

Simon Gutman

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Riga

Latvia

Interviewer: Svetlana Kovalchuk

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Do you know how old I am today? It is in the militia that they ask you the year of your birth, but for ordinary people it's good enough to know how old you are. I turned 94 in September 2001. And in my soul, I feel very young. I'm an artist, caricaturist by specialty, a humorist, and also an actor. My daddy's surname was Gutnomen-Gutman. It was in the Soviet times that we simplified it, abridged it to Gutman. My father's full name was Israel Solomonovich Gutnomen-Gutman, and he was born in 1873. He died in Kharkov in 1919, at the age of 46, of a heart attack. He was old, in my childish view.

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My family background

I know very little about my grandfathers and grandmothers. They traded in wood and lumber, mainly in Latgalia. About my daddy I can say that he was a good businessman. He wore rimless glasses, smoked Zefir cigarettes, and always knocked down a small glass of vodka before dinner. He was a lumber trader, but then he bought a cinema in Dvinsk. It was called Grand Electro. He bought the equipment for his cinema in Germany. This I remember very well. And when the front was very near Dvinsk, during World War I, my father was in Dvinsk all the time - the profit was quite good. There was a front zone, a large garrison. The Germans couldn't seize Dvinsk for three years. Only in 1917, when the Russian army fell apart, only then Dvinsk was taken.

About 1915, my father sent our family - mum, me and my two brothers, to Zilupe, formerly Razumovskoye. And later we lived in the vicinity of Moscow, in Pavlovski Posad. There I studied at school. We were three brothers. The eldest was Yakov and then came my twin brother, Solomon, and I. Solomon, or Salya, as we called him, was 20 minutes older than me. I was very small - no bigger than a scoop. Daddy took mum to the maternity house. Later, when he went back there on a cart to find out who was born, he was told, 'A boy!' - and he answered, 'Okay, that's fine!' Then, a couple of hours later, he went there again asking, 'Well, how's that boy?' And they told him, 'You've got another one!' Daddy apparently told the carter, 'Just don't you go in that direction again!' That was later told as a joke. Yakov was two years older than we, born in 1905. We had a governess in Dvinsk.

My elder sister Nyuta, born Anna Israelevna in 1903, had a sick leg. Mum took her to Berlin for medical treatment. She was eleven years old then, and on the eve of the war mum took her to Switzerland, and my sister stayed there. She learned German and French in Switzerland. Daddy helped her financially. When the West was cut off completely, my sister helped there working in mountain sanatoriums around Lausanne. She worked as much as she could to justify her stay in the sanatorium. She returned to Riga, to our uncle's place, via Finland in 1921. We only met in 1923.

Before we left for evacuation, we lived on 20 Rizhskaya Street in Dvinsk. Once, when mum was seeing her sister Tirtsa off to Vilnius [today Lithuania], she took me and Salya to the station. They were standing in front of the railway car and talking and had temporarily forgotten about us. And we didn't know what to do. We were six years old at the time. Salya was a dashing guy and he said, 'Let's go!'. So we addressed the cab driver, 'Hey, old man, have you seen our mum?' - 'What does she look like?' - 'She is tall and beautiful.' - 'No, I haven't.' - 'Take us home then.' And off we went to 20 Rizhskaya Street, right down the road, near the station! It seemed to us a long way to walk, but very close on a horse-cart. Just imagine, my mum turning around at the railway station, and both of us being gone! She cried, panicked and was scared to death.

My mum's name was Berta Borisovna; her maiden name Aronovich. Her mother, my grandmother Sheina Aronovich, was married three times. All her husbands died one after the other. Mum was a single child from my grandmother's first marriage. With her second husband, Velvel Israeltan, my grandmother had a whole bunch of children - my mother's stepbrothers and stepsisters. She lived with her last husband in Copenhagen, Denmark, but returned to her daughter from the second husband, Aunt Tirtsa Koldobskaya, nee Israeltan, to Vilnius. There she lived and there she died. Aunt Tirtsa's husband was a prominent businessman. Grandmother died in the summer of 1931. Mum went to Vilnius to attend the funeral. Aunt Tirts? died in Vilnius in 1936, before the war.

Let me tell you about the Israeltans, the family of my mother's stepbrother. They are the most apparent victims of the Holocaust of all my relatives. Bella Karpovna, nee Rabinovich, my uncle's wife, called me around 20th June 1941, and asked, whether it was possible for them to leave with me. And I didn't know myself what to do.

My uncle's name was Solomon Velvel - they also called him Solomon Vladimirovich - Israeltan. The state of Israel wasn't yet established, but the surname already existed. We called him Uncle Sam. He had been to the USA several times and spoke good English. They lived on ?ntonievskaya Street in Riga, in a large beautiful apartment with wall-paintings, ornaments and pictures. It is he who gave shelter to Nyuta after she returned from Switzerland in 1921. And whenever I went to Riga, I stayed in their apartment. He was the manager of a large textiles shop, owned by Kazatsky, a Jew. This big shop was situated on the corner of Krishyan Baron and Elizavetinskaya Streets. When the Soviet power was established, he was appointed the shop's manager. The relatives of his wife - the Rabinovich family - lived in Dvinsk and were engaged in the trading business. Uncle Sam sent them the goods.

His wife, Bella Karpovna, wasn't as beautiful as she was imperious and clever. They had wonderful, educated sons Yulik or Yuly, and Vovik or Velvel. They were proficient in German, Latvian and Russian, but they didn't speak Yiddish. My uncle and aunt only spoke Russian at home. Velvel married a nice girl in May 1941. I visited them on the occasion and we had a lot of fun. He sent her

to a sanatorium in Sigulda [a town 50 km from Riga]; she was pregnant then. You can imagine, the war began, and she remained alone in Sigulda, expecting a baby. I was told that Yulik and Vovik were shot by Nazis at the very beginning of the war. Aunt Bella and Uncle Sam perished in the ghetto in Riga. In the 1960s I accidentally met their former housemaid in the street, Tanya, a simple Russian woman with a Nizhniy Novgorod accent. It was she who told me that my aunt and uncle had been in the ghetto and that she had brought them food suppressing her fear.

Growing up

My mother and grandmother lived in Griva district in Dvinsk. Financially they lived under very low standards, and my mother had to read books under the blanket. She was persecuted at home for wasting kerosene and candles. Daddy was much older than mum. I don't remember exactly how much older. My mother's attitude towards my father wasn't so romantic. He bought a carriage, a horse and used to take her for a ride. I learned that from my sister. Mum communicated more with her than with us.

Our language at home was exclusively Russian. However, mum spoke good Yiddish. As she was going to go abroad to bring my sister home, she attended courses in French.

In 1917 daddy took us from Pavlovski Posad to a resort on the coast of the Azov sea, in Berdyansk, for six weeks, and there we ended up staying for four years - during the revolution [see Russian Revolution of 1917] [1](#) and the Civil War [2](#) in Russia. We lived poorly, having taken to Berdyansk almost nothing, only my mother's fur coat, a coat of seal skin, which we sold, and just enough food for the winter. Daddy wasn't a religious man, but it was a generally accepted rule to visit the synagogue. When he occasionally went to Berdyansk, where there was a choral synagogue, he used to attend the service. He had a special silk cloak. I remember, he would point towards us in the synagogue and say in Yiddish, 'These are the performers of my funeral rites'.

There was that turmoil in Russia, and daddy still stayed in Dvinsk. In 1919 he was once more making his way to us with a train transporting some Austrian captives. The train was heading south. They robbed him of his purse and all his documents. He couldn't do a thing, they would just throw him out of the moving train. He was already sick, had heart attacks, and his whole body was shaking. Traveling was no good for him, but he still kept coming back to Dvinsk. So, during his last trip, he stopped in Kharkov, at my mum's cousin. He was put into a hospital and he died there of what they now call an infarct. Mum buried him in Kharkov. She went especially from Berdyansk to Kharkov to be present at the funeral ceremony. It was very difficult to get there.

We went to the synagogue when daddy died. My brother and me would go there daily, three times a day, to recite the Kaddish - the prayer of repentance. My elder brother, Yakov, didn't go. There were situations during the Civil War, when there was shooting, but all the same we used to attend the synagogue. My brother Solomon was fanatically religious in those years. He even read prayers for the night, lying in bed. But, you see, to offer a prayer you need a kippah! So he pulled a blanket over his head to say the prayer. Mum was religious, too. That was her family feature. She spoke extremely good Yiddish. And we haven't learned to speak Yiddish, whereas she taught all of her sons Hebrew. Wherever we lived, a teacher came to us, we always had a teacher of Hebrew. Many words I know up until today. A comrade taught us to read in Yiddish, when we were in the Komsomol [3](#). He was a highly principled, noble lad. He had taught us, and I felt somewhat comfortable at once. I still read in Yiddish today.

In Pavlovski Posad we went to a secondary school, and in Berdyansk to a grammar school. During the four years in Berdyansk I saw everything - the Civil War, the landing of troops, the anarchists of Makhno [4](#), the Red army, the White army [5](#), bombings. If I could recollect it all, you could shoot a whole film about it. In our Berdyansk home we met very interesting people. The second studio of MHAT [the Moscow Academic Arts Theater] came for guest performances, and the famous actors used to stay in our house - Stanitsyn [Viktor (1897-1976), real name Geze], Khmelev and so on. The elite of the Russian theatre. We had never been to the theater before, and they used to take us. Fantastic impressions! My elder brother was sick, he suffered from some mental disease. In 1921 my mother managed to obtain a free ticket for a group tour and our entire family went to Moscow. Imagine a free tour, at such complete poverty! We prepared for the journey, took some crackers. The journey from Berdyansk to Moscow was a whole epopee; too many details! We saw the starving people from Volga region at the stations, small children corpses! We were robbed, everything was stolen! We arrived in Moscow sick with measles, and that illness was a final blow for the mental condition of my elder brother. He was put into a hospital in Moscow, and there he died in 1922.

In Berdyansk we sympathized with the White troops, the environment was wholly bourgeois - shopkeepers, small retailers. And when from 1921 to 1923 we again lived in Pavlovski Posad, I became 'Red' under the influence of my comrades. We were publishing a newspaper! We collected money for the construction of planes, when Curzon [6](#) announced the ultimatum to the Red Russia. What a joy it was, when mum had finally taken our money to Moscow, and they printed a list of our names in the newspaper Izvestiya.

Salya and I liked to draw since we were children, but he drew better than me. He used to copy pictures by Russian artists from postcards. He liked water-colors, but he didn't use water; he used his tongue instead of water. His lips were always colored with paint. I copied flowers from cards. Mum found a drawing teacher in Berdyansk. I also did some modeling. I used to draw my teachers and schoolmates at lessons in Dvinsk.

We returned to Riga in September 1923 the three of us - mum, my brother and I. We arrived in Riga and stayed some time with my Uncle Solomon Israeltan, and then moved to Dvinsk. Our cinema was still there, but it appeared that the premises were already occupied. Mum tried to earn some money. We managed to make ends meet somehow, with mum borrowing some money sometimes.

The cinema attracted me and my brother. We were known in Dvinsk as the family of Gutman - the former director of Grand Electro - so they let us into the cinema free of charge. Once a mechanic at_ppolo cinema entrusted me with turning the handle of the manual film projector; his elder brother worked for my father in Grand Electro. Now they don't do it anymore! And there was a problem: when I thought the film was about to finish, I started to turn slowly, and the spectators were indignant! Wow! That's how I let myself down - and I stopped to go to the cinema from that moment on! It was really embarrassing!

We studied in a secondary Jewish school in Dvinsk. All subjects were taught in the Russian language. Of course we had to pay for the school. My brother and I participated in the Komsomol movement in school. The Komsomol had a very strong influence in Latgalia. The Komsomol organization was underground. Only the youth clubs were legal; we attended those as well. I wasn't

the most active member, but I was in prison for some time, nonetheless! I was in Riga's Central prison, in the solitary cell, but only for one month. In Daugavpils [formerly called Dvinsk] I served a short term, too. I had close connections with one comrade; we rented a room together. And when the members of our central committee were arrested, they were searching apartments and I was also put under arrest. They finally released me, but I remained under the supervision of the police. Later I was acquitted! In Riga, when I started to work, I had no links with the Komsomol any more. But the police knew me. I was always shadowed.

Later, when I arrived in Riga in 1928, my sister helped me to get a job with the Jewish theatre on 6 School Street. Every inch is familiar to me there. I'm the only living employee of that Jewish theater. All the rest are dead by now! Michael Io - his stage name was Io, but his full name was Ioffe - was the chief artist of the theatre. There were many actors, I made sketches of them all. What wonderful acquaintances we had! From America, from Poland, from different countries! In the first season I worked in a workshop. I thought, let them think there, in Dvinsk, 'Wow, Simka is an actor in a theatre!' And in fact it was like this: take a brush and do the wall-painter's job!

During the first year I worked in the decoration workshop, and the next year I was offered the position of a stage property-man. What is a property- man? Well, I was supposed to prepare everything: the tools, the guns and so on. If they were going to eat on stage, I was to cut the bread. I prepared the wine, but diluted it with water; it was just for make-belief. Our guests included the American stage director Adler, and Clara Young. She was 70 years old then, but behaved like a young girl on stage. I met the local actors as well: Einas, Shapiro, Ronich, Peter Surits. There were a lot of amusing episodes. The actor and director Rubin once came from Moscow, from the theater of S. Mikhols [7](#); he staged Sholom Aleichem's [8](#) 'The Big Money' in our theater. That was a great performance! All in the modern style - the decorations, the actors' make-up, and the stage manager's fantastic ideas!

In my life I was lucky to see in close up how the famous stars like Mozhukhin [Mozhukin, Ivan (1889-1939): Russian-born actor, died of tuberculosis in France]. In the middle of the 1920s the French director Turzansky [Turzansky, Viktor (1891-1976): director, born in Kiev, today Ukraine.], a Russian emigrant was shooting a film with Russian actors Mozhukhin and Kovanko [Kovanko, Natalya (1899-1967): actress born in Yalta, died in Kiev]. The film was based on the novel by Jules Verne and was called 'Michel Strogoff'. The film was shot in Dvinsk, they thought that the nature was suitable there - Siberian! All the town did nothing except watching how the film was being shot! The Dvinsk garrison of the Latvian army participated in these shootings - they played the Russian army. I took part, too!

I studied in a number of art schools in Riga. I attended the arts studio of the Riga graphic artist Roman Suta [9](#), I was his 'disciple' and took part in the exhibitions. One exhibition was in 1932. They chose some pictures for the museum, including mine. I created it in my mind, when they were taking me from Dvinsk jail to Riga central prison. It is now that they transport prisoners in a special truck, but back then the guards were just convoying me along the pavement. I kept the impression from that walk for a long time! Sitting in the solitary cell, I began to draw sketches of that image. In spring they let me out, and in summer I finished the picture. And when there was an exhibition of our studio, supervised by Roman Suta, my picture was bought for the Arts Museum. The picture is entitled 'Escorting of a prisoner'.

I remember the studio of Yan Liepin on Mariinskaya Street, in the court yard. When I went there, a few more or less skilled pupils were sitting and drawing. I sat down, too, and took a sheet of paper. And here enters a naked model! Holy smoke, I held my breath! I almost fainted! Well, really! Boys use to spy, through a hole in the fence, and here she comes out in what she was born! I started to draw, and during the break I looked at the other sketches. And the other guys represented the model not in her natural size, like me, but made her look stout - with heavy legs and arms. I asked, 'Where do you see such arms and legs? The model is of quite normal stature!' And they answered, 'You should draw what you think, rather than what you see!' Well, that's the Latvian style! Later I got used to it.

My brother was staying in Dvinsk at that time. When he arrived in Riga, he found a job as an ordinary transport worker, and used to carry heavy bags. Then he left for Slovakia, the city of Brno. He studied there for about two years. It was a rare thing for Riga Jews to get a higher education. And he was studying to become a foreman in textile factories - he learnt how to make carpets, tapestries. Having returned from Brno, he worked in Dvinsk in a small textile factory. The bosses and owners of such small factories were usually Jewish. And when the Soviet power was established, he was appointed director of that factory.

Married life

In 1931 I got acquainted with my future wife, Ida Ruvimovna Kvasnik, born in 1917. I met her in Stropy. The remarkable Stropy Lake! She was sitting there on a bench near a kiosk for the holiday-makers, and I approached her and started a conversation. I'm of a deleterious character to women! I liked to fall in love back then. I had affairs with women disregarding age. That's why I had two infarcts. Back then it was a country-side romance - I took her on boat trips, though I could hardly row at that time.

I was enlisted for the army that year. She used to come down to the walls of the Dvinsk fortress, where I served in Zemgalskaya division. Once I was punished for coming late, thus violating the strict order, because I was spending time till late at night with her! And I had a watch that I had won in a soldiers' lottery - this watch worked all right while I was walking, but as soon as I stopped, it stopped too. Oh, it was a romantic story! I had a very good and beautiful wife. She was younger than me, but she's dead by now; during her last years she was very seriously ill.

We married in 1936. Did we have a chuppah? Let me just tell you this: I wasn't religious, and to this day I am not. Her father, who came from Lithuania, was religious. Her mum died two or three years before our wedding, of breast cancer. Her father spoke Russian, as everyone from Lithuania, with a very strong accent. Well, there was something like a chuppah, but I preferred not to disclose this to people! We had a kind of chuppah at some relatives' home, in an apartment. I yielded to their request to avoid a scandal. My wife wasn't especially religious. She spoke good Yiddish, but didn't go to the synagogue. They lived poorly, although they ran a small grocery store, in the house where they lived. The apartment was miserable. Her younger sister Rosa was plump and chubby. Her brother looked kind of unhealthy.

We had no property at all at first, we were renting furnished rooms, and only once we stayed in them for the summer season. In summer we usually rented a cheap cottage in Melluzhi, Yurmala. By that time, in 1938-39, I had some savings, money I had earned as an artist, and I could afford to rent the rooms in town in summer as well. We paid about 35-40 lats a month. After we started to

live together, my wife stopped working. We could hardly afford buying anything. The first time we bought some furniture was in 1940, in the Soviet times!

I had an attraction for cinema, inherited from my father, and I went to work in film advertising. They gave me photographs, and I made drawings for the ?RS company. That company used to show Soviet and American films. I made posters for the Soviet films. The posters without text were used all over the pre-Baltic countries. Later I gave the originals of my posters to a cinema archive. Simultaneously, I made some additional money as a caricaturist. I signed my pictures Gutman.

By 1940 everybody knew how the situation was likely to develop. In 1939 Moscow presented an ultimatum to Ulmanis [10](#) and there were Soviet military bases at sea. The bases needed protection! The war was going on in full swing all around, and the people's state of mind was quite predictable! We knew that nothing good was going to come out of it. On 17th June the Soviet troops entered Riga. On the 21st there was a demonstration at the central prison: all communists were granted amnesty. On that very day I decided to go to Riga from our summer residence. I saw an incredible show! Crowds of people moving, carrying red banners. It was something tremendous! Just recently, for a red cloth, thrown at night on wires, you were sentenced to several years of imprisonment.

Not far from the prison, behind the railway, a crowd of people gathered waving trade union flags. They were mainly Latvians. Suddenly a Soviet airplane appeared, and there one elderly Latvian lady exclaimed, 'Look, our eagles are flying!' When I nowadays narrate this story to Latvians, they cannot believe it! Later, communists began to come out of the prison and the crowd greeted them warmly. Then we all headed for the presidential palace and the presidential banner was hanging there. The Latvians shouted, 'Nost so kabatlakatinu!' [Remove that handkerchief!]. There was a bunch of dare-devils, who tied an Ulmanis portrait to a bicycle, wrapped it in a prisoner's uniform and were riding along that way! All these historical events were tremendous! But I noticed angry faces in many windows as well. It should be remembered, you know, the climax was yet to come!

In 1940 there were meetings with many well-known Soviet artistic figures. We received a prominent Soviet film director Grigori Aleksandrov and actor Lyubov Orlova. Then we had a meeting with writer Mikhail Zoshchenko [11](#). I worked with the Riga magazine Crocodile then.

I didn't care about nationalization. They did what they considered necessary, but I kept my distance from it! The New Year celebrations of 1941 were very cheerful! We all gathered in the house of the Jewish community, on School Street; there was a remarkable ball!

There was a Jewish newspaper in Yiddish, a communist newspaper, and I was drawing good caricatures for it. Ulmanis expected the events and declared, that in each house there should be a pair of top-boots and a shirt, as reserves for the army. I remembered that declaration! And I made a caricature, which consisted of two parts. Part one - Ulmanis shows the boots, and part two - the boot of history, the Soviet boot, kicks him out! That caricature didn't survive, but apart from that I have a large number of caricatures at home! Especially from 'The Soviet Latvia'!

During the war

1941 - the smell of a thunder-storm hung in the air! I remember that morning, Sunday, 22nd June [the beginning of the so-called Great Patriotic War] [12](#), I was in our office. I remember the speech

delivered by Molotov [13](#). And then we hid in a cellar as the Germans were bombing the city. On Wednesday the 25th the Fifth Column riflemen started to fire from roofs! From all roofs! It was horrible! Everything was prepared! We were sitting and asking each other, especially Jews, 'What now?!' Everyone was panic-stricken!

In our film company we had our own transport base. Mister Gudkin, a Jew, was in charge of that base. He later went to Israel, I don't know if he's still alive. He worked as a film mechanic with the 'Cinema-Town', and then he got that transport supervisor position. And so, here comes a truck, and my wife and I approach it. We were told that all men were supposed to stay and defend Riga! But where were the rifles?! Everybody kept looking at each other! The truck stopped and my wife boarded it with a bag and pillow, among other women and children. I stayed. Then came Gudkin and said, 'There, pal, get in the truck, if you want to go.' We both wrote some kind of passes for each other, saying that we were accompanying the groups, otherwise they wouldn't have let us out! That's how we left with the women.

On the way we passed by 'Cinema-Town'. There were crowds of people! They raised their hands! But it was impossible to take everybody! It was a dramatic scene! So we headed for Pskov along the highway. We saw dead bodies on the road. Somewhere far away, planes were flying low. In Pskov, in turmoil, I got over to the truck in which my wife was. Bombing began. The Germans were bombing Pskov. Later we reached the railway station, got on a train and went in the direction of Yaroslavl, Gorky. Finally, we found ourselves in Sharya, Gorky region.

The heat was awful, we were thirsty all the time. We were assigned to a wood-processing plant to work. We were accommodated in a school and given some bed linen. We worked for several weeks, preparing the logs. What for, do you think? Logs for Donetsk [the biggest coal basin in the Ukraine]. The front needed coal! In August a message was received, saying that men from Latvia were ordered to join the Latvian Battalion. I was enlisted as well. There came the moment of farewell! We went to Gorky. I swear to you, when the train was approaching the station, the howling of the women was unbearable! A nightmare! In no country do women scream as loud as in Russia when they see their men off!

From August till December I was in Gorokhovets camps. The Latvian Battalion was being formed there. Our everyday life? Nothing worth talking about! We took a hot shower in a tent. Four of us at a time - standing. Those who were taller than me were all right, but I was left only with dirty water dropping down on me! Then we were jumping out, barefoot, in October, running through the woods over cones and thorny grass. The same pot that we used for dinner we used for washing ourselves, too. The commissary in charge was arrested later and tried in the military tribunal.

On 3rd December 1941 we approached the city of Naro-Fominsk, where the Latvian Division was fighting. I was a private and remained in this rank until the end of the war. My first impression of the war was when I saw young inexperienced soldiers in a truck coming from the front line - all blood-stained and bandaged! When I saw it, I understood what it was all about. Shortly after I fell ill with an acute form of dysentery. It was hard to feel sick in the frost and while on the move! When we came to a halt, I told the commander that I felt unwell. But the military have no such word in their vocabulary - unwell that is. You are either okay or wounded in the army. So we were lying there and then the 'Katyusha' [a powerful Soviet rocket artillery unit] suddenly struck! Such an explosion, so many flames! I was moving with my last ounce of strength.

All this was happening around 1st January. I wasn't sent to hospital at once. I had been to a couple of first-aid posts first. On 1st January 1942 we were passing some sanitary unit, and they gave me a bowl of hot tea with a lump of sugar! I haven't ever drunk a tastier cup of tea! It was hot, it was sweet! Finally I reached the hospital. It was the hospital for infectious diseases of the Western front. Practically all the staff was from Belarus. The commissar, having learned that I was an artist, ordered at once, 'Leave him here! We need him.' A country woman from an adjacent village worked as a nurse there. She prepared the bed for me in the following way: she lifted me with her left arm and made the bed with her right one. That's how weak I was! Afterwards I stayed in the same hospital for a long time, until summer, with the attendants team. I was in charge of linen in the laundry. It was necessary to control the cleanliness of linen very strictly. If the boss saw an insect, you were dismissed. Then we were brought to the region of Vyazma, to the front line. I was enlisted to the Urals division; I was reluctant to go to the Latvian Battalion again.

On 12th September 1943 I thrust myself out from the trench, and was hit on my left arm. Bleeding profusely I crawled to my comrades and they gave me first aid, bandaged me - my arm was twisted the wrong way and broken. I was taken by cart to a sanitary unit. Then I got on a sanitary train, and found myself in Kuibyshev region, the station of Shantala, in a hospital. In that hospital I stayed from September to February 1944. Then I went to my wife in Stalinabad [today Dushanbe, Tajikistan].

My mum, my sister and Salya's family set off from Riga on foot. A friend, a military officer, helped them. Nyuta had always limped, so she was put on a horse. And Salya had two boys by then. How we found each other after the war, I cannot recollect. Fact is, that I had visited them, my mum and sister, in Chelyabinsk region in 1943. The family of my brother went somewhere further. My wife went via Tashkent to Stalinabad. There she found work in the directorate of a power station construction project. She had a room there. I joined her after I recovered.

From Stalinabad I returned with my wife to Riga in March 1945. We had an apartment on _k_s Street. Mum and Nyuta joined us in the fall of 1945. In November 1946, on the eve of the November holidays, my mother died in a hospital; she was extremely exhausted from the time in evacuation. My sister was very devoted to my mother, and mum suffered greatly from the fact that she had to leave her alone. She worked as a nurse in a polyclinic. She was often sick and was frequently treated in hospitals. My sister never married. She had a boyfriend, as she told me shortly before her death, a businessman from Dvinsk. He courted her for quite some time and seemed to be in love with her, but when he understood that she had nowhere to live, he broke up with her and she didn't see him again. My sister died five years ago. She was 90 years old when she died.

Many of my friends had no children before the war! But after the war the situation changed sharply. The law of nature! My son was born in May 1945, just before Victory Day [14](#). My son's name is Lyova, or Lev, a name inherited from our Jewish grandfathers, almost all of them had double names. My brother's name is Solomon, but in honor of our grandfather his real name is Zalman-Mendel. I'm Simon, but in honor of our grandfather I'm Simom-Shleme. Lyova was first called Ruvin-Leibe, like the father of my wife, but then we decided to give him a name in honor of Leo Tolstoy [15](#). He graduated from the Polytechnic Institute, the power faculty. In the army he served in Kaliningrad region. He worked here, got married and has a daughter. After some time his wife had the idea to leave for the USA. They lived in Houston. He worked under contract. Then they

moved to Colorado, the State of Denver. He now works as an interpreter in the Hague, Holland, translating from English to Russian. But he divorced his wife. His daughter must be around 23 by now.

Post-war

My second son, Naum, was born in 1951. He is named in honor of grandfather Nakhman, on my wife's side. He is very devoted to me. I always consult him, I consider him to be the boss. Not I am the boss, but he is the boss for me. Naum failed to enter the Academy of Applied Arts, he didn't get enough points at the exams. He worked as an artist in the Aurora cinema, but when all the cinemas were closed, he actually remained without work. He is married and has a son.

My twin brother was absolutely different from me. But somehow we always had similar ideas. He was taller than me. In the beginning he was frantically religious, but when we both changed our views in Pavlovski Posad and Dvinsk, he became an outermost left-winger. He was politically more to the left than me, but he was never touched by the police. I was a less active Komsomol member and still I managed to serve several terms in prison somehow. He was severe, strict, and very erudite. In his apartment there were a lot of books. He was very interested in politics. His appearance was unlike mine.

After the war he came to Riga and worked in the advertising department of a film company, made large posters for cinema, and worked in the Lachplesis cinema. He worked there for a long time and had a good reputation. He didn't like melodramas, broken hearts and things. For example, he was contemptuous of the film by Sergei Bondarchuk, 'Fate of a Man'. Emotional break-down! Fie! He didn't care much about himself, but he was very devoted to children!

My brother got married even earlier than I. He was a good artist. Our father could only play the accordion and our mother could sew. There wasn't anything artistic in their characters. Salya's son, Naftoly Gutman, is also an artist, an old man by now, too. And Naftoly's son is an artist as well. Salya's daughter chose a musical career, although she was reluctant to study music as a girl and her parents had to push her. Anyway, she has become a good musician. She's a teacher in a music school. She has left for Germany with her second husband and children. My brother died a few years ago, of pancreas disease. His widow lives in Germany now. The eldest son of my brother, Sergei, was kind of a ne'er-do-well fellow. They found a job for him, in a commodity railway terminal, but he was squeezed to death between carriages there. He was only eighteen.

Gudkin invited me to work in the cinema company in 1945. I stayed there all the time, up to my retirement age. I became a member of the Union of Artists of Latvia and took part in many exhibitions. There were exhibitions of caricaturists, placard-artists, and performances by the front artists. Readers of The Soviet Latvia of the elder generation know me very well. My caricatures were constantly published. The caricatures were political. During the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in 1967 [see Six-Day-War] [16](#) I was telling everybody, that I wasn't Simon Israelevich, but Simon Aggressorovich! Yes, I'm a humorist, an actor, a film director, and when I feel high emotionally, I can write verses. I wrote verses not so long ago. When I worked at the film-studio, I composed poems for amateur performances. I retired rather late. My labor experience is 45 years. My wife worked in the ticket office at the Pionieris cinema for a long time.

Glossary

1 Russian Revolution of 1917

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

2 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.

3 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.

4 Makhno, Nestor (1888-1934)

Ukrainian anarchist and leader of an insurrectionist army of peasants which fought Ukrainian nationalists, the Whites, and the Bolsheviks during the Civil War. His troops, which numbered 500 to 35 thousand members, marched under the slogans of 'state without power' and 'free soviets'. The Red Army put an end to the Makhnovist movement in the Ukraine in 1919 and Makhno emigrated in 1921.

5 Whites (White Army)

Counter-revolutionary armed forces that fought against the Bolsheviks during the Russian Civil War. The White forces were very heterogeneous: They included monarchists and liberals - supporters of the Constituent Assembly and the tsar. Nationalist and anti-Semitic attitude was very common among rank-and-file members of the white movement, and expressed in both their propaganda material and in the organization of pogroms against Jews. White Army slogans were patriotic. The Whites were united by hatred towards the Bolsheviks and the desire to restore a 'one

and inseparable' Russia. The main forces of the White Army were defeated by the Red Army at the end of 1920.

6 Curzon (of Kedleston), George Nathaniel Curzon (1859-1925)

marquess, foreign minister of Great Britain 1919-24, conservative. The youngest viceroy of India in history (1899-1905). During the Soviet-Polish war in 1920 he demanded that the Red Army should stop the offensive at the line known as the Curzon line, which was recommended to become the Eastern border of Poland. The post-WWI border between the Soviet Union and Poland was largely drawn along the Curzon line. In May 1923 the British government issued an ultimatum written by George Curzon, thus known as the Curzon ultimatum, to the Soviet Union, which was defied by the latter.

7 Mikhoels, Solomon (1890-1948) (born Vovsi)

Great Soviet actor, producer and pedagogue. He worked in the Moscow State Jewish Theater (and was its art director from 1929). He directed philosophical, vivid and monumental works. Mikhoels was murdered by order of the State Security Ministry

8 Sholem Aleichem (pen name of Shalom Rabinovich (1859-1916)

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

9 Suta, Roman (1896-1944)

Latvian graphic artist. At the end of 1924 three young graphic artists - Roman Suta, his wife Aleksandra Beltsova, and Sigizmund Vidberg - opened an art studio, Baltars, in Riga. The style of Roman Suta was nation-building in its essence. He used both folk motifs and sketches of everyday life of the Latvian people on china and porcelain. In the 1920s, the works of the studio were very popular in Western Europe and the United States, but by 1930 the collective of Baltars fell apart because of financial difficulties.

10 Ulmanis, Karlis (1877-1942)

the most prominent politician in pre- World War II Latvia. Educated in Switzerland, Germany and the USA, Ulmanis was one of founders of Latvian People's Council (Tautas Padome), which

proclaimed Latvia's independence on November 18, 1918. He then became the first prime minister of Latvia and held this post in several governments from 1918 to 1940. In 1934, Ulmanis dissolved the parliament and established an authoritarian government. He allowed President Alberts Kviesis to serve the rest of the term until 1936, after which Ulmanis proclaimed himself president, in addition to being prime minister. In his various terms of office he worked to resist internal dissension - instituting authoritarian rule in 1934 - and military threats from Russia. Soviet occupation forced his resignation in 1940, and he was arrested and deported to Russia, where he died. Ulmanis remains a controversial figure in Latvia. A sign of Ulmanis still being very popular in Latvia is that his grand-nephew Guntis Ulmanis was elected president in 1993.

11 Zoshchenko, Mikhail Mikhailovich (1895-1958)

Russian satirist, famous for his short stories about average Soviet citizens struggling to make their way in a world filled with red tape, regulations and frustration. Zoshchenko was attacked in Soviet literature journals in 1943 for 'Before Sunrise', which he claimed was a novel whereas it appears to be more of a personal reminiscence. The Central Committee of the Communist Party condemned Zoshchenko's work as 'vulgar' and he published little afterwards.

12 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.

13 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.

14 Victory Day in Russia (9th May)

National holiday to commemorate the defeat of Nazi Germany and the end of World War II and honor the Soviets who died in the war.

15 Tolstoy, Lev Nikolayevich (1828-1910)

Russian novelist and moral philosopher, who holds an important place in his country's cultural history as an ethical philosopher and religious reformer. Tolstoy, alongside Dostoyevsky, made the realistic novel a literary genre, ranking in importance with classical Greek tragedy and Elizabethan drama. He is best known for his novels, including War and Peace, Anna Karenina and The Death of Ivan Ilyich, but also wrote short stories and essays and plays. Tolstoy took part in the Crimean War

and his stories based on the defense of Sevastopol, known as Sevastopol Sketches, made him famous and opened St. Petersburg's literary circles to him. His main interest lay in working out his religious and philosophical ideas. He condemned capitalism and private property and was a fearless critic, which finally resulted in his excommunication from the Russian Orthodox Church in 1901. His views regarding the evil of private property gradually estranged him from his wife, Yasnaya Polyana, and children, except for his daughter Alexandra, and he finally left them in 1910. He died on his way to a monastery at the railway junction of Astapovo.

16 Six-Day-War

The first strikes of the Six-Day-War happened on 5th June 1967 by the Israeli Air Force. The entire war only lasted 132 hours and 30 minutes. The fighting on the Egyptian side only lasted four days, while fighting on the Jordanian side lasted three. Despite the short length of the war, this was one of the most dramatic and devastating wars ever fought between Israel and all of the Arab nations. This war resulted in a depression that lasted for many years after it ended. The Six-Day-War increased tension between the Arab nations and the Western World because of the change in mentalities and political orientations of the Arab nations.