

# Ronia Finkelshtein

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Kiev

Ukraine

Interviewer: Inna Zlotnik

Date of interview: November 2002



*Ronia Finkelshtein lives in the Pechersk neighborhood in the center of Kiev. She is a tall slim woman with gray curly hair. She has kind and vivid hazel eyes. She lives in a three-bedroom apartment on the first floor of a building constructed shortly after the war. She has all necessary comforts in her apartment. She has a collection of books on history and archeology and works by Russian writers and poets from the 1960-70s. The furniture in her apartment is 1960s style. It has become difficult for Ronia to leave the apartment, and Hessed has appointed an aid to help her about the house. Hessed provides food packages to her every month. Ronia's nephews call her from Israel, Moscow and Poltava. Her acquaintances and friends often come to see her. Ronia is a kind and sociable person and people like to be of help to her.*

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## **My family background**

My grandfather on my father's side, Moisey Finkelshtein, was born in Cherkassy in the 1860s. All I know is that my father came from a working-class Jewish family. He told me that Cherkassy belonged to Lithuania at some stage, then to Poland, and at the time my grandparents lived there it was part of Russia. The town had Polish, Jewish, Lithuanian, Ukrainian and Russian inhabitants. Jews constituted almost half of the population: There were about 1,000 Jewish families. There were several synagogues in town.

My grandmother was a housewife. The family was religious: They observed all traditions and celebrated holidays. My grandmother died when my father was a small boy, and my grandfather passed away in 1920, shortly before I was born. I wish I had asked my parents more about my grandparents during my childhood. After my grandmother died my grandfather remarried. I dimly remember my father mentioning his sisters, or perhaps, they were his stepsisters. Frankly speaking, I wasn't really interested in them. They lived in Cherkassy and perished during the Holocaust.

My father, Abram Finkelshtein, was the oldest child in the family. He was born in 1890. Two years later his sister Runia was born, Lisa followed in 1895 and Yunia in 1898. My father and Yunia finished cheder and the girls studied at home with a teacher. When my father was 13-14 years old he left for Poltava [350 km from Kiev]. Poltava was a big industrial town. My father was a laborer, then he finished an accounting course and got a job as an accountant.

My father's sisters and his brother also moved to Poltava after the Revolution of 1917. Runia finished a school for medical nurses and worked at the Jewish children's home. Lisa finished an accounting course and worked as an accountant. Uncle Yunia graduated from the Industrial Institute in Kharkov and became an engineer. When they left their parents' home in the 1910s, they stopped observing Jewish traditions. Young people were under the influence of revolutionary ideas at that time and atheists in their majority. Lisa got married. Her daughter, Vera, was born in 1930. Lisa, Runia, Vera and our family lived in Chkalov in the Ural [3,500 km from Kiev] during World War II, and after the war we returned to Poltava. Vera became a journalist and got married. She has two children: her daughter, Victoria, is the director of a swimming pool, and her son is a doctor. Uncle Yunia got married, too. He has a daughter, Ira. During the Great Patriotic War 1 he was at the front, and after the war his family returned to Kiev. Yunia was the chief engineer at the Geological Department.

My grandparents on my mother's side were born in Poltava, or in a town near Poltava, in the 1860s. After their wedding my grandfather rented an apartment and they settled down in Poltava. Now Poltava is a big town, a regional center. At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century Poltava was an industrial center: there were several plants, factories, smaller enterprises and shops. There were also theaters and libraries. Jews constituted about one third of the population in Poltava. There were also Ukrainians, Russians, Poles, Lithuanians and Belarus. My grandmother told me that the Jewish community was prosperous at the beginning of the 20th century: there were ten synagogues, a yeshivah, a cheder, a Jewish hospital, an old people's home and a Jewish library in town.

My grandfather's name was Moisey Izrailevich and my grandmother's name was Polina Izrailevich. They weren't a very wealthy family. My grandfather didn't have a house of his own. I remember the small building in which they were renting an apartment. They had a big verandah and two rooms, poorly furnished.

My grandparents were very religious and my mother, being their older daughter, did her best to please them. My mother, Adel Finkelshtein [nee Izrailevich], went to the market to buy a chicken and took it to the shochet to have it slaughtered, and she bought all kosher food for them. My grandfather knew Hebrew. He prayed every morning and evening and recited a blessing before every meal. They had a mezuzah on the door: a small box with a prayer inside. They touched it with their hands and kissed it before going into the house. It was believed to protect from evil. I liked the big bookcase in my grandparents' home: I enjoyed looking at the books. I couldn't read at that time and don't know exactly what kind of books they were, but I remember some bigger volumes in Hebrew and the Torah among them. The rest of the books were in Russian. My grandparents spoke Yiddish, especially when they wanted to conceal the subject of conversation from us. They also knew Russian. They celebrated all Jewish holidays and honored traditions. They went to the synagogue every Saturday and on Jewish holidays.

My grandfather was an accountant at the timber warehouse, and my grandmother was a housewife. She wore a white silk kerchief. She was a beauty: She was slim and tender and had a caring heart. My grandfather loved her dearly.

They had six children. Their oldest son, Savva, was born in 1887. My mother Adel was born in 1890, Sonia in 1892, Nyura in 1896, Aron in 1898 and the youngest, Tania, in 1902. Savva and Aron finished cheder, my mother and her sisters studied in grammar school for a few years. After that my mother didn't work or study. She was helping my grandmother about the house.

Savva didn't continue his studies after finishing cheder. His parents couldn't afford to pay for his education. Uncle Savva was a worker. He had a Jewish wife and three children: two daughters, Sarah and Nyura, and a son, Aron. Sarah had a son and a daughter, Sabina. When they were in evacuation in Leninabad their son fell ill and died. Uncle Savva died in Leninabad during the Great Patriotic War. After the war his wife, Sarah and Nyura moved to Ashgabad in Middle Asia. Sabina married a Russian man there and moved to Zhukovskoye near Moscow with her husband, and her mother Sarah. Sarah died there. Sabina and I correspond, and she often calls me.

Sonia married an accountant, Michael Rabichkin, a Jewish man. He worked at the sugar factory in Kolomak near Kharkov. Aunt Sonia moved to Kolomak. Their son, Boris, was born in 1914. Shortly after the revolution the Rabichkin family moved to Kharkov. Boris studied at the Jewish school. He spoke Yiddish fluently and even read Hugo in Hebrew. [Editor's note: Victor Hugo, French poet and novelist.] After school he couldn't enter a [higher educational] institute, as new Soviet laws only allowed young people from working class families to study in higher educational institutions. He finished an industrial school and became a worker at the Locomotive Repair Plant in Kharkov. Later he became a correspondent for the plant newspaper. He got married and had a son, Erik. His marriage didn't last long - they divorced. Boris entered the Faculty of Literature at the Pedagogical Institute in Kharkov. He married a Jewish woman, Fania Shtitelman. In the late 1930s their son, Sima, was born.

Nyura married a Jewish man, Ilia Gershinovich. Their son Volodia was born in 1926. In the 1930s the Gershinovich family moved to Moscow. During the Great Patriotic War Aunt Nyura and Volodia were in evacuation in Leninabad, Middle Asia, and after the war they returned to Moscow. Volodia finished a military school there and married a Jewish woman. They had two children: Galia and Alik. Their family often moved from one place to another because Volodia was a military man. Aunt Nyura lived in Poltava.

Aron finished a military college in Leningrad. He married a Jewish girl called Marusya and they had a son, Jacob. Aron served in a military unit in Leningrad and Marusya was a housewife. He finished a tank school shortly before the war. During the Great Patriotic War he went to the front and perished. Aron and Marusya were in the blockade of Leningrad [2](#). They starved to death.

My mother's youngest sister, Tania, graduated from the Pharmaceutical Faculty of the Medical Institute in Kharkov and worked as a pharmacist in a pharmacy. She was single. During the Great Patriotic War she lived in Chkalov in the Ural with Aunt Sonia's family. After the war she moved to Kiev with them and lived there until she died in 1982. She was buried in the town cemetery.

My mother's sisters and brothers were not religious: they didn't observe traditions or attend the synagogue.

My father worked as an accountant in Poltava in 1913 and could provide well for his family. I don't know how my parents got acquainted. Aunt Nyura told me that my father was engaged when he met my mother, but when he saw her, he fell in love with her at first sight. He left his fiancée and married my mother. My mother's parents were religious, so my parents had a traditional Jewish wedding. My grandmother told me that there was a chuppah installed in the yard of their house: a velvet canopy on four posts. My mother wore a fancy wedding gown and a white veil covering her head and face. My father wore a new suit. The rabbi said a prayer, gave his blessing and pronounced the marriage contract. My mother's relatives, neighbors and my father's friends came to the wedding. There were tables laid in the yard and klezmer musicians playing at the wedding party.

My father rented a room on the first floor in the center of Poltava. My mother became a housewife. My sister, Luda, was born in 1914. My mother was told that Jewish tradition didn't allow to name a child after a living relative, but she paid little attention to this. She liked the name Luda, which was the name of one of my mother's cousins. The girl was very pretty, blonde and had blue eyes, but there was something wrong with the way she was fed. The baby died of dyspepsia at the age of 7 months. My mother was grieving and wore mourning clothes for a long time. The revolution of 1917 didn't change my parents' life style. My father continued to work as an accountant and my mother remained a housewife.

## Growing up

I was born on 22nd August 1920. I was named Ronia after my deceased great-grandmother on my mother's side. It's an ancient Jewish name. We lived in a 20 square meter room my father was renting from a Jewish landlord. We had a leather settee, my wooden bed and my parents' bed with nickel balls. My father had a desk with carved legs and a bookshelf. There was a small yard near the house with a big lime tree, two old apple trees, a few jasmine bushes and a dogrose plant.

My mother was a very nice and kind woman. She took care of my father, me and my grandparents. My father first worked as an accountant and then as an inspector at the Oil Sales Company. He loved me a lot and spent plenty of time with me: he bought me books and toys and allowed me to do anything I wanted. Naturally, I loved him more than I loved my mother.

Aunt Nyura lived in our neighborhood, so my cousin Volodia and I were growing up together. We spoke Russian at home. My father and mother knew Yiddish and Hebrew. My mother studied in Russian at the grammar school and got more accustomed to speak and write in Russian. When our parents wanted to conceal the subject of a discussion from their children they switched to Yiddish, but it didn't really work the way they had expected. We grew up in a Yiddish environment hearing it in the streets and at our grandparents' home.

Our landlord sang at the synagogue, and my mother and I went to listen to him. The synagogue was a one-storied building in Komsomolskaya Street. Men prayed on the ground floor and there was a special area for women. There was a bigger two-storied synagogue in Gogolevskaya Street. My father wasn't religious and didn't go to the synagogue, but my mother attended the synagogue on all big holidays. I liked Jewish holidays. I remember the celebration of Rosh Hashanah, Chanukkah, Pesach and Purim. My mother made traditional Jewish food for our family and for my grandparents. We didn't follow the kashrut, but we didn't eat pork and didn't mix meat and dairy products. My grandmother, though, followed the kashrut strictly and my mother made kosher

food for her. Our family got together at the table at my grandparents' on Jewish holidays.

My mother had special dishes and utensils for Pesach that she kept in the storeroom for the rest of the year. Before Pesach she did a general cleaning of the house. She removed all bread and flour from the house. We celebrated the first day of Pesach at my grandparents'. The table was covered with white tablecloth and there was gefilte fish, chicken, sweet and sour stew and red wine. My parents hid matzah under a pillow for the children to search for it. My grandfather put on his tallit, sat at the head of the table and said a prayer. My cousin, Volodia, and I were supposed to take the matzah from under the pillow on the chair beside my grandfather in a way that he didn't notice. It was a challenge.

I remember how Volodia and I looked forward to Chanukkah because we got some money on this holiday. We celebrated it with our landlord. I liked it because he used to give me a silver ruble while my grandfather only gave me 50 kopecks. On Purim my mother made a sweet honey dish - hamantashen - triangle pies stuffed with poppy seeds. I remember my mother making teyglakh: she made small balls from eggs and flour, baked them and dipped them in boiling honey. Then she put them on a board, pressed them into a thick layer and cut them into small cubes.

My grandmother wanted to raise us religiously. I remember my cousin Volodia often saying to my grandmother, 'There is no God!'. I begged him to say to her, 'Yes, there is a God' because I saw how hurt she felt hearing this heresy. But he was stubborn and kept saying, 'There is no God and that's it!' This was the period of the official struggle against religion [3](#), and Volodia and I were growing up under the influence of this propaganda of atheism.

My grandfather had acute problems with his stomach ulcer in 1925. At that time my grandmother was dying in the room next door. She died from pneumonia within three days. I didn't go to my grandmother's funeral, but my mother told me later that she was buried in the Jewish cemetery and that there was a rabbi at her funeral. My grandfather was grieving over his wife and didn't recover for a long time. Aunt Tania lived with him, but my mother took him to our home after a little while, because Tania didn't take proper care of him. She didn't observe Jewish traditions. My mother cooked kosher food for him, lit candles on Saturdays, and we celebrated all Jewish holidays.

When I turned 5 I went to the group of a German governess, Mata, who had finished the Froebel Institute [4](#). There were 6 children in her group, Jewish and Ukrainian. We went to walk in the park and she spoke German with us. I learned to read and speak German that way. She also taught us manners, and we played a lot. There were several parks in the center of Poltava: a beautiful pioneer park and a birch garden.

I saw a chuppah in our yard at about the same time. Our neighbors' daughter had a wedding ceremony. Our neighbors were wealthy people and they made a beautiful chuppah on four posts. The bride was wearing a wedding dress and had her head covered with a light shawl. The rabbi said a prayer. It was a beautiful sight.

The son of our landlord and his family lived in a two-bedroom apartment next door. He had two sons: Misha and Izia. They were a little bit older than I and we often played together, but they didn't really enjoy my company. They were boys and had different interests. They were a wealthy family. It was the period of the NEP [5](#) and they had two cinema theaters in the center of Poltava: 'Record' and 'Coliseum'. Misha and Izia took me to all movies. We watched 'A Thief from Baghdad',

'New York', 'A Kiss from Mary Pickford' and others. I don't remember what they were about, though.

There was a theater in the center of Poltava, but there was no theatrical group in the town. Theaters from other towns came on tours. I remember opera and ballet performances: 'Red Poppy', 'Bayaderka', 'Swan Lake' and 'Sleeping Beauty'. There was no Jewish theater in Poltava, so no Jewish theater groups came on tour.

In 1928, at the end of the NEP period, these cinema theaters were nationalized and our landlords moved to Leningrad. We occupied one of their rooms, and my grandfather lived in his own room. I had many toys: Aunt Lisa and Runia, who lived nearby, gave them to me. They brought a beautiful doll from Kharkov. Later I got skis and skates. Misha, Izia and I were fond of walking on stilts and were very good at it. I also played chess and dominoes.

### **My school years**

When I was 8 I went to a Russian secondary school near our house. There were many Jewish children in our school. They didn't know Yiddish because their parents believed it was better for them to study in Russian schools to make their further education easier. In 1929 our house was transferred to the military. We received a two-bedroom apartment in a two-storied building near a big market. I had a room of my own, my parents lived in the bigger room. My mother bought a new cupboard and put my grandfather's bed behind the cupboard. We also had a wardrobe and two sideboards. There was a bookshelf in my parents' room. I also remember a desk covered with heavy green cloth and a low marble table. I had a wooden bed, a wardrobe and a book stand with my textbooks in my room. I liked reading, but we didn't have many books at home. We borrowed books from one another at school. We mainly read Russian classics. I remember books by Sholem Aleichem [6](#) and Jewish writers in Russian. There were many children in our yard. We played together, planted flowers and fed dogs. I had Russian and Jewish friends.

When we moved to a new apartment I went to another school. It was a Russian secondary school. I became a pioneer at school. The admission ceremony took place in the cultural center of the knitwear factory named after Nogin. I was to turn 10 in three months' time. When I came onto the stage and the commission asked me how old I was, my classmates began to whisper that I should tell them that I had turned 10. I couldn't lie and said that I would be ten soon. I was very concerned that they wouldn't admit me because children only became pioneers after they had turned 10. I was admitted, and when I got my red necktie I felt very happy. There were also badges with pioneer fire flames. I remember how proudly we were marching home past the synagogue. We ran into the synagogue, but were told to get out of there. We couldn't understand why. My grandfather was skeptical about my becoming a pioneer, but he understood that it was the trend at the time. I continued to celebrate Jewish holidays with my family, but I didn't tell anybody at school about it.

We had various clubs at school, such as a defense club and a physical culture club. We issued wall newspapers and took an active part in electoral campaigns. We went around the town on trucks holding posters. On Soviet holidays we arranged amateur concerts, recited poems and sang Soviet songs. I studied well. I was good at all subjects, but my favorite one was mathematics.

My grandfather died in 1932. He was buried in the Jewish cemetery. I wasn't allowed to go to the funeral, but my mother told me that there was a rabbi there. After my grandfather died our family celebrated fewer Jewish holidays until we stopped celebrating them completely. The Soviet power

struggled against religion. When the older generation was still alive their families celebrated Jewish holidays, but later I didn't see any family that observed any traditions. In our family only my grandparents were religious, and the following generations lost their commitment to the Jewish way of life. Of course, they all followed the covenants and carried God in their hearts, but there was no outward demonstration of their faith. They didn't go to the synagogue or follow the kashrut. However, my mother tried to keep some traditions: We celebrated Pesach and had matzah at home. My mother fasted on Yom Kippur. She fasted until I strictly forbade her to when she grew older. She had diabetes. I gave her injections and told her that it was said that if a person was ill this person was released from strict obedience to religious rules.

I had a Russian friend, Lyusia, who was lame. Her mother used to say, 'Ronias, how I wish that Lyusia married a Jewish man. Jews are such good husbands. He would take care of her'. It was a common opinion that Jews made good and caring husbands at that time. And Lyusia did marry a Jewish man when the time came.

I became a Komsomol [7](#) member in 1936, when I was in the 9th grade. It was a natural flow of events - from pioneers to Komsomol members. I never took part in public events, but it didn't ever occur to me that I might skip Komsomol. When I was in the 10th grade we were allowed to put up a Christmas tree at school, it was so lovely! Some traditions have ancient roots, and the tradition to decorate a Christmas tree dated back to the times of Tsar Peter [Peter the Great] [8](#). It was hard to eliminate old traditions from people's lives and many people kept having a tree. Christmas Trees were forbidden before with the excuse that it was a waste of trees. [Editor's note: Actually, Christmas trees were forbidden by the Soviet power as vestige of the bourgeois past.]

There was one Jewish lower secondary school at the Jewish children's home in Poltava. Aunt Runia, my father's sister, worked at this school as a medical nurse. She took children home to make them familiar with life at home. I had many friends from this school. Vera, the director of this children's home, was a very nice and kind woman. She was like a mother to the children. She spent all her time with them, and they loved her. They had clubs at school and organized amateur concerts. To complete their secondary education these children went to ordinary schools. There were some of the children from the children's home in our school. They lived in the children's home until they finished secondary school. My mother invited many of them to our home to treat them to something delicious - she cooked traditional food or gave them tea and sweets, just to support them and let them know what the warmth of a home feels like.

Two of my uncles were arrested in 1937 [during the so-called Great Terror] [9](#). One of them was my mother's brother Semyon. He was a prosecutor in Kharkov. He was a very smart and intelligent man. The other one was Nyura's husband, Ilia Gershinovich. He was chief engineer at Dnepro power station, and later worked for Kaganovich [10](#). My aunts went to numerous authorities to find out what they were charged for, but they got no explanation. Only when the process of rehabilitation began [following the Twentieth Party Congress] [11](#), we found out that our relatives had been executed in 1937 and only found 'not guilty' in 1953.

Back then a terrible tragedy struck my Jewish friend Musia Drobnis, my schoolmate. Her father was Chairman of Sovnarkom [Presidium of the government of the USSR]. He was a big official. He left Musia's mother and moved to Moscow in 1923 when one daughter was a year and a half and the other 3 years old. The girls' mother worked at the stocking factory. Her ex- husband helped her

every now and then, but they were very poor. In 1937 Musia's father was the director of a huge industrial enterprise. He was charged for derailing trains and arrested. Musia's family became impoverished. I remember them buying jam and eating it with brown bread. They enjoyed it so much that I felt extremely sorry for them.

The girls' mother was also arrested. She was accused of distributing anti- Soviet flyers. We didn't believe it. We knew that she went to struggle for the Soviet power when she was 13. Musia and her sister were expelled from school and forced to move out of their apartment. Their lives were ruined, they didn't have any means of living and had to do any work they could find. They were treated as members of families of 'enemies of the people' and couldn't even hope to get a better job or any further education. After 1953 Musia's parents were rehabilitated posthumously - it turned out they had been executed in the late 1930s.

I finished school in 1938. My friends Shura and Nina and I submitted our documents to the Kharkov Chemical Technological Institute. We were admitted. I lived in a hostel in the first two years. There were four of us sharing a room: Dora, Shura, Nina and I. We enjoyed ourselves, went to the cinema, theater and to parties, read books and went for walks. When I became a 3rd year student I moved in with my Aunt Sonia. Her son had graduated from the Institute before the war and lived with his wife Fania, an archaeologist, in his own apartment.

### **Beginning of the war**

After my 3rd year I went for practical training to Zaporozhiye [250 km from Kharkov]. On 22nd June 1941 we went on an excursion to the Dnepro power plant near Zaporozhiye. It was a beautiful sunny day. We got off the bus and saw a crowd of people listening to a radio on a post. It was Molotov's [12](#) speech about the beginning of the war in the USSR. I knew that Europe was in war, but we were assured by propaganda that Hitler wouldn't dare to attack the Soviet Union. We rushed back to our hostel, and our management called the Institute and told us that we were to go back to Kharkov. We managed to get train tickets and returned to Kharkov within a few days.

I soon received a letter from my parents in Poltava. They wrote that my father had got an assignment to the oil terminal in Orsk, Ural, and my mother and I could go there by train. My mother wrote that the train was to stop for a longer interval in Donbass, and I could join her there. She had had some time to pack our luggage, which made our situation during evacuation easier. We met two days later in the town of Solnechnoye, Donbass. From there we headed to the Ural. We saw bombed down trains on our way and our train avoided air raids only by some miracle.

We managed to get to Chkalov [3,000 km from Poltava]. Zholtoye village, where the oil terminal was located, was between Chkalov and Orsk. My mother and I were waiting for our father to arrive. We were helpless without him. My mother had never worked before, and I didn't have a profession. Some time later my father's sisters, Runia and Lisa, and Lisa's daughter, Vera, arrived in Zholtoye. We were informed that my father had arrived at the oil terminal, but that he was ill. He had pneumonia before the war. He had left Poltava on a truck and caught a cold which resulted in tuberculosis. He was very ill, but there was no hospital or medication in Zholtoye.

There were six of us living in Zholtoye: my father, my mother, Aunt Lisa, her daughter Vera, Aunt Runia and I. We all lived in one room where my father was lying in bed, ill with tuberculosis. My mother's sisters Tania and Sonia, Boris, his wife Fania and their son, Sima, also arrived in Chkalov,

Ural. My father went to work, even though he was ill. From September 1941 to May 1942 my mother and I looked after him. My mother went to the neighboring villages to exchange clothes for food for my father: We got butter and white bread. We didn't have much luggage, just some dishes, a few clothes and books, but we had to exchange all for food. I put on my father's winter boots and coat and went to Chkalov - I don't know how I found my way in the snowstorms - to get white bread for father because he couldn't eat brown bread. He couldn't digest it. The illness was stronger. My father died in May 1942. The area where we lived was flooded, and we couldn't get to the nearest cemetery in Orsk. We buried my father near the station in Chkalov.

My mother didn't work and we had to decide what we were going to do. I corresponded with my co-students and they sent me an invitation to come to the Institute. My mother and I decided that it was best for me to complete my education and get a profession. My Institute was evacuated to Alma-Ata in Middle Asia [2,000 km from Chkalov]. My mother and I arrived in Chirchik [4,000 km from Poltava]. There was a rich market in Chirchik. I couldn't resist the sight of grapes. I ate some and fell ill with typhoid. It resulted in pneumonia. I stayed in hospital for two months. My mother also lived in this hospital.

We had sold all our belongings and were starving. We couldn't make a living and went to Leninabad [5,500 km from Poltava] where Aunt Nyura and Volodia lived. Aunt Nyura was a doctor at the preserved food factory. At that time students of the Odessa Technological Institute came for training to this factory. Aunt Nyura introduced me to some students, and they told me to study at their Institute in Stalinabad, as one got a stipend and food portions there. My mother and I went to Stalinabad, and I studied at the Odessa Technological Institute for a year and a half. We stayed in the basement of a hostel in the unfinished House of the Government. There were six of us: four students from Odessa, my mother and I. My mother and I shared a bed, which was a usual way of living at that time. Our co-tenants, Lyusia and Fira, were Jewish, and Luba and Tania were Russian.

In August 1944 the Institute was to re-evacuate to Odessa, but the director didn't allow me to take my mother with me. I said to him, 'In that case I'm staying too. I'll find a job and a place to live'. He felt sorry for me and allowed my mother to come with us. In Odessa we lived in the hostel and shared a bed again. My mother was too old to go to work, and we lived on my stipend and the food that I received at the Institute. In January 1945 we went to have practical training in Leninakan, Armenia, and I sent my mother home to Poltava. I couldn't take her with me - the tickets were too expensive. Our house had been destroyed, and my mother stayed with my father's sister Lisa. Lisa, Runia and Vera were back from evacuation. My mother helped them about the house. After a month and a half I returned to Odessa.

## Post-war

I remember Victory Day on 9th May 1945. We celebrated it in Odessa. It was a day of great joy. I remember the fireworks, the trees in blossom, people infatuated with victory, hugging each other, crying and dancing. I graduated from the Institute a month later and got a job assignment to the packed food factory in Kiev. I was an engineer there and received a room in the factory hostel. My mother came to me from Poltava. However, soon this factory was closed as a non-profitable enterprise. I lost my job and place to live.

My father's brother, Yunia, who was chief engineer at the Geological Department in Kiev, helped me to get employment at the Laboratory of Secret Testing at the Geological Department. My

cousin Boris, his wife Fania and their son Sima returned to Kiev from Chkalov. Boris and Fania worked at the Institute of Archaeology and lived at the Institute - there were five rooms for the staff. I moved in with Boris and Fania, and my mother left for Poltava again.

Boris, Fania and I were very happy to learn that the state of Israel was established in 1948 and that the Jewish people finally had their own home country.

I worked at the Geological Department for five years. In the early 1950s, during the campaign against cosmopolitans [13](#), five employees of our laboratory, including me, were fired because we were Jews. I had access to sensitive information before. This access was cancelled, and my photo was removed from the Board of Honor. I was looking for a new job, but Jews weren't employed.

Later the Geological Department offered me a job at a geological expedition near Genichesk [700 km from Kiev]. There was a vacancy there because it wasn't an attractive location to work at. I was offered the position of the manager of the laboratory. The expedition site was 35 kilometers from the railroad. We were searching for nickel and cobalt - this was also sensitive area, but I was allowed to go there. [Editor's note: Natural resources deposit areas were state secrets in the USSR.] I took my mother with me. I lived with her and a friend of mine in a small room. I was glad that my mother was with me. She was a great cook and a very hospitable person, and my colleagues liked to visit us. Those were two beautiful years in my life (1952-1954). We were a great team of geologists and enjoyed working together. We got together in the evening to sing songs, discuss the latest news and books that we had read, had tea and danced. Life seemed wonderful to us.

### **The Doctors's plot**

Soon we heard rumors that the Soviet power was planning to deport Jews to the autonomous Jewish region of Birobidzhan [14](#). It was a trying period: the Doctors' Plot [15](#) was at its height. We were living in fear. We got up in the morning and listened to the radio. Of course, we didn't believe in Jewish doctors being murderers. We were old enough to understand that it was a plot. Then Stalin fell sick, and again we rushed to hear the news on the radio. On 5th March 1953 Stalin died, and there was mourning all over the country. My first thought was, 'What's going to happen now? If there were persecutions before what would they do to the Jewish people now?'. My mother and I remembered the repression of 1937 and didn't feel any sorrow about Stalin's death, but many people sincerely believed in his impeccability and cried. I was concerned about the uncertainty. Many years later Aunt Sonia recalled the time when Stalin died and said to Boris 'How we lowered our eyes to hide our joy from other people'.

Our expedition was over in 1954, and we returned to Kiev. We had no place to live and Aunt Sonia gave us shelter in her house. They exchanged their apartment in Kharkov for one in Kiev. I began searching for a job, but due to state anti-Semitism it was almost impossible. I never faced everyday anti-Semitism. My colleagues always treated me nicely. Uncle Yunia helped me again: He got me a job at GIINTIZ [State Institute of Engineering and Technical Survey]. We completed surveys for the construction of sugar factories and other industrial facilities. I submitted my request for an apartment for my mother and me. Meanwhile we were living with Aunt Sonia and Uncle Misha in their 30 square meter room. Their son, Boris, and his wife, Fania, played an important role in my life.

After the war Boris and Fania worked at the Institute of Archaeology in Kiev. Boris had finished the Faculty of Literature at the Pedagogical Institute, but he specialized in archaeology and had inventions in that field. In the early 1960s the Institute of Archaeology sent him to a reserve in Olvia [400 km from Kiev] where he was the director for two years. Boris was successful with his work in archaeology. He also wrote poems and short stories, but he wasn't ambitious and didn't publish his writings. Fania was very smart. She was the manager of the antique section of the Museum of Western and Oriental Art in Kiev in the 1970s. I liked to visit her at home. She always had gatherings of interesting people: archaeologists, historians, poets and writers. Her friends became my friends.

I got along well with my friends at GIINTIZ. We went to all concerts at the Philharmonic and the Conservatory. I liked performances of Russian and Ukrainian drama - there was no Jewish theater in Kiev at that time. Neither my friends nor I went to the synagogue. Of all Jewish holidays we only celebrated Pesach. My mother always got some matzah for Pesach, but we didn't really follow all the rules when we celebrated this holiday. We didn't light candles on Saturdays either. It wasn't customary in our circle.

When I was 43 I received an apartment. My colleague and I got a two-bedroom apartment in the Otradniy neighborhood, far from the city center. I got a room and my colleague got a room. My mother and I shared my room. My mother didn't have a right for this apartment as she wasn't an employee of our Institute. She was very happy that we had a dwelling of our own, but she only lived in this apartment for three years. She passed away in 1966. She was buried in the Jewish section of the Baikovoye cemetery.

## Retirement

I retired in 1975. I received a good pension of 132 rubles. I would have stayed at work longer, but I had to retire: Fania and Tania were very ill and we had to look after them. Boris, Fania and I decided to exchange our apartments for a three-bedroom apartment in the center of the town. It was better to live together to look after Boris' parents and Aunt Tania. Aunt Sonia and Uncle Misha died in the late 1970s, Aunt Tania passed away in 1982. They were all buried in the Jewish section of the Baikovoye cemetery.

Looking back I realize that I lived my life looking after my relatives: I gave them injections, took them to hospitals and looked after them. I haven't got my own family. I never met the man that would have made me feel like changing my whole life. My relatives always came first in my life.

Sima moved to the US in the 1970s. Boris, Fania and I visited him in 1990. It was my first trip abroad. We went to New York, Philadelphia, Chicago and Washington. We visited many museums. I am very happy I've been there, but during our visit Sima died in a hotel. Fania was grieving over him, and it was a great loss to Boris. Sima's daughter, Helen, moved to Israel shortly after Sima died. She almost convinced Fania, Boris and me to move there, too. We even had our documents processed, but at the last moment we changed our mind. To change life so dramatically at our age was just too much. Erik, Boris' son from his first marriage, also lives in Israel. I visited Israel in 1990. It's a wonderful country. I liked everything there. We traveled a lot, but I couldn't wait to go back home, to my town and friends.

Fania died of an infarction in 1992. Boris and I missed her a lot. Our friends supported us and often came to see us. Boris and I receive food packages at the synagogue twice a year. [The synagogue in Kiev supplies food to needy Jews at Rosh Hashanah and Pesach to support poorer people.] Once, when I was on my way to the synagogue to collect half a kilo of butter, I met an old non-Jewish woman. She asked me what I was going to get at the synagogue and when I told her she commented, 'How wonderful that you get support. There's nobody who thinks about us'. Frankly speaking, I felt ashamed of being privileged compared to many other old people who are less fortunate.

Boris died in 2000. I seldom leave my home now. A few years ago a fence fell on my back and injured my spinal cord. I have a nurse from Hesed called Nina Antonovna. She comes to help me around the house. There is another woman, Katia, who comes to cook. I receive a pension of 151 hryvna and I can pay these women. My niece, Galia Gershinovich, also supports me. She's a journalist in Moscow. She once said to me, 'Aunt Ronia, just imagine how happy my father would have been to know that I support you'. She sends me 600 rubles each month and this amount is almost enough to cover my monthly rent and living costs. It's very touching of her to support me. I can't pay her back anything except for my cordial appreciation of what she does for me. I understand that she doesn't have too much herself, but she still finds it possible to share what she has with me.

My cousin Vera lives in Poltava. She is a journalist with the radio. There is also my cousin Ira in Kiev. All my nieces and nephews are married to Russians: Sabina, Savva's granddaughter, is married to a Russian man, my brother Volodia's children Galia and Alik are married to Russian men with Kazakh and Tatar ancestors. I believe, love is the essential thing in a marriage, and nationality doesn't matter that much.

I am very happy that I'm not alone: Nina Antonovna and Katia take care of me, my nephews and nieces from Israel, Moscow and Poltava call me, Galia supports me by sending some money and my friends come to see me. The curator from Hesed brings me food packages twice a month. She also invites me to attend lectures on history, traditions and the culture of the Jewish people and go to concerts, but I'm too old to go. I am glad that people haven't forgotten me - it makes my life easier.

## Glossary

### **1 Great Patriotic War**

On 22 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.

### **2 Blockade of Leningrad**

On September 8, 1941 the Germans fully encircled Leningrad and its siege began. It lasted until January 27, 1944. The blockade meant incredible hardships and privations for the population of the town. hundreds of thousands died from hunger, cold and diseases during the almost 900 days of the blockade.

### **3 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.

#### **4 Froebel Institute**

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

#### **5 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 October Revolution and the 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.

#### **6 Sholem Aleichem, real name was Shalom Nohumovich Rabinovich (1859- 1916)**

Jewish writer. He lived in Russia and moved to the US in 1914. He wrote about the life of Jews in Russia in Yiddish, Hebrew and Russian.

#### **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 Peter the Great (1672-1725)**

Tsar of Russia from 1689-1725. Peter Europeanized Russia by imposing Western ideas and customs on his subjects. His interests were wide-ranging: Among others, he founded the Russian navy, reorganized the army on the Western lines, bound the administration of the church to that of the state and reformed the Russian alphabet. His introduction of Western ways was the basis for the split between upper classes and peasants that was to plague Russian society until the Revolution of 1917.

#### **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 Kaganovich, Lazar (1893-1991)**

Soviet communist leader. A Jewish shoemaker and labor organizer, he joined the Communist Party in 1911. He rose quickly through the party ranks and by 1930 he had become Moscow party secretary-general and a member of the Politburo. He was an influential proponent of forced collectivization and played a role in the purges of 1936-38. He was known for his ruthless and merciless personality. He became commissar for transportation (1935) and after the purges was responsible for heavy industrial policy in the Soviet Union. In 1957, he joined in an unsuccessful attempt to oust Khrushchev and was stripped of all his posts.

#### **11 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.

#### **12 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.

#### **13 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'.

#### **14 Birobidzhan**

Formed in 1928 to give Soviet Jews a home territory and to increase settlement along the vulnerable borders of the Soviet Far East, the area was raised to the status of an autonomous

region in 1934. Influenced by an effective propaganda campaign, and starvation in the east, 41,000 Soviet Jews relocated to the area between the late 1920s and early 1930s. But, by 1938 28,000 of them had fled the regions harsh conditions, There were Jewish schools and synagogues up until the 1940s, when there was a resurgence of religious repression after World War II. The Soviet government wanted the forced deportation of all Jews to Birobidjan to be completed by the middle of the 1950s. But in 1953 Stalin died and the deportation was cancelled. Despite some remaining Yiddish influences - including a Yiddish newspaper - Jewish cultural activity in the region has declined enormously since Stalin's anti-cosmopolitanism campaigns and since the liberalization of Jewish emigration in the 1970s. Jews now make up less than 2% of the region's population.

## **15 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.