Lena and Polia live in Israel now. Lena graduated from a music school in Vinnitsa. She has a daughter Asia, born in 1984.

I demobilized from the army at the end of December 1950. They wanted me to stay for an additional term and offered me an apartment in Port Arthur. But I couldn't stay, as I knew that my parents were living in poverty. In 1951 I passed my exams for ten years of secondary school. At that time I worked as a lab assistant at the physics laboratory, as I just had to be earning money. In 1951 I entered Kiev's mining college. I chose this educational institution because, as a participant in the war, I could enter this school without having to take entrance exams. They also paid the stipend that enabled me to study and live. I also had 2-3 months training sessions in Donbass, which enabled me to support my parents as well. I worked as a miner and was paid well. In 1955 I finished my studies in the electromechanical department of this college. At first I couldn't find a job. My eyesight was poor as a result of my experiences in the ghetto, and to get a job as a miner I had to go through a medical examination. The medical commission didn't issue me a work permit. I had problems finding a job.

### **Anti-Semitism**

Anti-Semitism at that time was both on the state and everyday level. I obtained my diploma without a mandatory for that time job assignment, and returned to Kiev. I went through job announcements and found one for a foreman in the electric shop at a certain plant. I arranged an interview with the manager of the human resources department. We discussed the

vacancy and then he asked me to show him my documents. He took my passport and saw that my nationality was a Jew. He immediately told me to call back in 2-3 days. I came back in two days and he said they had no vacancy for the position of foreman, only for an electrician in that same shop. He didn't expect me to agree to take this job. But I thought it would only do me good to go through all levels, from beginning to end, to gain experience.

In 1957 I got a job as a foreman at a military plant. Later, I was promoted to Deputy Manager of the electromechanical shop. In few years I became Chief Engineer at the plant. I worked there for 24 years and had excellent performance records. I received a two-room apartment. But still I felt some discrimination towards me, especially during the last year. In particular, when the manager of the maintenance shop went on an extended business trip for two years and I was offered the chance to replace him. But I also had to keep my job responsibilities. I agreed. After some time, the assistant accountant asked me about my salary rate, which I didn't know. But I hoped that it would at least be equal to that of the former manager of the shop. I asked the director, and it turned out that besides not being paid for doing two jobs, I had a lower salary than my predecessor. The director had realized that I would have to accept and was taking advantage of my situation. If I quit this job, it would be difficult for me to find another due to my Jewish nationality. And I had to stay at this plant. In 1978 I got a job offer from another plant and agreed to take it at once. I was appointed manager of the electromechanical shop at this plant and from there I retired in 1987. But I decided to continue working and got a job as a communications specialist. I quit finally in 1999.

Stalin's death in 1953 was a shock for me. I didn't believe the country could live without him. People were crying. I think, these were sincere tears. Later we recovered and life went on. Our thinking was changing gradually and denunciation of the cult of Stalin and the speech at the Party Congress<sup>11</sup> was kind of expected event.

### **Married life**

I got married in 1956. My wife Tamara Batenko is Ukrainian. Tamara was born in 1934 in the Fastov Kiev region. At the time we met, Tamara was a student in the Economics Department of Kiev University. We met at a party and fell in love. Contrary to my expectations, my parents had nothing against my marrying a Ukrainian girl. They must have changed their attitude to such mixed marriages, regardless of their religiosity. They liked Tamara very much. My mother always called Tamara her little daughter. Tamara got a job at the Institute of Public Economy after graduating from the University. Later, she obtained a job at the Academy of Sciences. But, unfortunately, she was very sickly and had to retire because of poor health. In the fall of 2002 we shall celebrate the 46th anniversary of our

wedding. On 20 July 1957 our son Alexander was born. He was born into a mixed family and got no religious education. He is an atheist and a cosmopolite - a man of the world. He obtained his education at the Kiev Communications College. He is a colonel now and works at the army headquarters as chief editor of military TV broadcasting. His wife Tatiana, a Ukrainian, is a housewife. We have two granddaughters: Katyusha, born in 1984, and baby Mashenka, born in 2002. Katia is finishing school and is going to continue her studies. My son's family live separately, but every single day they call us or drop by for a chat.

In 1963 my mother died. She was in poor health after the years she spent in the camp and in the ghetto. My mother was buried in Tomashpol in accordance with Jewish traditions. My wife and I decided to take my father to Kiev. By that time he was almost blind - he had cataracts in both eyes. He lived with us for almost 15 years. After two surgeries, he could see again. My father admired everything that we had: the tap with running water, the TV and telephone. My father put on his thales and prayed twice a day: in the morning and in the evening. Only in the last years of his life he couldn't do it: he was too old to remember the prayers. My father died in 1979 at the age of 95. He was buried at the Jewish cemetery in Kiev. There was no rabbi at his funeral and I said Kaddish, which I remembered from childhood.

My sister Polia moved to Israel. Unfortunately, I didn't dare to go. My wife isn't a Jew and I was afraid that she would go through prejudiced attitudes in Israel similar to the ones I experienced in the Soviet Union. I have been to Israel twice and I now realize that I was wrong. But we are old people now and it is too late to change our life so dramatically. I liked Israel, our country. I admired the blooming Israel - the country where ancient history and modern life have entwined so organically. It's hard to imagine all the hard effort involved in turning the desert into a blooming oasis. I respect and feel grateful to the people of Israel. I visited my sister Polia in Ber-Sheva. She and her family enjoy living in their new Motherland.

Many things changed after Ukraine gained its independence. Of course, it will take some time before life improves, but I can see big changes. There is no or almost no anti-Semitism in the new Ukraine. There is none on the state level, and if there is some remnant of it, it comes from older people. Young people have different outlooks. Jewish people hold management positions and nobody has anything to say against it. I am not a religious person, and do not visit the synagogue. A Jewish way of life is also restoring. We have Jewish newspapers and magazines in Yiddish and in Russian. I receive "Jewish news" and it is free for me. There are Jewish performances and concerts. Hesed does a lot to support us physically and spiritually. I attend very interesting lectures about the history of the Jewish religion and celebrations of Jewish holidays. This is just

wonderful.

I don't want you to think that the life of our generation is a chain of calamities. We lived through a lot of terrible things: famines, repression, war, struggle against cosmopolitanism and suppression of the Jews. Many members of our family perished. At that most difficult time we used to say that if we survived - although we didn't believe we would - we would only talk about what we had to go through for the rest of our life. But the years went by and I came to understand that people forget the bad things and remember the good ones for a long time. I would like to address all those who are going to read my story to try and do everything we can to prevent any repetition of the past.

## Glossary

### **1 The artificially-created famine of the Stalinist period that killed millions of people in the Ukraine**

It was arranged by Stalin to suppress protesting peasants who would not accept Soviet power and join collective farms. 1930-1934 - the years of the dreadful, forced famine in the Ukraine. The Soviet authorities took away the last food products from farmers. People were dying in the streets, whole villages perished.

### **2 Komsomol - a Communist youth organization, created by the Communist Party to enable the state to take control of the ideological upbringing and spiritual development of Ukrainian youth almost up to the age of 30**

### **3 The White Guards, a counter-revolutionary gang led by general Denikin**

They were famous for their brigandage and their anti-Semitic actions all over Russia; legends were told of their cruelty. Few Jews survived their pogroms.

### **4 According to Jewish tradition every junior child must ask four ritualistic questions related to the history of Pesah and its celebration**

A senior member of the family leading the seder must answer them.

### **5 In the mid-1930s Stalin launched a major campaign of political terror**

The purges, arrests, and deportations to labor camps touched virtually every family. Untold numbers of party, industrial, and military leaders

disappeared during the "Great Terror". Indeed, between 1934 and 1938 two-thirds of the members of the 1934 Central Committee were sentenced and executed.

## **6 The nonaggression pact between Germany and the Soviet Union, known as the Molotov-Ribentrop Pact**

Engaged in a border war with Japan in the Far East and fearing the German advance in the west, the Soviet government in 1939 began secret negotiations for a nonaggression pact with Germany, meanwhile continuing negotiations, begun earlier, with France and Britain for an alliance against Germany. In August 1939 it suddenly announced the conclusion of a Soviet-German pact of friendship and nonaggression. This pact contained a secret clause providing for the partition of Poland and for Soviet and German spheres of influence in Eastern Europe.

## **7 22 June 1941 at 5 o'clock in the morning fascist Germany attacked the Soviet Union without declaring war**

On this day the Great Patriotic War began.

## **8 Molotov (Skriabin), Viacheslav Mikhailovich (1890-1986) - a Soviet political leader**

During the October Revolution he was a member of the Military Revolutionary Committee. He belonged to the closest politicians surrounding Stalin, and was one of the most active organizers of repression in the 1930s to early 1950s. In the early 1950s he spoke out against criticism of the cult of Stalin.

## **9 According to Jewish tradition, in order to celebrate any holiday or Sabbath a minian - a minimum of 10 religious males were to be present at the synagogue or at a prayer house**

A congregation including fewer than ten males had no right to address God with their prayers.

## **10 In 1945**

the war in Europe was over, but WWII continued. in the Far East, where Japan was fighting against the countries of the anti-fascist coalition and China. The Japanese army incurred great losses at the hands of the USA and Great Britain in 1943-44. However, Japan was still strong. The USSR declared war against Japan on 8 August 1945. Japan signed the act of capitulation in September 1945.

**11 At the %% Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 195,**

Khrushchev publicly debunked the cult of Stalin and lifted their 1945.

**12 At the ?? Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 195,**

Khrushchev publicly debunked the cult of Stalin and lifted the veil of secrecy from what had happened in the USSR during Stalin's leadership.