

# Anna Ivankovitser

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Chernovtsy

Ukraine

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Date of interview: June 2002

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## My family background

My name is Anna Ivankovitser. I was born in the Jewish town of Shargorod, in Vinnitsa province, on 30th December 1930. My father's name was Iosif Ivankovitser. My mother's name was Mina Ivankovitser [nee Schigol].

My father was born in the village of Dubrovka, in Zhytomir province, in 1895. The only thing I know about his mother is that she died of a disease in the 1900s, when my father was a young boy. He didn't remember his mother, and so I know nothing about her. I knew my grandfather Israil Ivankovitser. He was born in Dubrovka in the 1870s. He was always reading the Talmud. My grandfather had a beard and payes and wore a kippah. When going out he put on a hat. He always wore black clothes, even when it was hot outside. I don't know what he did for a living. He had 3 children. My father's younger sister Freidl was single and lived with us in Shargorod at one time. She moved to Polonoye before the war. She didn't evacuate during the war and the Germans killed her. My father's older brother lived in Poland. He settled down in Cracow when it still belonged to tsarist Russia. After the Revolution of 1917 [1](#) Poland became a foreign country. I didn't know my uncle, because during the Soviet era it was not safe to keep in touch with relatives who were living abroad. He may have perished during the war. My father's youngest brother died when he was young. He had heart problems.

My grandfather didn't remarry after his wife's death. He was very religious and gave his children a religious education. My father and his brothers studied in cheder. They spoke Yiddish in the family. The family observed Jewish traditions and celebrated the Sabbath and all the Jewish holidays. My grandfather went to synagogue in Dubrovka every day. He died around 1925. Half of the inhabitants in Dubrovka were Jewish. The population of the town was Russian and Ukrainian. It was a small town and people knew each other. People in Dubrovka lived like good neighbors; they treated each other with respect and supported one another. There was a square in town and the



main buildings of the town were located there. They were a church, a synagogue and a market. That is all I know about the life of my father's family in Dubrovka. Regretfully, I didn't take any interest in the history of the family while my parents were alive. Only later did I regret that I didn't do so at that time.

My father was recruited into to the tsarist army during World War I. He was captured by the Germans. He told me later that the Germans treated prisoners-of-war well. I don't know where they were kept, but I know it wasn't in Russia. There was a rabbi in the camp and they celebrated all the Jewish holidays. The local Jewish families used to invite the captives to join them for celebrations. The Germans were very good to all the captives. I believe all of them could observe their own religion. What my father told me helped me understand why members of the older generation, like my father, refused to evacuate during World War II. They trusted the Germans.

My mother was born in Polonoye, in Khmel'nitskiy province, in 1900. My mother's father, Iosif Schigol, was born in Polonoye in the 1860s. He died in 1927, before I was born. I knew my mother's mother, Leya Schigol, who was born in Polonoye in 1862. I don't know her maiden name. My grandmother told me that she was the only daughter in her family. Her mother died in childbirth. Her father didn't remarry and spent all his time with his daughter who looked very much like her mother. My grandmother's father called her Mamele [mummy in Yiddish], and she was called so for the rest of her life. Even our neighbors in Shargorod called her Mamele.

My grandfather was a construction materials supplier. I don't know exactly what he supplied, something like bricks, wood, nails, cement, and so on, to landlords. He built a good brick house for his family. It was a big house. Theirs was a wealthy family. Their daughters and sons had rooms, there was their parents' bedroom, my grandfather's study, a dining-room and a living- room, besides a kitchen and bathroom and storerooms. They had good solid furniture. It wasn't posh, but they had all they needed: chairs, tables, beautiful wooden wardrobes and chests of drawers. They had books I believe they were mostly religious books in Yiddish. They also had classical world literature in Yiddish.

My grandmother was a housewife, as was traditional at that time. She also had a housemaid to help her about the house. There was a big orchard in the backyard and a flower garden in front of the house. My grandmother kept a cow. My mother told me that had all the dairy products were made at home.

My mother's parents were very religious. My grandfather and grandmother went to synagogue at least once a week, and they prayed at each meal, in the morning and before going to bed. There was a big choral and two or three smaller synagogues in Polonoye. My grandmother always went out wearing a wig. She wore it at home, too. She had long, beautiful silk and velvet gowns. She also wore a golden Magen David around her neck. My grandfather wore a black jacket and a hat. At home he wore a yarmulka on his head. He had a small beard. They always celebrated the Sabbath at home. My grandmother lit candles and cooked a festive dinner. My grandfather read a prayer. I don't remember them singing. My grandmother strictly followed the laws of kashrut. They celebrated all the Jewish holidays. At Pesach they bought matzah, made stuffed fish, chicken, goose cracklings and stuffed chicken necks. They baked strudels with jam, nuts and raisins, sponge cake from matzah flour and special Pesach cookies. All the adults and children over 11 fasted on Yom Kippur. There was Chanukkah gelt at Chanukkah and concerts of klezmer musicians at Purim.

They celebrated some other holidays, too, but I don't remember which ones. They spoke Yiddish in the family, and they knew Russian and Ukrainian very well.

My grandmother gave birth to 12 children, six of which died in infancy. The surviving children were three daughters and three sons. Their oldest daughter, Esther, was born in 1890. Etl was born in 1892. The next two were sons: Gershl, born in 1894, and another boy, born in 1895. My mother, Mina, was born in 1897 and the youngest child, Motl, was born in 1900.

The boys went to cheder and the girls must have been taught at home. My mother knew Hebrew well and she could read and write both in Hebrew and Yiddish. All of the children received religious and secular education as well. My mother and her brothers and sisters finished an 8-year grammar school. My mother always helped us with our geography and history homework. She also knew Russian, Jewish and German literature well.

My mother's sisters moved to America before the Revolution of 1917. Esther was the first to go. She was a communist and was involved in revolutionary activities. The police department became aware of this. My grandfather had acquaintances there and was told confidentially that they were going to arrest Esther. My grandfather told Esther to escape to America. She left in 1915. Esther married a Jewish man in America. I don't remember his name. He was an engineer. Esther was very good at embroidery. We had a few collars that she embroidered. But she didn't like housework and her husband did everything about the house, which he didn't mind at all. They had two daughters and a son named Erik. I don't remember their daughters' names. They lived in California.

Etl followed her to California about a year later. She was a professional photographer. Etl's fiancé had left with Esther and was waiting for Etl to join him. He became a farmer and they specialized in egg production. They had two daughters. I don't remember their names. They graduated from university and became professors in oceanology. Etl wanted her parents to come to America. She wrote them that she would send them an invitation. My grandfather didn't want to go. He didn't know what he would do there. They wrote to one another before the war. I still have Etl's letters to her mother in Yiddish.

Esther visited the USSR twice at the invitation of the Comintern [Communist International]. She came on her first visit in 1925. She came with her family and we met Esther's husband and children. Her second visit was to Moscow in 1938. She went with Erik. They lived at the Moskva hotel. Esther's son couldn't adjust to the cold climate. He fell ill and died in Moscow. My mother visited Esther in Moscow. Esther didn't visit us. During the war we heard no news from Esther. We thought she had gone back to America. After the war Mama wrote Etl from Chernovtsy to ask her if she knew Esther's address in America. Etl wrote back telling us that Esther returned to America in 1945 after the war was over. I don't know why she stayed in Moscow so long, because we didn't know anything about her. Mama didn't write them any more, because the relationship with Americans were more complicated after the war and it was not wise to correspond. My sister had just entered the Medical Institute and my mother was afraid that she might be expelled if the authorities found out about our relatives in America. Later, during the 'thaw' of the 1960s Mama wrote a letter to her sisters in America. The letter was returned indicating that the addressee had moved. Her sisters probably died of old age and their children went to different locations. I also tried to search for them but with no results.

After finishing grammar school in 1916 my mother also wanted to go to America, but it wasn't easy. Mama went to Warsaw, Poland, hoping that it would be easier to leave for America from there. She told me how beautiful Warsaw was. My father was in Warsaw at that time and my parents met. They decided to go to America together. My mother's sisters even sent them boat tickets. I don't remember what exactly happened, but they couldn't leave. They stayed in Poland for some time and then returned to Ukraine.

Before and after the Revolution of 1917 Petliura's [2](#) gangs attacked towns and villages. They didn't kill people, but robbed them. They would beat or threaten people, but in all this time they didn't kill anybody in Polonoye. This town was lucky in this respect, because Jews were killed in other towns. Polonoye was a small town with a population of 1,000 at most. Before the war, Jews had no conflicts with the Ukrainian and Polish population. In 1941 the entire Jewish population was exterminated. Since then there have been no Jews in this village. The Revolution of 1917 had no impact on the way of life in Polonoye. There were communists among the poorer people in Polonoye, but they didn't make any difference in the general pace of life of the town.

My parents married in 1921. I don't know whether they had a wedding party. It was a difficult time in the country. By that time my mother's brothers got married and left their parents' house. Gershl and another brother lived in their own houses in Polonoye. Motl, the youngest, moved to Murafa and worked at the mill there. My grandparents remained alone in their house. They wanted to have at least one of their children living with them. My parents settled down at my mother's parents' house. Mama told me that my grandmother did the housekeeping and wouldn't allow my mother to do anything around the house. She told her that she would have her share of housework in her life and she might as well take some rest while she could afford it. My sister Maria was born in Polonoye in 1925.

My grandfather began to have problems in 1925. Everybody in the village knew that he had money. State security officers were beginning to take away valuables from wealthy people. They summoned my grandfather to the committee and demanded that he gave them his gold. My grandfather was scared and gave them all he had. Mama kept only a few pieces of jewelry that she had received as her wedding gift from her father. Anyway, this committee didn't leave him alone. The local communists who had become state security officers constantly persecuted my grandfather. They knocked on the windows and doors at night shouting for my grandfather to give away the gold that he had stolen from the people. He kept telling them that he had nothing left, but in vain. They called him to the committee almost every week. Once, they arrested him and kept him in a cell for over a week. Then they let him go, offering no explanation. My grandfather had a poor heart and every such visit ended in a heart attack. He was living in constant tension. They threatened to send him into exile or shoot him 'accidentally' in the street. My grandfather Iosif died from a myocardial infarction in 1927, after another visit to the state security committee office. He never tried to leave his own town. He believed he was innocent and didn't owe anything to the authorities after he had given away all he had. He was hoping that they would leave him alone one day.

## Growing up

In 1927 my parents and sister moved to Shargorod. People living in villages didn't have passports at that time. This means they didn't have the right to vote. Without a passport they couldn't get a

job. This meant that they could only be employed in farming. This law was issued by the Soviet authorities in order to tie miserably poor villagers to the land and force them to work at collective farms [3](#) like slaves, leaving them no opportunity to move to towns. At that time poor people had all priorities with the Soviet power. They were nominated to all the highest positions. My father didn't come from a wealthy family. He had a cousin named Shimon who came from a very poor family. Shimon was a communist and a party leader in Vinnitsa. He suggested that my parents move to Shargorod, in Vinnitsa province. My father was an intelligent man, and Shimon helped him get a position as director of a food store. My father never became a member of any political party or movement and tried to stay away from politics. Mama helped my father with his work. When I was born Mama left work and became a housewife.

We rented an apartment in a very beautiful house in Shargorod. There were wall and ceiling paintings in the rooms. The landlord was a handsome old man, a Jew. His last name was Kipel. The landlord and his family lived in one apartment and the rest he leased out. Our apartment had two rooms, a hallway and a kitchen. It faced the yard. There was a shoe shop in two other rooms in the building. Kipel had a wife and a son. His son was married. Kipel's wife was a teacher at the Jewish school before the war. We were friends with that family. After the war I visited them in Shargorod.

My father and mother lived in the bigger room and my sister and I occupied the smaller one. We had a leather sofa with a high back that my parents brought from Polonoye. My sister and I slept on it.

There was a Russian stove [4](#) in the kitchen that we used for baking bread. We had ceramic pots in which to cook food. There was no running water in the house. At first, water was supplied by a cart with water barrel, but later they installed a water pump near the house. There was a heating stove to heat the rooms. It was built into the wall between the rooms and was made of beautiful patterned bricks.

Mama often took me with her to the market to do the shopping. We bought only cereals, tea and bread at the store. The rest we bought at the market. I remember seeing long wooden stands full of apples, cherries and apricots. I always liked the bright, festive colors. The unit of measurement was a bucket: a bucket of potatoes, a bucket of apples. Mama bought meat and dairy products at the market. All the butchers were Jews, and the local Ukrainian farmers sold vegetables, fruit and dairy products. Mama also bought chickens and took them to the shochet. There was a Jew who sold ducks and geese killed by the shochet, and Mama always bought these from him. I also remember pieces of butter, wrapped in big burdock leaves. The bright yellow rolls of butter were like flowers on the big green leaves. At home Mama kept butter in a bucket of cold water. There were no fridges and the food was stored in cellars. Every day housewives went to the market in the morning to buy food for the day.

## **My school years**

In 1933 my sister began attending a Ukrainian school in Shargorod. In 1938 I went to the first grade at the same school. I don't know why our parents decided to send us to the Ukrainian school when there was a Jewish school in Shargorod before the war. We studied arithmetic, Ukrainian language and literature, calligraphy (I didn't like it) and had singing and dancing classes and physical education. Our teacher for all subjects except singing and dancing was named Voitovich.

There were quite a few Jews among the children and teachers at school. Shargorod was a Jewish town. The population in the central part of the town was Jewish. Ukrainians lived on the outskirts of the town. The secretary of the district committee of the CPSU [Communist Party of the Soviet Union] in Shargorod was a Jew, and all the officials in the town were Jews. There was no anti-Semitism in Shargorod.

People spoke Ukrainian in town, but we spoke Yiddish at home. Many Ukrainians spoke fluent Yiddish in Shargorod. My sister and I studied at the Ukrainian school and knew Ukrainian well.

I became a Young Octobrist [5](#) at school. We had different club activities after classes. I went to meetings of the literature club, played the balalaika in the orchestra and went dancing. I loved to dance the gopak, a Ukrainian folk dance. We even performed concerts in the neighboring village of Sosnovka. Before we finished the 3rd grade a few of the best Young Octobrists, including me, became pioneers. I remember feeling proud of becoming a pioneer. Mama was very ill at that time. She had polyarthritis and was confined to bed for half a year. Papa got her a ticket to the recreation home and she was cured there.

In 1932 and 1933 there was a serious famine in Ukraine [6](#). My mother's golden jewelry, her wedding gift from her father Isosif saved us from starving to death. We could go to Torgsin stores [7](#) where one could buy food for currency or gold. Mama left all her jewelry in the Torgsin in exchange for cereals, flour or butter. Mama baked our bread herself. The famine was not so visible in the bigger towns, but many people suffered from hunger in the country.

After the Revolution the Soviet authorities started a struggle against religion [8](#). They closed many churches and also closed the synagogue in Shargorod. I remember the scarlet poster that said 'Religion is the opium of the people!' hanging on the closed church in Shargorod. Quite a few mocked believers, calling them retrograde. After moving to Shargorod my parents didn't observe Jewish traditions as strictly as they used to before. Mama didn't light candles on Sabbath, but she made challah and stuffed fish for Sabbath dinner. She didn't quite follow the kashrut then, either. Mama always cooked traditional food at Pesach. I cook more or less the same way my mother did. We had stuffed fish, chicken broth with dumplings and eggs, chicken necks stuffed with liver, and strudels. As the synagogue was closed, a Jewish family made matzah. They had a wheel to make little holes in the matzah. They were invited into homes to make matzah. Jews continued to live their customary lives even if they were afraid of persecution by the authorities. We didn't have any relatives in Shargorod, so we celebrated Pesach just by ourselves.

In the summer my sister and I visited grandmother Leya in Polonoye. I remember having evening tea parties at grandmother's long table with a samovar on it. We had tea and jam and our grandmother told us stories from the Bible in Yiddish. My grandmother told these stories in a very nice manner, as if she were talking about somebody she knew well and loved a lot. She animated the Biblical characters for us.

My parents had a few Jewish friends. My sister and I also had friends among the school children and neighbors. They were mostly Jews. However, we also had Ukrainian friends. My sister's classmate Gorbenko, a Ukrainian, often came to our home. During the war he brought food for us to the ghetto. There was no anti-Semitism before the war. I believe that if there were any expressions of anti-Semitism before the war, they would elicit nothing but surprise or bewilderment, so strange would they seem.

Grandmother Leya used to stay with us during the winter. Her visits were always very much welcomed. We loved her dearly and she loved us. My grandmother told us episodes from Jewish history. I can still remember the story she told us about how Joseph was captured and held in a pit. My grandmother could read Yiddish. It was not very common at that time. Most Jews had no education. Our neighbors in Shargorod liked to come to grandmother's house, and she would read the Bible to them in Yiddish - both Jews and Ukrainians understood and could speak Yiddish. My grandmother knew all the prayers. She prayed at home daily. During the Soviet era my mother did not follow the kashrut and my grandmother visited us with her own kosher pot and plate. She cooked her own food and called my sister and me to help her eat it. She was very nice. She didn't wear a wig in those years. She covered her gray hair with a little shawl. She was still beautiful even in old age. She wore beautiful clothes. I remember she had a nice black suit. During the war we exchanged my grandmother's clothes for food.

In 1940 our grandmother moved in with us. She was ill at that time. She died in 1941. Later, my mother said that the Lord felt sorry for our grandmother and spared her from all the horrors that we had to live through. My grandmother's funeral was in accordance with Jewish traditions. She was wrapped in a white cerement, a takhrikhim [shrouds] in Yiddish, on the floor. Everybody sat on the floor mourning over her. The rabbi of Shargorod recited the Kaddish over my grandmother's grave. We installed a Jewish monument of granite wood over her grave. I went to Shargorod 15 years ago and saw that her grave and monument were still there.

The arrests began in 1936. [The interviewee is referring to the so-called Great Terror.] [9](#) They lasted until the war. They usually came for people at night. When we heard loud knocking on a door, we knew that they came for someone. Our family did not suffer from the arrests. Nobody in Shargorod knew anything about our 'criminal' bourgeois past. My father was much respected in Shargorod. Well, as they say, the Lord was merciful to us.

### **During the war**

I can't remember how we learned that Hitler came to power in Germany or about the 'Crystal Night' and the persecution of Jews. Perhaps it was from newspapers, because we didn't have a radio. I remember the films *The Oppenheim Family* and *Professor Mamlock* [10](#). It was stiffening to watch them, but the events seemed so far away from us. Nobody thought that all these horrors would be a reflection on our future. I was still a child, though. Perhaps adults had a different conception of it, I don't know.

I remember 22nd June 1941, the first day of the war. There was a radio near our house in the central street. At noon we heard the Molotov's [11](#) speech, in which he announced that Germany had traitorously attacked the USSR. At first, we didn't quite understand what it was all about. Our mother kept crying and our neighbor, a teacher from the Jewish school, told her that the war wouldn't last long and that in a few weeks our army would be in Germany. Many people thought so then.

We were late getting evacuated, because our father was not allowed to leave his work before all food products in Shargorod were sold out or delivered to storage facilities. My father was doing the inventory at the last store in Shargorod when he was told that the Department of Commerce and all the officials had left. My father opened the door, and crowds of people instantly snapped up everything in there. Shargorod was far from the railroad. The nearest railway station was located

100 km from there, in Zhmerynka. My father got a horse and cart. My mother packed whatever few things she could and we left. We didn't get far. The Germans were about 5 km from Shargorod. We had to go back home, and after a few days the Germans occupied the town. The town was bombed once during this time. There were no strategic facilities in town. People still lived in fear. We heard the roar of the war. The Germans came to town quietly at night. One of their military units stayed in Shargorod for about a month. Germans were walking the streets with whips in hand, and the townspeople hid in their houses.

Shargorod became a Jewish ghetto. The Germans placed Jews from other locations in our houses. Another family was living in one of our rooms. Most people came to Shargorod on foot. There were a few wealthy families from Mohilev-Podolsk or Chernovtsy who paid a lot of money to come by train. In some of the rooms in our building there were 15-20 people sleeping on plank beds. They cooked on self-made steel stoves. We also had a stove. We used sunflower husks to make fires. We baked small pieces of potatoes on the stove. It was the best delicacy for us. We fetched water from a rather far away well.

Several streets in Shargorod were fenced to prevent people from going out. We were not allowed to walk out of the ghetto or to speak to people outside the ghetto. We were even afraid to meet a German soldier in the streets of the ghetto. We elected a Jewish council of older people. The Germans were giving orders, collecting people for work, and collecting money through the council. We were lucky, so to say, with our ghetto. There were no mass shootings in our ghetto.

When the Germans left Shargorod, a Romanian unit came to replace them. Life was easier with them. They didn't kill or punish people; they just watched that things were in order, and that we followed the instructions that they received from their German commanders. I can't say that they treated us nicely, but they did not hate us so vehemently and they weren't as cruel as the Germans. They liked bribes, money and gifts. One Romanian soldier even had a Jewish lover in the ghetto.

The Jewish population in the ghetto increased several times. Between 4 and 22 people were living in one room. I think that initially there were 2,000 to 2,500 people living in the ghetto in Shargorod. People were dying like flies. There were dead people lying in the streets. The first winter in the ghetto was extremely cold. People had no clothes or shoes and died from cold, starvation and infectious diseases. The dead were taken away to be buried somewhere to prevent spreading infections. My mother fell ill with typhoid. There were no doctors or medications in the ghetto. The only treatment available was an attempt to take down the fever. When there was no ice available, people wrapped the sick in a cold wet sheet. Mama had spotted fever, but nobody else in our family got the infection. Spotted fever is spread by lice, and so we tried to keep ourselves clean. I was covered with furuncles from lack of food and beriberi. There were many on my head, and my hair had to be cut.

We got food by exchanging whatever goods we had. Rich Jews from Chernovtsy came with suitcases full of goods, and they didn't starve. The poor ones were starving to death. The Romanians allowed farmers to come to the ghetto for a small bribe: a few apples or a dozen eggs. People from the ghetto were lining up to exchange whatever they had for a piece of bread or some flour and potatoes.



There was no school in the ghetto, but we were children and wanted to spend time with one another. There were Jewish boys from Bukovina in the ghetto. They could speak only German. We girls found a woman who spoke German and took classes from her. I don't remember how much we paid her, but we got German classes. My sister and I spoke almost fluent German and could talk with these Jewish boys from Bukovina. One of them played the saxophone. We got together to listen to him play. My sister Maria had many friends in the ghetto, all of them older than I. They had school textbooks, and the older children taught the younger ones. We studied and entertained ourselves with singing and dancing. My sister had a Ukrainian classmate. His last name was Gorbenko. He often came to the ghetto to spend time with us. We were not allowed to leave the ghetto, but he could come in to bring us food. We had a record player and listened to music and kissed. Whatever the times, young people are the same. We celebrated Pesach in the ghetto. There was a rabbi who came from Bukovina. He read the Pesach prayer. [The interviewee probably refers to the Pesach Haggadah.] We made matzah and that was the only traditional food that we could have. Of course this matzah was far from authentic matzah, but so was our life in the ghetto.

In April 1944 the Soviet army liberated us. The population of the ghetto was half of what it had been three years before. The war lasted for another year. We had to think of our future. We had no food or money. There were a few families from Chernovtsy. They returned home after liberation and my sister went with them to see whether it was worth moving to Chernovtsy. We didn't want to stay in Shargorod. There were too many terrible memories from living there. Gersh and another of my maternal uncles, whose name I don't remember, perished in Polonoye. They and their families were killed, shot by the Germans in 1941. Only Motl, the youngest, survived. He lived in the small town of Murafa near Shargorod. He and his wife and their children stayed alive. Motl died of cancer in 1957.

## Post-war

Chernovtsy hadn't been destroyed by the war. Shops were open; there was plenty of food, and goods to be bought. My sister came from Chernovtsy several times. She brought some paint that she sold to the local farmers. She took a train to Mohilev-Podolsk and had to ride on the roof of a railcar, because these were freight trains. From the station she got to Shargorod by whatever transportation was at hand. My sister told us to move to Chernovtsy without delay. She said that there were many vacant apartments there. We went to Chernovtsy on a horse-driven cart.

There were not many people left in Chernovtsy. On 28th June 1940 Bukovina was united with the USSR. Chernovtsy was part of it. The local people had lived under Soviet power for a year before the war, so they knew already what life was like under the Soviets. Many of the locals rushed to Romania. Later, some of the Jews left Romania for Palestine. They were running away from the Soviet regime. Roshia was a German colony on the outskirts of Chernovtsy. The Germans had left it, too. We moved into a four-room apartment in the center of the city.

People treated Jews nicely in Chernovtsy. There was no demonstration of anti-Semitism. We soon felt at home. The local people told us that relations had been cordial for ages. The Jews were patrons of the arts and music. This area initially belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, then to Hungary and Romania. There was a Jewish school, a hospital for poor Jews, and a Jewish children's hospital in Chernovtsy before the war. And there were 67 synagogues! At present there is only one synagogue in town. After the Olympiad of 1980 when the eternal fire's route to Moscow

crossed Chernovtsy, there appeared a joke: 'What did the Olympiad give Chernovtsy? A good road to the synagogue.' They asphalted this road in preparation for the Olympiad, and this is the road that leads to the synagogue. At one time Chernovtsy was called 'a small Paris', because it was a very culturally developed town. The writer Moshe Altman lived and worked here. The writer and poet Iosif Burg lives here. He is 90 years old. He wrote about the life of Jews in Yiddish. Speaking about the culture of Chernovtsy we need to mention the famous tenor Iosif Schmidt. He ended his life in a concentration camp. He was a world-renowned singer when the war began. The Germans sent him to a concentration camp. He wasn't allowed to sing and was constantly persecuted. He couldn't bear it any longer and committed suicide. Eleizer Shteinberg, a Jewish fable writer, lived here and many more famous people as well.

I was 14 when we came to Chernovtsy. I didn't go to school. Mama was afraid that I would be sent to the labor front in Donbass like many other youngsters. She went to talk with the director of the Construction College, gave him a jar of honey, and I was admitted to college, although I was a little bit too young. I entered the college in 1944. Over half of the students in my group were Jews. We got along well and nobody cared about our nationality at that time. Most of our teachers were Jews, too. I graduated from this college in 1948. My sister was admitted to the Commercial College and studied there for a year. She entered a preparatory course for the Medical Institute in 1945. Maria was a brilliant student and graduated from the Institute with a Red Diploma. She became a very good cardiologist. After graduating from the Institute, Maria married her co-student Isaak Tsypris, a Jew. They were a wonderful couple, but, unfortunately, they didn't have any children. Both of them got job assignments in the village of Lishkovtsy and worked there for 8 years. Later, they came to work in Chernovtsy. Maria was a very respectable person in Chernovtsy. She died in 1990. She had breast cancer. She had one breast amputated. She died soon afterwards. Her husband married again after a couple of years. He lives in Chicago in the US, but he still treats us as his family. He writes and calls us and is planning to visit here. My sister and her husband helped us financially. When our father grew ill they gave us money for medications and medical treatment. Our father died in 1950. After graduating from college I got a job assignment with the Housing Maintenance Agency in Chernovtsy. I worked as a technician, forewoman, engineer and chief engineer. My employment record book has two inscriptions: 'Employed' and 'Retired.'

Mama didn't work after we moved to Chernovtsy. She rented out one room in our apartment to students. She cooked for them and did the housework and laundry and was paid for this. She did this work until I began to earn more.

We followed Jewish traditions, although we would buy a piece of pork or ham once in a while. Mama didn't quite like it, but she didn't argue with us. We celebrated the Sabbath and Pesach together. We bought matzah at the synagogue and cooked the same food that Mama did before the war. There was a shochet in Chernovtsy, and we had him kill the chicken for our festive dinners. Mama went to synagogue on holidays. We spoke Yiddish to Mama, although she knew Russian well.

In 1948 the campaign against cosmopolitans [12](#) began. I had just finished college and started working. People treated me nicely at work and I didn't face any anti-Semitism. However, my colleagues were mostly Jews.

The Kiev Jewish Musical Theater performed in Chernovtsy, because their building in Kiev had been destroyed during the war. It was a very good theater. Mama, my sister and I attended all of their

performances. It was visited by people of many nationalities. The actors were wonderful. The theater was full every night. They had performances in Yiddish and Russian. They staged classical works, like *Tevye the Dairyman* by Sholem Aleichem [13](#). In 1948 the theater was closed. The building that housed the theater was very beautiful. After the theater closed, it was transferred to the university, but stood in decay until the early 1990s.

After Ukraine gained independence the building was very nicely restored and turned into the Academic Hall of the Medical Academy. The Jewish school in Chernovtsy was also closed. The authorities were firing Jewish teachers, writers and journalists. However, people understood that things weren't quite the way they were presented.

The Doctors' Plot [14](#) was a different matter, though. In the 1950s my sister and her husband were working at a polyclinic. They had problems. Their patients would run out of her office when they found out that my sister was a Jew. A Ukrainian nurse refused to work with my sister's husband. She said she didn't want to be an unintentional assistant of a doctor- murderer. Their patients didn't want to visit them and many of them were saying openly that they didn't want to be treated by Jewish doctors. My sister was about to quit her job and go to work as a cleaning woman. But fortunately, it was a short period of time and it was over when Stalin died in March 1953.

I cried when we heard about Stalin's death. Many people cried over him. We were convinced that he had been doing the right thing regardless of all the hardships and cruelty of reality. Everyone was concerned about what was going to happen. We thought life would be over without Stalin. We didn't know how to live or what to do without him. There was so much faith in Stalin that even the children whose fathers were in prison believed it was true that they were enemies of the people. Some people understood the true state of things, but the majority was blind to the truth. After the Twentieth Party Congress, [15](#) we had our eyes opened. It was easier for the Jews to believe the truth because we had seen what Stalin did to the Jews. They said that if he hadn't died all of us would have been deported like the Chechen or Tatar people. [The interviewee is referring to the policy of forced deportation to Siberia.] [16](#) God protected us.

Our family was enthusiastic about the establishment of Israel. Although we live here we have a feeling of assurance now that the Jews have got their own state now.

### **My husband Natan**

In 1956 I married Natan Gorshtein, a Jew who was born in Odessa in 1926. With his fair hair and gray eyes he didn't look like a Jew. He was the only child in his family. His father, Boruch Gorshtein, and his mother Hana were very kind, intelligent people. They accepted me as their daughter from the very first day they met me. After Natan left Odessa they moved to Kotovsk in the suburbs of Odessa. Natan's parents were not religious. They only celebrated Pesach as a tribute to tradition. They spoke Russian in the family. Natan's mother was a housewife. His father was chief accountant at the Mill Factory. He was a very decent man. His wife said that he was out of this world. Other people might become millionaires holding his position, but he only received a modest salary. They lived a modest life. They loved each other very much. My father-in-law called his wife Hanochka and she addressed him as Buzinka. We often visited them and they visited us. Natan's parents were very dear to me. His father died in 1969. His mother refused to move in with us. She died in 1970. Both of them were buried in the same grave in the Jewish section of the town cemetery.

Natan graduated from the Railroad College and got a job assignment at the railcar depot in Chernovtsy. His mother's sister was living here. For a few years, Natan served in the army in the Far East, where people had no idea about what Jews were like. He never heard Yiddish and when he came to Chernovtsy he was surprised to hear Yiddish spoken in the street. Out of about about 150,000 people in Chernovtsy, 60% were Jews. He liked it so much there that he requested to be sent to Chernovtsy after finishing college. The reason he gave was that he had a fiancée in Chernovtsy. His words proved true. I had a friend who lived in the same building as his aunt. Once, his aunt mentioned to my friend that her nephew was visiting her and that it would be good if he met a nice girl. This friend of mine introduced us to each other in March. We courted for half a year and got married in September. His mother's name was Hana, the same as mine. Somebody told her that it was against Jewish tradition for a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law to have the same name. She said: 'My son wants to marry her. And if something bad were to happen, let it happen to me.' We didn't have a Jewish wedding. Mama made dinner for the family and close friends. My husband moved in with us. Mama and I spoke Yiddish, and he learned the language during those years. Some time later he entered the University of Railroad Transport Engineers.

### **My daughters**

Our elder daughter Polina was born in 1957. Polina graduated from the music school and then attended the Musical Pedagogical College. Polina married Mihail Korenblum, A? Jew, in 1978. He is an engineer. He graduated from the Polytechnic University in Lvov. Their daughter Faina was born in 1980. Faina is a medical nurse at the military hospital now. Their son Semyon was born in 1987. He has finished the 9th grade at the Jewish school in Chernovtsy. He will continue his studies in Israel. Polina worked at the kindergarten for 8 years after finishing college. After this kindergarten was closed, she got a job as a librarian at the Jewish school. That's where she works now.

Marina, our younger daughter, was born in 1964. Marina graduated from the Department of Economics at the University of Chernovtsy. She married David Fisher, an engineer, after finishing her studies. Their older daughter, Mila, was born in 1989 and in 1990 Marina and her family moved to Israel. They live in Herzliya. Marina works as a shop assistant. Her husband graduated from the Moscow Road Transport Institute. He works as a programmer at a plant. Their second daughter, Keren, was born in 1996.

We continued celebrating the Jewish holidays in our family. We celebrated Pesach according to the tradition. We bought matzah, made stuffed fish and baked cakes. My daughter Polina cooks this traditional food now. My husband came to like these holidays. I have fasted at Yom Kippur since I was 11, and Natan joined me. Polina speaks Yiddish and Hebrew. As for Marina, I don't think she knew any Hebrew before she left. We also celebrated Soviet holidays. We enjoyed cooking a nice dinner for the family and having guests. We didn't care much about the meaning of these holidays.

From the 1950s through the late 1980s anti-Semitism was on the rise at the state level in Chernovtsy, as well as in the rest of Ukraine. It was mainly demonstrated during admission to the higher educational institutions. I will give you an example with the Medical Academy. If they admitted about 300 students per year, there could be only 2-3 Jews among them. Just because they were Jews these young people were not allowed access to higher education. Our children went to other cities, mainly in Russia and the Baltic republics, where anti-Semitism was not so strong.

In the 1970s Jewish people began to move to Israel. We sympathized with those who were leaving, and were a little bit jealous. Regretfully, our family couldn't leave. One had to pay for one's diploma at that time before moving, and we didn't have that much money. The authorities justified this requirement with the fact that the state had spent money to give us an education, so we were obliged to compensate it for the costs. My husband and I, my sister and her husband had diplomas, and the amount we were supposed to pay was far above what we could afford. We were eager to go to Israel, all of us, but our financial problems were an obstacle. When Ukraine declared its independence in 1990, we started planning to move to Israel again, but my sister fell ill with cancer. She needed help and I could not leave her when she was so ill. My sister died in 1990. Two or three years later my husband fell severely ill. We stayed. My husband died in 1997 after several surgeries. He was a wonderful man, husband and father. I shall never recover from losing my sister and my husband.

I've visited my daughter three times in Israel. I went there for the first time while my husband was still alive. I stayed there a month. My second visit was after my husband died. That time I stayed there for 4 months. I stayed half a year in Israel during my third visit. They also visited me last year. I was very impressed by what I saw in Israel. When we read the word 'paradise' in the Bible, I imagine Israel. I find it terrible that people can't live quietly and in peace in this country.

In 1990 the Jewish way of life began to revive in Chernovtsy. There are Jewish communities and Hesed here. In 1991 a Jewish school was opened in Chernovtsy. At that time about 70% of the children at this school were Jewish and all the teachers were Jewish. Afterwards, many of the Jews moved to Israel, and so there are not many Jews left at school. But this is a very good school and many non-Jewish children study here at present. And the school changed its name from the Jewish School to the Educational Institution with Advanced Courses in Jewish Subjects. Classes are taught in Ukrainian. Besides the general curriculum subjects, there are classes in Hebrew, traditions, history, music and Jewish literature.

My daughter Polina is director of Chernovtsy's community of progressive Judaism. I am a member of this community. We call ourselves mishpokhe - a family, because we are members of the family. Families are members of this community: wives, husbands, grandmothers and grandfathers. We celebrate the Sabbath, holidays and birthdays of members of our 'family'. There were over one hundred people in this community in the recent past. Many have left, but we go on. We discuss the Torah. Every Saturday we read a chapter from the Torah. I like progressive Judaism. I prefer it to a synagogue where the men sit downstairs and the women sit upstairs. We pray together. We sit beside each other, sing anthems, recite prayers and feel equal. Chernovtsy honors the Jews who perished during the war. On 9th May 2002 a monument in the shape of the Star of David was erected in memory of the 900 Jews killed in the Chernovtsy ghetto.

We are doing well now. I receive a pension as a former ghetto prisoner, plus my retirement pension. Thank God, I can even support my daughters and their families. It is most important to stay in good health and live in peace. I wish peace for Israel. God worked one miracle when he rescued the Jews from Stalin. May he show his strength in Israel. I pray that he works a miracle to spare from terror the country that accepted my young family and where my granddaughter was born. May mothers and their children live in peace everywhere on Earth.

## **1 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.

## **2 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.

## **3 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.

## **4 Russian stove**

Big stone stove stoked with wood. They were usually built in a corner of the kitchen and served to heat the house and cook food. It had a bench that made a comfortable bed for children and adults in wintertime.

## **5 Young Octobrist**

In Russian Oktyabrenok, or 'pre-pioneer', designates Soviet children of seven years or over preparing for entry into the pioneer organization.

## **6 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.

## **7 Torgsin stores**

Special retail stores, which were established in larger Russian cities in the 1920s with the purpose of selling goods to foreigners. Torgsins sold commodities that were in short supply for hard

currency or exchanged them for gold and jewelry, accepting old coins as well. The real aim of this economic experiment that lasted for two years was to swindle out all gold and valuables from the population for the industrial development of the country.

## **8 Struggle against religion**

The 1930s was a time of anti-religion struggle in the USSR. In those years it was not safe to go to synagogue or to church. Places of worship, statues of saints, etc. were removed; rabbis, Orthodox and Roman Catholic priests disappeared behind KGB walls.

## **9 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.

## **10 Professor Mamlock**

This 1937 Soviet feature is considered the first dramatic film on the subject of Nazi anti-Semitism ever made, and the first to tell Americans that Nazis were killing Jews. Hailed in New York, and banned in Chicago, it was adapted by the German playwright Friedrich Wolf - a friend of Bertolt Brecht - from his own play, and co-directed by Herbert Rappaport, assistant to German director G.W. Pabst. The story centers on the persecution of a great German surgeon, his son's sympathy and subsequent leadership of the underground communists, and a rival's sleazy tactics to expel Mamlock from his clinic.

## **11 Molotov, V**

P. (1890-1986): Statesman and member of the Communist Party leadership. From 1939, Minister of Foreign Affairs. On June 22, 1941 he announced the German attack on the USSR on the radio. He and Eden also worked out the percentages agreement after the war, about Soviet and western spheres of influence in the new Europe.

## **12 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'.

### **13 Sholem Aleichem (pen name of Shalom Rabinovich (1859-1916))**

Yiddish author and humorist, a prolific writer of novels, stories, feuilletons, critical reviews, and poem in Yiddish, Hebrew and Russian. He also contributed regularly to Yiddish dailies and weeklies. In his writings he described the life of Jews in Russia, creating a gallery of bright characters. His creative work is an alloy of humor and lyricism, accurate psychological and details of everyday life. He founded a literary Yiddish annual called Di Yidishe Folksbibliotek (The Popular Jewish Library), with which he wanted to raise the despised Yiddish literature from its mean status and at the same time to fight authors of trash literature, who dragged Yiddish literature to the lowest popular level. The first volume was a turning point in the history of modern Yiddish literature. Sholem Aleichem died in New York in 1916. His popularity increased beyond the Yiddish-speaking public after his death. Some of his writings have been translated into most European languages and his plays and dramatic versions of his stories have been performed in many countries. The dramatic version of Tevye the Dairyman became an international hit as a musical (Fiddler on the Roof) in the 1960s.

### **14 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.

### **15 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.

### **16 Forced deportation to Siberia**

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