

# Geta Jakiene

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Kaunas

Lithuania

Interviewer: Zhanna Litinskaya

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*Geta Jakiene is a small elderly woman. She is very affable. She lives in a small tidy apartment in the building of the 1970s in the dormitory suburb of Kaunas. In spite of being sick, Geta gladly agreed for an interview. There were times when we had to interrupt our interview either because she was not feeling very well or because of her not being able to remember certain names and dates. Unfortunately, Geta did not keep many facts in her memory and they remain unrevealed. the lady itself is the true image of Jewish woman and mother. The saddest thing is that God whom Geta asked to give her a long life, did not hear her prayer. In couple of moths after the interview, after the interview in January 2006, Geta passed away. That is why her every word is precious for us.*



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## **My family background**

My name is Geta Jakiene. My maiden name is Ushpits (Ushpitseite in Lithuanian ). When I was born I was named Entl. It was uncommon name in Russia and in evacuation I was given another name Geta. I was born on 18 October 1922 in a small Lithuanian town Sakiai [about 150 km from Vilnius]. Unfortunately, I am old and feeble that is why my senile memory has not kept the names of my kin, though I would like to remember them.

There is hardly anything I know about my mother's relatives. The matter is that my mother died when I was two. Her death was caused by some complications after parturition. Maternal grandparents were not alive and I even had no idea what their names were, they were from, and

what they did for a living. My mother's name was Chane Rochl. She was born in 1892. In 1924 she gave birth to a girl who had lived only for couple weeks. She did not get better after parturition she had some infection. Father said that she did not go outside. At times she cried that everything was burning inside of her. Mother insisted that she should be taken in Germany as her cousin had his own clinic there. Father took mother there, but it was too late. She died.

I knew my paternal grandparents very well. After mother's death they actually raised me. Father got married for the second time and his wife treated me like a step mother, so my paternal grandmother took me to her place. I grew up in her house. In spite of the fact that grandparents were actually like parents to me, I cannot recall grandfather's name. Grandmother's name was Sarah. Grandfather was born in early 1860s. Grandmother was couple of years younger. They lived in a small Lithuanian town Prenai [about 70 km from Vilnius]. Here grandmother had his own house and churn. Grandfather died from heart stroke in 1935 was survived by grandmother for several years. Granny lived to see outbreak of war [1](#) and was murdered by fascists along with other Prenai Jews.

My father, who was the eldest child, had three sisters. The elder sister Chana lived in her own house in the same yard with grandparents. Her husband Meer Kronrot, Polish Jew, was a very nice and kind person. Chana and Meer had three children, whose names I cannot recall. Meer died in fascist prison in Mariampol. There were rumors that he helped the communists, and fascists beasts did not find it enough just to kill him, but they also decided to put him through tortures before death. Chana and her children perished in Prenai

Father's second sister Sarah also lived in Prenai with her husband and 3 children- two sons and a daughter. Sarah's husband dealt with shipments. He owned a large truck and transported all kinds of cargoes within Lithuania. Sarah's entire family perished in 1941 with grandmother, Chana and her children.

My father's youngest sister (I do not remember her name) lived in Southern Latvian town Pilviskai with her husband Yankle. They did not have children. They loved me very much and I spent every summer with them in Pilviskai. Yankle owned a small store, located in their house. He also had a small husbandry growing the things at a small land plot. Both of them stayed on occupied territory. When the fascists came from house to house looking for the Jews, aunt sent Yankle to the garret thinking that a woman would not be needed to the occupants. She was taken and shot the same day in early June 1941, but uncle Yankle managed to run away roving in different places, but still he was taken to concentration cam in Germany. He survived it and came back in Lithuania. He got married in couple of years and had a pretty long life.

My father had brother Avrum Ushpits. In the 1910s he left for America, where he got married. He became a rather famous violinist. Before war, he wrote letters rather often. I remember he sent grandmother very beautiful pictures, which looked like post cards. After was we did not keep in touch with my uncle and I do not know what happened to him.

My father Gerts Ushpits, born in late 1880s in Prenai, did not get any other education but cheder and several classes of elementary Jewish school. He was literate. I do not know how my parents met, I think their date was arranged with the help of Jewish matchmakers- shedchens. After wedding they settled in Shakai. They had a two-storied stone house. Their store was on the ground floor of their house. Father was the owner of that store. In 1914 my elder brother Meishe was born

and in 1917 my sister Leya was born. I was the third in the family. Of course, I do not remember mother. I only remember the warmth of her touch. In 1924 mother gave birth to a daughter, she died shortly after parturition. Soon mother died.

## **Growing up**

I can say I did not have childhood since then. Almost right after mother's death father got married and a stepmother appeared in the house. I do not remember her name. All I know is that she was much younger than my dad. My paternal grandmother was very sorry for us children and decided to take the youngest to her. Thus, shortly after stepmother appeared in our house, I was taken to Prenai. My childhood and adolescence were spent there.

Prenai is a small town with the population mostly consisting of Jews. Jewish population lived in the center of town. The houses of Lithuanians were on the outskirts. The town was beautiful, clean and neat. There were small stores in the center, which belonged to Jews. There were also craftsmen workshops – tailors, cobblers, glazers, clock menders. There was a smithy out of center, where a Jewish smith was working. There were synagogues in town as well. I do not remember how many. As far I can recall there was a large two-storied stone synagogue. My grandparents went there on Saturdays and on Jewish holidays. They had their own purchased seats. Grandfather's was in the first floor and grandmother's was on the second, where women were praying.

Grandparents had their own two-storied stone house. There were several rather small, but very cozy rooms. I slept in a smaller room on the sofa. My room was next to grandparents' bedroom. When I was sick in the childhood, grandpa took my room so that I stayed with granny. There was a fair dining-room. The kitchen was near that room, there was a large stove in the center of the kitchen. Something was constantly cooked. Our housekeeper, a Lithuanian lady, cooked mostly during the week. She also helped grandmother with house chores. On the eve of Sabbath and on holidays grandmother did not let anybody approach the kitchen. Though, as I understood later on, she was not a very tidy woman. I did not like the idea that the kitchen was not clean. Grandmother sacredly observed kashrut. There were separate dishes for milk and meat. God forbid to confuse a knife or a folk. There was a case when granny threw away the fork which I used in the wrong way. We ate only kosher meat. There was no kosher meat store in Prenai. Sometimes Sarah's husband brought it from neighboring town, but I was not very often. As a rule, grandmother cooked poultry which was supposed to be cut in a special way. We did not have our own livestock, so grandmother bought fowl on the market. I remember thoroughly granny how chose chicken, blew on the feathers, haggled. When I was small grandma took me to the market and to shochet in the synagogue. When I grew up, I took the poultry to shochet myself. There was a small shed in the yard of the synagogue, where the poultry was cut. Shochet made a precise cut on the fowl's neck so that it would not suffer for long, hung it on special hook over the funnel where blood was seeping down. Only after than the fowl became kosher and was ready to be cooked.

There was a churn in the shed. It was grandfather's business. The peasant from the neighborhood often came to us to make oil from sunflower seeds. Besides, there was a spinnery where grandma spun yarn from sheep wool Grandpa was constantly busy, especially in sun-flower season. At that time there were big carts in the yards. Those who arrived were sitting in the kitchen at a big table. There were Lithuanian, Poles, and Russians. Grandma found a place for everyone. Those people came to grandpa, then went to the market and in the stores while grandpa was processing their

raw materials. On that day grandma boiled a lot of potatoes in the large pot and then all people ate it with fatty tasty herring. Once, some of the new-comers gave me a piece of pig's fat. Grandma looked at me in such a way that it threw it away. It seemed to me that my arm was defiled. I was only four.

My grandparents were religious. They observed all Jewish traditions. Both of them covered head- grandpa always had either a kippah or fur hat on. He wore the latter in winter. Grandmother covered her head with a kerchief every day. When she went to the synagogue on Sabbath and on holidays, she wore a wig. On Saturdays grandmother took me to the synagogue and I carried her prayer-book. There were all kinds of tasty dishes on the table - gefilte fish, all kinds of tsimes [2](#), pastries. Cholntn was the main dish. It was cooked from meat, potatoes and beans. It was kept in the bakery where chalachs were baked. When baking was done, the stove was still hot, and all Jews from the street brought their cholnts in the pots with their names written on them, On Friday grandma and we dressed in clean clothes were sitting at the table. Usually on Fridays and Saturdays the family of aunt Channa was with us. Grandmother lit candles, read prayers, then grandpa blessed wine and bread. After that we started dinner. We cannot do anything on Saturday, the food was brought by our Lithuanian housekeeper. She lit candles and did other things needed. Later on when I got the letter on Saturday, I was waiting by the fence for a non Jew to pass by and open the envelope. I could not do that myself.

Grandmother loved me very much. Grandparents did not refuse me in anything, they even pampered me. They bought me the best clothes, wonderful dolls and other toys. My poor mother wouldn't probably afford it. Once, I overheard the conversation of my aunts Channa and Sarah. They rebuked grandma for loving me more than other children. Grandmother said that I did not have anybody else to love me, while their children had parents. In actuality, I was almost an orphan. After mother's death I also lost father. He practically took no interest in me and came in Prenai very rarely. He was like a stranger to me. Grandparents were like parents to me.

Aunts Channa and Sarah also treated me very good. Channa, Meer and children lived in our yard. They had their own house. Meer was a very kind man. He loved me and sympathized with me. He gave me presents. His attitude to me was much warmer than father's. Meer was a gifted watch mender. He was almost like a "goldsmith". I always got upset when grandma scolded Meer. He always took a lot of orders and could not cope with his work on time. The clients nagged at him often and underpaid for his job. That is why grandmother reproached, but he joked with her. At times they quarreled. It seemed to me that Meer would get upset and leave, but I was afraid of that. Our families- grandmother's and Channa's had separate husbandry, but they were times when they planted things together. Very often we sat at one table. We met Sabbath together. On holidays Sarah's family joined us.

Pesach was my favorite holiday. It was not the holidays in itself I liked the best, but the feeling of the holiday on its eve. I liked the fuss during preparation for Pesach. Almost once month in advance right after Purim a thorough cleaning started in the house- heavy velvet curtains were taken off, as well as other covers were dusted. All was washed. Before Pesach there were clean dressy curtains. The furniture and the floors were shining clean. On the eve of the holidays the festive kosher dishes were taken from the garret -silverware, porcelain, tots and goblets. The rest of the dishes - pot and pans -were koshered in a huge pot with water and hot stones in the middle of the yard. Matzah was brought from synagogue as it was baked there. Meer took huge baskets with matzah,

covered with white cloth, for both families, for us to have it enough for the holiday. All children were wearing new clothes on Pascal seder. Apart from traditional products – eggs, herbs, potatoes, matzah, there were also festive dishes- gefilte fish, chicken stew, all kinds of matzah dishes- kneidlach, patties, deserts and sponge cake. Beet soup was obligatory dish. This soup from red beet was eaten with matzah, grandfather carried out seder. He hid afikoman- a piece of matzah, and always made it so that I would find it. I was given present for that. As a rule it was a new frock or a pair of shoes. It was another time when my aunts got jealous. They were perturbed that their children never found afikoman and got no present from grandpa. My cousins asked four traditional questions about the origin of the holiday. In general, seder in our house was according to the rite.

I do not remember the rest of the holidays vividly. As usual, grandmother made festive dinner with the relatives. Milk dishes were cooked for Shaveot. There were pie with curds, all kinds of casseroles and stews. On Rosh- Hashanah grandmother gave me the hen to be taken to shochet. He rotated alive hen over my head making kapores rite. On the eve of Yom Kippur we had a substantial meal as we did not eat before the next day. Grandma told me that I could eat as children and sick people were allowed to skip the fasting, but it was a pleasure for me to fast with everybody. I liked Sukkot and Simchat Torah. Sukkah was put by grandpa right in our yard. From the roof he took down handmade whickered dome. In that peculiar sukkah grandfather prayed during the holidays. He also had meals there. When it got cold in the evening, grandfather came home to get warm. On Simchat torah and Channukah grandfather, aunts and uncles gave me money, I and other Jewish kids were looking forward to that holiday.

In general my life with grandparents was very good. During all those years I saw my brother Meishe and sister Leya only twice. They lived with father and stepmother. Leya often wrote sad letters to grandma saying that stepmother did not love her. By that time stepmother gave birth to two sons. Of course, she did everything for her own children.

My grandfather's death was one of the saddest events in my childhood. It happened in 1935. I was resting in my room and suddenly heard the sound of the fall. I rushed in the bedroom and saw grandpa lying on the floor without being able to speak. I called the doctor, who said that he would live for 5 hours at the most. I do not remember how grandpa managed to explain to me that I should call dad. I sent a telegram from the post office. Grandpa died, when I came back. The dead grandpa was staying on the floor covered with straw. There were candles behind his head.. we had to wait for father to come. When he came in, the collar of his shirt was cut in accordance with the Jewish rite. There were people around grandpa. They were praying. Grandpa was buried in accordance with the Jewish rite – he was clad in shroud and carried on the boards across the town and put in the grave in Jewish cemetery.

When grandpa died I moved to grandmother's room. I had stayed there before I lived Prenai. When I turned seven I went to Prenai elementary Jewish school. It was an ordinary Jewish school. I do not have any recollections in regard to that. I had studied there for four years. Here I got the rudiments- learned how to read and right in Yiddish, some arithmetic's. Thus, in accordance with the Jewish traditions, I could stop my studies with that. According to grandmother, my father insisted that I should not go on with my education. Grandpa, who was still alive at that time, dreamt that I- his favorite granddaughter- should get a good education. He was the one who insisted that I should enter lyceum. There was only one lyceum in Prenai. It was a state Lithuanian lyceum. Most of the students there were Lithuanian. There were few Jews. Apart from me there were two Jewish

girls in my class. I did not demonstrate bright results in my studies. I was a rather mediocre student. I learnt Lithuanian language and literature. Jewish kids were treated fairly. We were taught Jewish religion by the teacher who came to us from Jewish school. There was a really good relationship between teachers and students. I had never heard any reproaches concerning my nationality. My best friends were Lithuanians. Unfortunately I do not remember the names of childhood friends. We often strolled in the park, went to the cinema. I enjoyed going to the cinema. I went there almost every Saturday. I came home rather late from cinema and went to bed quietly no to wake up grandma. By the way she was breathing I always understood that she was not asleep, waiting for me to come back. At that time I also made friend with some Jewish girls. They were members of youth Zionistic [3](#) organization in Prenai. There was a small kibuts and the ladies got ready to depart for Israel. One of my friends took me to the underground komsomol [4](#) meeting. I liked those people very much as they spoke of equality, brotherhood and gave me a warm welcome. There were couple of times when I stealthily attended their meetings, but I did not join komsomol.

During my stay in Prenai I saw my siblings for couple of times. When I grew up, we started writing letters to each other. Meiseh finished Jewish school and Leya studied at the lyceum. Of them had a hard time at home and they left for Klaipeda as soon as they got a chance. Meishe found a job as a worker at the textile factory, owned by some of our distant relatives. Leya worked in the office of the same factory. Both of them insisted that I should go to Klaipeda and live with them. Sister loved me and wanted me to study in Klaipeda. Having finished four grades, in 1938 I left for Klaipeda in spite of grandmother's protests.

I still remember how I met with my sister. We were crying and laughing at a time. Brother Meishe was also happy to see me. I moved in Leya's place. We rented a small room from a German lady. Leya and Meishe were working. I also wanted to get a job, but my siblings said in one accord that I was the youngest and had to get education first. Leya took me to the typist and short-hand courses and I started studying. Those course were not free and my siblings paid for them. Leya and I had a modest living. After work sister hurried up home and we cooked moderate dinner. Meishe often joined us for dinner. I did not have any friends in Klaipeda. The main reason for that was that both my sisters and I were cooped up at home. Besides, fascism movement was emerging at that time. It was the strongest in Klaipeda as it was the closest to Germany. There were slogans calling upon extermination of «kikes». There were fascist gangs in the street. It was scary. Our landlord also changed. She became an ardent stickler of Hitler. Her love for fuhrer was displayed in the hatred towards Jews. When there were direct threats, when the landlord started saying that soon all Jews would be destroyed, Leya and Meishe decided that it was necessary to leave Klaipeda. It happened in summer 1939. I had lived with my siblings less than a year.

Brother headed to Kaunas right away. Some of his friends were living there. Leya came back to father in Shakai. Father probably had mixed feelings. On the once hand he was happy to have us back, on the other hand he was afraid of his wife's wrath. At any rate, we were given a cold shoulder and stepmother reiterated that the house was demised to her sons. Those guys, who were my brothers, were even afraid to come up to their elder sisters -Leya and me. in couple of days Leya said good bye and left for Kaunas. Meishe found a job for her there. I stayed in Shakai.

Soon I found a job in the office of Transportation Company. I was literate as I almost got lyceum education. I also had short-hand and typing skills. I liked my job. I was very tidy and coped with all

the tasks. The director of the office Lithuanian Shakalis treated me very well He was 10-15 years older than me and was like a father to me. I was too young at a time to understand the feelings of a mature man. Now I understand that Shakalis was infatuated with me. His wife lived in another city and once the director suggested taking a walk in the town park. I said if I went for a walk with him, the whole town would know about it, and I disapproved of rumors. After work I usually went home. Stepmother gave me a small room. After dinner I went in my room right away. I talked to father and step mother only if needed.

### **The Soviet invasion of the Baltics**

In June 1940 there was a turnaround in our life. Soviet militaries entered Lithuania [5](#) and soviet regime came to power [6](#). First, there were no vivid changes, though the lists of rich people were made. My father's name was also included in the list. Once in the middle September I was held up at work – Shakalis and I had to make adjustments in accounting. It was dark and he saw me off. The windows of our house were dark and I gingerly came in. There was nobody there. Certain things were missing in the house. My room remained untouched. My linen was on the sofa. I was afraid to stay home by myself and went to the office. I spent a night there, sleeping on the chairs. Next day I found my father and his family. It turned out than he and stepfather were evicted. Their house was sequestrated with the exception of my room. Father's house was nationalized right after the Soviets came to power. Father and his family had to live in a small room at the house, where the several rich Jewish families were taken together. Rabbi's wife shared father's room. Rabbi was deported [Deportations from the Baltics] [7](#) to Siberia. By that time several families had been deported from the city. There were Zionists, rich people both Lithuanian and Jews were among those unwanted by soviet regime. I was not willing and I could not live in the house by myself, so I moved to the place of my distant relative. I had stayed there for a year. I saw my siblings couple of times, they came in Shakai on Jewish holidays. I also visited them in Kaunas. I did not go to Prenai to visit my grandma. I still cannot forgive myself for that...

### **During the war**

22 June 1941 was a warm day. In spite of the fact that it was Sunday, I had to go to work to fulfill a task. I worked calmly for a while. Then I had some premonition. I walked out and saw that there were crowds of people outside carrying their things, including feather beds. They were scattering in different directions. My first thought was that those people were getting ready for deportation. Then I heard the word «war» and found out that Germany attacked Soviet Union. I ran out to work as I had the keys to the safe and desk and I had to decide what to do with the documents. Director Shakalis and chief engineer Khakhlymov were at work. Khakhlymov was Russian. He came to work for us in 1940. Shakalis said that we had to leave right away as fascists would be in the city soon. He sent me home to pack my things. I ran to my dad and said good-bye to him. I had not misgiving that it was the last time I saw my dad. I thought that I was leaving only for couple of weeks until the soviet regime ousted fascists. I only took the documents, underwear and an old coat.

There was a horsed cart waiting by the office. They were waiting only for me. Shakalis was very worried as he could not find his wife. It turned out that she had left earlier in some cart. The three of us- I, Shakalis and Khakhlymov- headed to Vilnius. We saw the fugitives on our way as well as retreating units of the army. There were a lot of wounded people. Those who were severely wounded were in the carts. There were fascist planes above our heads. We, peaceful citizens, who

were no guilty of anything, were bombed. For the first time in my life I understood how close the death was. I dreaded that I could not say good-bye to grandmother and my siblings as I did not know when I would see them again. We reached Vilnius outskirts. Shakalis left me here in a small wood and took Khakhlymov to look for his wife. He told me to wait for him there. He said he would come back and get me if he had not been killed. I had been waiting for 24 hours. I cried having lost home that he would return, but Shakalis kept his word. Late at night a car came with Shakalis, his wife and Khakhlymov. Shakalis found his wife in a hospital. That lady was a nurse and was evacuated with a hospital. His wife was pregnant. The lady did not like me instantly. Maybe it was feminine jealousy as I was a young and pretty lady.

We reached Smolensk on that car. Here Shakalis and Khakhlymov came to the military enlistment office. Both of them were drafted in the army and sent to the front right away as they were communists. Shakalis's wife was sent to agricultural works in kolkhoz [8](#) in the vicinity of Smolensk. I did not know anything about fieldwork and the next day I was assigned as an assistant to the secretary of komsomol organization. I had worked for a while. People had a very good attitude to me. In general, Russian people turned out to be very kind and outgoing. Probably I would stay there, but some unexpected meeting changed my life. I must have been protected by God. I met the fugitives, Polish Jews, on the square by administration building. They had already known what was happening to the Jews and they were talking me into heading towards the East. This is what I decided to do. I took the locomotive train with my new pals, who treated me like a relative.

We were on the road for about two weeks. Soon I ran out of the bread that I was given in kolkhoz and my new pals gave me good. Though, we did not have much food with us. At that time I found out what it was to starve. We came in the city Ulyanovsk [now Simbirsk, Russia, about 800 km to the East from Moscow]. At first I was taken to the evacuation point, where all of us were fed. Here we finally took a bath. I was sent in a small settlement in the vicinity of Ulyanovsk and housed in with a Russian lady. I did not work for a while and the lady gave me food. Unfortunately, I cannot recall her name. I will be grateful to her till the end of my days. Her husband was in the lines and she lived with her small daughter. She did not eat to the fool, but treated me like her sister. Once in late fall, I went to the lake, slipped down and fell in freezing water. The hostess took frozen dress from me, rubbed me, tucked me in bed, and gave me warm tea. It was a motherly care. The hostess even gave me her clothes as I practically had nothing. I starting speaking a little of Russian as before that I did not know a single Russian word and explained what I wanted with the help of the gestures.

With time I found a job as an attendant in the orphanage. I had a lot of work to do. The children who were found in the region, were hungry, dirty and lice-ridden. We washed them, shaved their heads and disinfected their clothes. I had meals here. The food was scares, but it was enough for me. I did not need much. In a while, in 1942 I was employed at the military plant. When I was working with the tool, I felt that I was helping the front and making contribution in the victory. I settled in the hostel. There were 8 ladies in one room. There were different people- kind, nice, and blatant thieves. Someone stole my food cards for several time and I starved. The only warm thing I had- a jacket - was also stolen. We had meals in the plant canteen, where we gave our food cards. In the evening we had carrot drink, sang patriotic songs and waited for the news from the front. In general we lived the life during the war. I was here on the victory day, the 9th of May. After that I started thinking about heading home, though I understood that my relatives most likely had



perished. In 1943 I sent a request in the search bureau in Buguruslan and they replied that none of my relatives –dad, grandma, Leya, Meishe- were in the lists of the evacuees. I sent couple of letters at old addresses in Lithuania and got the response to my surprise.

### **After the war**

Uncle Yankle, the husband of my aunt from Pilviskeie, wrote to me. He came back from concentration camp in Germany and miraculously received a letter sent at his old address. From uncle's letter, I found out my sister Leya and brother Meishe, survived Kaunas ghetto [9](#). Soon I received Leya's letter from Kaunas. Leya wrote that I should not hurry home as many fascist followers left in the woods and made all kinds of diversions. I insisted on my return and Leya sent me the invitation letter. At that time it was hard to get tickets. It looked like the whole country was going somewhere either to the west or to the east. I stood in the line for couple of times. Once, a man at the train station put me in the line saying that I was his wife and I managed to get the ticket to Lithuania. In 1946 I went to Kaunas.

Leya met me at the train station. It reminded me of our meeting in Klaipeda. Now we were laughing out loud as both of us managed to survive. She took me in her room. Leya was a housekeeper of some well-off people and lived in a small room for a maid in their apartment. I stayed with her. During the first days we could not help talking. Each of us told about adversities. I found out bitter truth from Leya: my father Gerts Ushpits, his wife and two children perished in Skakai. They were shot in the first days of occupations along with other Jews. My grandmother and all her grandchildren were executed in Prenai. Only Leya, Meishe and me were the only ones out of our entire family, who survived the war. Leya and Meishe were in Kaunas. They had stayed in Kaunas ghetto during the entire period of occupation and saw all horrors of that. Before ghetto was liquidated, Leya and Meishe managed to find a shelter and survive somehow. There were some people upon liberation, who blamed Meishe for treason. As they told that he allegedly gave away children's crib (editor's note.: in ghetto crib was the shelter, where Jews were) and children died in ghetto because of him. It was a slander, but neither Meishe nor Ghetto were able to prove the truth. My brother was to go through the trial and he was sentenced to 10 years in severest camp. By the time when I came back in Lithuania, Meishe had been in Siberia having to go through underserved punishment. During the first day of our arrival Leya and I went to Shakai and Prenai and saw terrible pits in the area where our kin was executed.

We had to live. I started looking for a job. Nobody wanted to employ me as I did not have a place to live and no Kaunas residence registration document [10](#). It was written in my documents that I was permitted to live in Kaunas, but nevertheless they did not want to register me. My sister and I had to go to many officials to have me registered. I found a job before I got the registration. I went to work as a waitress in the restaurant. It was the only place where one could be employed without having residence registration. The work was very hard. I had to carry heavy trays with plates all day long, but in those hard starvation times the opportunity to eat at the restaurant kitchen made up for all other trouble. I even managed to bring some food home for Leya.

In fall Leya married Vilnius Jew Moshe Finkelstein. I stayed in a tiny room by myself. In couple of days after Leya's departure, I saw Shakalis at the table in the restaurant. He was the person who took me in evacuation, whom I actually owed my life. When I finished working, he saw me off home and told about himself. He was in the lines and captures. His wife having received the

message that he had disappeared, married a Russian officer right away. When Shakalis came back in Lithuania after war, he wrote a letter to her. Former wife wrote that she was happy in her second marriage and asked him not to disturb her anymore. Shakalis overcame all those hardships very bravely. We made friends again, but there was no way we could have close relationship. I respected my former director, but he was much older than me. In a while Shakalis found a match. He married a pretty Lithuanian lady and had lived with her in Kaunas for many years. When we met he said that he was not pleased that I was working as a waitress. At that time that job was considered almost disgraceful, but I paid no attention to his reproaches.

Shortly after meeting with Shakalis I met my future husband. We were introduced to each other by former inhabitant of Shakai, my father's pal. He took the guy in the restaurant where he was watching me. When we got acquainted, we felt warm feeling towards each other right away. On the first night my new acquaintance saw me off home, but being a decent girl I did not ask him in. We had stayed on the threshold for a long time. We went for a walk and told each other about ourselves. His name was Kalmin Zak. He was born in 1925 in Shakai, which is not far from Shaulai, Kalmin's father died from peritonitis long before the outbreak of war. He had a fit of appendicitis, and was not operated on time. His mother remained by herself with 12 children. Of course, I do not know their names. All I know that there were 11 sons and 1 daughter. All of them but Kalmin were shot in occupation. He managed to hide in the shed. He saw mother and his siblings taken outside. Later on Kalmin happened to be in ghetto, where from he was sent in concentration camp in Germany. He was lucky to survive. When he came in USSR, he was sent in the remote area of Russian, where he was involved in construction. It was hard for him to get out of there, but still he managed to come back to his motherland, Lithuania, where nobody was waiting for him. Our fates were alike. I was also lonely. Kalmin and I started seeing each other. I was very strict, I did not let him kiss me or even touch my hand. We had several dates and Kalmin proposed to me and we got married shortly. He bought wedding rings and Leya made a dress for me, we I put on for marriage registration ceremony. I took my husband's name. Later on when I was getting a new passport, the lady who was issuing it, made a mistake and my last name as Jakiene, not Zakene. Thus my last name is Jakiene.

Both of us were raised Jewish and decided to get wed according to Jewish tradition. Kalmin and I were wed in chuppah in Kaunas synagogue. Before that I dipped in mikvah. In postwar times we were one of the few couples who were brave enough. Unfortunately, I have not save the certificate issued by rabbi. We had a wedding party at home, where my sister Leya and her husband, some distant relative of my husband and a pal who introduced us, were present.

We were a family. Soon I got pregnant and my husband insisted that I should leave my work. I became a housewife since that time. My Kalmin was an ordinary worker. He worked for glazer's shop. In soviet times he made pretty good money. Kalmin was a very kind person. He always gave me his salary and never asked me to report to him. I was rather economical and we lived comfortably. We had not lived for long in my small room. Soon, my pals helped us get a small apartment in the old part of the city. Later on, in the 1970s, the house was demolished and we were given the apartment in the district where we are still living. We hung it together with my husband. In summer we rented a dacha either in Palanga or in Prenai. We also went to the resorts, e.g. to Druskenkai, where we had mineral water. We had never owned a dacha. Husband bought a car in the early 1960s and we went on vacation by car. We almost did not go to the theaters. I

enjoyed reading. I read a lot of books of Russian classics, Jewish and European authors.

In 1947 I gave birth to an elder son, whom I named Iakov. In 1952 our second son was born. We named him Gerts after my father. We had a very good living. My husband and I managed to preserve a true Jewish spirit, which was raised in us. Yiddish was spoken at home and our boys got to know their mother tongue since childhood. We also tried to keep Jewish traditions the best way we could, though it was very hard in soviet times. I tried observing kashrut- at any rate I never mixed milk and meat food, never had pork at home. I failed to observe Sabbath, as Saturday was a working day- Kalmin had to work, boys had to go to school. I tried not to do anything on Saturday though- no laundry, cleaning. We marked holidays- Pesach, Rosh Hashanah, Shaveot, Simchat Torah the way it was done in grandmother's house. Husband and I obligatorily attended synagogue on holidays. We were the members of Kaunas Jewish religious community. We raised our children Jewish- both of them went through britmilah, bar mitzvah at the age of 13. They identified themselves as Jews since childhood. We told our children how their ancestors died, and Jewish tragedy at Great Patriotic War, we always took them to the place where their relatives were executed.

Our family was not interested in politics. Neither I, nor Kalmin, were the members of communist party, or komsomol. Our children Jakov and Gerts did not want to join pioneer organization [11](#), or komsomol. Of course, all of us were aware of the things going on in the country Stalin's death in 1953 was like the death of the tyrant. Kalmin must have understood it and I was influenced by his opinion. We also knew about doctor's plot [12](#), and persecution of the Jews. We personally were not affected by that, but still we were worried for our tribesmen. I remember we were happy when the state of Israel was founded and we followed the events taking place there and rejoiced in their victories. We were not thinking of immigration though. All was fine in our life. Nobody hurt us. We had our rights and we felt ourselves at home. Besides, best is the enemy of the good.

My elder son Yakov finished school with straight excellent marks. Then he served in the army in Riga. That period of his life was hard, but not only because of the anti-Semitism and imparity for the juniors, he was simply not very used to the strict discipline. Then he finished Kaunas economic institute and became an economist. Jakov married Jewish girl Rita. In 1971 he and his wife left for Israe. He found a job of the economist. He is working at the military plant from dawn till night, but he feels happy. My grandson Arnold was born in Israel in 1980. Rena became a writer in Israel. I have not read her works, but I know that she is rather famous. I do not know what Arnold does for a living. In Jakov's words he is fond of music. They live in Tel Aviv. Jakov and his family observe Jewish traditions, go to the synagogue.

My younger son Gerts is also truly Jewish. He married a Jewish lady Eugenia. She is a music critic. She loves her job. She goes to the theatres, concerts. Recently Gerts exchanged his apartment to live in one building with me. Gerts has a sport education. He graduated from Kaunas sport institute. He is a football referee now. His children- 19-year old Ari, and 13-old Dova, Gerts raises Jewish. Both of them were circumcised on the 8th day. The also went through bar mitzvah. Now Gerts is the chairman of the Jewish community in Kaunas and the chairman of Jewish charity organization, which helps elderly and feeble Jews in those hard times. Gerts is trying to observe kashrut., to mark all Jewish holidays in accordance with the tradition.

My lovely Kalmin had a heart trouble that was the reason why he could not go to Israel. We could not visit Jakov as the doctors said that Kalmin would not survive the flight and climate change. In 1995 my husband died at the age of 70. We postponed the funerals for several days as we were waiting for our son to come from Israel. He was buried, when Jakov arrival. Kalmin was taken to the synagogue, where our close people and friends said good-bye to him. Rabbi read a prayer and he was buried in accordance with the Jewish rites. There is a place for next to my husband's grave at the cemetery.

I am by myself since then. My sister Leya became a widow in 1980s. Now her health is very poor. She is living in Vilnius with Arnold. We cannot talk on the phone often, as it costs a lot of money, but still we keep in touch and know what is happening with each other. My brother Meishe, who in early 50s came back from the camp, settled with us. In a while he married a Jewish lady Sarah. They had two children- Channa and Shloime. Unfortunately, ghetto, then soviet prison and camp undermined my brothers' health and he died in 1975. His elder daughter Channa is living in America and son Shloime is living in Kaunas with Sarah. We meet with them on Jewish holidays at my place. My son with his family also come to me on holidays to communicate with me. I try to cook delicious Jewish food the way it was done by my grandmother.

I did not feel any joy out of breakup of the Soviet Union, we had never felt bad attitude to us, at work and in other situations. My sons did not complain of being reproached either. Now Lithuania regained independence [12](#). I think now the life is tougher - people are not pleased, finding fault with each other - Lithuanians are not happy with Russians, Russians- with Jews. All kinds of neo-fascist organizations are emerging. The life became harder. The medicine, utilities, education have become expensive. We got used that all of that was free. During Soviet times it was easier to get by with the pension we were paid, but now the old people cut and contrive having nobody to help them.

Now I get a small social pension as I did not work. I get 233 litas (editor's note.: about 90 USD). But I am not needy as my sons are helping me, Jakov helps me with money and Gerts physically and morally, he impaired his health because of him. I had five infarctions Recently, I have spent three weeks in two hospitals. He comes to me three times a day to fall in drops in my eyes as I have glaucoma and cataract. He is the best sitter in the world. He does laundry and cleaning, buys medicine, goes shopping. I do not know what I would do without him. I am trying to be the best friend for him. I asks me for advice and it is important for me to be useful for him in some way. Jewish community is also helping me. The nurse looks after me. They give me some money for the medicine, give me products. When I felt better, I went to the community for all kinds of events, holidays, meetings with interesting people. I used the library. I do not go anywhere over the past three years as I am sick, but I am not forgotten. Now before Rosh Hashanah I got a greeting card from the community and a basket with food. Soon there would be Yom Kippur, the day when the fate of all Jews for the coming year would be decided. Now I am not fasting as I am sick, but still on that day I will ask God to give wellbeing and health to my children and grandchildren. I will also ask to prolong my life as I know that my son will feel bad without me.

## **GLOSSARY:**

## **1 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.

## **2 Tsimes**

Stew made usually of carrots, parsnips, or plums with potatoes.

## **3 Revisionist Zionism**

The movement founded in 1925 and led by Vladimir Jabotinsky advocated the revision of the principles of Political Zionism developed by Theodor Herzl, the father of Zionism. The main goals of the Revisionists was to put pressure on Great Britain for a Jewish statehood on both banks of the Jordan River, a Jewish majority in Palestine, the reestablishment of the Jewish regiments, and military training for the youth. The Revisionist Zionists formed the core of what became the Herut (Freedom) Party after the Israeli independence. This party subsequently became the central component of the Likud Party, the largest right-wing Israeli party since the 1970s.

## **4 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.

## **5 Soviet Army**

The armed forces of the Soviet Union, originally called Red Army and renamed Soviet Army in February 1946. After the Bolsheviks came to power, in November 1917, they commenced to organize the squads of worker's army, called Red Guards, where workers and peasants were recruited on voluntary bases. The commanders were either selected from among the former tsarist officers and soldiers or appointed directly by the Military and Revolutionary Committee of the Communist Party. In early 1918 the Bolshevik government issued a decree on the establishment of the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army and mandatory drafting was introduced for men between 18 and 40. In 1918 the total number of draftees was 100 thousand officers and 1.2 million soldiers. Military schools and academies training the officers were restored. In 1925 the law on compulsory military service was adopted and annual drafting was established. The term of service was established as follows: for the Red Guards- 2 years, for junior officers of aviation and fleet- 3 years,

for medium and senior officers- 25 years. People of exploiter classes (former noblemen, merchants, officers of the tsarist army, priest, factory owner, etc. and their children) as well as kulaks (rich peasants) and cossacks were not drafted in the army. The law as of 1939 cancelled restriction on drafting of men belonging to certain classes, students were not drafted but went through military training in their educational institutions. On the 22nd June 1941 Great Patriotic War was unleashed and the drafting in the army became exclusively compulsory. First, in June-July 1941 general and complete mobilization of men was carried out as well as partial mobilization of women. Then annual drafting of men, who turned 18, was commenced. When WWII was over, the Red Army amounted to over 11 million people and the demobilization process commenced. By the beginning of 1948 the Soviet Army had been downsized to 2 million 874 thousand people. The youth of drafting age were sent to the restoration works in mines, heavy industrial enterprises, and construction sites. In 1949 a new law on general military duty was adopted, according to which service term in ground troops and aviation was 3 years and in navy- 4 years. Young people with secondary education, both civilian and military, with the age range of 17-23 were admitted in military schools for officers. In 1968 the term of the army service was contracted to 2 years in ground troops and in the navy to 3 years. That system of army recruitment has remained without considerable changes until the breakup of the Soviet Army (1991-93).

## **6 Occupation of the Baltic Republics (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania)**

Although the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact regarded only Latvia and Estonia as parts of the Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, according to a supplementary protocol (signed in 28th September 1939) most of Lithuania was also transferred under the Soviets. The three states were forced to sign the 'Pact of Defense and Mutual Assistance' with the USSR allowing it to station troops in their territories. In June 1940 Moscow issued an ultimatum demanding the change of governments and the occupation of the Baltic Republics. The three states were incorporated into the Soviet Union as the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republics.

## **7 Deportations from the Baltics (1940-1953)**

After the Soviet Union occupied the three Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) in June 1940 as a part of establishing the Soviet system, mass deportation of the local population began. The victims of these were mainly but not exclusively those unwanted by the regime: the local bourgeoisie and the previously politically active strata. Deportations to remote parts of the Soviet Union continued up until the death of Stalin. The first major wave of deportation took place between 11th and 14th June 1941, when 36,000, mostly politically active people were deported. Deportations were reintroduced after the Soviet Army recaptured the three countries from Nazi Germany in 1944. Partisan fights against the Soviet occupiers were going on all up to 1956, when the last squad was eliminated. Between June 1948 and January 1950, in accordance with a Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the USSR under the pretext of 'grossly dodged from labor activity in the agricultural field and led anti-social and parasitic mode of life' from Latvia 52,541, from Lithuania 118,599 and from Estonai 32,450 people were deported. The total number of deportees from the three republics amounted to 203,590. Among them were entire Lithuanian families of different social strata (peasants, workers, intelligentsia), everybody who was able to reject or deemed capable to reject the regime. Most of the exiled died in the foreign land. Besides, about 100,000 people were killed in action and in fusillade for being members of partisan squads and some other 100,000 were sentenced to 25 years in camps.

## **8 Collective farm (in Russian kolkhoz)**

In the Soviet Union the policy of gradual and voluntary collectivization of agriculture was adopted in 1927 to encourage food production while freeing labor and capital for industrial development. In 1929, with only 4% of farms in kolkhozes, Stalin ordered the confiscation of peasants' land, tools, and animals; the kolkhoz replaced the family farm.

## **9 Kaunas ghetto**

On 24th June 1941 the Germans captured Kaunas. Two ghettos were established in the city, a small and a big one, and 48,000 Jews were taken there. Within two and a half months the small ghetto was eliminated and during the 'Grossaktion' of 28th-29th October, thousands of the survivors were murdered, including children. The remaining 17,412 people in the big ghetto were mobilized to work. On 27th-28th March 1944 another 18,000 were killed and 4,000 were taken to different camps in July before the Soviet Army captured the city. The total number of people who perished in the Kaunas ghetto was 35,000.

## **10 Residence permit**

The Soviet authorities restricted freedom of travel within the USSR through the residence permit and kept everybody's whereabouts under control. Every individual in the USSR needed residential registration; this was a stamp in the passport giving the permanent address of the individual. It was impossible to find a job, or even to travel within the country, without such a stamp. In order to register at somebody else's apartment one had to be a close relative and if each resident of the apartment had at least 8 square meters to themselves.

## **11 All-Union pioneer organization**

a communist organization for teenagers between 10 and 15 years old (cf: boy-/girlscouts in the US). The organization aimed at educating the young generation in accordance with the communist ideals, preparing pioneers to become members of the Komsomol and later the Communist Party. In the Soviet Union, all teenagers were pioneers.

## **12 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.

## **12 Reestablishment of the Lithuanian Republic**

On 11th March 1990 the Lithuanian State Assembly declared Lithuania an independent republic.

The Soviet leadership in Moscow refused to acknowledge the independence of Lithuania and initiated an economic blockade on the country. At the referendum held in February 1991, over 90 percent of the participants (turn out was 84 percent) voted for independence. The western world finally recognized Lithuanian independence and so did the USSR on 6th September 1991. On 17th September 1991 Lithuania joined the United Nations.