

Yevgenia Kozak

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Bershad

Ukraine

Interviewer: Zhanna Litinskaya

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Yevgenia, a thin, absolutely gray, poorly dressed woman, with big and sad eyes, meets me sitting in her bed. She recently had an injury – she had a hip fracture and only recently began to get out of her bed slowly. Yevgenia’s apartment has two rooms full of light in her apartment and a kitchen. Her apartment is very poorly furnished: an old bed, dented crockery, but she keeps her apartment very clean. The furniture is plain and old: there are only the most necessary pieces of it. Here is an old black-and-white TV by the window in Yevgenia’s room. In this room there is a table and a side board with medications and a meal delivered by Hased on it. There are two beds and a chandelier in another room. Yevgenia gets a little embarrassed saying that she’s prepared this room for her sons in case they want to visit her. During our conversation Yevgenia stops her story crying and complaining of her life full of hardships and her loneliness. I try to comfort her as much as I can. At the end of the interview Yevgenia sings beautiful Jewish songs that she knows since her childhood: she does it on her own initiative. When I say ‘good-bye’ Yevgenia asks me to remember her and call every now and then. I leave her house feeling sad.

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My family background

My maternal and paternal ancestors came from Bershad, a Jewish town in Vinnitsa province. Bershad was a bigger Jewish town: its population in the early 1920s was over 6 thousand Jews. Jews lived in small houses closely adjusting to one another in the central part of the town: there was no place for gardens available. There were cobblestone streets with cunettes on both sides of streets and bridges over them to each house. In spring they were filled with rain water and melting snow flowing into the Dohna River surrounding the town on three sides. Jewish men were craftsmen: tailors, shoemakers, potters, glass cutters. They earned their living to the best they could. They spoke Yiddish (and so did we in the family), but they all knew Ukrainian, as well as Ukrainians spoke Yiddish. There was Pyatkovka village across the river where Ukrainians lived, and there was also a ‘katsap’ street in the town. Katsap was a jargon word for Russians. Residents of the town got along well and had good neighborly relationships. Jews attended a beautiful synagogue near the market in the center of the town. There were several smaller synagogues in the town. Ukrainians

and Russians went to a big church over the river.

My grandparents died before I was born. All I know is that they were born to big Jewish families in Bershad, traditionally religious and observing all traditions. I believe my both grandfathers were raised Jewish: they studied in the cheder, but this was all education they got. My maternal grandfather Shloime-Yoina Mitzel, born in 1870, was a high-skilled cabinet maker. Mama told me my grandfather made not only solid and usable, but also beautiful furniture. My grandmother Etl Mitzel (I don't know her maiden name), my mama's mother, studied midwife's vocation and became a good midwife. Many babies in Bershad entered this world through her kind hands. She taught young mothers to bathe and swaddle their babies. She handled the navel string and taught mothers to take care of their babies. Granny Etl was always busy with either her midwife's business or having to look after someone's baby – it's amazing how she managed to raise her own eight children: four sons and four daughters. I remember the names of my aunts and uncles, but not the years of their birth. My mother, born in 1895, was the oldest. Then came the sons: Sina, Motl, Abram and Haim, and after them three daughters: Golda, Mania and Riva.

The boys studied in the cheder. Grandpa Shloime taught them cabinet making. His shop was one of three rooms in the house. The house was very much like other houses in Bershad: three rooms and a kitchen with a big Russian stove [1](#). Grandmother Etl baked bread and Saturday challit in this stove, and also kept Saturday dinners in it. My grandparents' family strictly observed traditions, followed kashrut and honored Saturday. My grandfather was religious and always wore a kippah or a hat. Every morning he went to the synagogue in the center of the town and started work after he came back from the synagogue. He never worked on Saturday or Jewish holidays. Grandfather read religious books aloud and the family took a rest listening to him. Grandpa died of some disease in 1924. He was buried according to the Jewish traditions in the Jewish cemetery in Bershad.

Mama's brothers worked independently before and during the NEP [2](#). After the NEP they worked for a furniture shop in Bershad. Fortunately, our family escaped accusations of being declared to be kulaks [3](#), like it happened to many wealthier families – grandfather Shloime's family was rather poor. I can't remember details of my relatives' life. I know that my uncles had Jewish wives and children. Sina had three sons: Dod, Naum and Moishe. Motl had a daughter and a son, whose names I can't remember. They were in evacuation during the Great Patriotic War [4](#) and returned to Bershad after the war. My aunts and uncles have passed away, but I don't know the dates. Uncle Haim lived the longest life. He died in Bershad in 1978. After he died his wife Raya moved to her sister in Israel. They had no children.

Mama's sisters Mania and Golda, born in the early 1900s, had no education. They were raised to be good housewives and raise children. They married Jewish men from Odessa in the 1920s through matchmakers and moved to Odessa [5](#). Mania's husband Aron Biller was a tailor. He arranged for his cousin brother Isaac Breiman, also a tailor, to meet Golda, the youngest sister, and they also moved to Odessa. Mania had two children: son Semyon (the first boys in our family were traditionally named after grandfather Shloime, with the corresponding Russian name Semyon [6](#), and daughter Lusia. Golda had two sons: the older one's name was Semyon, but I can't remember the name of her younger son. Riva married Rafail Podolskiy, an engineer at the distillery in Bershad. He was a communist. Riva, the youngest in the family, was the only one to get fond of revolutionary ideas. She was an active Komsomol member [7](#). During the Great Patriotic War fascists shot Riva in Bershad for being a messenger of a partisan unit. Her daughter Lusia and son

Semyon were raised in our family. Lusia lives in Israel now. The husbands of my aunts perished at the front during the Great Patriotic War. Golda died in 1965, Mania in 1974 in Odessa. All my mother's sisters but Riva, observed Jewish traditions throughout their life.

Mama didn't have any education – this was quite customary for Jewish families. She helped grandmother Etl about the house since her early age, as grandmother Etl had to travel even to the neighboring villages: people believed her to be better than any educated assistant doctor. Mama learned to cook traditional food: gefilte fish, thick broth with delicious kneidlakh, sweet and sour stew and chalet for Saturday. She also cooked Saturday dinners and was good at preparing the house for a holiday.

This was a small town where people knew each other well. Therefore, mama didn't give much thought to frequent visits of her cousin brother on grandmother Etl's side Abram Shafer at first. She didn't think more than of a relative of him and it was a great surprise for her, when he proposed to her. However, at that time marriages of cousins were quite common in Jewish families.

Abram's mother Surah Shafer was grandmother Etl's sister. She was a few years younger than Etl. I don't have any information about Etl's other brothers or sisters. Abram's father Gershko Shafer, born in Bershad in the 1860s, was a leather tanner. He worked very hard steeping, handling and drying leather, but he earned well, and his family was better off than the family of my grandfather Shloime-Yoina Mitzel.

Besides Abram, there were two other sons and a daughter in the family. David, the oldest son, his wife and children, whose names I don't remember, lived in Teplik village near Bershad. They didn't evacuate in 1941 and perished. My father's younger brother Mendel perished at the front during the Great Patriotic War. His wife Etl and daughters Sonia and Luba lived some place in Donetsk region after the war. Etl died in the early 1980s. I have no contacts with her daughters. My father's sister Sima, who was about 12 years younger than my father, her husband and two daughters lived in Odessa. They didn't evacuate during the war and were shot by fascists.

My father Abram Shafer was born in 1888. He finished cheder and became a religious Jew. His father Gershko was even more religious than grandfather Shloime. He went to the synagogue every day, read the Torah and Talmud and raised his sons Jewish. David, the oldest son followed into his father's steps and became a tanner. My father learned to make long and warm leather coats that were of great demand with Ukrainians. Coat craft was popular in Bershad: coats were also sold to neighboring villages. My father was not recruited to the army during WWI due to his hernia. By the time he proposed to my mother he was a skilled coat maker and could support his family.

When a shadkhan came to Etl and Shloime's house suggesting that they gave consent to her daughter's marriage with Abram, they were happy to give it. Besides, the fiancé offered quite a lot of money for the girl and his father Gershko promised to cover all wedding expenses and buy the newlyweds a house. Since my mother's was a poor family they couldn't afford to give her any dowry. Mama didn't want to marry Abram. She liked a poor guy from the village, a grandfather's Shloime's apprentice, but she had to obey. Jewish families did not appreciate disobedience to parents.

My parents got married in 1919 during the outburst of the Civil War [8](#), the time of devastation, hunger and diseases, when the power switched from one group to another in the town, and each time there was a pogrom [9](#). However, they had a traditional Jewish wedding. There was a chuppah in the most beautiful synagogue in Bershad, and musicians played at the wedding. Grandfather Gershko Shafer bought them a house where they moved in after the wedding, only grandfather Gershko and grandmother Surah died from typhus shortly after the wedding. Mama got pregnant. During pogroms mother and father took hiding in grandfather Shloime's cellar. Mama said they always ran to her parents' home: she believed her father could protect her from pogrom makers. Once, during a pogrom mama put on a wet shawl on her head and lied down and father put a 'typhus' sign on the door, and pogrom makers didn't dare to enter the house.

Mama gave birth to a boy: the baby didn't have arms and died soon. The girl, who was born next, died a few months after she was born. Then there was a boy, born in 1920: he only lived a few years. I was born on 29 December 1922. One day in 1924 mama and the children stayed overnight in grandfather Shloime's house, when his house set on fire. Grandfather rescued grandmother Etl, mama and the children from the burning house, and fell ill. A few days later he died of pneumonia. My older brother also died from tuberculosis in that same year -1924.

Growing up

I was two years old, when this happened, and I know about it from what mama told me. I was named Sheindl at birth, but at home I was addressed Zhenia, a more common name. When obtaining my passport at the age of 16, I had the full name of Zhenia - Yevgenia put down in my passport. I was a healthy child. Mama doted on me having lost three babies before. In 1926 my brother named Shloime after grandfather was born. In 1931 my younger sister Lubov (her Jewish name was Leiba) was born.

I remember our house in Oktiabrskaya Street adjusting to or neighbor's house. It was small and there was no space for a garden. We bought meat, vegetables and dairies at the market. It was open every day, and on Sundays it even spread to the central street. Vendors came from neighboring villages to sell their products and there was a variety of colors in the street: red tomatoes, greeneries, orange pumpkins and striped water melons pleasing the sight. My father and I went shopping that I enjoyed very much. He knew many vendors and they greeted Shloime-the-coat-maker with hugs and kisses. Some of them stayed overnight in our house and my father used to stay in their homes, when traveling to take orders. There were little Jewish shops at the market selling everyday goods: tools, buckets, plain crockery and fabrics. However, this lasted till the end of NEP only. Though I was only about 6 years old, I remember how our neighbors were dispossessed. They were taken to the railway station, including old people and children. Later it turned out that they were all sent to the virgin lands of the Kherson steppes. Some of them returned to Bershad several years later and others disappeared for good. I remember that men from kulak families were sent to the construction of the Dnieper power plant, the biggest in the USSR. When they returned, they told us that the conditions on this 'socialist construction site' were unbearable.

Our family was poor. My father earned to support the family and my mother was a housewife. We were not miserably poor, though. Mama always managed to make a special dinner on Saturday. We rarely had meat or fish, but she made delicious puddings, strudels with jam and challot. Before

Pesach and other holidays we bought poultry in advance and kept them in a shed in the backyard. My father took them to the shochet and we always had all traditional food on holidays. I wouldn't say my family was that religious. My father or mother didn't have their heads covered. My father didn't cover his head to sit at the table. Perhaps, this was the sign of time. However, my father put on a kippah and my mother had a kerchief on to go to the synagogue every Saturday. I liked going to the synagogue with my parents. I liked the ceremonious mood embracing the town on Saturday: all Jews and their children dressed up (we also had fancy outfits) to go to the synagogue. I usually carried my father's book of prayers - he was not supposed to do even this kind of work on Saturday. Mama and I went upstairs where women were supposed to do their praying, and my father stayed downstairs with other men. I continued going to the synagogue, when I became a pioneer [10](#), though pioneers were not allowed to attend it. I liked Jewish holidays even without knowing their history: I enjoyed the happy moments of my childhood, going out with the family and having delicious food. On Purim mama and grandma made delicious hamantashen filled with poppy seeds. I remember Sukkot in autumn, when we had meals in the sukkah in the backyard, but my favorite holiday was Chanukkah, when we visited grandma, who gave us some money and we enjoyed nice doughnuts and potato pancakes. During Pesach my father didn't conduct the seder - the family just sat at the table and enjoyed a special meal. However, we had fancy silver kosher crockery that was kept in the attic. His crockery, the matzah that my father brought from the synagogue and traditional food - this was all that marked the Pesach in our house. Sometimes we visited grandmother Etl on holiday where we met with mama sisters Mania and Golda and their husbands and children who also visited grandma and arrived from Odessa.

I studied in a Ukrainian school. I don't know why my parents did not send me to the Jewish school in Bershad - probably because the Ukrainian school was quite near our home. There were many Jewish children in my school. My friends were mainly Jewish girls. Our teachers were Ukrainian, but they treated Jewish children well and did not discriminate between the children. I remember the famine in 1932-33 [11](#). I can't imagine how we survived: probably people were more sympathetic and supported each other then. I remember my father bringing some cereals and flour from his clients in villages. The situation was also hard in villages, but they at least had some vegetables gardens where they could grow something. Mama baked bread to sell it at the market and we only could have some leftovers. Villagers occasionally paid my father for his work with potatoes and other vegetables. We were given a bun and some soup at school. Fortunately our family survived while many other people died in Bershad.

I wasn't quite fond of studying and had only satisfactory marks at school. Being the oldest child in the family I had many duties about the house. I helped my mother and looked after my dear little sister. In summer I went to the bank of the Dohna river to bathe and lie in the sun with other children. My brother Shloime and little sister also went with me and I watched them there. I was proud of having to be responsible for them. In winter mama and I did our laundry in the river. Sometimes I went to amateur concerts in the club in the central square of Bershad. I liked Soviet holidays. I went to parades with my school: we carried slogans, placards and flower garlands. There were parties at school. We didn't celebrate Soviet holidays at home, though.

In the late 1930s arrests began [Great Terror] [12](#), when party and Soviet officials began to disappear. Nobody in our family was arrested. We didn't give much thought to what was happening. We believed that punishment was the right thing for the guilty ones. We also thought

the situation in Western Europe and Germany in the early 1930s had little to do with us. From newspapers we knew about Hitler, who came to power, and about fascists, but neither newspapers nor radio mentioned anything about their attitude to Jews. However, we watched the 'Professor Mumlock' [13](#) film that showed the prejudiced attitude of Hitler followers to Jews, but again nobody in Bershad gave much thought to it.

During the war

A few days before the Great Patriotic War began I finished the 8th form. Mama wanted to send me to my aunts in Odessa in summer – I was eager to see the sea, but this was not to be. On 22 June 1941 at noon our neighbors came to our home to listen to the radio – we bought it shortly before the war. Molotov [14](#) announced that the Great Patriotic War began. Mama started crying. Papa calmed her down saying that Germans were cultured people and were not going to hurt Jews. At first everything stayed the same. My father's shop began to make coats for the front. We were surprised they would need them: the radio kept saying that Germans were not going to be long in the country and that our army would chase them away soon, but the reality was different. In early July grandmother evacuated with her daughters Mania and Golda, whose husbands were at the front. We and aunt Riva and her 5-year old daughter Lusia and 2-year old son Semyon were in Bershad. Her husband Rafael Podolskiy was at the front. On 22 July the first bombs fell on Bershad. They dropped bombs mainly to destroy the distillery, but one bomb hit a Jewish house and killed a woman. The next day mama, papa, my brother and sister and I left Bershad. Many Jews feared to leave their homes and thought that since Germans were quite civil during WWI, nothing bad was going to happen to them. This was what older people were telling the others. Grandmother Etl made my mother promise that we would follow them and evacuate before she left the town. There was no transport available and we left the town on foot. Riva and her children wanted to leave some days later.

My mother and father carried whatever little luggage we had: a backpack and a suitcase, my 13-year old brother carried a bag and so did I and my sister. It was hard to think of us as refugees – there were many others like us walking along the road and so were the troops of our dear Red Army retreating. I was struck at the sight of our soldiers: gloomy and silent. During air raids we took hiding in sunflower and corn fields. We also slept in the fields at night: the weather was still hot. We arrived at Novoukrainka, Kirovohrad region, 180 km from Kiev. We arrived at night soaked in the rain. A local Ukrainian family gave us shelter. We washed ourselves and had some food and slept in the house after a long time. The next day we took a train. We already knew that on 28 July our dear Bershad was occupied. We didn't have any information about Riva.

The train was overcrowded. This was a train for cattle transportation. We had no food stocks left. We only had dried bread. When the train stopped, I fetched some boiling water in the kettle. Occasionally we could get some soup or cooked cereals at stations, but this happened rarely. During air raids the train stopped and we scattered around. Our trip took a month before we arrived in Ossetia in Northern Caucasus. The train stopped near Ordzhonikidze, Azerbaijan, and we were sent to a kolkhoz [15](#), in a village near Ordzhonikidze. We were given a warm welcome there. We were accommodated in a small room with a kitchen. A family from Kharkiv resided in the next-door room. Mama, my brother and I went to work in the field and my father went to work as a janitor in the kolkhoz granary. We received food products for work and in winter the kolkhoz provided wood for heating. The local residents gave us winter clothes and we managed through the

winter.

In summer 1942 fascists approached the Northern Caucasus and we had to move on. The kolkhoz gave us a bull-driven wagon where we loaded our miserable belongings. We bid farewell to the locals and moved on walking behind the wagon. We reached Makhachkala [today capital of Dagestan republic within Russian Federation] and from there we crossed the Caspian Sea with thousands of other escapees. We arrived in Uzbekistan and were accommodated near Andijon. Shortly afterward aunt Mania found us. She lived with grandma and aunt Golda near Andijon. She wrote us and mama went to see grandma. This was the last time they saw each other. As for me, I didn't see grandma Etl this time. She died shortly afterward. Mama told me she was buried in a common cemetery, but she was buried in cerements and with no coffin according to Jewish traditions.

Life was very hard. Mama and I went to work at the factory manufacturing cotton ropes. Mama and I were workers. Father also worked there as a janitor – he could not do hard physical work due to his hernia. My sister went to school. My brother Shloime (we addressed him Semyon and he adopted this name, when obtaining a passport) left and didn't tell us where he was going. He just ran away from home with a bag of dried bread and we didn't hear from him for ten years. We received workers' cards, but we didn't get sufficient food and were starving. We lived in a little room in a clay house. Its roof leaked when it rained and we had to sleep in wet beds. Actually we slept on some grass on the floor. However, we didn't complain. This was a common situation. I suffered from malaria terribly. I had attacks, felt cold, fever and couldn't wait to leave Uzbekistan.

In March 1944 we heard that Bershad was liberated and decided to go there immediately. I wrote my friend in Bershad and she sent us a permit to come home. We didn't even wait till our documents were processed. We paid a railroad man and caught a train to Ukraine. Our trip lasted long and we changed trains, but our hearts couldn't wait till we got home. We arrived in Bershad in May 1944. Here we heard the horrible news: aunt Riva and her children left Bershad, but got in encirclement. She had to go back home and they stayed in the ghetto. Riva was a messenger for a partisan unit under command of Yasha Tahles, a Komsomol activist. Her home was their secret address. Fascists found out the truth and shot Riva in the central square of Bershad before everybody else. Fortunately Riva's children Lusia and Semyon survived: the partisans managed to save them. Riva's husband Rafael Podolskiy perished at the front. There were other people living in our house and we stayed in Riva's house. Her children were with us. We lived together for a year. Life was very hard. Riva's children were paid a pension for their father. Mama turned to the court to have our house back and it took her almost a year before she got one room where we moved in 1946. Riva's relatives took her children. They also sold her house. Lusia went to live with her aunt Mania in Odessa. Aunt Mania treated her like her own daughter. Her son Semyon returned from the front, fell in love with his cousin sister and they got married a few years later. Riva's son Semyon went to live with his father Rafael Podolskiy's relatives.

After the war

The first postwar years were very hard. Father went around the neighboring villages fixing clothes, making coats and doing whatever job he could managed. People were poor and could only afford to alter or fix old clothes. He brought some food products from the village and this helped us to survive. Mama baked bread and I sold it at the market. However hard life was, mama was happy

to move back into our house. All of a sudden my brother arrived in 1952. My brother told us that he worked in mines in Donetsk region. He was grown up and independent. He was well-dressed and brought us gifts. My brother didn't stay long. There was no job for him in the town. He went to Orenburg region in Russia. He married Galina, a Tatar girl. He just informed our parents after the wedding fearing that they might be against his marrying a non-Jewish girl. My parents felt hurt, but they didn't show it.

We faced anti-Semitism in those years. I cannot say there was much of it in Bershad where the population was mainly Jewish. I never heard direct abuses, but Jews had problems with getting a job since there were Ukrainian officials holding the leading positions in the town. I couldn't get a job anywhere, though I addressed all kinds of offices. Well, I actually had no education: whatever knowledge I got at school was lost during and after the war. I remember Stalin's death in march 1953: my sister and parents were crying and there was a meeting in the central square of Bershad where all people cried.

However hard life was, we continued to observe Jewish traditions. My parents went to an old synagogue (the new one had been removed) but that one was all right. On Saturday father didn't work and mama tried to cook something special: latkes, kugel, even there was nothing else, but flour that she had. Father always brought matzah from the synagogue on holidays, or sometimes we made it in the Russian stove. We fasted on Yom Kippur and I still keep fasting nowadays. On Chanukkah mama made buckwheat pancakes. My children also know this holiday - they always got a few coins for sweets on this day.

I had to think about my personal life. My friends got married, but I didn't even meet with anyone. Mama's old acquaintance offered to introduce me to her distant relative. Next day he visited us and told us his story at tea. Meyer Kozak was born in Odessa in 1915. His ancestors came from Bessarabia [16](#), and Meyer knew Romanian since childhood. Before the war Meyer was a worker. During the war he was an interpreter for Romanians, who were Hitler's allies. After the war he was sentenced to 10 years in Stalin's camps of the Gulag [17](#), as a military criminal. He was kept in Magadan in the north. After he was released he moved to Bershad where he had distant relatives. Meyer swore on his honor that he was not a traitor and had never been involved in any action against Jews and that he just worked as an interpreter in the town office of Odessa to save his life. I believed him - I liked Meyer. Besides, if he had been guilty he redeemed his fault. We got married in 1953: we just signed under our names in the registry office. We didn't even have rings.

Meyer worked at the furniture factory and earned well. We lived with my parents: my mama and papa treated him very well. Life was getting better and I even thought that my fortune smiled at me, but it happened to be an illusion. On 11 February 1954 my son was born. We named him Alexey. Shortly afterward I got pregnant again. As for Meyer, he fell severely ill: this was an impact of 10 years of hard work in the north. When I was pregnant 5 months, Meyer died from tuberculosis in hospital in Odessa. I was struck with grief. Mama and I went to the funeral. My husband was buried in the hospital cemetery. On our way back my son got severely injured - his hand was squeezed by the door. He burst into tears and I finally started crying. Now I knew I alone had to raise our children. My second child was born in late 1955. I named him Mikhail after his father Meyer.

My parents helped me to raise the children. In 1958 I went to the town committee to ask them to help me with employment. My boys were with me. They gave me a job of a janitor and then I became a worker in the dyeing shop where I worked till I retired. They helped me to make arrangements for my older son to go to a kindergarten. Mama looked after my younger son. My work was very hard: there was no heating and it was freezing in winter. There were also hazardous vapors from paints, but I was glad to have this job. In the morning taking a slice of bread – my lunch – I ran to work and returned home late in the evening. I worked overtime to earn more. In the evening I did the laundry and fed my kids trying to give them whatever little bit of motherly care.

In 1968 my mother fell ill. When dying she begged my pardon for her leaving me with my kids alone. My father fell ill with cancer then and was bedridden for five years. Several months before he died he had duodenal obstruction. I was alone to cope with all this. My brother lived in Orsk and had his own life. He could hardly make ends meet himself. My sister Luba married shoemaker Moshkovich, a Jewish man from Odessa in the early 1950s. She lived with her husband and son in Khust in Subcarpathia. In 1974 my father died. My sister Luba died from cancer in Khust in 1981. She was buried in the town cemetery there. She was 50 years old. My parents and sister were buried in the Jewish cemetery following all Jewish traditions. My sister's husband and their sons Semyon and Felix moved to Israel in the late 1980s.

This was a period of emigration, when many Jews were leaving Bershada for Israel, USA and Germany. I didn't even consider emigration: I didn't have time to even look around. My older son Alexey had all excellent marks at school. His teachers praised him at parents' meetings at school and thanked me for raising them well and I listened proudly. After finishing the 8th form with all excellent marks – and I was sitting in the presidium, when he obtained his certificate, my son finished the Radio Electronics College in Lvov and served in the army. Then he met Yelena, a Jewish girl from Leningrad, married her and moved to Leningrad where her family lived. From the very beginning I didn't quite get along with my daughter-in-law. She probably thought I was an uneducated provincial Jewish woman and didn't pay much attention to me. She didn't even want to send her son Maxim, born in 1989, to Bershada in summer.

My younger son Mikhail injured his eye, when he was a child, and didn't go to the army for this reason. He became a shoemaker after finishing school. He married Bronia, a Jewish girl from Bershada and lived with her and their son Boris in Bershada. I retired in 1985. In the early 1990s my son started talking about emigration: he decided to move to USA with his family. They also included me in their documents for emigration. We went to Moscow where we were given the status of refugees, but when my daughter-in-law told me that we were going to live separately in the USA, I burst into crying and told my son I didn't want to spend my old age alone and in a strange country. I refused to go with them and they moved without me. My son and his family live in Chicago. He is an electronic specialist at a plant. Before leaving he bought me a two-room apartment in Bershada – this is where I live now. My daughter-in-law was against it, but my son insisted on his idea, and I can finally enjoy living in a good house.

Three years ago – I think, in 2000 my younger son and his family moved to Germany. I didn't go with them – I don't want to listen to the German language and get used to life in a different country at my age. I want to live the rest of my life beside my own people speaking Yiddish and Ukrainian and I want to be buried in my hometown where I've lived my life. My son lives on welfare. He rarely writes me. Visiting him is out of the question – we don't have money for this and I am afraid I might

never see any of my family again in my life.

Of course, I felt sad. In the early 1990s a Jewish community was established in our town, and it helped me to overcome my sadness and find myself in life. I attended Sabbath and participated in celebration of all Jewish holidays. We began to speak Yiddish and talk about traditions. I was involved in preparation to the events. I cooked gefilte fish for Sabbath and baked strudels like mama did it. Jewish women still consult me on recipes. I am not a religious person, but I try to celebrate major Jewish holidays like we always did in our family. I have had a hard life and have always been hard up. I've never been interested in politics. All I've thought about was how to manage from one payday to another and how to provide food for the family. Therefore, it's hard for me to say, when life was harder – during the Soviet period or in the independent Ukraine. But I can say one thing for sure – and that is that I'm grateful to our country for giving an opportunity for religious communities to develop and restore Jewish traditions and religion. I am ill now – I have a severe fracture and cannot attend the community, but they do not leave me. Curator of Hesed, chairman of the community, often visits me. They deliver meals to me at home and buy medications. If it were not for my disease, I would think I have a better life than I've ever had before. I asked my sons to visit me to see each other before I die, but they either cannot afford or don't want to come. My brother does not write me. I know he has two sons, whom I've never seen and cannot remember their names. He has grandchildren, too. I feel very distressed and lonesome. When I feel sad, I hum Jewish songs that my mama taught me. They are sad songs: I sing them and cry: about my bitter fortune, hard life and lonely old age.

GLOSSARY:

1 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.

2 NEP

The so-called New Economic Policy of the Soviet authorities was launched by Lenin in 1921. It meant that private business was allowed on a small scale in order to save the country ruined by the Revolution of 1917 and the Russian Civil War. They allowed priority development of private capital and entrepreneurship. The NEP was gradually abandoned in the 1920s with the introduction of the planned economy.

3 Kulaks

In the Soviet Union the majority of wealthy peasants that refused to join collective farms and give their grain and property to Soviet power were called kulaks, declared enemies of the people and exterminated in the 1930s.

4 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.

5 Odessa

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

6 Common name

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

7 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.

8 Civil War (1918-1920)

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

9 Pogroms in Ukraine

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

10 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.

11 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.

12 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.

13 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.

14 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.

15 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.

16 Bessarabia

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

17 Gulag

The Soviet system of forced labor camps in the remote regions of Siberia and the Far North, which was first established in 1919. However, it was not until the early 1930s that there was a significant number of inmates in the camps. By 1934 the Gulag, or the Main Directorate for Corrective Labor Camps, then under the Cheka's successor organization the NKVD, had several million inmates. The prisoners included murderers, thieves, and other common criminals, along with political and religious dissenters. The Gulag camps made significant contributions to the Soviet economy during the rule of Stalin. Conditions in the camps were extremely harsh. After Stalin died in 1953, the population of the camps was reduced significantly, and conditions for the inmates improved somewhat.