

# Iosif Bursuk

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Chernovtsy

Ukraine

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## My family background

My father's parents were born in the small town of Ataki in Bessarabia [1](#). Before 1918 Bessarabia belonged to Russia, then it became a part of Romania and in 1940 it was transferred to the Soviet Union. My grandfather Avrum-Rugel Bursuk was born in the 1860s, and my grandmother Rachil Bursuk in the 1870s. I don't remember her maiden name. My grandmother was a young widow when my grandfather married her. Her first husband Blaivis had died, leaving Rachil with their son Haim, born in 1890. I don't know exactly how my grandparents met. I only know that my grandmother was a beauty when she was young and my grandfather married her although his relatives had been trying to talk him out of marrying a widow. Besides my grandmother's son Haim, who was loved and raised by my grandfather as his own child, my grandparents had four children. My father Abram, born in 1898, was the oldest. Their daughter Golda was born in 1903 and Dvoira in 1906. Moishe, born in 1908, was the youngest.

My grandmother and grandfather made a typical Jewish family of such a small town as Ataki. There were many Jews in Ataki. Jews constituted approximately half of the population. Basically, the inhabitants of Ataki were craftsmen and farmers. All tailors and shoemakers in Ataki were Jews. Jews also kept small stores where they sold food, clothing and shoes, etc. They lived in peace with the Romanians and Ukrainians. There were no nationality conflicts. They got along well and the Jews were well respected. Disputes were resolved by a Jewish neighbor. They believed that a Jew would be a fair judge. There was a synagogue and a rabbi in Ataki. There also was a Christian Orthodox church and a catholic cathedral. People in Ataki respected the national traditions of one another.

My grandparents were moderately wealthy. They made their living by trade like the majority of the Jewish population of the town. They had a store where they sold construction materials. My grandmother was a shop assistant in the store. My grandfather was a religious man. He didn't do anything about the house. He prayed and studied the Talmud.. My grandfather read religious books during the day and in the evening he went to the synagogue to discuss what he had read with the



rabbi.

I remember two big portraits in our apartment: one of my grandmother wearing a dark gown and a golden chain around her neck and another one of my grandfather wearing a long black jacket and a cap on his head. My grandfather had a small gray beard. They lived in a small two-storied house on the bank of the Dnestr River. The store was on the first floor and their apartment of four rooms and the kitchen was on the second floor. Their apartment wasn't richly furnished but they had everything they needed: a big dinner-table always covered with a clean tablecloth, twelve chairs, two iron beds with feather mattresses and pillows and a chest of drawers. There were beautiful curtains on the windows. There were pictures on Biblical subjects on the walls. I remember one picture of Paradise. There were bookcases in the rooms with my grandfather's religious books and some general books in Yiddish. There were few fruit trees near the house, but there was no garden or orchard. My grandmother also did all the housekeeping even though she worked in the store from morning till night. When their daughters got older they began to help their mother about the house.

My grandfather and grandmother were religious people. Their sons studied at cheder and their daughters received religious education at home. Besides, all children received general education. My father and Haim studied at the Russian school, and their younger sisters and brother started at the Russian school, but finished a Romanian school. None of them had any special education. As my father told me they strictly observed Jewish traditions at home, celebrated Sabbath and all Jewish holidays. My father didn't tell me any details. So, I don't have any memories about it, but I need to say that our family strictly observed all traditions that were observed in my father's parents' family. I believe it was done the same way as my grandparents used to do it. My father's parents spoke Yiddish at home and Russian or Romanian with their non-Jewish neighbors.

I remember my grandmother Rachil. She often visited us in Chernovtsy and all my childhood memories are associated with her. I have fewer memories of my grandfather.. He didn't visit us in Chernovtsy. My parents went to Ataki sometimes and my older brother and I went with them. I have dim memories of my grandfather. I didn't talk with him much. My grandfather preferred to read his religious books rather than speak with his grandchildren. I remember my grandfather wearing a black jacket and a long white shirt with the plated color strings with tassel hanging down from underneath. When I grew older my father explained to me that it was called tallit katan and it was to be worn underneath a shirt. My grandfather always had a little cap on his head at home and a bigger black one when he went out. My grandmother wore long dark gowns: woolen ones in winter and cotton ones in summer. In summer my grandmother wore a dark skirt and a flowered or polka dots blouse. My grandmother didn't wear a wig, but she always covered her head with a shawl, even at home.

My father was a very talented man and understood that he didn't have any perspectives in Ataki. He moved to Chernovtsy in Bukovina in 1922. It was a cultured European town. There was a university and theaters. Chernovtsy belonged to the Dual Monarchy until 1918. In November 1918 Bukovina became a part of Romania. Chernovtsy used to be a Jewish town. After the Romanians came to power some Jews left Chernovtsy. But even then the Jewish population still constituted over 60%. There were about 65,000 Jews out of the 105,000 people that lived in Chernovtsy. Jews had great opportunities. They were allowed to build big stone houses in the center of the town. Jews that invested money in the development of industries or culture were tax exempt for 20

years. Yiddish was spoken in the streets as frequently as German or Romanian.

Upon his arrival in Chernovtsy my father rented an apartment and got a job as a shop assistant at a haberdashery store. The owner of the store noticed my father's talents and my father began to get promotions. He became senior shop assistant and then merchandise expert. Within a few years he reached the position of merchandise manager at a big wholesale depot.

My father's sisters got married. Golda married Mendel Peisis, a local man in Ataki. I don't know what her husband did for a living. Dvoira married a military, named Brunshtein. His military unit was based in the town of Kerzhentsy near Ataki. Dvoira and her husband lived at their parents'. I don't know whether Golda and Dvoira had observed religious traditions in their families before I met them, but when I was old enough to know about it I saw that they led a very secular way of life. Their families only celebrated Pesach of all Jewish holidays. I don't know what my father's stepbrother Haim Blaivis did for a living. I only know that he was married and lived in Ataki, separately from his parents. He had two children, a son called Aron and a daughter called Maya. My father's youngest brother Moishe moved to Argentina in the 1920s and that's all I know about him.

My mother's family also lived in Ataki. My mother's father Zolman Derman, born in the 1860s, didn't come from Ataki. He was born in one of the small towns in Bessarabia, I don't know which one. My grandfather Zolman came to Ataki after finishing a yeshivah in Kishinev. He married Khasia, a local girl. I don't know my grandmother Khasia's maiden name. My grandmother was three or four years younger than my grandfather. My grandfather was a rabbi in Ataki and my grandmother did the housekeeping.

There were five children in the family. My mother had two brothers and two sisters. One of the brothers was called Moishe. I don't remember the name of the other brother. I think, only Moishe was younger than my mother. I don't have any information about their dates of birth. Clara and her husband moved to Brazil in the 1900s, a long time before I was born. They lived in Rio de Janeiro. I only knew her from family pictures. Before the war and for some time after the war she sent letters to my mother, but then they stopped corresponding [because it was dangerous to keep in touch with relatives abroad] [2](#). Both brothers lived in the US, but I don't remember where exactly. We had pictures of my mother's brothers and their children that they sent us. I remember how shocked my parents were when Moishe's daughter married a non-Jewish man, who was black [African-American] to crown it all! This event was discussed for a long time. There were practically no mixed marriages in the Jewish community before the war. Nowadays it wouldn't be a surprise but at that time it came as quite a shock to my parents. After the war the communication with my mother's brothers stopped.

I only knew my mother's older sister Seril Derman, Yurkovich in marriage. Seril was much older than my mother. Seril and her family lived in Beltsy, Bessarabia. I didn't know her husband. They had three children. In 1940, when Bessarabia became a part of the USSR, Seril, as the daughter of a rabbi, her husband and children were exiled to Novosibirsk region. Perhaps, this saved their lives later. Seril's husband died upon their arrival in Siberia, but Seril and her children settled down in Novosibirsk hiding away from the war. Seril's older daughter Fenia lived with her husband in the Bessarabian town of Faleshty at the beginning of the war. She perished in Transnistria [3](#) during the Holocaust. But Seril's daughter Polia and her son Gersh, who lived in Novosibirsk, survived. In 1946 Seril, Polia and Gersh came to Chernovtsy. Seril was ill and died shortly afterwards. Polia and Gersh

moved to Israel after she died. Gersh died in Israel recently and Polia still lives there. My mother had two brothers and sister Clara. One of the brothers was Moishe. I don't remember the name of another brother. I think, only Moishe was younger than Mother. I don't have any information about their dates of birth. My mother was born in 1903. Clara and her husband moved to Brazil in the 1900s, a long time before I was born. They lived in Rio-de-Janeiro. I only knew her from family pictures. Before the war and for some time after the war she sent letters to my mother, but then they stopped corresponding<sup>1</sup>. Both brothers lived in the US, but I don't remember where exactly. We had pictures of my mother's brothers and their children that we had received from them. I remember how shocked my parents were when Moishe's daughter married a non-Jewish man that was black to crown it all! This event was discussed for a long time. There were practically no mixed marriages in the Jewish community before the war. Nowadays it wouldn't be a surprise but at that time it was quite a shock for my parents. After the war communication with my mother's brothers terminated. My mother's family was very religious maybe more so than other families because Zolman was a rabbi. At that time it was natural for Jewish families to observe their ancestors' traditions. All children in the family received religious education: the sons studied at cheder and the daughters had a teacher at home. All children finished secondary school as well. They spoke Yiddish in the family, but they all knew Russian and learned Romanian after 1918. My grandmother did all the housekeeping herself. They had three rooms and a kitchen in their house located in the center of town near the synagogue. There was also a small flower garden near the house. They didn't keep any poultry or cattle. I know very little about my grandfather Zolman. My mother only told me that he was a rabbi in the synagogue in Ataki. My grandfather conducted wedding ceremonies. I also know that local Jews often asked his advice or help. He was a respected man in town. People called him Rabbi Zolman. Regretfully, he didn't live a long life and did much less than he could have done. I wish there was somebody who knew my grandfather and could tell me more about him.

My mother Frima was born in 1903. Grandfather Zolman died in the early 1920s. My mother Frima My mother was the only child still staying at home at the time. All other children had left their home already.

There were no Jewish pogroms <sup>4</sup> in Bessarabia while the Austrians and then the Romanians were in power. There was no anti-Semitism until the middle of the 1930s.

My father and mother had known each other since their childhood. My father came to Ataki to propose to my mother when he already had a well-paid job and bought an apartment in Chernovtsy. My parents got married in Ataki on 1st June 1928. They had this date engraved on the inside of their wedding rings. Besides the date, my mother had my father's name engraved on her ring and my father had my mother's name on his. They had a traditional Jewish wedding. Their guests were Jews from Ataki and my father's friends from Chernovtsy. There was a chuppah and the rabbi married Frima Derman and Abram Bursuk. We still have my parents' contract of marriage, the ketubbah, issued by the rabbi's office in Ataki in Yiddish, and a copy of the invitation to their wedding. After the wedding the newly-weds settled down in Chernovtsy. My grandmother Khasia moved in with them. My grandmother died in 1934 when I was three years old. She was buried in the Jewish cemetery and according to the Jewish tradition.

## Growing up

We lived in a three-bedroom apartment on Gonta Street in Chernovtsy before and after the war. My brother leguda was born in 1930, I followed in 1931 and my younger brother Munia in 1934.

My mother was a housewife. My father worked as merchandise expert at a big wholesale depot. We were a wealthy family and could afford to keep a housemaid and a nanny to look after the children. When we reached the age of five we started to learn Yiddish. We didn't go to cheder, our Yiddish teacher came to teach us at home. He was also an English teacher at school and college. I had a good command of Yiddish before the war, but since then I've forgotten a lot, although I can still read easier texts.

We spoke Yiddish at home. Chernovtsy was under the jurisdiction of the Dual Monarchy before 1918 and of Romania afterwards. People spoke German and Romanian. Romanian was the state language and German was the language of communication. There was a time before the war when there was a sign in all stores reading, 'Only Romanian is to be spoken here'. So, we spoke Yiddish at home, German in the streets and Romanian at school. I remember all these languages.

In 1940, after Bukovina was annexed to the USSR, a Russian and Ukrainian school were opened here. There was also a Romanian and a Jewish school here. My older brother went to the private Jewish elementary school when he turned eight. It was called Maizler school, after its owner and director. I also went to this school four years later. My younger brother was still in kindergarten. In 1941 I finished the 3rd grade at the Jewish school. We studied all subjects in Yiddish and had all textbooks in Yiddish. We studied the basics of religious education and Jewish traditions, although all pupils had studied the Torah and the Talmud at cheder or at home with a teacher. We had these classes in Hebrew.

My family was a traditional Jewish family. We spoke Yiddish in the family, observed all traditions and celebrated all religious holidays. I remember Sabbath at our home. On Friday evening my mother always cooked a festive dinner. We always had good food, but it was particularly special on Friday evenings. At Sabbath there was stuffed fish, stuffed chicken neck and carrot tsimes. My mother always baked challah for the Saturday meal herself. She covered the challot with a napkin with some quotations from the Torah embroidered on it. I remember my mother telling me that the paraphernalia of Sabbath were two candles, two challot and a glass of wine. I remember big silver candle sticks for Saturday candles. My mother lit two candles and I recall her enlightened face when she moved her hand three times over the burning candles. It wasn't allowed to turn on the light or heat up food on Saturday. I remember that our neighbor came to do that and we had steel boxes with kerosene lamps burning inside keeping the pots with food warm all the time. My father blessed the kids. We sang zmiros during and after meals. My parents always went to the synagogue on Saturday. When my older brother and I were old enough they began to take us with them.

We used special fancy dishes at Pesach. I remember the plates painted with lions. I looked forward to Pesach every year to see those lions again. All bread was removed from the house and breadcrumbs were swept up and burnt in the stove. We didn't have a slice of bread at home during all the eight days of Pesach. We ate matzah all this time. We bought a lot of matzah. My mother cooked stuffed fish, boiled chicken and made goose stew. We always had delicious matzah and potato puddings on the table. Matzah was crushed in the mortar to make sponge cakes. My mother made strudels with jam, raisins and nuts. She also bought red wine for Pesach. The whole family



got together for the seder on the first night of Pesach. I remember asking my father the traditional question: 'Why is this night different from all other nights?' in Hebrew. And my father replied with quotations from the Torah. They put an extra glass on the table and filled it with wine. My father told me that this glass was for the prophet Elijah, who came into every home at Pesach and tried the wine that had been prepared for him.

I remember Sukkot. We had a big yard with old trees. There were several Jewish families in our building and every family made a sukkah - a tent from branches. Every family put a table in the sukkah and had all meals there in the sukkah. The tent was constructed in a way to leave the view of the sky open.

Everybody including children over five years of age fasted at Yom Kippur. I remember that on the eve of the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah, one had to make the rounds of the people that one might have hurt to ask their forgiveness. It was believed that one had to meet Yom Kippur purified from all sins. I remember a phrase from the Torah: 'We will all be subject to judgment at Rosh Hashanah and the sentence shall be passed at Yom Kippur, because on this day He will forgive you to purify you from your sins'. Therefore even children tried to earn forgiveness at Rosh Hashanah to be without sins on Judgement Day. Therefore, some time before Rosh Hashanah I tried to avoid fights with other boys so I wouldn't hurt them.

My brothers and I always looked forward to Chanukkah. This was a very merry holiday. There were lots of delicious things on the table. We had guests, relatives and friends, and we received Chanukkah gelt - money at Chanukkah. I also remember Purim and the overwhelming carnival that the whole town was involved in. Disguised people came to the houses and there were performances of the Jewish theater in the squares of the town that were attended by the whole population.

There was a small synagogue near our house. My father had a seat of his own there and we went to the synagogue on Friday evening and Saturday and on all holidays. Respectable people were called to read from the Torah in front of the audience. They often called my father and sometimes they called me to read from the Torah. I could already read in Hebrew and the rabbi showed me which text I should read. My father prayed at home every day. He had tallit and tefillin. He didn't wear tallit katan like my grandfather Avrum-Rugel, but he never skipped the morning prayer in the synagogue. When I turned 13 I had my bar mitzvah. I had a big celebration. Then I got my own tefillin and prayed with my father in the morning. But this didn't last long.

My parents didn't dress us like little Orthodox Jews or have us grow long hair-locks. We wore ordinary clothes and didn't wear any cap or hat at home or outside, but we were raised as Jews. We said a prayer before meals.

There was a Jewish theater in Chernovtsy. In 1937, when I turned six, my parents took me to a concert of Sidi Tahl, a beautiful Jewish singer. She sang Yiddish folk songs. She was working at the Philharmonic in Chernovtsy. I have listened to her many times since then, but I will remember that first concert forever. My parents took us to all performances at the Jewish theater. My father had a good collection of books. They weren't all religious, but also secular books. He had books by Anskiy, Ginelzon, Itshak- Leib Perets, etc. I remember the brown and green leather bindings of these books with the golden stamping. I read all these books in Yiddish. After the war all these books disappeared, I don't even know where to.

I remember that there was a Jewish community in Chernovtsy before the war. Every member of the community had to pay a monthly contribution fee. It was traditional among Jews to give money to charity. If a widow's daughter, for example, was getting married, members of the community would collect money for her. People gave as much as they could afford, but nobody ever refused to help.

We got along well with our neighbors. Our Jewish neighbors Sonia Beznos and Cora Berik were my mother's best friends. Although all of them had children and the house to take care of, they always found some time to see one another. My brother and I had Jewish friends, as we studied at the Jewish school and lived in a house inhabited by Jews.

I remember how Bukovina was annexed to the USSR in 1940. The power changed and so did life. My neighbor used to say, 'They freed us from everything', meaning our property, money, business, freedom of speech and conscience. However, my family was still quite wealthy. My father got a job as a merchandise expert at a big textile depot, we had an apartment and everything that we needed. My brother and I went to the Jewish school that was opened during the Soviet power, and became pioneers. But even so life became more difficult.

I remember somebody from Moscow arrived at my father's workplace in 1940. That man was taken by surprise by the variety of goods in the stores and the low prices. The rate of the Soviet ruble was 40 lei to the ruble. A roll cost 1 lei. So, one could buy 50 rolls for one ruble. I remember that guy from Moscow went to buy shoes for his wife and children and my mother couldn't understand why take so much luggage. We didn't understand how stores could be empty. We understood this later, during the Soviet power. A few months before the war the authorities began with the deportation of wealthy families to distant areas. I already told you about Seril and her family. The only fault of these people was that they were wealthy. This was unjustifiable cruelty. Fortunately, they didn't touch us. Perhaps, the war rescued us from deportation.

### **During the war**

On 22nd June 1941 [the beginning of the so-called Great Patriotic War] [5](#) Germany unleashed the war against the Soviet country. Our town was located near the Romanian border and within ten days the town was occupied by Romanian troops. Many people evacuated. We stayed at home: there were three small children in the family - six, nine and eleven years old - and my mother was ill. My parents decided to stay. At that time we didn't know about all those horrific things that Germans did to Jews. However, I need to say here that those were Romanians that were committing atrocities during the first days of the war. There was a Jewish pogrom on the outskirts of town in the first two or three days of the war. They killed about 2,000 Jews. There is a common grave at the cemetery. 800 people were buried there. There is another grave of 400 people on the bank of the Prut River. And in the surrounding villages the locals were killing Jews without restraint from the authorities. In one night former neighbors and friends turned into adamant enemies and murderers.

I recently read a letter in German that a local Ukrainian received from a Jewish woman living in Canada. She came from the village of Shopot in Putyvl district. They grew up together and this woman wrote him a letter to find out where her relatives' graves were. I was stunned that an adult woman couldn't force herself to come here just because she still remembered how the victims were screaming throughout the night and how her father had to run away to the woods with his children since their neighbors were killing all Jews in the village. Many Jews were killed in the villages.

In October 1941 a ghetto was established in Chernovtsy. There were about 50,000 Jews in the town. They were all allowed to live in one neighborhood of the town, fenced with barbed wire. We received a room there and moved our belongings into this room. Our Russian neighbors helped us to move there. There were no restrictions about walking in the town, but it was only allowed to live in the designated area.

Within two weeks the Romanians expanded the territory of the ghetto and our former house happened to be located within this area. We returned home. Three other families were accommodated in our apartment. Later the Romanians began to send all people to Transnistria from the ghetto. We were directed to go to the railway station and board a train. We hired a cart for our luggage and went to the railway station. But it turned out that the neighborhood in the ghetto where we lived wasn't moving yet. We didn't go back home. Instead, we stayed with our acquaintances for two months.

Romanian gendarmes came to the families to announce that they had to go to Transnistria, but they weren't insistent or violent. And people were gradually moving. We delayed our departure. My parents didn't want to go. We already knew that the situation in Transnistria was much worse than in Chernovtsy. We knew it from letters that we received. I remember a German officer, who brought us a letter from my father's sisters Golda and Dvoira. They wrote that they had been sent to Transnistria. My grandfather and grandmother Bursuk died on the way there. Their families didn't get a chance to bury them. Their bodies were thrown off the train and we don't even know where their graves are.

The sisters and their children reached Transnistria and lived there. Golda's husband Mendel Peisis was in the Soviet army. We also learned from letters that my father's stepbrother Haim Blaivis had perished during the occupation and his children Aron and Maya had evacuated. This same officer visited us several times bringing letters. These letters were written in Yiddish so that Germans or Romanians couldn't read them.

After two months they stopped moving Jews to Transnistria. The ghetto was eliminated and about 15,000 Jews out of the original 50,000 stayed in town. 35,000 were deported. About 10,000 obtained an official permit to stay in Chernovtsy. Those were the ones that couldn't move out for some reason or specialists that couldn't be replaced. After the elimination of the ghetto in June 1942 they began to deport the 5,000 Jews that didn't have a permit to live in Chernovtsy according to the list to Transnistria. We were on the list. We were hiding in the attic of our acquaintances'. They were Romanians and the police didn't search their attic. The authorities issued certificates to the Jews that remained in the town. Such a certificate was called authorization. My father had money and connections, but it was still a problem to obtain this certificate. The individual helping my parents to obtain this authorization was under a certain risk. He would have been shot if this had become known. But everything went well and we were able to stay in Chernovtsy until 1944, when Bukovina was liberated by the Soviet army, and we had the authorization to do so.

## Post-war

After Chernovtsy was liberated we returned to our apartment. My father's sisters and their children came to us from Transnistria. Their town of Ataki was almost completely destroyed and they didn't have a place to live. Golda's husband Mendel Peisis returned from the front in 1945. Some time later Golda, her husband and children and Dvoira and her children moved to Israel. Golda and



Dvoira have already died; their children still live in Israel. Aron and Maya, the children of Haim Blaivis, also moved to Israel. I visited Israel in 1996 and met with Dvoira's daughter Khasia, who had left for Israel when she was seven. Khasia wrote a book about the Jews of Ataki. She wrote it in Hebrew, a language that I don't understand, so, I didn't take this book with me. There are many photos of our family in the book: of my grandfather and grandmother, my mother and father and us, children.

In 1944 I went to the 6th grade of the Jewish school. Two years later I finished the 8th grade. I have a certificate about finishing eight years at the Jewish school. The Jewish school was closed that same year. I have a certificate about finishing 8 years at the Jewish school. I do know Yiddish quite well. There are very few those that studied at the Jewish school left. Some of them died and the others left the country. Large numbers of Jews moved abroad in 1946. It was possible to go to Romania or Austria and move on anywhere else from there. We were planning to leave, but for some reason we didn't. I don't remember why. I had to continue my studies. I started to learn Russian in 1940 and because I had to go to the Russian school. After studying at the Jewish school I was having language problems. I didn't know one single term in mathematics or physics. So I couldn't go to the day school with my poor Russian. I went to an evening school for adults that wanted to complete their secondary education. The requirements weren't as strict as at evening schools. In 1949 I finished the evening secondary school. I was the best student there.

There was anti-Semitism after the war. My teachers at school thought I had to study physics and mathematics at university, but I decided to become a doctor. I submitted my documents to the Medical University in Chernovtsy. I was very doubtful about writing the composition at the exam in Russian literature. I learned all possible subjects and received a '4'. But I received a '3' in physics, although I was so sure that I would do excellent. Other applicants that were standing by the door and heard my answers at the exam said that it was an unfair mark and that I had to demand their review of my results. I went to my examiner later and asked him why they had given me a '3'. He replied that they should have given me a '2' and that I shouldn't come back and ask them questions. I wasn't admitted, as I didn't have a good enough mark to pass.

I was told that there was a decree to admit local people to higher educational institutions without competition. I went to see the rector and said to him that I was born in Chernovtsy and was thus a local. He replied that the decree meant hutsuls but not Jews. So, it didn't matter that I was born there. The following year I entered the Medical Academy in Chernovtsy. There were a few Jewish students at the academy. I was a 3rd-year student during the time of the Doctors' Plot [6](#). Many lecturers from the medical institute were fired. Few of them returned later. The Jewish theater was also closed at that time, and members of our family had been regular theatergoers.

Stalin's death in spring 1953 didn't touch me. There was no such hysteria in Chernovtsy about Stalin as in the rest of the country. There were grieving people, but there were also those that were happy about his death. They still remembered the horrors of the deportations [following the arrests of people during the so-called Great Terror] [7](#). They still remembered life before the Soviet power and after.

After the war my father and mother strictly continued to observe Jewish traditions. They celebrated holidays and Sabbath. My mother was a housewife and my father worked at his previous job until he retired. After 1948, the height of the campaign against 'cosmopolitans' [8](#), there remained only

one operating synagogue in Chernovtsy. My father went there every Saturday. Once I asked him, 'You are not so religious now, so why this strict mode of family life?' My father replied, 'For us to know it and remember'. And I did remember it.

After the war our family began to celebrate Soviet holidays, too. But it was more an occasion to get together with the family, that's all.

Upon graduation from the institute I was sent to Baumanskaya region in Donetsk. I specialized in traumatology there. I had a [mandatory] job assignment [9](#) for three years and returned to Chernovtsy in 1960.

My older brother Ieguda was a foreman for chemical coloring at the textile factory. He married a Jewish girl in the 1950s and they lived in their own apartment. There were many vacant apartments in Chernovtsy in the 1950s and it wasn't a problem to find a place to live. Ieguda was the only one of the three of us who was religious. He went to the synagogue and they celebrated all religious holidays in his family. I visited him on Jewish holidays, but I didn't go to the synagogue any more. My brother died in 1991. His wife and son moved to Israel where they still live today.

My younger brother Munia finished the energy institute in Ivanovo. It was easier for a Jew to enter a higher educational institution in Russia than in Chernovtsy. Upon graduation Munia became chief of the laboratory at the scientific research institute in Slaviansk, Donetsk region. Later he moved to Kramatorsk. He had a lovely apartment in the center of town, a nice country house, and a car. People in town knew and respected him. His daughter moved to Israel four years ago and he followed her some time later. My brother lives near Tel Aviv, but I think he regrets having moved. . He went there for the sake of his daughter, but they live separately, although they do see each other often. He often calls me and I understand he misses his homeland.

I'm the only one to have married a non-Jewish woman. My wife Tamara Testlina was born in 1932. She studied at the Medical Institute in Chernovtsy and we met there. We went on our job assignments upon graduation and got married in Donetsk in 1958. Later we returned to Chernovtsy. My wife's parents were schoolteachers. Her father was a teacher of physics and mathematics and her mother was a teacher of the Russian and Ukrainian languages. I can't say that they were particularly amused that their daughter married a Jewish man, but they accepted me. Tamara and I lived separately from her parents. Tamara's relatives had a different attitude towards our marriage. I felt comfortable and at home with some of them and awkward with others. My parents accepted our marriage. Tamara became their favorite daughter-in-law.

Our older son Victor was born in Donetsk in 1958. Our younger son Evgeniy was born in Chernovtsy in 1961. Victor left home at 17 when he entered the Military Engineering College of the Underwater Fleet in Leningrad. Upon graduation he was sent to the Northern Fleet where he became commander of division. Victor is a military sailor. He is a very intelligent man and he made a good career. He is Laureate of the State Award. He served in the Navy for 21 years and was transferred to the headquarters in Moscow. He, his wife and two sons live in Moscow. His older son studies at the medical institute and his younger son at the military college.

Our younger son Evgeniy was born in Chernovtsy in 1961. My younger son Evgeniy and his family live with us in Chernovtsy. He followed into my footsteps and graduated from Chernovtsy Medical Institute. He is a doctor, a traumatologist. He is married and has two sons. Both of them study at

the mathematical lyceum in Chernovtsy. When our sons obtained their passports in the 1970s we were to decide which nationality they would have written in their passports. My wife expressed her hope that I wasn't going to complicate their life by saying it should be Jewish. I gave in and we had their nationality written down as Ukrainian.

My younger son's colleagues consider him a Jew, but I don't think so. I have wonderful sons and great grandchildren, but they are not Jewish, neither in their blood nor in their mentality. They married non-Jewish girls. They've assimilated. It's a common process in the world, but I feel sorry about it. However, my grandchildren go to Jewish camps every summer. They hear about Jewish holidays and traditions and bring back badges, flags and souvenirs. But they aren't Jews. Recently a world conference was held in Chernovtsy in Yiddish. The writer Shraibman, a Jewish writer from Kishinev, visited us. He wrote stories in Yiddish about the life of contemporary Jews. He made a speech at the conference and said that Yiddish is fading away and that Jews are being exterminated now. And that this extermination isn't done with weapons but with a kiss on the lips. He meant mixed marriages and said that Jews vanish due to assimilation.

My mother died in 1968. She was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Chernovtsy. In the 1970s Jews began to move to Israel in great numbers. My father summoned us all together to decide what to do. I didn't go because my wife didn't want to. She knew how miserable we were feeling here and was afraid that she would feel even worse in Israel. A few years later, though, she told me that it was my fault that we didn't go because I wasn't insistent enough on our departure. Perhaps she is right, but I cannot force someone into anything. So we stayed in Ukraine. No member of our family left. My father died in 1970. His dream about going to Israel never came true. My father is buried beside my mother in the Jewish cemetery in Chernovtsy. Two of my colleagues left at that time. Recently I went to the US and Israel and met with them there. Both of them are doing very well. Israel is a very beautiful country and it made an unforgettable impression on me. But I stopped thinking about emigration. Everything has to be done at the right time. Besides, my wife is very ill. She is an invalid of the 1st category. Now we can only regret about what we didn't do in those faraway 1970s.

My younger brother was called Munia. Later he officially changed his name to Mikhail [see common name] [10](#). My name is Iosif Abramovich and I've never been ashamed of my Jewish first name and patronymic. I've never been ashamed of being a Jew. I worked as a doctor at the hospital. Later I became manager of a department. I have reached everything that a practicing doctor can reach: head of the department at the regional hospital and a regional specialist of the highest category. However, I've always felt that I was a Jew and a stranger here. There were conferences of the regional specialists and in the 1970s there were eight traumatologists that were Jews, but in the late 1990s I was the only Jew left. Regardless of all respect and honors paid to me I've always felt a stranger. I work as a traumatologist at Hesed only. There are 1,000 people there. I know these people and support them as much as I can.

I'm not religious now, but in the past I used to go to the synagogue at the anniversary of my father's and my brother's death to recite the Kaddish. We buy matzah, and not only on holidays. We have matzah at home and our kids know about Pesach and Chanukkah. We give them Chanukkah money and make hamantashen at Purim. I work as a traumatologist at the Chesed. There are 1000 people there. I know these people and support them as much as I can. I'm the head of the association of the former inmates of ghettos and concentration camps. We collect money

and erect monuments at the places where Jews were killed. There are no Jews left in the villages. Villagers address us to tell us about the places where Jews were killed and we go out there to erect monuments. We constructed several monuments last year. On 25th August 2002 we inaugurated the monument in Mileyevo village. 118 Jews were killed there by their fellow villagers. I couldn't attend this ceremony. My wife is paralyzed and sometimes I have to stay at home. People that witnessed the events in Mileyevo spoke at the ceremony asking forgiveness for their ancestors that were killing Jews only because they were Jews.

I still read Jewish books in Yiddish. I read at least one book a year to remember the language. I can also write in Yiddish. Sometimes I speak in the 'Dos Yidish Wort' program on the radio. It is the only radio program in Yiddish in Ukraine. That's what my father wanted: that I remember that I'm a Jew. I remember what he wanted me to be like.

## Glossary

### **1 Bessarabia**

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

### **2 Keep in touch with relatives abroad**

The authorities could arrest an individual corresponding with his/her relatives abroad and charge him/her with espionage, send them to concentration camp or even sentence them to death.

### **3 Transnistria**

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

#### **4 Pogroms in Ukraine**

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

#### **5 Great Patriotic War**

On 22nd June 1941 at 5 o'clock in the morning Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union without declaring war. This was the beginning of the so-called Great Patriotic War. The German blitzkrieg, known as Operation Barbarossa, nearly succeeded in breaking the Soviet Union in the months that followed. Caught unprepared, the Soviet forces lost whole armies and vast quantities of equipment to the German onslaught in the first weeks of the war. By November 1941 the German army had seized the Ukrainian Republic, besieged Leningrad, the Soviet Union's second largest city, and threatened Moscow itself. The war ended for the Soviet Union on 9th May 1945.

#### **6 Doctors' Plot**

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

#### **7 Great Terror (1934-1938)**

During the Great Terror, or Great Purges, which included the notorious show trials of Stalin's former Bolshevik opponents in 1936-1938 and reached its peak in 1937 and 1938, millions of innocent Soviet citizens were sent off to labor camps or killed in prison. The major targets of the Great Terror were communists. Over half of the people who were arrested were members of the party at the time of their arrest. The armed forces, the Communist Party, and the government in general were purged of all allegedly dissident persons; the victims were generally sentenced to death or to long terms of hard labor. Much of the purge was carried out in secret, and only a few cases were tried in public 'show trials'. By the time the terror subsided in 1939, Stalin had managed to bring both the Party and the public to a state of complete submission to his rule. Soviet society was so atomized and the people so fearful of reprisals that mass arrests were no longer necessary. Stalin ruled as absolute dictator of the Soviet Union until his death in March 1953.

#### **8 Campaign against 'cosmopolitans'**

The campaign against 'cosmopolitans', i.e. Jews, was initiated in articles in the central organs of the Communist Party in 1949. The campaign was directed primarily at the Jewish intelligentsia and it was the first public attack on Soviet Jews as Jews. 'Cosmopolitans' writers were accused of hating the Russian people, of supporting Zionism, etc. Many Yiddish writers as well as the leaders of the



Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee were arrested in November 1948 on charges that they maintained ties with Zionism and with American 'imperialism'. They were executed secretly in 1952. The anti-Semitic Doctors' Plot was launched in January 1953. A wave of anti-Semitism spread through the USSR. Jews were removed from their positions, and rumors of an imminent mass deportation of Jews to the eastern part of the USSR began to spread. Stalin's death in March 1953 put an end to the campaign against 'cosmopolitans'.

## **9 Mandatory job assignment in the USSR**

Graduates of higher educational institutions had to complete a mandatory 2-year job assignment issued by the institution from which they graduated. After finishing this assignment young people were allowed to get employment at their discretion in any town or organization.

## **10 Common name**

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