

# Sophia Belotserkovskaya

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Kiev

Ukraine

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Sophia Belotserkovskaya lives in a small one-bedroom apartment in one of the central districts of Kiev. She is lame and has problems walking. One can tell that it is difficult for her to keep her apartment clean and tidy. She has a visiting nurse/housemaid from Hesus to help her with the housekeeping. When Sophia met me she wore a fancy dress with Ukrainian embroidery and a coral necklace. There are many books, old magazines and theater posters in her apartment. Sophia was prepared for our meeting. She felt very happy to speak about her parents and in particular, about their contribution to Ukrainian art and theater.



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## Family background

My mother, Rachil Belotserkovskaya [nee Shukhman], came from an artistic family. My maternal grandfather, Avraam Shukhman, born in Odessa <sup>1</sup> around 1870, sang in the Odessa Opera Theater. He had a very rare timbre of voice: dramatic tenor. My mother told me that once a well-known Christian activist called Ioahn Kronshtadski from Saint- Petersburg visited Odessa. He went to the opera where he heard my grandfather sing. He liked him so much that he met him and invited him to sing in a church choir. However, in order to do this my grandfather would have needed to convert to Christianity. My grandfather said, 'I shall die with the same faith I was born with'.

My grandfather was a self-educated person. He was religious, went to the synagogue and observed Jewish traditions. My mother's family celebrated Sabbath and all Jewish holidays and followed the kashrut. However, it was more like a tribute to old traditions and the education that my grandparents got from their families. It was probably due to my grandfather's surrounding and his work in the opera. At least all my mother told me was associated with the theater and artistic surrounding that she was raised in.

I know that my mother's family lived in a three-bedroom apartment in the center of Odessa. They had a grand piano, which was the focus of their life. My grandmother Sophia Shukhman - I don't

remember her maiden name -- was a housewife. She died around 1910. My grandfather lived eight years longer. After his wife died he became very sickly and it was hard for him to sing. He became the director of the music library of the theater. During the Revolution of 1917 [2](#) and the Civil War [3](#), the time of attacks of gangs [4](#) and pogroms [5](#), the family found shelter in their Russian neighbors' houses. It was a hard time. My grandfather actually died of hunger and diseases in 1918.

My maternal grandparents had three children: my mother was the oldest. She had two brothers: Yakov, born in 1900, and Grigori, born in 1902. They got secular education. Their parents spoke Yiddish and Russian. The children spoke both languages. I don't know exactly where my mother's brothers studied, but they were intelligent people. Yakov was an accountant. He lived in Odessa with his family, but we hardly ever communicated with them. During the Great Patriotic War [6](#) he was at the front. Yakov and his wife Emma died in Odessa in the 1970s. Their children Arkadi, born in the 1920s and Semyon and Vladimir, both born in the 1930s, moved to America with their families in the late 1970s. I'm not in contact with them. All I know is that they got some technical education and worked as engineers.

Grigori got fond of revolutionary ideas. When the Reds [7](#) came to town he left with one of their units. He took part in combat actions during the Civil War. He also joined the Communist Party at that time. After the Civil War Uncle Grigori was sent to the border with Romania where he served in a frontier unit. In 1937 [during the so-called Great Terror] [8](#) he was arrested and charged of espionage like thousands of other innocent people. He was taken to an investigation cell in Kiev where he was tortured and abused. He was devoted to the Soviet regime nonetheless and believed everything that happened to him to be a mistake. In 1939, when Yezhov [9](#) was arrested and Beriya [10](#) replaced him, my uncle was released. He was lucky because in order to make accusations about Yezhov the authorities reviewed many cases and released prisoners. During the Great Patriotic War Uncle Grigori served with SMERSH [Editor's note: special secret military unit for the elimination of spies; lit. translation: 'Death to spies']. After the war he became a professional military. He moved with his wife Polina and their children Stanislav and Nadia [Nadezha] from town to town as his service required. After his demobilization from the army in the 1960s they moved to Kiev. He received a nice apartment and a good pension. He died in the early 1980s. His wife Polina passed away shortly afterwards. Nadia and her children live in Kiev. We speak on the phone occasionally. Stanislav and his family moved to the US in the 1970s.

My mother was born in Odessa in 1898. At the age of three she performed on the stage of the Opera Theater in an episode of the opera 'Little mermaid'. From then on her soul belonged to the theater. She dreamed of becoming an actress. She learned to play the piano. After finishing grammar school she went to study at the Froebel Institute [11](#), which trained teachers for children's institutions. She worked as a governess for rich families for some time. She and my grandfather were hiding from pogroms in Russian families. They suffered from hunger and destitution. After my grandfather died Uncle Grigori, who served in Kamenets-Podolskiy in Western Ukraine at the time, sent her an invitation. He helped her to get a job at a factory and lodging.

In 1922 a young man approached her asking her in Ukrainian, 'Do you know where I could find a place to stay?' My mother was surprised that a young man of typical Jewish appearance spoke such fluent Ukrainian. It was even more surprising to her because in her family and in Odessa people spoke Russian. She became even more interested when she got to know that he was working at the drama theater, which was on tour in Kamenets-Podolskiy. This young man was my father-to-be,

Lev Belotserkovski. He was an actor and prompter with the Kiev Ivan Franko Drama Theater.

My father was the son of a poor craftsman named Gershl Belotserkovski. My father was born in Alexandria, Kirovograd region in 1896. Alexandria was a small town with a Jewish and Ukrainian population. My father told me about his town. He said there were houses with heavy iron shutters, high fences and signs reading, 'Beware of the dog' on the gates. There were narrow streets with puddles that never dried up.

There was a church and a synagogue in town. My grandfather Gershl went to the synagogue every evening. He didn't have time to read religious books since he had to provide for his family. I don't know what kind of craft my grandfather followed. I don't remember my grandmother's name either. She was a housewife. They lived in a small two-bedroom apartment in a small one-storied house in Hannibalskaya Street in the Jewish neighborhood of Alexandria. Their neighbors were poor Jews trying to make their living with hard work. They were tailors, shoemakers, glass-cutters, carpenters and cabinet-makers. I met my grandfather and grandmother at the age of 2 or 3, when my mother and I visited Alexandria. I don't remember them. My grandfather died in the early 1930s. I don't know any details about the funeral. I've never been to his grave, but I think he was buried in the Jewish cemetery. My grandmother passed away during evacuation in Kazakhstan in 1943. She was buried there and I think she was probably buried in an ordinary cemetery. I don't think there were Jewish cemeteries in Kazakhstan at all.

My father's older sister Sophia, born in 1892, lived in Alexandria. She was a housewife. During the Great Patriotic War she was in evacuation in Kazakhstan with her husband and children. Aunt Sophia died in the 1960s. I don't remember the names of her husband and her three children. I only saw them once in my childhood. I had no contact with them. All I know is that they lived in Moscow.

My father didn't tell me how religious his family was, but I think they observed Jewish traditions, followed the kashrut, celebrated Sabbath and Jewish holidays. My father studied in cheder, spoke fluent Yiddish, could even read in Hebrew and knew the basics of the Torah and Talmud. However, he was self-educated because he only finished two or three years of elementary primary school. His family was poor and my father had to go to work at an early age. He was an errand-boy and a shop assistant.

My father spent all his free time reading Russian, Ukrainian and Jewish books that he borrowed from a local library. He dreamed about big towns and roads that he would take one day. There was a holiday when traveling actors or circuses came to their small town. My father and his friends watched performances of gymnasts, acrobats and clowns and dreamed of leaving town with them. The only thing that kept my father from doing so was his understanding that his parents depended on his support. Life was dull and boring in Alexandria, and my father wanted to join a traveling circus to leave it. He got very fond of theater. The building of the town theater was situated on the main square in Alexandria. Traveling actors performed in this theater. Occasionally good actors came on tours. My father never missed a single performance. He met several other young men that were fond of theater and they founded a drama club. Its members were Michael Grushevski, who became a writer and producer, Ilia Nabatov, a Soviet satirical actor, Mariengof, an artist, Folia Korf, a future actor with the Satirical Theater in Moscow, and others. Before that, young people learned roles, recited poems in Russian and Ukrainian and held speeches about theater and literature.

In May 1912 something happened that determined my father's life. The Russian Tsarist Army Theater came on tour to Alexandria. They showed a Jewish play in which Gnat Yura, later a famous actor, performed. [Editor's note: Gnat Petrovich Yura (1887/88-1966), a great Soviet Ukrainian actor, producer and People's Artist of the USSR (1940). In 1920 he became one of the founders of the Ivan Franko Ukrainian Theater (Kiev) and its chief producer in 1961.] My father was very impressed by his acting. He met Yura after the performance. They became friends and my father often visited Yura at his home where Yura's mother and sister welcomed him warm-heartedly. In this small house in Alexandria my father and his friends read plays by Maxim Gorky [12](#), forbidden by the tsarist government, as well as interesting books, poems and their own works. Soon Yura Gnat had to leave Alexandria because of his military service. My father kept in touch with Yura's mother and sister.

During the Civil War poor Jewish families had a very hard life. My father decided to move to a bigger town to look for a job. In late 1917 he went to Ekaterinoslav [today Dnepropetrovsk] by train. He knew that Gnat lived in this town. They met. My father stayed with Gnat, who rented a room in the center of town. Gnat helped my father to get a job in a hospital. My father became an attendant there. However, life was difficult and he didn't earn enough to make a living. My father's parents wrote him letters and asked him to come home. Gnat gave my father a recommendation letter addressed to his brother Terenti Yura, who had become chief of the studio theater Surmy in Alexandria in 1916. My father was very happy about this opportunity. He went back to his home town.

My father worked in this theater until 1919. He played minor roles. He spoke very beautiful Ukrainian and Terenti helped him to become a prompter. My father often recalled the time of the development of the Surmy studio. They were trying to inspire people with hope for a better life and distract them from their everyday problems.

The power in Alexandria switched from one White Guard [13](#) gang to another. Jewish people suffered the most under them. There were often pogroms. My grandfather Gershl also became a victim of their attacks. Once, when my father returned home from rehearsals, bandits were leaving the house taking everything they could carry with them. They ordered my father to take off his clothes and took them with them, too. My father didn't have any clothes left. Terenti Yura gave my father some clothes and even organized a benefit night for him. We had a poster from this performance that we kept for many years. It read, 'Benefit night for prompter Belotserkovski who suffered from a pogrom - new staging of the play entitled Persecuted about Jews persecuted by pogrom makers'. Terenti gave my father all the money they collected from this performance. Then another incident happened that could have cost my father his life. Once a bunch of infuriated Petliura soldiers [14](#) ran onto the stage after a performance and shouted, 'Any zhydy [kike] here?'. A Ukrainian actor told my father to hide in the box where they kept their costumes and stay quiet. When the bandits came into the costume room he sent them away telling them that he hated 'zhydy parkhaty', too, and that there was none in the theater. They had another incident while on tour in a small Jewish town. When they left the theater building in Golta they saw Jews that had been hung in the main square: a gang had attacked the town during their performance.

My father and his friends were very enthusiastic about the Revolution of 1917. They belonged to the world of art, were far from politics and believed in slogans about equality and justice.

In summer 1920 another important event happened. Gnat Yura came to visit his brother in Alexandria. He invited his brother and a few others, including my father, to Cherkassy where he was organizing the Ivan Franko Ukrainian Drama Theater. That summer my father moved to Cherkassy. From then on he worked in this theater. And so it happened that a young man from a poor Jewish family not only came to liking the Ukrainian language wholeheartedly, but also became one of the founders of a famous Ukrainian theater. My father went on tours to Ukrainian towns with the theater and once they visited Kamenets-Podolsk where my father met my mother Rachil Shukhman.

They fell in love and got married. They had a civil ceremony and a small wedding party to which my father's friends from the theater came. Although the bride and bridegroom came from religious families they didn't have a Jewish wedding. My mother 'contracted' my father's love of the Ukrainian language. She studied Ukrainian for several months. Then she began to work in the theater, where she recited poems by Pavlo Tychyna. [Editor's note: Pavlo Grygorovich Tychyna (1891- 1967), Ukrainian poet.] My mother was very pretty and soon began to play minor roles in the theater. In early 1923 the government issued an order for the Ivan Franko Theater to move to Kharkov, which was the capital of Ukraine at that time.

The theater was housed in a nice building in Kharkov. The leading actors and the management of the theater were temporarily accommodated in a hotel, and young actors and employees of the theater stayed in a barrack-type building. My parents lived in a small section separated from the rest of the room with a sheet.

## Growing up

I was born on 11th April 1925 and named Sophia after my grandmother. When I was three months old I fell ill with poliomyelitis and my mother quit work. She spent a lot of time with me and massaged my legs, but I remained an invalid. My mother began to sew at home.

In 1926 the theater was ordered to move to Kiev, the 'old' capital. Actors and employees were upset because they were losing their status of 'actors of the capital theater' to become 'provincial actors'. Nobody knew back then that Kiev would become the capital of Soviet Ukraine in 1932. In Kiev our family received a one-bedroom apartment with a big room and a kitchen. It was a very cold apartment and we had to keep the stoves burning all the time. We were still cold and became sickly. My father earned little and we were poor, but my childhood was full of joy whenever my father took me to the theater with him where I watched unforgettable performances.

I began school in 1932. My parents decided that I would have no problem learning Russian since everybody around us spoke it and therefore sent me to a Ukrainian school. A Jewish school was out of the question. Although my parents always identified themselves as Jews and even exchanged phrases in Yiddish, my father spoke Ukrainian because his profession required it. Besides, my parents were typical Ukrainian intellectuals of Jewish origin.

The saddest memory of my childhood is the famine in Ukraine in 1932-33 [15](#). I even dreamed of white bread at night. I remember that my mother refused to buy me a bun averting her eyes from me - this was my mother, who loved me more than I could think of. I remember long evenings when my mother and I were waiting for my father to come back from the theater. He could buy two sandwiches at the canteen without food coupons. He brought us these delicacies wrapped in



tissues. In winter 1933 Uncle Grigori visited us. He brought bread, pork fat and some sausages: this was an incredible treat for the time. When he put the food on the table the doorbell rang. My mother's friend Olia, an actor's wife, came to see my mother. When she saw the food on the table she stepped back to the door intending to leave, but my mother invited her to sit down. She sat down at the table, dropped her head in her hands and began to cry bitterly. She hadn't seen such nourishing food for a long time and her son was starving at home. In the morning I often saw dead people in the streets: villagers came to town looking for a job and food and starved to death.

In 1934 a new Ukrainian school opened in the yard of our house. I went to this school. My mother tried to bring me up a sociable girl so that I wouldn't feel my invalidity acutely. I had many friends. They dropped by our apartment during intervals and after classes. My mother made tea and pies for us. The famine was over and she could buy flour and bread in stores. I studied well. I liked maths and exact science, but I still preferred literature. I was an active pioneer and editor of the school newspaper. I joined the Komsomol [16](#) at school. I liked Soviet holidays: 1st May and 7th November [October Revolution Day] [17](#). My father and I went to parades. The theater employees went to Kreschatik, the main street in Kiev, wearing their costumes and make-up. Circus employees joined them to march along the street. They marched juggling and demonstrating acrobatic tricks. They also had their circus pets with them.

My father's colleagues visited us. My father had more Ukrainian friends, but nationality didn't matter to us. We much more valued personal qualities such as honesty. I liked going to the theater, which had an atmosphere of respect. My father continued working as a prompter. Sometimes he played minor roles, too. He also took part in the development of the stage sets and accessories and participated in discussions related to music in performances. My father had some Jewish colleagues, but none of them celebrated any Jewish holidays. I don't remember any celebration of Christian holidays, either.

We were aware of Stalin's persecutions [the Great Terror]. In early 1937 Uncle Grigori was arrested and brought to Kiev. My mother went to speak to his investigation officer and stood in long lines to send him food parcels. Standing in those lines she listened to stories of wives and relatives of innocent people that were taken to prison. Of course, my parents understood that it wasn't possible that there were so many 'enemies of the people' and that therefore all those cases must have been made up, but they never mentioned it in my presence. Thousands of innocent people perished in Stalin's prisons. The poet Sokyрко, the husband of Natalia Uzhviy, an actress of the theater, was arrested. Some other actors were arrested, too. Many poets and writers were announced outcasts. I couldn't help feeling stunned and this situation developed doubts in the just attitude of the security authorities. However, we never associated Stalin with this horrible suppression of human and legal rights. We trusted Stalin as if he were God and blamed the local authorities for all of it.

### **During the war**

We knew from newspapers and the radio that Hitler had started a war in Europe. I remember that the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact [18](#) came as a shock to our family. We believed it to be ingratiating with fascists. We felt sad about the Soviet troops advancing to Western Ukraine. [Editor's note: Western Ukraine was annexed by the Soviet Union in 1939 according to a secret treaty with Nazi Germany.] There was a joint parade of German and Soviet troops in Brest. It was actually an occupation of Western Ukraine and it seemed strange, to say the least.

In June 1941 my father and the theater went on tour to Moscow. On 21st June my mother and I went to a concert in the House of Officers. We returned home in a very pleasant and happy mood. Nothing suggested disaster. We went to bed late. In the morning my mother's friend woke us up telling us the terrible news about the war. My father stayed in Moscow for a few days. Then some actors left for Tambov in Russia where the Ivan Franko Theater evacuated to and some, including my father, returned to Kiev to pick up their families. At that time an order was issued to keep men that weren't subject to military service in reserve. My father had a 'white card'. Men with white cards were to move out of Kiev. My mother went to the military commandant to beg him to let my father go, but it didn't help. My father had to move to the East. There were air raids near Poltava and their unit was dismissed. My father stayed in Poltava and then moved to Kharkov. We didn't have any contact with him.

In the theater my mother obtained evacuation documents for us. We didn't take very much luggage. We only had hand baggage, but thank God, somebody told us to take warm clothes with us. We went down the Dnieper River by boat. There were air raids. We were scared, women and children cried - there were mostly children and women on that boat. We got off the boat near Kremenchug, 150 kilometers from Kiev. My mother and I walked to the town of Sumy where Uncle Grigori lived with his family. It took us a long time to get there. We walked and got a ride every now and then.

We stayed in Sumy for a few days until Uncle Grigori, who was at the front already, obtained evacuation documents for us and his wife Polia and their son. We were to move to Saransk in Mordoviya. We went by special train for families of the military and state security employees. At Kupyansk station Polia met her sister and her sister's husband. They joined us. We also met Dobrovolski, an actor of the Ivan Franko Theater, who was trying to convince us to get off the train and go to Tambov where the theater was in evacuation. He convinced us that my father would be looking for us in Tambov. My mother and I stayed at Kupyansk station for a few days waiting for a train to Tambov.

We received a warm welcome. Young actors stayed in a hostel and established actors lived in a hotel. My mother and I sat on a bench in a garden, where we were supposed to meet with Gnat Yura: my mother wanted to ask him to help her get a job in the costume shop and, also, get some lodging. At that moment Terenti Yura and his wife approached us. His wife was an actress. Her last name was Bravinskaya. They took our luggage and we went to their hotel room. They had two beds brought into the room for us and after a few days my mother went to work in the costume shop. This happened in late August. On 1st September I started to go to school in Tambov. I remember I woke up on 22nd September 1941 when I heard somebody sobbing. It was Bravinskaya, who had heard on the radio that Kiev had been occupied. She cried because of the fascists who had come to her home town and she also cried because of the things they had left behind. She had a nice collection of pictures by French and German artists and antiques. I also burst into tears. It was hard to imagine fascists marching along the streets of my town. My father arrived in late September. In early October, when air raids began in Tambov, the theater evacuated to Semipalatinsk in Kazakhstan, some 3,000 kilometers from home.

Our trip lasted 29 days. We had to change trains, waiting at stations for days. We stayed overnight inside stations or in the open air. There was a measles epidemic among children. Fortunately, I didn't get the disease. On 4th December 1941 the theater opened its season in Semipalatinsk. We

lived in a small room that formerly served as a kitchen in a communal apartment [19](#). There was a Kazakh family that also lived in this apartment. We got along very well. My mother and father received bread coupons for working people and I received a dependant's bread coupons. We got about a kilo of bread per day. This was all the food we had. We were starving. I was surprised that some adults lost their dignity when they were starving. I remember one actor, an intelligent and interesting man, begging for 'at least a piece of bread'. I finished secondary school in Semipalatinsk.

In June 1943 the theater moved to Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, 3,500 kilometers from Kiev. Life was a little easier there since the employees of the theater received bread coupons and food packages. We could buy vegetables and fruit. I entered the Faculty of Philology at Uzbek State University. Our lecturers were professors from Moscow and Leningrad. I made many new friends and enjoyed studying at university. My first year passed by quickly. I remember how happy we were to hear that our hometown Kiev was liberated in early November 1943. We stayed in Tashkent for another half year. On 12th July 1944 we made our way back to Kiev with the theater. My mother had had malaria some time before our departure. She was carried into the railcar and had a fever until the train left the hot climate zone. She got better as soon as the temperatures dropped.

### Post-war

Kreschatik and many historical monuments had been ruined. We got accommodation in a hotel. Our apartment was occupied by other tenants. After a month we received a room in a communal apartment in the city center. My father walked to the theater through piles of bricks on Kreschatik. Employees of the theater and I worked at voskresniks [20](#) cleaning up the debris. We worked hard cleaning up the city. In September 1944 I went to study at the Faculty of Philology at Kiev State University. I became a 2nd-year student. I graduated in 1948.

Many Jews, including our family, remember the period in the history of the Soviet Union known as a state campaign of anti-Semitism called 'campaign against cosmopolitans' [21](#). Jews were declared to be cosmopolitans. They were fired and many of them arrested. Some were even executed - in the same way people had been back in 1937 [during the Great Terror]. Many employees of Kiev Conservatory, Kiev University, publishing and printing houses fell victim to this campaign. The situation in the theater where my father worked was different. Gnat Yura spoke at a meeting and said, 'Who are cosmopolitans - is it Pruslin or Matvey Drak or Belotserkovski? This is nonsense. I've known them for 30 years and I don't believe anything, but what I see with my own eyes'. [Editor's note: Drak was the chief painter at the theater and Pruslin was a composer and conductor.] I guess Gnat Yura was ordered by the Central Committee of the Party to disclose Jews that were 'enemies of the people', but he was an extremely decent and honest man. I don't know what effort it took him to protect his people, but he managed to keep a warm and friendly atmosphere in the theater.

Vatulia and Kosheski, honored actors of the USSR who worked in the theater, helped me to get a job. I was employed as an editor at a publishing house called Soviet School. In 1949 I got an invitation to a plenary meeting of Soviet writers because I was interested in the development of Ukrainian literature. I was very proud to represent our publishing house. This plenary meeting made a terrible and oppressive impression on me. It was conducted under the slogan 'Down with cosmopolitans and anti-patriots' [meaning 'down with the kikes']. Well-known Soviet writers made



aggressive speeches. This anti-Semitic campaign reached its height in early 1953. This was the period of the so-called Doctors' Plot [22](#). I was on a business trip in Moscow and remember a woman in a tram, shouting that a man with Semitic appearance had pricked her with a syringe.

Later, in the 1980s, newspapers wrote that KGB [State Security Committee] agents in disguise commuted in public transportation to provoke people. But back then people seriously believed in Jewish murderers in white cloaks. It was no surprise: there were massive articles about doctor being poisoners. I don't know what happened to this woman: she just got off, but other people in the tram continued shouting curses addressed to Jews. You can imagine what a huge wave of anti-Semitism was created at that time! When Stalin died in 1953 I felt the bitterness of the loss like all others did, but I didn't cry. Then people began to talk about his persecutions, his cult and personal guilt. Therefore, the speech of Khrushchev [23](#) at the Twentieth Party Congress [24](#) in 1956 didn't come as a surprise to me: I was grateful for him to be the first to speak openly about it.

I worked as an editor for a year and then I got bored with correcting other people's typescripts. I went to the School Department of the Ministry of Education and asked them to send me to work in a school in a village. I wanted to become a teacher of Ukrainian language and literature. They were very surprised to hear that I wanted to work in a village because people preferred to work in towns at that time. I got a job assignment to work in a school in Skvira district, Kiev region, where I worked from 1949-1950. I rented a room in a house. Although it was a cold room that wasn't heated properly I enjoyed working at school. I had wonderful pupils that were eager to study and villagers struck me with their kindness.

Many years later my pupils came to see me when they visited Kiev. They told me about themselves and thanked me for what I had taught them. I didn't stay longer in the village due to my illness. It was either a result from hard conditions during evacuation or, more likely, from living in that cold room. I fell ill with tuberculosis. Fortunately, it was a closed form of tuberculosis. I got treatment in a nice hospital. Later I stayed in a recreation center for some time. I recovered, but I didn't go back to the village. I went to work in a secondary school and then became a teacher in an evening school. I cannot say that I faced any anti-Semitism when I tried to get employment, but I should mention that except for my job in the village I got all other jobs with the help of actors from the theater. In the evening school I was a Russian and Ukrainian teacher. My students were young war veterans and eager to study. Many of them became high officials later, and they never forgot about me.

In 1952 we received a bigger apartment. My father worked at the theater until 1960. Then, within two years, he wrote a book, his memoirs about the theater and the atmosphere there, and about nice talented people that he was lucky to work with. This book, entitled A Prompter's Notes was published by the Publishing House of Art and Musical Literature in Kiev, with an edition of 3,000 copies. When the book came out in 1962 my father was severely ill. He died in 1966. My mother became mentally ill after he passed away. She had schizophrenia. She couldn't stay alone at home due to her suicidal moods: she tried to jump out of the window several times. I had to put her into a mental hospital. I often visited her there, but her illness was progressing and she didn't even recognize me any more. My mother died in 1972. My parents were buried in the town cemetery in Kiev.

I've lived alone since then. I've never been married. There was a man in my life once: he loved me and came to see me from another town, but he didn't dare to leave his wife and children for me. However, I'm grateful to him that he brought many happy hours into my life and made me a fully-fledged woman. I don't know whether I would have been so happy in a marriage. We both cherished our short meetings.

I usually spent my summer vacations in recreation centers where I got treatment to strengthen my locomotorium. Sometimes I traveled to the Baltic Republics and the Caucasus.

I had many friends who were in the art scene or teachers: they were Jews, Russians and Ukrainians. I've always identified myself as a Jew, but I've never celebrated any Jewish holidays. To tell you the truth, I never knew about holidays. From time to time we got together with friends for a cup of tea and that was a holiday for us. We celebrated Soviet holidays and birthdays. We usually had parties on those days, listened to music, danced and talked. My Ukrainian friends and I went to Babi Yar [25](#) on 29th September every year to honor the memory of the 100,000 victims that perished there in 1941. We even went there before the monument was erected, when KGB agents spied upon those that came to lay flowers onto the grave. They spied upon people because they tried to keep information about the victims a secret - they even planned to build an amusement park on the spot to erase the traces of this tragedy. I shudder when I recall the many people that were arrested by KGB officers and taken to a nearby bus. Many were held for 15 days for 'hooliganism in public' and some were kept in prison even longer. I respect the people that came to Babi Yar in those years when it wasn't officially forbidden to do so but suspicious and, therefore, dangerous.

I never considered moving to Israel. I welcomed the establishment of Israel, but Ukraine, its people, art, language and literature, have always been my first choice.

I joined the Communist Party in 1948. I was a convinced communist. I never doubted any decisions or actions of the Party and believed communism to be the only right form of a state. I wasn't a party activist and didn't think of making a career in the Party, but I always attended party meetings and paid the monthly fees. I took part in preparations for Soviet holidays at work. We organized concerts where our pupils sang, danced and recited poems. We invited teachers, parents and relatives to our concerts. I made a speech about the achievements of the Soviet people in industry and agriculture, the completion of plans by Soviet enterprises and illustrated my speech with specific data. I also conducted political classes for my colleagues and pupils and taught them about the international situation and the pace of our country toward communism. Even after I retired I was involved in many party activities. I held lectures about the advantages of communism in various institutions.

I saluted perestroika in the 1980s and spoke my mind about my attitude towards everything new that came into our life. At last my eyes opened and I understood what horrible lies had been surrounding me throughout my life. There were publications about the horrors of life in camps and the terrible injustice of life in the USSR that was camouflaged by propaganda from citizens and outsiders. I left the Party in 1990, even before it was eliminated. I submitted my request to be expelled from the Party due to my old age. Regretfully, I wasn't brave enough to write openly what I thought - that the Party had outlived itself, that it was a party of murderers and that I didn't want to be its member any more. However, I believe that my action to leave was also brave in a way.

I appreciate independent Ukraine. I believe that, although the current situation is difficult, especially for pensioners, this time will pass. Regardless of my old age I read and write my memoirs and poems. I keep going to the Jewish Charity Fund, the Hesed, where I hold lectures about Ukrainian literature, poetry and theater. I get invitations from the Ivan Franko Theater where my father had worked for 40 years. I share my memories about my parents and the people who founded this theater.

It's wonderful that Jewish life has revived in Ukraine and that the Jewish community supports its members like it used to before the Revolution of 1917. I can still do without assistance. I hate to ask for help and I'm happy to be of use to the community. It's great that people can return to their roots, go to the synagogue and observe the traditions of their ancestors. I read a lot about Jews, Jewish life and traditions. It's interesting, but then history of any nation is of great interest to me. It's difficult to change at my age, though. I've never observed any Jewish traditions.

## Glossary

### **1 Odessa**

The Jewish community of Odessa was the second biggest Jewish community in Russia. According to the census of 1897 there were 138,935 Jews in Odessa, which was 34,41% of the local population. There were 7 big synagogues and 49 prayer houses in Odessa. There were heders in 19 prayer houses.

### **2 Russian Revolution of 1917**

Revolution in which the tsarist regime was overthrown in the Russian Empire and, under Lenin, was replaced by the Bolshevik rule. The two phases of the Revolution were: February Revolution, which came about due to food and fuel shortages during WWI, and during which the tsar abdicated and a provisional government took over. The second phase took place in the form of a coup led by Lenin in October/November (October Revolution) and saw the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks.

### **3 Civil War (1918-1920)**

The Civil War between the Reds (the Bolsheviks) and the Whites (the anti-Bolsheviks), which broke out in early 1918, ravaged Russia until 1920. The Whites represented all shades of anti-communist groups - Russian army units from World War I, led by anti-Bolshevik officers, by anti-Bolshevik volunteers and some Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries. Several of their leaders favored setting up a military dictatorship, but few were outspoken tsarists. Atrocities were committed throughout the Civil War by both sides. The Civil War ended with Bolshevik military victory, thanks to the lack of cooperation among the various White commanders and to the reorganization of the Red forces after Trotsky became commissar for war. It was won, however, only at the price of immense sacrifice; by 1920 Russia was ruined and devastated. In 1920 industrial production was reduced to 14% and agriculture to 50% as compared to 1913.

### **4 Gangs**

During the Russian Civil War there were all kinds of gangs in the Ukraine. Their members came

from all the classes of former Russia, but most of them were peasants. Their leaders used political slogans to dress their criminal acts. These gangs were anti-Soviet and anti-Semitic. They killed Jews and burnt their houses, they robbed their houses, raped women and killed children.

## **5 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.

## **6 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.

## **7 Reds**

Red (Soviet) Army supporting the Soviet authorities.

## **8 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.

## **9 Yezhov, Nikolai Ivanovich (1895-1939)**

Political activist, State Security General Commissar (1937), Minister of Internal Affairs of the USSR from 1936-38. Arrested and shot in 1939. One of the leaders of mass arrests during Stalin's Great Purge between 1936-1939.

## **10 Beriia, L**

P. (1899-1953): Communist politician, one of the main organizers of the mass arrests and political persecution between the 1930s and the early 1950s. Minister of Internal Affairs, 1938-1953. In 1953 he was expelled from the Communist Party and sentenced to death by the Supreme Court of

the USSR.

### **11 Froebel Institute**

F. W. A. Froebel (1783-1852), German educational theorist, developed the idea of raising children in kindergartens. In Russia the Froebel training institutions functioned from 1872-1917 The three-year training was intended for tutors of children in families and kindergartens.

### **12 Gorky, Maxim (born Alexei Peshkov) (1868-1936)**

Russian writer, publicist and revolutionary.

### **13 White Guards**

A counter-revolutionary gang led by General Denikin, famous for their brigandry and anti-Semitic acts all over Russia; legends were told of their cruelty. Few survived their pogroms.

### **14 Petliura, Simon (1879-1926)**

Ukrainian politician, member of the Ukrainian Social Democratic Working Party, one of the leaders of Centralnaya Rada (Central Council), the national government of Ukraine (1917-1918). Military units under his command killed Jews during the Civil War in Ukraine. In the Soviet-Polish war he was on the side of Poland; in 1920 he emigrated. He was killed in Paris by the Jewish nationalist Schwarzbard in revenge for the pogroms against Jews in Ukraine.

### **15 Famine in Ukraine**

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

### **16 Komsomol**

Communist youth political organization created in 1918. The task of the Komsomol was to spread of the ideas of communism and involve the worker and peasant youth in building the Soviet Union. The Komsomol also aimed at giving a communist upbringing by involving the worker youth in the political struggle, supplemented by theoretical education. The Komsomol was more popular than the Communist Party because with its aim of education people could accept uninitiated young proletarians, whereas party members had to have at least a minimal political qualification.

### **17 October Revolution Day**

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



## **18 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact**

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

## **19 Communal apartment**

The Soviet power wanted to improve housing conditions by requisitioning 'excess' living space of wealthy families after the Revolution of 1917. Apartments were shared by several families with each family occupying one room and sharing the kitchen, toilet and bathroom with other tenants. Because of the chronic shortage of dwelling space in towns shared apartments continued to exist for decades. Despite state programs for the construction of more houses and the liquidation of shared apartments, which began in the 1960s, shared apartments still exist today.

## **20 Voskresnik**

Unpaid voluntary work after regular working hours on Sunday. This was created in the late 1920s on the example of the subbotniks in order to raise funds for the great industrialization drive projected by the first five-year plan.

## **21 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 antisemitic 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'.

## **22 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.

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

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

### **24 Twentieth Party Congress**

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

### **25 Babi Yar**

Babi Yar is the site of the first mass shooting of Jews that was carried out openly by fascists. On 29th and 30th September 1941 33,771 Jews were shot there by a special SS unit and Ukrainian militia men. During the Nazi occupation of Kiev between 1941 and 1943 over a 100,000 people were killed in Babi Yar, most of whom were Jewish. The Germans tried in vain to efface the traces of the mass grave in August 1943 and the Soviet public learnt about mass murder after World War II.