

# Piotr Levitas

Piotr Yakovlevich Levitas

St. Petersburg

Russia

Interviewer: Tamara Rozensaft

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*Piotr Yakovlevich Levitas is a man of a very advanced age. He is 90 years old. But despite his age, he visits Hesed [1](#), where he must go by subway. And in Hesed Piotr Yakovlevich is very active – he speaks perfect Yiddish, sings Jewish songs. He sang some Jewish songs to me, including those sung to him by his mother, when he was a child.*

*Piotr Yakovlevich lives together with his wife Maria in a one-room apartment on the sixth floor in a large, new block of flats. Dust has accumulated on the furniture in their room, but the spouses are both very elderly and it is difficult for them to clean up. Maria is Russian, but her husband has accustomed her to celebrating Jewish holidays. He complains that in Leningrad Jews are reluctant to speak Yiddish.*

*Piotr Yakovlevich has a book by Sholem Aleichem [2](#) at home, published in Yiddish, and a book of Jewish culinary recipes. Living in Leningrad [today St. Petersburg], Piotr Yakovlevich did not try to assimilate, as did many Jews, but, on the contrary, he tried his best to be loyal to Jewish traditions.*

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## My family history

I, Piotr Yakovlevich Levitas, was born in 1911, in the small town of Brusilovo in Zhytomir region [today Ukraine].

The name of my paternal grandfather was Bentsij Levitas. He was a hatter. He had five sons and two or three daughters. I don't remember what my grandmother's name was. The parents of my father were born in Brusilovo. Unfortunately, that's all I remember about my father's parents.

My father, Yankel Bentsionovich Levitas, was born in 1881 or 1882 in Brusilovo. Father finished cheder, then became a hatter. His brothers were tailors and blacksmiths. Four of his brothers left for America when I was two or three years old. One of his brothers lived in Canada and was engaged in construction of trams, what the others did I do not know. My father wasn't able go away as he didn't have enough money for it. Those of his brothers left, whose work turned out to be more profitable and who were able to make some money. The sisters remained with my father.

My mother's name was Hanna Peisakhovna Levitas, nee Lakhterman. Mom, too, finished cheder. She worked as a dressmaker and when my parents got married, Father also became a tailor. Our family was of an average well-being. We had no nannies. I was brought up by my father and mother. If I didn't obey – they would give me a slap in the face. When we were small, we went to cheder. Later, my sister and I studied in the Ukrainian school. I went to school in 1920 and studied there for three years.

I had several brothers and a sister, but all my younger brothers died at an early age in an orphanage, when Father had to send us there. It happened in the time of the Soviet regime. At that time Father didn't have enough money to keep us, and he had to send us to the orphanage, where we lived for three years. The only ones who survived were me, my sister Manya, born in 1913, and my two grown-up brothers: Boris and Syoma. Syoma was born in 1905, and Boris in 1908.

Syoma died in 1922 at the age of seventeen or eighteen. He had fallen in a lethargic sleep [coma], slept more than two months and they fed him while he was sleeping, but in the end he died.

About my grandfather and grandmother on my mother's side I know absolutely nothing, because in 1916, when just another pogrom took place in Brusilovo, they were shot by gangsters. Pogroms were a usual thing in Brusilovo [3](#).

My grandfather and grandmother on my mother's side used to bake bagels. They had a bakery. There was a large Russian stove [4](#) there and we, the children, frequently went there as visitors to eat fresh bagels.

## Growing up

Jewish traditions were strictly observed in our family. All our women would always wear kerchiefs. We observed Sabbath. On Saturday we went by foot to the synagogue, because during Sabbath it was prohibited to ride. The synagogue was situated not far off. At all times we went there by foot. Our borough was a small one, with a population of about 20,000. There was only one synagogue. It was a small synagogue, for about twenty persons. We frequently went to the synagogue. The synagogue was also a place of communication.

It was also prohibited to work until the end of Saturday. We used to have a big feast on these days, where they necessarily served stuffed fish, though fish was rare where we lived. Fish was bought at the local market. Russians used to come to our place on Saturdays and for a little money they did the work, that couldn't be done by Jews on Saturdays: put the lights on and off and so on.

The language that we spoke at home was 'loshn koydesh' ['Holy tongue' in Hebrew] – it is a dialect that the Jews in those places use. Yiddish was different in different locations. In our place Yiddish was referred to as 'loshn koydesh' and was different from the Yiddish spoken by Jews in other places. We also knew Russian, because it was necessary to communicate with Russians, but at home we spoke only 'loshn koydesh.'

Jews lived as friends. They often went to see each other, baked various tasty things – pies, lekakh. Lekakh is a cake made of biscuit dough, with some honey in it. They baked challah. They baked patties with raisin and millet porridge, but I've forgotten what they are called. They also cooked some broth.

There was a kosher shop in the town, where people bought clean ground wheat on Pesach. This wheat had to be absolutely clear, without any rye. At first this wheat was examined by a rabbi. In the case it turned out to be clear, that is, without any rye, the rabbi sanctioned to put it on sale, so that people could bake matzah. People bought it and baked matzah in the special bakery or at home.

At home we sang a lot of songs in Yiddish. We celebrated all Jewish holidays. There was a tradition: when a child was born, neighbors took children from cheder, gave them lekakh and other sweets, and came to congratulate the parents to admit the newborn in our community. On Chanukkah, we, the children, were given money.

Jews in our small town worked both as merchants and workers. Basically, Jews were engaged in trade and crafts. There were carpenters, tailors, shoemakers.

In 1914, when the World War I began, Father was drafted into the army. And then he returned and worked again as a tailor.

There were a few hundred residents in the small town of Brusilovo. Besides Jews, there lived Russians and Ukrainians there. There was a market place and a church in our small town.

Jewish pogroms were frequent in our area. To start a pogrom they needed an excuse. During the rule of Nikolai II there was the so-called 'Beilis case' [5](#). Beilis was a manufacturer in Kiev. He owned sugar factories. One day somebody stealthily abandoned a small, stabbed Russian child in his yard and filed a suit against him claiming that Jews took the blood of Russian children to make matzah. It was a very scandalous affair, and it lasted several years. Prominent scientists, among whom was a St. Petersburg professor called Bekhterev, took the side of the Jews and tried to convince the public that it could not be true. But on the basis of these suspicions pogroms began. Pogroms raged in Brusilovo, Radomyśl, Korostyn, Zhytomir and many other towns – all of Ukraine was engulfed in pogroms.

I remember one of these pogroms. Bandits came to our home, put my father and mother against the wall and were about to shoot them. But as Mom and Daddy were tailors, the bandits made them sew clothes for them. And they ordered to sew them immediately. Father shows them, 'here, look – I have cut it, now I will sew,' but they shouted that they had no time to wait; they demanded to have the clothes right now. The bandits put my father and mother to the wall, frightened them, and Mother fell on her knees begging them to have mercy and told them that when they arrive next time everything would surely be ready. And these scenes repeated themselves many times, the bandits came very often.

Then the revolution began [6](#) and bandits started to rage even more. In 1917 soldiers of the Red Army took the Jews who stayed alive to the village of Kocherevo to hide them from bandits. That village was in Zhytomir region, twenty kilometers from Brusilovo. There we stayed with one Ukrainian peasant family. They were very nice people; we lived with them, and my parents made clothes for them. But their son was a bandit.

When pogroms began [7](#), Mother gave the jewelry to one woman, not Jewish, who brought us milk all the time. She wanted that woman to keep the jewelry hidden from gangsters. When we were hurriedly taken away from Brusilovo, Mother had no time to take it back. So my parents went from

Kocherevo to Brusilovo to get the jewelry, and gangsters were all around. The woman was not at home and Father didn't want to wait and went back, and Mother stayed and waited. Besides, Daddy thought that one by one they would have more chances to slip away unnoticed. Mom waited until the woman returned, recovered the jewelry and rode back. But on the way she met the son of the peasants at whose family we lived. He ordered her to get off the cart. Mom answered that she wouldn't do that. He shot and killed her. Then the carter came to us the following day and described what had happened. And Father with my older brother, who was ten years old then, went to the site and buried Mom right there in the woods.

We didn't live for long with those peasants in Kocherevo. As soon as the raging calmed down a little, we escaped to another place. We would move from place to place. We could not go back home, because our houses were seized by bandits.

It was difficult for Dad to raise us all by himself, and he handed us over to an orphanage, and began to roam through villages and sew clothes to earn some money. He was paid sometimes with cash, sometimes food, and he fed us up a little bit. In that shelter I lived for about three years. The shelter was in Radomysl, also in Zhytomir region. Many children died there of various illnesses: typhus, scarlet fever, and influenza. All my younger brothers died. Having earned a little money, Father took those of us who stayed alive from the orphanage.

That orphanage was a common one, there were both Jewish and Russian kids. We lived in the orphanage in the Soviet time, and at that time there were no Jewish orphanages. While living in the orphanage, we didn't observe any Jewish holidays. But it was not out of fear or because of prohibition; we simply did not observe them. There were mainly Russians and Ukrainians and a few Jews in the orphanage. We never had any troubles on account of our Jewish nationality. Everybody there was treated equally. After my father took us away from the orphanage, we began to keep Jewish traditions again.

In 1924 Father got married the second time. The name of his second wife, my stepmother, was Faina Grigorievna, or Fradl. Before marriage she worked as a cook for an owner of a sugar factory named Brodsky, and, having married my father, she became a housewife.

In 1925 our family left for Mariupol [today Ukraine], because Father had no work and we were in need. We lived in misery. At first, when we settled in Mariupol, my father also went from house to house, took orders and sewed, but later he got a job as a cutter at a garment factory.

My older brother, Boris, was sent by Father to a grammar school. The rule in those times was like this: for a Jewish child to be admitted to grammar school, his parents were to pay not only for their kid's studies, but also for the study in this same grammar school of one or two non-Jews. So Father had to pay both for Boris, and some Russian boy.

Father was not able to pay for my studies too, and so I went to work. It was in 1925. I worked as a tin worker with a Jewish foreman. The first year I worked unpaid and lived on Father's money, and in the second year I got fifty kopecks a week, and in the third year I already received nine rubles a week, and then 22 rubles.

After finishing grammar school my older brother went to tailor school. In 1931 he was drafted into the army. He served in an aircraft regiment first, and then was enrolled in the fleet, where he

became a captain, first rank. But then he got dismissed, for he was a Jew. He was in advanced years then and after his dismissal he lived on his pension.

My brother was married. His wife's name was Anna Lvovna, she was Jewish. They had no children. Soon after his dismissal my brother and his wife left for Vitebsk [today Belarus]. Before, they lived somewhere in Ukraine. I don't know why they left for Vitebsk. You see, I lived in Leningrad and my brother didn't let me know of his news very often, although we had amicable relations with each other. They lived in Vitebsk to their dying days. My brother died in 1993, his wife died shortly after.

My sister Manya married a Russian man. Neither for my father, nor for anyone else in our family was this a tragedy. We didn't mind it very much, though I doubt whether anyone of us would have wished to follow her example. She was a housewife. She married early – she was only 13-14 years old. Their son was born soon. When the Germans came to Mariupol in 1941, she pretended to be Armenian and fled. She died soon after the war, in 1947; she was hit by a car.

I worked as a tin worker, and in 1926 I was enrolled into the army. At first I was in Georgia, then in Armenia and in Turkmenistan. There I participated in battles against local bandits. I got wounded and returned as an invalid. Having done my service term, I came back to Mariupol. I worked again as a tin worker, then as a stove-maker and construction worker.

I got married in 1929. My wife's name was Sonya, she was Jewish. We had two children. We continued living in Mariupol, I worked again as a tin worker. My wife was a worker in a fish factory. We were a family of moderate means. My father worked as a senior cutter at the garment factory. They built a four-storied house especially for the workers of this factory, so that a worker was able to buy an apartment at a low price. When I got married, my father bought an apartment for me in this house, and I lived there with my wife and children. There were three rooms in our apartment, a kitchen and a corridor, and also a bathroom and a lavatory.

A lot of Jews lived in Mariupol. For some reason, most of the personnel of the factory, where my father worked, were Jews. There were Ukrainians and Russians as well, but they were in minority. So in our house there lived mainly Jewish families.

As compared to other towns, where synagogues and churches were closed down by the Soviet regime [8](#), Mariupol synagogues continued to operate. There were three synagogues: one for 'the intellectuals,' that is, for merchants, doctors, teachers and so on, another synagogue 'for craftspeople,' that is, for simple workers and handicraftsmen, and the third one was the so-called Small Synagogue. The Small Synagogue was visited by people regardless of their social status, but it was meant for about 20 persons. It was generally visited by those who rarely went to the synagogue. The synagogue for 'the intellectuals' had space for about 50 persons. Seats there were numbered, as compared to the two other synagogues.

I and members of my family visited the synagogue 'for craftspeople.' It was the biggest synagogue: it had room for more than 100 persons. The synagogues were situated in different city districts. We, as before, observed all Jewish holidays. My children attended cheder.

## **During the War**

My wife and children were killed by the Germans during the war. On 14th August 1941 the Germans entered Mariupol. Almost all my relatives, including my father, stepmother, my wife and

children were shot. As soon as the Germans came into the city, they immediately gathered all the Jews and convoyed them with their dogs along the street. In the first day they shot about one thousand men. They took their things and clothes.

Some local residents were pleased that the Jews were being killed. Few people helped Jews. It was mainly Ukrainians who helped Germans to kill Jews. From all the Jews who I knew in Mariupol only a few survived. I managed to escape shortly after the Germans came to Mariupol. I could not take either my wife, or children with me, because it was difficult to escape even for one person, and had I run together with them, we would have surely been caught.

At nights I was crawling through some vegetable gardens, then I ran along the coast of the Azov Sea. At first I reached Taganrog, then Eisk, from there I got somewhere else – I can't remember where. Germans were all around. I spoke Georgian, Armenian or Azeri. These languages I had learned back in the army. I gave myself out for a Georgian or an Armenian. The Russian commanders did not want to take me to the front, because I was an invalid after dismissal from the army [in 1926]. I decided to make my way to Leningrad.

At long last I reached Leningrad and was enlisted into the national voluntary army. I was liberating Leningrad from the blockade [9](#), fought in the hottest places. I participated in the battles at 'Neva spot' ['Neva spot' was a place where it was practically impossible to survive, only the wounded survived there, because they were taken away and sent to the hospital.] I was wounded and taken to hospital, where I got acquainted with my second wife. Her name was Maria Nikolayevna Avilova, she was Russian. She worked as a therapist in that hospital. Having recovered, I was dismissed from the army as a war invalid in 1944, and in that same year we got married.

## After the War

Jews were treated well in the army, there was no anti-Semitism. I didn't have to conceal my religiosity and my knowledge of Yiddish.

I had no place to live in Leningrad, and my wife and I settled in her apartment together with her relatives. They lived in a communal apartment [10](#). A few more families lived there along with us. All of them were Russian. We received a separate apartment many years later. With my wife's relatives I had very good relations. I was on friendly terms with my neighbors as well.

Living in Leningrad, I tried as much as possible to observe the Jewish traditions. I attended the synagogue, each year I bought matzah. At one time, for about two years, I didn't go to the synagogue, because I had too much work to do and just didn't have the time for that, and then again I became a regular congregant. A lot of people always visited the Leningrad synagogue.

I celebrated all Jewish holidays and my wife celebrated them with me. I cooked stuffed fish and other Jewish meals. I learned to cook in my childhood – looking how mother did it, and remembering. Now I have a culinary book with Jewish recipes.

When my neighbors would come to congratulate me on Pesach, I would treat them to matzah and other things, and they liked it all. They, in turn, treated me to a kulich [Easter bread], eaten during Orthodox Easter.

Certainly, sometimes it was necessary to work on Saturdays. I didn't always manage to observe kosher principles, because it was very expensive to do so. Sometimes I ordered kosher food in the synagogue, but one meal used to cost 120 rubles [in the Soviet times], and I couldn't afford to spend this much money each day.

I went to work as a painter to paint cars in the Second Taxi Park. There I worked all my life, until retirement. People were nice to me everywhere. I can communicate with people. I had more friends among Russians in Leningrad because the majority of people I met were Russians. Besides, in Leningrad, Jews were too shy to speak Yiddish and did not observe traditions. I know and remember many Jewish songs that I learned in childhood.

In 1945 our son Boris was born. He acquired a worker's profession and worked at a factory. He has four daughters and one son, as well as grandchildren. We didn't get on well with him, that's why it's hard for me to speak about him. My son was registered as a Jew in his passport [11](#). I had him circumcised. I took him to the synagogue, tried to teach him Yiddish. But he had closer relations with his mother and her folks, and all of them are Russian. He did not learn to speak Yiddish. He was a poor pupil in school. He did not like to study. After finishing school, he worked somewhere. All his friends were Russian. He was not interested in Jewish traditions. My grandchildren do not know of any Jewish traditions either.

## **Glossary:**

### **[1](#) Hesed**

Meaning care and mercy in Hebrew, Hesed stands for the charity organization founded by Amos Avgar in the early 20th century. Supported by Claims Conference and Joint Hesed helps for Jews in need to have a decent life despite hard economic conditions and encourages development of their self-identity. Hesed provides a number of services aimed at supporting the needs of all, and particularly elderly members of the society. The major social services include: work in the center facilities (information, advertisement of the center activities, foreign ties and free lease of medical equipment); services at homes (care and help at home, food products delivery, delivery of hot meals, minor repairs); work in the community (clubs, meals together, day-time polyclinic, medical and legal consultations); service for volunteers (training programs). The Hesed centers have inspired a real revolution in the Jewish life in the FSU countries. People have seen and sensed the rebirth of the Jewish traditions of humanism. Currently over eighty Hesed centers exist in the FSU countries. Their activities cover the Jewish population of over eight hundred settlements.

### **[2](#) Sholem Aleichem (pen name of Shalom Rabinovich) (1859-1916)**

Yiddish author and humorist, a prolific writer of novels, stories, feuilletons, critical reviews, and poems 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 Milkman became an international hit as a musical (Fiddler on the Roof) in the 1960s.

### **3 Black Hundred**

The Black Hundred was an extreme right wing party which emerged at the turn of the twentieth century in Russia. This group of radicals increased in popularity before the beginning of the Revolution of 1917 when tsarism was in decline. They found support mainly among the aristocrats and members other lower-middle class. The Black Hundred were the perpetrators of many Jewish pogroms in Russian cities such as Odessa, Kiev, Yekaterinoslav and Bialystok. Although they were nowhere near a major party in Russia, they did make a major impact on the Jews of Russia, who were constantly being oppressed by their campaigns.

### **4 Russian stove**

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

### **5 Beilis case**

A Jew called Menachem Mendel Beilis was falsely accused of the ritual murder of a Russian boy in Kiev in 1913. This trial was arranged by the tsarist government and the Black Hundred. It provoked protest from all progressive people in Russia and abroad. The jury finally acquitted him.

### **6 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.

### **7 Pogroms in Ukraine**

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

### **8 Struggle against religion**

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



## **9 Blockade of Leningrad**

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

## **10 Communal apartment**

The Soviet power wanted to improve housing conditions by requisitioning 'excess' living space of wealthy families after the Revolution of 1917. Apartments were shared by several families with each family occupying one room and sharing the kitchen, toilet and bathroom with other tenants. Because of the chronic shortage of dwelling space in towns communal or shared apartments continued to exist for decades. Despite state programs for the construction of more houses and the liquidation of communal apartments, which began in the 1960s, shared apartments still exist today.

## **11 Item 5**

This was the nationality factor, which was included on all job application forms, Jews, who were considered a separate nationality in the Soviet Union, were not favored in this respect from the end of World War II until the late 1980s.