

# Elka Roizman

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Chernovtsy

Ukraine

Interviewer: Ella Levitskaya

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Elka Roizman and her husband live in a small private house in a quiet neighborhood. When I came to see her she was in pain suffering from osteochondrosis, but Elka didn't cancel our interview. She speaks Russian with a slight Romanian accent. She recalled more and more details in the course of our interview and was surprised that her memory brought back so many details. When she talked so enthusiastically about her past her face was glowing and her voice sounded very young. and different. Elka is an interesting person. She reads a lot and is deeply interested in what is going on in the world.

My father Shloime Braiman's parents came from the town of Yedintsy, which belonged to Russia before 1918. After 1918 Bessarabia [1](#) became part of Romania. I don't remember my father's parents. My grandfather, David Braiman, died in the 1910s and my grandmother, Elka Braiman, died in 1919, long before I was born. They had seven sons: my father and his older brothers. Their family was religious, like all Jewish families at that time. My grandparents observed Jewish traditions, prayed every day, went to the synagogue on Saturdays and holidays, observed Sabbath, celebrated Jewish holidays and followed the kashrut.

The majority of the population of Yedintsy, about 5,000 people, was Jewish. There were also Russian, Moldavian and Romanian inhabitants. Jews in smaller towns were mostly craftsmen. In Yedintsy many Jews were shoemakers, tailors, barbers and tinsmiths, etc. There were also Jewish doctors, lawyers and teachers. And there were tradesmen: vendors and owners of bigger stores. There were two synagogues, a Jewish elementary school and cheder. Jewish families lived in the center of town. Land was rather expensive in the center of town and they bought plots of land just big enough for a house and a minimal number of yard facilities. Russians and Moldavians lived on the outskirts of the town and had enough land to grow fruit and vegetables. Every Monday farmers from surrounding villages came to sell their products at the market, and the rest of the week the local population from the outskirts of town sold their products at the market. Dairy products and fruit were delivered to people's homes. There were no pogroms in Yedintsy Throughout the history of Moldavia there was onland no conflicts between the different nationalities in the local population.

I don't know anything about my grandparents' house because after they died their children left their parents' home to get jobs and support themselves. My father's oldest brother, Zeidl Braiman, was 9-10 years older than my father. He must have been born around 1882. Zeidl lived in Zheredevka village, about 5 kilometers from where we lived. His wife's name was Miriam. They had no children. Miriam's sister, I believe her name was Rokhl, lived in the same village. Uncle Zeidl and Miriam's sister owned a water mill. Besides, my uncle had a dairy farm. He kept cows and calves. He had employees on his farm.

My father's second brother, Fivish Braiman, and another brother, whose name (I don't know,) moved to America in the 1910s.

The next brother, Ishye Braiman, was born around 1886. He lived in the town of Beltsy. He was a very handsome man with refined features and a full beard. He had a son and a beautiful daughter. His daughter studied at grammar school in Beltsy, and his son worked with Ishye. They had a farming and trading business. After grammar school Ishye's daughter married a rich merchant's son. This merchant sold grain abroad. They had a traditional Jewish wedding. The bride and bridegroom were standing in a big chuppah in the middle of a huge hall. The rabbi said a prayer, and they exchanged rings. Then they sipped wine from a crystal wine glass. They wrapped the glass into an embroidered napkin and threw it onto the floor. Then the wedding party began. This took place in 1935, and I was there, but I was only 4 years old then.

During the Great Patriotic War [2](#) my father's older brothers, Zeidl and Ishye, and their families perished in a ghetto in Transnistria [3](#).

The next brother, Idl Braiman, was born around 1887. He lived in Yedintsy. His wife's name was Esther. They grew wheat. They had two daughters, Tzeitl and Pesl. During World War II Idl and his family were in the ghetto in Bershadt. Idl's wife Esther died of a disease, cold and starvation. Idl returned home with his daughters. Tzeitl made clothes and sold them at the market. She fell ill with tuberculosis after the harsh living conditions in the ghetto and died a few years later. Uncle Idl had a job as a guard. Pesl went to school. She heard about the rabbi of Chernovtsy who helped orphaned children to move to Israel. Pesl talked to him, and he helped her to obtain all the necessary documents for emigration. She moved to Israel in 1946. Her mother's older brothers, who lived in Brazil, found her there. They were rich and had no children. Pesl moved to Brazil where she got married and had two daughters. She corresponded with us and sent us parcels with fabrics and clothes. In 1954 Pesl came to Yedintsy and took her father to Brazil. Uncle Idl died there in the 1970s. After his death Pesl, her husband and their children moved to Israel. She still lives there.

My father's other brother, Yosl Braiman, was born in 1889. He lived in Yedintsy. Yosl married a rich girl. Her name was Manya. Her dowry included fields and cattle. She had finished grammar school. Yosl and Manya had two sons. One son was a little older than me, and their second son was born in the ghetto in Bershadt. The whole family survived in the ghetto. After the war their older son graduated from the Academy of Agriculture and held high official positions. The younger son was an engineer. Uncle Yosl died in 1976. His wife and two sons moved to Israel. His wife died there in 1988. The older son died recently, and the younger one lives in Israel with his family.

My father was the youngest child in the family. He was born in 1891. I know very little about his childhood. He didn't like to talk about it. He preferred to talk to me about his work. My father and his brothers were managers of landlords' estates. My father did his job very well. He made sure that everything was in order and that there was no theft or loss of harvests. There were Russian and Moldavian landlords but no Jewish ones. Jewish men worked as managers for them, as a rule.

My father and his brothers studied at cheder. Neither my father nor my uncles were deeply religious, but they observed traditions. Every morning and evening my father put on his tallit and tefillin and prayed. He could read and write in Yiddish and knew all prayers in Hebrew.

My grandmother on my mother's side, Dina Kotliar,) was born in Karpachi village in the 1870s. Before 1918 Karpachi belonged to Russia, and afterwards it became part of Romania.

Karpachi was a big village with about 500 houses. The majority of its population was Russian and Moldavian. There were 15-20 Jewish families in the village. Almost all Jews were farmers. They had gardens and orchards and kept livestock. Besides, Jews owned stores where they sold food and other essential goods. Garments and shoes were sold in nearby towns. There was no anti-Semitism in the village. People were good neighbors and respected each other's culture and religion. There was no synagogue in Karpachi, so Jews went to the synagogue in a neighboring village. When Moldavia became part of Romania, the Romanian authorities allowed Jews to build a synagogue in the village. My grandfather and grandmother were honored to lay the first stone for this new building. There was also a traveling shochet. He worked for several villages. He notified people in advance when he was going to come.

My grandmother had two older brothers I knew: Mones and Ksil. My grandmother and her brothers were very close. My grandmother told me a lot about her childhood and her life. She got engaged when she was 9 years old. Karpachi was close to Lvov, which was called Lemberg at that time. [Editor's note: Lemberg belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy at that time.] There were big fairs in Lemberg and people from all the surrounding villages went to these fairs. The fairs lasted for a month. People made deals of all kinds at the fairs. My grandmother's parents were very religious. They met another religious family at a fair. This family had a 10-year-old son and my grandmother's parents had their 9-year-old daughter. They reached an agreement that their children would get married when they came of age and that before that time they would be mekhutonimk [Yiddish for 'in-laws'].

When they returned from the fair, they told my grandmother that she was a fiancée. She didn't quite understand the meaning of it, but she liked the idea. When she turned 16 she got married. My grandparents had a wedding with a chuppah according to Jewish traditions, and her husband stayed to live in my grandmother parents' house. A year later they had a baby girl that died in infancy. Later it turned out that my grandmother's husband was ill with tuberculosis. The rabbi conducted a divorce ceremony. Divorces were rare at that time. There had to be a valid excuse to break off a marriage. My grandmother's reasoning was convincing: They couldn't have children due to her husband's disease.

Later matchmakers introduced her to my grandfather, Itzhak Kotliar, who also came from Karpachi. He was born in the 1860s. He was a widower by the time he met my grandmother. My grandmother was 20 and my grandfather was about 30 when they met. He was a melamed at cheder. They had a traditional Jewish wedding, and my grandmother moved to his house. He had two children from his first marriage. My grandmother raised them as her own sons. One of them moved to America when he was in his teens. Shmil, the younger one, stayed in Karpachi. He had a big house with a store that he owned.

My grandfather was a tall gray-haired man with a white beard. He wore trousers with suspenders over a shirt and a dark jacket. On Jewish holidays he wore an expensive, new black jacket. He always wore a yarmulka. He enjoyed dancing Jewish folk dances. He was an honorable attendant of the synagogue and a respected man in the village. My grandfather prayed every morning and evening and read religious books every night after work.

My grandmother was a beautiful slender woman. She didn't wear a wig. On weekdays she wore a kerchief, and on when she went to the synagogue on Saturdays and Jewish holidays she wore a beautiful shawl. My grandmother didn't wear traditional Jewish clothes such as (dark skirts and blouses). She wore fashionable skirts and light blouses. She made her clothes herself.

My grandparents had six daughters. My mother, Leya Braiman [nee Kotliar], the oldest one, was born in 1902. In 1940 the Romanian area around Karpachi became part of the USSR. When the Soviet authorities issued her Soviet passport her name was written into it as Lisa. The newly established authorities even tried to give them Christian names. My mother never got used to her new name and was called Leya her whole life. My mother's sister Rivke was born in 1903, Frodl in 1904 and Surah in 1906. Rukhl was born in 1911 and the youngest one, Khone, in 1914.

When her daughters were still small my grandmother worked for a landlord. His estate was across the Prut river on the other side of the village. He had a big mansion and kept livestock. My grandmother stayed in his mansion for a month or two in a row and made clothes for his family. Her daughters were with her. My grandfather was a teacher at cheder and took care of the house. He managed with the housework just fine and also did the cooking. They had a room for themselves. Other employees looked after my grandmother's daughters when they were playing in the yard while she was busy with her work. My grandmother told me that the landlord was a very decent and educated man. He had meals with his employees at a long table, joked and talked with them. My grandmother only ate kosher food, and the landlord ordered his cook to make special food for her. My grandmother sewed for the landlord for a long time. I remember that my grandmother took a pile of bed sheets once and we went to the landlady together. She was very happy to see my grandmother. They hugged and kissed, and when we left she gave us sweets and other treats.

My grandparents' house was very different from other houses. The entrance door opened into a big room. This must have been a hallway, but my grandmother had a stove installed there. She had her sewing machine there, and in summer the family lived in this room. The door from this room led into a smaller room. It was warmer and in winter we usually lived there. This room again led into the kitchen. There was another stove there with a stove bench where the children used to sleep. My grandmother also baked bread in the stove twice a week. From the kitchen one could get into the bedroom.

My grandmother taught her daughters how to sew. They were of big help to her. She did the cutting and her daughters sewed things together. She received orders at home. My grandmother had a big table with heaps of pieces of fabric on it. I remember her working at this table. They made dresses, skirts and blouses for peasants. They were paid with food for their work. Peasants had a wedding season in the fall, and my grandmother and her daughters had a lot of work making new dresses for the brides and bridegrooms and for their guests and parents. My grandmother and her daughters even worked at night to get more work done and make more money. They had a glass of water to wet their eyes to stay awake. My grandmother and my mother worked on the sewing machines, and the others sewed on buttons and finished the clothes so they were ready by morning. My mother said that she worked so hard for such long hours that it became difficult for her to stretch her back.

All my mother's sisters were very smart. They were educated at home. My grandfather taught his daughters Hebrew and religion, the alphabet, the basis of mathematics, literature and history - everything that he was teaching at cheder. Two younger daughters, (Rukhl and Khone,) studied at grammar school before the war, but they were external students. I remember that they went to take exams somewhere in Romania one winter day wearing their heavy winter coats. That was in the 1930s.

1914 was a very difficult year. People didn't have enough food. My mother told me that my grandmother fed the family with mamaliga, a popular meal in Moldavia. When mamaliga got cold it could be cut into pieces. My grandmother gave each girl a piece of mamaliga. The girls went to the kitchen garden and ate their mamaliga with spring onions that they nipped off onion plants. Later my grandmother kept two cows and chickens and had a big orchard.

All the daughters, except for the youngest one, got married and had children. Only Aunt Riva had a love marriage. There was a quarry not far from my grandparents' house where her future husband, a Jew, worked as an accountant. Riva was a very pretty and vivid girl, and he fell in love with her. The other sisters met their husbands through matchmakers. There weren't enough young men in the village, but matchmakers were looking for partners in other places. My mother's youngest sister, Khone, was single. She was introduced to a teacher from Beltsy at the beginning of 1941, but the war destroyed their plans of getting married.

My mother's sister Surah died in 1938. She was tall and beautiful like her mother. She died after an abortion. Abortions were illegal, but there were people who agreed to conduct them. They often ended tragically due to unsanitary conditions. Surah had two children.

During the Great Patriotic War my mother's sisters Frodl and Khone died in a ghetto. Only my mother and her sisters Riva and Rukhl survived the war. They lived in Chernovtsy after the war and made their living by sewing.

My parents also met each other through matchmakers. They had a traditional Jewish wedding in Karpachi. After the wedding they moved to Yedintsy where my father came from. They didn't have a house and had to rent an apartment.

I was born in Yedintsy in 1931 and named Elka after my grandmother on my father's side. My brother was born in 1934. He was named Ersh-Ber when he was born, but after the Soviet power was established he was called Boris. My father was working for a landlord. Soon after my brother was born my parents decided that it would be easier for them to make their living in a village. They could grow vegetables and keep livestock. They moved to Karpachi. In the beginning my parents rented a house from a Moldavian woman. The landlady lived in a small hut next to the house that we rented from her. She was a very kind woman. Her children had their own families and lived separately. When my parents were at work the landlady took care of my brother and me. We were very fond of her and called her 'vuina anika' [Moldavian for 'darling mother'].

My parents worked at the sugar factory in Repichany village, across the river from where we lived. This factory operated during the sugar treatment season, from the beginning of fall to spring. The rest of the year my parents stayed at home and took care of us, children. My mother did the housework and made clothes for us. In 1936 my mother bought a house in the village. There was a plot of land next to it. It was a small house, and my parents bought construction materials to build

a new house on this plot of land. After my mother bought this house she quit her job to be a housewife. She had a big kitchen garden and grew flowers. She also kept chickens, geese and ducks. She sold poultry to poultry dealers.

At some point my mother fell ill and was told to drink goat milk. She bought two goats. She had enough milk for the family and sold the remaining milk to the neighbors. My father also took on other jobs when there was no work at the sugar factory. He was a grain dealer. He bought grain from local farmers and sold it to wholesalers. Moldavian farmers kept sheep. My father purchased sheepskins from them in spring to sell them to leather dealers.

My mother also sewed at home. She bought a sewing machine after she got married and made very beautiful clothes for her clients. My mother was a beautiful woman and liked beautiful clothes. She liked to buy new clothes for the money that she made. I always wanted to learn how to sew, but my mother refused to teach me. She said that I wouldn't have time for myself if I learned how to sew.

My mother could also weave Moldavian carpets and spin wool. In winter a painter from town painted hanks of yarn in different colors. There were looms in almost every house. We also had one. On winter evenings women used to make carpets. We had homemade carpets on the floors, on the sofa and on the walls.

There was an assistant doctor in the village, but there was no doctor, hospital or pharmacy. It's hard to imagine now how we managed back then. When my mother had a stomachache our neighbor brought her herbs and an ointment. My mother also had appendicitis and was taken to the Jewish hospital in Yedintsy. There was a Jewish and a Moldavian hospital in Yedintsy. People were charged for surgeries, but post-surgery treatment was free.

My mother and her sisters had many non-Jewish friends. We had a Moldavian neighbor, who had many daughters and a son. He arranged two wedding parties for his son because his fiancée was a Moldavian woman. One party was for all their Moldavian relatives and friends and took place in the afternoon, and the other party was for the Jewish guests and took place in the evening. They had so many Jewish friends! He had to arrange a separate party for his Jewish guests, because he had to have kosher food made for them. My father went to the shochet to have chickens slaughtered for the wedding. The kosher food for the wedding was cooked at our home.

We all spoke Yiddish at home. When my parents wanted to discuss something and didn't want us to understand them they switched to Hebrew. My brother and I knew Yiddish, Moldavian and Romanian. We had books at home. Most of them were religious books: the Torah and prayer books. We also had fiction in Yiddish and a few Romanian books.

When I turned five I went to cheder in our village. The cheder was housed in the synagogue. There were tables and benches and an aron kodesh. It was a one-storied synagogue. There was a section for men on the right side and one for women on the left. My brother also studied at cheder. On Fridays and Saturdays Jews came to the synagogue to pray, and on the remaining days of the week children studied there at cheder. We learned prayers and verses, but I can't remember any of them now.



My parents were religious people and raised us religiously. We always observed Sabbath. My mother cooked meals for two days on Friday. She also baked challah. In the evening the family got together for a prayer. My mother said a prayer over the candles, then she lit them, and afterwards we had dinner. Nobody worked on Saturdays. My father and I visited my father's brother Zeidl and his wife Miriam on Saturdays. They didn't have any children and were very happy to see us. We went to see them on foot, stayed with them the whole day and returned home afterwards.

We celebrated all Jewish holidays at home. Before Pesach my parents went to the nearest town to buy matzah. It was sold in big 10-kilo flax bags. Matzah was kept on the stove at home to keep it dry. My mother also had special tableware for Pesach, which was kept in the attic. It was taken from the attic to be used during the holiday, and our everyday utensils were taken to the attic instead. My mother also used her everyday kitchen utensils if she didn't have enough special ones, but she made them kosher before she used them. We ate matzah and mamaliga but no bread. There was a woman in the village who made and sold matzah flour. My mother cooked gefilte fish, boiled chicken, and made hacklings from goose fat and stewed geese. She made honey cakes, strudels, cookies and pancakes from matzah flour. She also made puddings from potatoes and matzah and eggs. My father always conducted the seder ceremony on Pesach. He had a prayer book in Hebrew and my mother had one in Yiddish. [Editor's note: The interviewee probably meant a Haggadah.] My grandmother Dina, my mother's sisters, my father's brother Zeidl and his wife, our Jewish and non-Jewish neighbors visited us, or we visited them, to celebrate.

I've had a critical mind since my childhood. I could never just take things the way they were. I always needed an explanation. Pesach was celebrated in April when it was still cold. Every person had to drink four glasses of red wine, and one glass was put on the table and nobody was supposed to drink from it. My mother opened the door singing, 'Borech habaa, borech habaa'. I studied Hebrew at cheder and knew that it meant, 'Welcome, welcome. Once I asked my mother to close the door because I got cold. I asked her whom she was waiting for anyways, and she explained that it was Elijah, the Prophet and that the spare glass of wine was meant for him. I didn't ask my mother any more questions that time, but the following year, when she opened the door and sang 'Borech habaa' and my father said a prayer, I looked very closely at that spare glass. Nobody came in to drink from it! When my mother closed the door I declared that she was probably telling me a lie. She told me that Elijah, the Prophet wasn't a man but a spirit and that he had wings and was invisible. He didn't have time to sit down at the table. He flew in to give his blessings and flew out again. It was a plausible explanation, and I believed it.

On Purim my mother made hamantashen. She also made poppy seed cookies that were boiled in honey and honey cookies with raisins and nuts. The tradition on Purim was to take treats [shelakhmones] to neighbors. Some poor person was hired to take them to other people. He got paid for doing this and also received treats for his family. A tray, covered with a white napkin, was filled with pieces of honey cakes, poppy seed cookies, hamantashen, walnuts, apples, oranges and a handful of raisins. Another napkin was put on top of it. My mother used to send this tray to my grandparents first because they were the senior members of the family, and to other relatives, friends and neighbors afterwards. They sent their treats to us in return. On Shavuot we only used to eat dairy products after we returned from the synagogue. My mother made cottage cheese puddings, macaroni soup with milk, cheesecakes and dumplings with cottage cheese.

My brother and I enjoyed visiting my grandmother, who lived close to us. All her grandchildren enjoyed playing in her big yard. My grandmother always had delicious food for her grandchildren. She was always busy doing something, even when she grew very old.

I got very fond of reading at an early age. My parents wanted me to get a good education. Education was expensive, and I remember one evening when my parents discussed how much money they would be able to save. One year at grammar school cost 10,000 or 20,000 lei - I can't remember exactly. They decided that they couldn't afford it, and sent me to a Romanian secondary school in the village. Education there was free. The director of this school was my father's friend and he admitted me one year before I reached the standard school age. I was a very industrious pupil. I never forgot how eager my parents were to give me an education. I appreciated the opportunity to go to a school free of charge. My brother went to cheder at that time. He was too young to go to school.

My father leased a field in 1939, and my brother and I helped him to work on it. We sow seeds and weeded the field. There was a poor Ukrainian family that didn't live very far from the field. When my brother and I were alone in the field they kept shouting, 'Zhydeniata are pups and zhydovka is a bitch!'. [Editor's note: This was a common rhyme in Ukrainian.] There were no anti-Semitic demonstrations in the village at that time, and we were very disturbed about this. We were afraid to go to the field alone. When we were with our parents those children didn't dare to say or do anything of this kind.

In 1936 fascist organizations appeared in Romania. The two biggest ones were the Iron Guard [4](#) movement and the Cuzists [5](#). They openly propagated anti-Semitism and threatened that they would put an end to Jews when they came to power.

German troops arrived in Romania in 1939. The USSR demanded Moldavia and Bessarabia threatening to start a war otherwise. In June 1940 our area became Soviet territory. All richer people were immediately arrested and imprisoned or sent into exile to Siberia. Our Moldavian neighbor was very rich. His younger daughter was the same age as I, and we were friends. He was arrested and tortured to death at the interrogations. We weren't rich and therefore didn't have any problems with the Soviet authorities.

Our school became a Russian school. We had a young Russian teacher who didn't know any Romanian. She tried to talk with us, but we couldn't understand what she was trying to say. A year passed and then the war began.

Since our territory had become part of the Soviet Union, a frontier military unit was deployed in our village. Once we were woken up by the roar of explosions, and on 22nd June 1941 I saw a wounded soldier with his head in bandages. The commanding officer of the unit ordered us to leave the village. We went to the neighboring village, where the majority of the population was Jewish. One of the richer Jews accommodated as many people as he could fit into his house, including us. Soon battles on the border began. We went to Yedintsy, where my father's brothers Idl and Yosl lived. My father's older brother Zeidl also went there from Beltsy. We settled down in Yedintsy. My mother thought that we would be staying in Beltsy for some time and hired a young Jewish teacher to teach me school subjects. She was afraid that I wouldn't be able to catch up with the other children at school once we returned home.



After two weeks the Soviet army began to retreat, and German and Romanian units arrived in town. The German units moved on and left an area of about 400 kilometers east of the Bug River under Romanian supervision. Pogroms began in Yedintsy. Romanians began to shoot at young Jews in the streets. I remember how my teacher came to us and asked us to hide him because he had been shot at. A gendarme came after him, took him out and shot him. Many men were shot on that day. In the afternoon the Jewish population was chased out of their houses. We were taken to the seminary building. Children, old people and women were kept there until late in the evening. Then they announced that those who wished to go home could do so. The people who left were shot when they were on their way home. On the following day they told all men to step aside. My brother begged them to leave our father alone. My little brother stood in front of them telling them to shoot him instead of his father. He was crying in despair. My father was left alone.

On the following day we got on our way. There were about 1,000 people on this march and many more joined from the towns and villages that we passed. My father's brothers Yosl and Idl, my mother's parents and her sisters were with us. We were staying in fields overnight. We were whipped and didn't get any water. Older people fell down in exhaustion and gendarmes shot them. My grandparents perished on the way, but I don't know where exactly. We were dirty and had lice. We came past a river but weren't allowed to go down to the riverbank to drink some water. Local gendarmes shot people if they tried to get close to the water. I wanted to go down to have some water, but my father slapped me and said, 'If you do that I will kill you myself rather than let these fascists kill you'.

We reached a Moldavian town about 40 kilometers from Yedintsy. They fenced an area in a field on the outskirts of town with barbed wire. We lived there for two months. Adults worked on the road construction site. My mother was there, too. Local villagers brought some food to exchange it for clothes or valuables. We were starving. I have no idea how we survived. My mother got some flour in exchange for a few clothes. She boiled a little bit of flour and this was our food. After two months we got on our way across the Dnestr River to Ataki and from there further on to Mohilev- Podolsk in Vinnitsa region. The town was ruined, the houses were destroyed and the streets were covered with broken glass. When we were allowed to take a rest in the field we scattered around looking for something eatable. It was September and there were remains of corn and cabbage in the fields. We ate them raw. People also found beans in the field and boiled them over a fire. Once, when we were about to get on our way again, we discovered that my brother was missing. My father went back to the field and found him fast asleep with a piece of cabbage in his hand.

We came to Transnistria where we were distributed to various ghettos. We were to go to the ghetto in Ternovka village, close to Bershad, in November 1941. There were huts with no windows there - they used to serve as sheds for the dairy farm. There were haystacks near the farm, and we closed window openings with hay and also slept on hay. Lice were eating us alive and our bodies were horribly sore. Later we found an abandoned sauna building and settled down there with another family. We slept on ground floors. My mother told me later that out of 500 families that were in this ghetto in the beginning only about 50 survived.

My father fell ill with pneumonia. There was no hospital in Ternovka, but the Romanian soldiers refused to take him to hospital. My brother and I were allowed to accompany my father, but no further than Bershad. My brother and I went to the nearest village to get a horse and a cart to take our father to hospital. We got one from some old people, put our father on it and walked behind the

cart all the 18 kilometers to the hospital in Bershad. Nobody stopped us on the way. My father's brothers Yosl and Idl were in the ghetto in Bershad. Yosl's wife was pregnant before the war began. Her younger son was born in Bershad. He was very weak, but fortunately he survived. My father was admitted to the hospital. My brother and I stayed with Uncle Idl. My father's brothers Yosl and Idl were in the ghetto in Bershad. Yosl's wife was pregnant before the war began. Her younger son was born in Bershad. He was very weak, but fortunately he survived.

Our father got better somehow. During the winter a local woman hired us. My mother and I went to her home to knit sweaters, socks and stockings for her and her children. One evening our employer told us not to be afraid if we saw strangers in her house late at night. Her husband was a partisan. The partisans lived in the forest and came to the village late at night. Our employer cooked for them and they came at night to pick up the food. They spoke Russian, so we couldn't understand them. I remember that the woman's husband's name was Todoska. The partisans had a meal and left early in the morning. Once partisans attacked the ghetto and killed one Romanian guard and two policemen. After that a German unit came to the village to fight against the partisans. They captured people in the streets. Inmates of the ghetto were among the captives. They were shot in the vicinity of the village. Once the Germans noticed some people in a haystack and rolled over it with a tank. When the bodies were brought to the ghetto it was impossible to look at them. The fascists did terrible things.

Ternovka was a Ukrainian village. I don't know whether there were any Jews there before the war, but there was no synagogue in the village. We didn't observe any Jewish traditions or celebrate holidays in the ghetto. Only a few older Jews got together for a prayer, but there were no younger Jews among them. At that time God forgot about us, and we forgot about God.

In March 1944 we were liberated by the Soviet army. I remember the first Soviet tank entering the village. The Romanians had left a day before. We were so happy and couldn't stop crying and kissing the Soviet soldiers that got out of the tank. I remember a young soldier who gave my brother and me a piece of bread. We went back home, but what we saw in the village when we returned was even more horrific than what we had faced in the ghetto.

An acquaintance of ours told us that there was a Cuzist organization in our village. Members of this organization were our acquaintances, and they had their knives ready to slaughter Jews when the Germans arrived in the village. There was a knife for each Jew and there was a label on each knife with the name of the future victim. Two Jews, Gedale, (he who lived on the outskirts,) and Sabina who lived in the center of the village, left the village first but returned later. The villagers took them to the Prut river and put them into a boat. Villagers were standing on both banks of the river and whenever the boat approached a bank they were throwing stones until the boat turned over and the man and woman drowned. They begged for help, but nobody came to their rescue. None of those who had been their neighbors, went to church and considered themselves decent parishioners came to help. They forgot one of the ten commandments: 'Do not kill' ['Though Shalt Not Kill']. It was all their own doing because they weren't forced by the Germans or Romanians to do this. Since that time I've had a critical attitude towards religion and people who make a show out of their beliefs. I can firmly state that there was anti-Semitism before and after the war, and it will never vanish. One can never know what's on the mind of a person calling himself your friend.

Our house had been completely plundered. There were no construction materials, doors, windows or even roof sheets left. When my mother entered the house she saw her prayer book on the floor covered with bricks and broken glass. I still have this book. There were no clothes or any of our other belongings left. My mother saw our possessions in our neighbors' houses, but only one family returned our things. My mother was told that her friend Olga was the first among the robbers when the German and Romanian units came to the village. Apparently she said that she would chop my mother like a cabbage if she saw her. I still don't understand why. My mother used to sew for her for free, and they looked after each other's children when one of them needed to go out. Of course, I'm not saying that all people plundered houses or threw stones onto that couple in the boat.

My parents didn't want to stay in the village and live side by side with people who would smile at you but sharpen their knives behind your back. We decided to move to Yedintsy where my father's brothers, who had returned from the ghetto, lived.

Almost the entire Jewish population of Yedintsy had perished, and there were many vacant houses. We found a small house in the center. There was a kitchen close to the house where my mother grew vegetables. My father got a job as a sheepskin supplier with a supply company. My mother earned some money by sewing. Some time after the war we began to celebrate Sabbath and Jewish holidays and went to the synagogue on holidays.

I started to go to school again in 1944. Children who had finished three classes before the war went to the 6th grade. I was too old to go to the 4th or 5th grade. I had taught my brother to read and write in Yiddish and Moldavian in the ghetto and he could go to the 3rd grade after the war. We went to a Russian secondary school even though we didn't know Russian. There was a Russian and a Moldavian school in Yedintsy. Most of the Jewish children went to the Russian school because Russian was the state language. My classmates were children of militaries from the frontier military unit based in Yedintsy. We didn't know one single Russian letter or word, and our teachers didn't know Moldavian. We didn't understand most of what they told us, but we tried hard and slowly learned Russian. It took me about a year to improve my Russian.

I finished 8 years of this school. I wanted to continue my education. My mother's sister Riva lived in Chernovtsy where I could go to a higher secondary school. Riva became an invalid in the ghetto due to the hard living conditions. She earned her living by sewing at home for a garment shop. My aunt was very poor. Her family lived in a one-bedroom apartment with a very small kitchen in the attic of a building. Riva had four children. Two of them moved to Israel in 1946 and the two others, a son and a daughter, stayed with her. When I came to live with them her son was in the army.

Aunt Rukhl lived nearby. She also sewed for a living. Jews constituted more than half of the population of Chernovtsy before the war, and there were many Jews left after the war. The Jewish community was strong. There was a synagogue, and my aunts and I went there on Saturdays and holidays. Aunt Riva couldn't afford to observe Sabbath at home because she had to earn money to support her family, but she celebrated Jewish holidays. She always tried to make traditional Jewish food even though she was very poor. She always had matzah for Pesach. She cooked chicken and gefilte fish even if that meant that we had to eat bread and have tea without sugar on weekdays. We fasted at before Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. My friends and acquaintances attended the synagogue regardless of their age.

In 1948 life began to change in Chernovtsy. The Jewish school and Jewish theater were closed and Jewish (writers, actors, musicians, diplomats and scientists) were persecuted. They were declared to be cosmopolitans [6](#). They were fired and sent into exile and many of them were physically tortured. It was hidden fascism of the Soviet regime, but we only realized that much later.

I got a job as a receptionist at a polyclinic and studied in the evening. I was the youngest student at this evening school; the oldest one was 55. It was a special two-year higher secondary school for people who worked but wished to complete their secondary education and get a certificate. Many of the students were ex-soldiers, and there were also teachers who had been demobilized from the front.

Aunt Riva taught me how to sew and was glad to get an assistant. It had always been my dream to learn how to sew, and I was happy to get a chance to make my dream come true. It turned out to be a very handy skill. I took advantage of it to make clothes for my daughter and myself when it wasn't possible to buy things in stores. I spent my summer vacations with my parents in Yedintsy.

There were quite a few Jewish doctors at the polyclinic and the hospital. Most of them were lecturers from the Medical College in Chernovtsy. I wanted to enter this college after finishing 9 classes at school, but a doctor I knew advised me to complete my higher secondary education and go to the Medical Institute [University].

It was difficult for a Jew to enter a higher educational institution. When I finished school I went to Beltsy in Moldavia. I entered the Faculty of Biology at the Pedagogical Institute. There were eight Jewish students out of a total of 75 students at this faculty. Most of the students and teachers treated us very well and made no segregation. You see, people are different regardless of their nationality: There are thieves, scoundrels, blockheads or genius representatives... Anyway, I had the highest grades at the institute and graduated from it with a red diploma. [Diploma with distinction in former communist countries.]

I was a student when the Doctors' Plot [7](#) began. (6). I was at the library once when a Moldavian student came and told me that he heard on the radio that Jewish doctors wanted to poison Stalin and other members of the government. I thought I would faint. I couldn't believe it, but there were people that actually believed this malicious calumny. Only Stalin's death in March 1953 put an end to the Doctors' Plot. When the news about his death was announced on the radio all of us burst into tears. I lived in a hostel at the time. All the students were in the hallway listening to the radio and crying. We all cried - Moldavians and Jews. We weren't aware of the actual state of things. Only the Twentieth Party Congress [8](#) revealed the truth, but I still learn new terrible details about the period of Stalinist rule from people that went through many ordeals.

When I was in my final year at the Pedagogical Institute I met my future husband, Olter Roizman. He was born in the Moldavian village of Brichany in 1930. His family was very poor. His father, Shymon Roizman, was a shoemaker and his mother, Molka Roizman, was a housewife raising four children. Olter's two younger sisters perished in the ghetto in Transnistria, and his father perished at the front. His mother and older sister survived in the ghetto, but his mother was exhausted after the ghetto and died in 1946. His sister lived in Storozhynets. After his service in the army Olter came to Storozhynets to look for a job. He had a lower secondary education and failed to find work. He decided to go to Chernovtsy where he had acquaintances. They were my aunt's neighbors and gave him accommodation. Before my departure for Beltsy I had a picture of my aunt, her daughter

and me taken and left this picture with my aunt. Olter mentioned to our neighbor that he would marry a nice girl if he met one. This neighbor saw a picture of me and asked my aunt if she could introduce her to Olter. He visited my aunt and saw my picture. Later I received a letter from my aunt's daughter saying that a young man wanted to meet me.

I visited them on New Year's Eve in 1953 and Olter and I met for the first time. We had been talking for a while when the neighbor's daughter came in to invite us to her engagement party. This neighbor lived on the first floor. We had lemonade and cookies and stayed there until morning. We had a lot of fun. Olter's acquaintances, who knew me fairly well, told him that we weren't a good match and that he needed to find a more common girl, but Olter was determined to marry me. He proposed to me. Of course, I wanted my husband to be an educated man, but Olter was reliable, and I understood that he would be able to provide for me.

We got married in 1954. We had a wedding party at my parents' home in Yedintsy. There were 60 guests at the party. We had a chuppah and there was a rabbi from the synagogue. He conducted the wedding ritual, and then we sipped wine from a wine glass. Afterwards we broke the glass according to the tradition. Of course, the authorities didn't approve of worship, but Yedintsy was a small town, far from Chernovtsy where we lived and worked. Old traditions and rules were still in force in the town and the authorities were loyal in that regard. It wouldn't have been possible to have such a wedding arranged in Chernovtsy - we would have been reprimanded or even fired.

Upon my graduation in 1954 I got a job assignment in a Moldavian village. [The interviewee is referring to a mandatory job assignment.] [9](#) I knew Moldavian and Romanian. I got married in the middle of my academic year and I returned to work after the wedding. The director of the school wanted me to stay until the end of the academic year. Olter stayed in Chernovtsy. I joined him after the academic year was over. Olter got a job at a plant. He was an apprentice and later became a worker. We didn't have a place to live and settled down in my aunt's kitchen. I couldn't find work. Besides I had health problems. I had miscarriages and the doctors told me that this was due to the years that I spent in the ghetto. My first baby was stillborn. And then, in 1959, I finally had a baby girl. I named her Dina after my beloved grandmother. I had to stay at home to look after the baby.

In 1957 my husband received a plot of land in the center of town. It was in the same street where my aunt lived. We bought construction material and built a small house. It took us about two years, but the house was completed before our daughter was born.

My husband and I observed Jewish traditions, but my husband had to work on Saturdays because it was an ordinary working day. However, we celebrated all other Jewish holidays. We followed all fasting requirements and went to the synagogue on Jewish holidays. I cooked traditional Jewish food. We had matzah, gefilte fish and chicken on Pesach. Matzah was baked in private houses in Chernovtsy: Jews whispered the addresses of these houses to one another and secretly brought flour to these houses at night to pick up matzah the next day. If the authorities had found out the addresses of these houses they would have closed them and arrested their owners, but Jews kept this knowledge to themselves and nobody revealed it to the authorities. My aunt taught me how to bake. My colleagues respected my traditions. Only official authorities were fighting against religion; common people always showed understanding. We weren't used to Soviet holidays, but we joined small celebrations at work.



My husband and I visited my parents in Yedintsy every year. They liked Olter and became his family. My father retired in 1962, and my parents agreed to move in with us. My mother looked after our daughter, and I began to consider getting a job. I found a temporary job at a kindergarten and worked there until I retired. Our son Michael was born in 1966. My husband named him after his grandfather.

My brother Boris finished 8 years of school in Yedintsy and entered a college for mechanics in Bronziany. After finishing college he became chief mechanic at the vehicle yard in Yedintsy. A year later he went to serve in the army. When he returned his school friend and distant relative invited him to a wedding where he met the bride's best friend, a Jewish girl called Hanusia. She was finishing her studies at the Chernovtsy Pharmaceutical Institute at the time. They began to see each other and got married shortly afterwards. My brother moved to Chernovtsy and began to work as a chief mechanic at the Central Post Office Vehicle Yard. He worked there until he retired. Hanusia was a pharmacist in a drugstore. My brother and his wife observe Jewish traditions and celebrate Jewish holidays. They have two daughters who live in Chernovtsy. One of them is an accountant at Hesed; the other one is a businesswoman. The older daughter's son studied at school in Israel and now he's in the army there.

I never faced any anti-Semitism at work. I'm not saying that there wasn't any, but everything depends on people. I worked among intelligent people and they understood that there are no bad nations just bad people. I was judged by my actions rather than my nationality. Apart from me there was only one other Jewish woman at work, but I had very warm relationships with all of my colleagues.

We spoke Russian and Yiddish at home. My parents always preferred Yiddish and Moldavian to Russian. My children have known Yiddish since their childhood. When they grew up we began to study Hebrew with them. My daughter entered the Chernovtsy Medical School and became a midwife in a polyclinic in Chernovtsy after she finished her studies. She married her fellow student, Semyon Gofman, in 1978. They had a traditional Jewish wedding. We arranged a wedding party in a restaurant and a chuppah at home. A rabbi from the synagogue conducted the wedding ceremony. There were only our closest relatives and the rabbi at the celebration at our home. The rabbi conducted the ceremony under the chuppah, said a prayer, then the bride and bridegroom sipped wine and broke the glass. After that they had a civil ceremony at the registry office and a party at the restaurant. My granddaughter, Elizabeth, was born in 1982. When Elizabeth was 7 my daughter moved to Israel with her. It took her some time and effort to find a job there, but gradually things improved. My granddaughter served her term in the army and now she is a first year student at university. My daughter and son-in-law work. My daughter is a nurse at a maternity home.

My son finished the Chernovtsy Road Transport College and got a job in Chernovtsy. He is a valued employee. Michael married a Ukrainian girl. I wanted him to marry a Jewish girl, though. I was afraid that my son might face anti-Semitism in his own family. Thank God, this didn't happen. They love each other dearly and have two wonderful children, and that's the most important thing for me. My older grandson, Roman, was born in 1988 and my granddaughter Anna was born in 1995. My son and his family live in Chernovtsy. My son doesn't observe any Jewish traditions, but it's his life and his family and he should know what's best for him.



My father died in 1982 and my mother in 1983. They were both buried according to Jewish traditions in the Jewish cemetery in Chernovtsy. Every year on Rosh Hashanah my husband and I go to the cemetery. My husband recites the Kaddish, and I hope that some time our son will pray for us.

My husband and I visited Israel in 1990. My husband's brothers and our daughter and her family live there. I admired the country. I felt at home, but moving there was never an issue for us. We couldn't leave our parents, and they were too old to move.

My husband and I are pensioners now. We have a lot of free time. I can spend more time reading. I read a lot about the history of the Jewish people. It's a tragic history. Although there has been no anti-Semitism on the state level after the USSR fell apart I have a feeling that it's still there. It's true that Jews can openly go to the synagogue, have communities, watch Jewish programs on TV and listen to Jewish radio. However, there are newspapers in Ukraine that openly blame Jews for all the problems in Ukraine saying that Jews have embezzled the country. And the writers of these articles are respectable people. Intelligent and educated people should know that there are different people regardless of nationality or belief. I believe these authors try to gain popularity - at least in certain circles of society. They choose a Jewish subject hoping to have followers that are not used to think about things themselves. That's the wrong path. There was a slogan in Russia once which stated, 'Beat the kikes to rescue Russia'. They exterminated or chased away all Jews, but it didn't help Russia. I think, these people are all like Hitler. Hitler also took this path. The authorities either can't or don't want to put an end to it. I'm afraid for my grandchildren and for the future of the world. The world will be on the edge of collapse until people learn to respect each other.

When Jewish organizations, such as Hesed, were established in Chernovtsy they took their place in the life of our family. My husband and I receive food packages. We have such a miserable pension, so that's a great support. I attend a number of clubs at Hesed. My son and I attend a course of Hebrew. Every week I attend a club for older people. I made new friends at Hesed. I go to the club for 'Students of the Torah' and attend the literature club on Wednesday. My husband and I often spend Sabbath and holidays with our friends at Hesed. Our friends often come to see us, we listen to music and have tea. We also discuss world news and books.

Glossary

## **1 Bessarabia**

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

## **2 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.

### **3 Transnistria**

Area between the Dnestr and Bug Rivers and the Black Sea. The word Transnistria derived from the Romanian name of the Dnestr River - Nistru. The territory was controlled by Gheorghe Alexianu, governor appointed by Ion Antonescu. Several labor camps were established on this territory, onto which Romanian Jews were deported from Bessarabia and Bukovina in 1941-1942. The most feared camps were Vapniarka, Ribnita, Berezovka, Tulcin and Iampol. Most of the Jews died between 1941-1943 because of horrible living conditions, diseases, and lack of food.

### **4 Iron Guard**

Extreme right wing political organization in Romania between 1930-1941, led by C. Z. Codreanu. The Iron Guard propagated nationalist, Christian-mystical and anti-Semitic views. It was banned for its terrorist activities (e.g. the murder of Romanian prime minister I. Gh. Duca) in 1933. In 1935 it was re-established as a party named 'Everything for the Fatherland', but it was banned again in 1938. It was part of the government in the first period of the Antonescu regime, but it was then banned and dissolved as a result of the unsuccessful coup d'état of January 1941. Its leaders escaped abroad to the Third Reich.

### **5 Cuzist**

Member of the Romanian fascist organization named after Alexandru C. Cuza, one of the most fervent fascist leaders in Romania, who was known for his ruthless chauvinism and anti-Semitism. In 1919 Cuza founded the LANC, which became the National Christian Party in 1935 with an anti-Semitic program.

### **6 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'. [7](#) 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.

## **8 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.

## **9 Mandatory job assignment in the USSR**

Graduates of higher educational institutions had to complete a mandatory 2-year job assignment issued by the institution from which they graduated. After finishing this assignment young people were allowed to get employment at their discretion in any town or organization.