

# Lazar Sherishevskiy

LAZAR SHERISHEVSKIY

Moscow

Russia

Interviewer: Svetlana Bogdanova.

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*Lazar Sherishevskiy is a short bald-headed elderly man living alone in a small, dark one-bedroom apartment on the 1st floor of a 1960s 5-storied building in the northwestern part of Moscow. However poorly furnished his apartment is, there are plenty of books, mainly Russian classical and modern literature, that are everywhere around – on the shelves, in bookcases and on the table. There are Moscow townscapes and portraits of the host on the walls. They are his friends' gifts. Lazar often feels ill and rarely goes out. He readily agreed to give this interview. He is a wonderfully smart story teller and has great memories.*

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## **My family background**

My paternal grandfather Aron Sherishevskiy and grandmother Malka (I don't know her maiden name) died in Kiev in the early 1920s, before I was born. They came from Belarus. They were poor – I think my grandfather was a tanner or a shoemaker. They moved from one place to another for some reason. My paternal grandfather was born in the town of Turets. [about 9000 km west of Moscow]. My grandmother Malka died from typhus during an epidemic during the Civil War [1](#). My grandfather died from stomach cancer around 1923. He was about 70. They were buried in the Lukianovskoye cemetery [2](#) in Kiev. They were religious. I saw their portraits that were lost later. They looked like orthodox Jews: my grandfather wore a yarmulka, payes and a beard and my grandmother had a kerchief on. Their children, including my father, went to cheder. My father's brothers went to work, when they grew older, but my father managed to continue his education. My grandparents lived in Novo-Glodynki town in Belarus. [about 900 km west of Moscow] and from there they moved to Kiev for unknown reasons. They settled down in the Jewish neighborhood in Dymeevka in the suburb of Kiev [Today it is already a central district.].

Aron Sherishevskiy and his wife had five sons and one daughter. My father was the youngest. He was born in 1892. Leib Sherishevskiy was the oldest son. All I know about him is that he lived in Lodz [Poland] and had a business. He died young. I was named after the second son, whose name was Lazar (Leizar) Sherishevskiy. He died before the revolution [3](#). He had sons Isaac and Abram Sherishevskiy. Since their father died young and their mother could not raise them, they were

raised by their uncles. Isaac went to stay with his uncle Samuel in Nizhniy Novgorod region, and Abram stayed with us. Isaac finished a Chemical College in Leningrad and became a scientist in chemistry. He published scientific works in Russia and abroad. Isaac was also a good musician. He lived in Leningrad and perished during the siege [4](#). Abram finished a vocational school in Kiev. He worked at the shipyard. When he turned 20, he decided to enter a Navy School in Leningrad. My uncle Teviy Sherishevskiy, who had been in exile during the czarist regime and was a respectable revolutionary during the Soviet time, gave him. Abram entered the School in 1933. After finishing it he became a Navy artillery man. He retired in the rank of captain in the early 1960s.

My father's third brother Samuel Sherishevskiy was a tanner. He lived in Smorgon' town in Belarus. [About 550 km west of Moscow] He was born in 1882. He was 10 years older than my father. During WWI, when Germans occupied a part of Belarus, this tanning factory evacuated to Bogorodsk town, 40 km from Nizhniy Novgorod. [About 400 km east of Moscow. In 1932 the town was renamed to Gorkiy; in 1990 renamed to Nizhniy Novgorod] My grandfather worked at the factory before he became a Soviet activist after the revolution of 1917. He joined the Communist Party and held official positions in Bogorodsk. He was manager in some offices and a shop superintendent at his factory. During the Great Patriotic War [5](#), when Germans occupied Kiev, my family and I moved to my uncle. He was about 60. He was personnel manager at his factory. He had two children. His daughter Revekka, a doctor – she finished a Medical College in Nizhniy Novgorod, and worked at a hospital during the war; after the war she worked as a neuropathologist in Bogorodsk. She married Veniamin Kaznelenbogen. He was an economist. He was at the front. After the war he worked in the accounting department. Their son Aron is a candidate of technical sciences [6](#). He works in a scientific research institute in Nizhniy Novgorod. Samuel died in 1964 at the age of 82.

My father's brother Teviy Sherishevskiy was born in 1886. He became fond of revolutionary ideas, when he was young. At the age of 19 he took part in the revolutionary uprising in 1905 [leading ultimately to the 1905 revolution], was arrested and spent 10 years in the czarist exile. Unfortunately, I don't know any details of his exile, but I know that he was involved in hard work in Siberian mines. His living conditions were unbearable and he was in irons, but he never complained about it he said he met wonderful people there driven by revolutionary ideas and ready to give their lives for them. He was released by the revolution of 1917, the newly established Soviet regime released all political prisoners. He became a member of the association of political exiles. He married Maria Gutman, a Jewish widow. She had two children from her 1st marriage: Misha and Vera Gutman. My uncle raised them. Uncle Teviy died at the age of about 55. The exile had a severe impact on his health condition. He showed me bruises on his legs – traces of irons. He had liver problems. He was a worker. Vera worked as a chemical engineer at the plant. Misha was an engineer. He lived in Kiev, wrote a lot, had a scientific degree and lectured at the Construction College in Kiev.

I never saw my father's sister Rosa Sherishevskaya. She stayed in Vilno [Present Vilnius, capital of Lithuania] after the revolution and we had no contacts with her: Soviet authorities did not encourage any contacts with relatives abroad [7](#).

My father Veniamin Sherishevskiy was the youngest son of his father Aron Sherishevskiy. After finishing cheder my father could study at a gymnasium with his older brothers' support. My father was well educated: he knew Hebrew and Yiddish (they spoke Yiddish in the family), and French and

German. After finishing his gymnasium he took an accounting course and went to work as an accountant. In 1913 he was recruited to the czarist army and served in Siauliai at the border of the Russian Empire and Eastern Prussia. When WWI began, my father's unit relocated to Eastern Prussia in August 1914 where they took part in a fierce battle. They suffered a terrible defeat: general Samsonov shot himself after the battle, many Russian officers and soldiers were captured. My father was in captivity for 5 years. The captives lived in barracks in a camp. There were English and French prisoners, and my father mastered his French and German in the camp. He said there was no national segregation in the camp. He was just another Russian prisoner for them. Germans sent prisoners to some farm works. In 1918-1919 the process of exchanging prisoners started. The CENTROPLENBEZH [center for work with captives and refugees] organization, founded in the Russia after the revolution, exchanged German prisoners for the Russian ones in Germany and Austro-Hungary. If someone wanted to stay in Germany, they could do it. When my father returned, he was mobilized to the Red army. My father took part in combat action fighting against the White army [8](#) near Kiev. He returned home in 1920. My father went to work as an accountant in Mostotriad, a bridge construction and renovation company. Later he went to work at the instrumentation plant 'Leninskaya Forge' where he worked as an accountant till he perished.

My parents got married in 1924. I don't know how they met - they never mentioned it. I, their only child, was born in 1926. They were not religious and had no Jewish wedding. My maternal grandfather Yefim Finkelstein came from Mazyr town in Belarus. [about 600 km west of Moscow] He had a secondary education and was a timber specialist. He worked in timber companies and even wore a uniform cap with leaves on it. He traveled across Belarus a lot. His headquarters were in Kiev - so my grandfather moved to Kiev, lived there many years and died in Kiev. He was born in 1863 or 1865. He died in 1936. My grandmother Golda's maiden name was Begman. Her parents lived in Pinsk. [about 50 km west of Mazyr] My grandmother and grandfather probably had a prearranged wedding around the 1890s. My grandmother Golda was born in 1873. She died from pneumonia in evacuation in 1943. I remember her well. My grandfather died, when I was small, and I don't remember him that well. He was buried in the Jewish Lukianovskoye cemetery in Kiev. After his funeral my grandmother followed the mourning ritual [Shivah]. They lived on the borderline of the Pale of Settlement [9](#) in Kiev, in Bessarabka [in the very center of Kiev], in Bolshaya Vasilkovskaya Street. In autumn 1905 during a pogrom [10](#) in Kiev, when my mother was 9-10 years old, the family took shelter in a basement, where the pogrom makers didn't reach them, but they broke into their apartment and robbed it. In 1916 my grandparents moved to another apartment in Saksaganskogo Street (I don't know the reason) near the railway station, and this was where I was born. The family occupied the whole apartment, but later 2 more families moved in there. In 1918 a shell flew into the kitchen of this apartment through a window. It was kept later to keep the door from closing. My grandparents and the children were hiding in the basement of the house and survived. This is what the family tells about it.

My great grandfather Lazar Bergman was the father of a big family - they had ten children. For some reason most of Lazar Bergman's children moved to Petersburg before the Civil War and the revolution. Solomon Bergman and Semyon Bergman were educated people. One of Solomon or Semyon Bergman's children Gedalia became a popular actress in Leningrad. Her family name was Belogorskaya. Her daughter Tatiana finished the College of Culture in Leningrad. She, her husband Ilia and their son Tolia moved to the USA. Marcus Bergman also lived in Petersburg. I knew his daughters Zhenia and Luba. Zhenia lived in Leningrad and Luba - in Moscow. My grandmother's

brother Meyer Bergman lived in Bobruysk [About 550 km west of Moscow]. He perished during the Great Patriotic War. Germans killed him in the town.

My grandparents were very religious. They lit candles on Saturday and had silver stands for them. They often went to the synagogue and had old prayer books. My grandmother prayed every Friday. On Friday morning she covered her head, lit candles and prayed. On holidays and on seder my grandfather put on his old kitel and yarmulke, lit candles and broke bread or matzah over the wine and recited a prayer. They had kosher silver crockery stored separately and only used on Pesach. They had all necessary accessories for rituals. They celebrated all holidays and gave me Hanukkah gelt on Chanukkah. Hey ordered matzah for Pesach and I stole a piece according to the ritual and posed traditional questions. We had delicious traditional food on Pesach, delicious Haman ears [hamantashen] with poppy seed filling on Purim. When I knew them, my grandfather was a pensioner, and my grandmother was a housewife. She had never gone to work. She was very kind and loved me dearly. She believed I would become a writer. She told me that my grandfather wrote poems in Yiddish, when he was young. My mother's older brother Isaac wrote poems in Yiddish and Russian. He got fond of revolutionary ideas, later he moved abroad and became an engineer. So, I became a literature man following my grandmother's forecast. My grandfather had finished a gymnasium and had fluent Russian, but he spoke Yiddish at home. My grandfather was an intelligent and well-to-do man. He managed to sent his son to study in Switzerland.

My grandfather and grandmother had three children: Son Isaac Finkelstein, born in 1892, daughter Anna Sherishevskaya (nee Finkelstein) – my mother, born in 1895, and younger daughter Maria Kaz (nee Finkelstein), born in 1901. The children were not religious. They were loyal to their parents' religiosity, but they did not participate in any observances. Being a pioneer [11](#) at school where we were taught to be atheists, I tried to convince my grandparents to change their views, but without success, I guess. Our family lived with my grandparents. Isaac was a journalist and had a literature pseudonym 'Ischin'. After finishing a gymnasium he took to revolutionary ideas. He was arrested in 1912. My grandfather pulled strings for him and he ended up abroad. My grandfather paid a bribe of 10 golden rubles for a foreign passport to be issued for my uncle. Uncle Isaac finished a Polytechnic College in Zurich, Switzerland, and became an engineer. When WWI began, he returned to Russia and was recruited to the army. He was sent to the Turkish front where he fell ill with enteric fever. When he recovered, his health condition did not allow him to be on the front line and he became an officer at the sanitary train transporting patients from the front line to Moscow and Kiev. In 1919, when Denikin [12](#) captured Kiev, he took to underground activities again, was captured by Denikin fighters, but my grandfather managed to bribe someone to arrange an escape for my uncle. After the revolution he worked as an engineer. His wife's name was Tsylia, she was a Jew – I don't know her maiden name. Their daughter Dana was the same age with me. In 1941 my uncle went to the Territorial army [People's volunteer corps during World War II; its soldiers patrolled towns, dug trenches and kept an eye on buildings during night bombing raids. Students often volunteered for these battalions], though he was over 50 years old. He perished in 1942. His wife and daughter evacuated, and later we received letters from them from Ashgabat in Turkmenistan. [about 2500 km south of Moscow].

My mother's younger sister Maria finished a gymnasium in 1917 and married Izia Kaz, a Jewish engineer from Kiev. I remember aunt Mania well. She lived in one room in our apartment, and worked in an accounting department with her husband, who was also an accountant. She was kind

and cheerful. During the Great Patriotic War she evacuated with us. She perished in an accident at the military chemical plant in Dzerzhinsk near Nizhniy Novgorod in 1942. She was buried there. Her husband returned from the war, but we had no contacts with him.

My mother finished a gymnasium for girls in Kiev. Golda Meir [13](#) studied there as well 5 years later. There was a 3 or 4 % [14](#) admission quota for Jews in those gymnasia, but there were also private gymnasia, and my mother must have finished a private one. My grandfather could afford to pay for her studies. My grandfather also bought her a Schreder piano. Mama played the piano and I also studied music for some time. It was destroyed during the Great Patriotic War. After finishing the gymnasium my mother entered the higher course for girls at the Legal Faculty in Kiev University. He finished the course in 1917. She studied the czarist laws that were cancelled after the revolution. So mama went to work as a librarian. My parents spoke Russian at home and switched to Yiddish, when they didn't want me to know the subject of their discussion. Mama and papa had finished Russian gymnasia and were both atheists. When I started learning French at school, my father talked French to me at home. My father had beautiful handwriting. My father loved literature and taught me to like it. I knew many of Pushkin and Lermontov's works by heart. My father also knew Jewish antiques and Jewish literature. He told me Biblical stories with no reference to religion or Jewish traditions. My father also taught me to read Sholem Aleichem [15](#) and he knew the works by Mendele Sforim [16](#). He was well aware of Russian, Jewish and foreign classical literature. Mama read a lot working in the library. We lived in two rooms of the 5-bedroom apartment that had formerly belonged to my grandparents, but later soviet authorities accommodated two other families in two rooms, and my mother's sister Mania lived in one room. I remember the famine in 1932 and 1933 [17](#). Terrible famine. My father received rationed food at the plant. I remember taking four and some other products home on sledges. My parents bought me white bread at the market paying crazy money for it. Mother and Father received rationed bread, black with green shimmer. My cousin brother Abram received some black bread rations at the shipyard. Papa earned 600 or 700 rubles at the time - this was a good salary and he was a valued employee at his plant. When he was arrested, our life became very miserable. My grandmother did not received any pension since she had never gone to work before. My mother's brother Isaac, an engineer, supported us.

When I was small, we spent vacations at a dacha. In autumn my father went to Sochi [Black Sea resort town.] in the Caucasus [about 1600 km south of Moscow] where he stayed at a recreation center, and his employer paid for his stay. He had heart problems and took hydro sulfuric bath treatment. I remember my father bringing a suitcase full of tangerines and nuts. I spent my summer vacations in a pioneer camp in the woods near Kiev. I enjoyed my time there - there were many children, we had lots of fun, played sports games, sang songs sitting by the fire and swam in the river. Mama didn't travel with papa on vacations. Papa went on vacations, when academic year began at school, and mama could not leave me at home alone. Mama and papa had friends and met with them either at our or their homes. They were mainly Jews. Our relatives also visited us. My father and uncle Teviy were very close. My father's other friend was in captivity with papa during WWI. He stayed in Germany, but remained a citizen of Russia. He returned to Russia in the early 1930s. My father helped him to find a job. He told us a lot about Hitler in Germany. Father always read newspapers and magazines and was very much interested about the situation in Germany. He subscribed to the 'Internatsionalnyi mayak' ('International beacon') issued by the MOPR society ('international society of support of revolutionaries') [18](#). My father was a member of



this society and subscribed to their magazine. MOPR wrote about events abroad. Papa also subscribed to the magazine 'Abroad'. My father also was interested in the Beilis case [19](#). He kept a pile of Kiev newspapers with articles about this case. My grandmother remembered the case. They lived in Kiev then.

## Growing up

I studied well at school and was fond of literature and poetry and wrote poems. There were many Jews in my class. There were so many Jews in our neighborhood that there was even a Jewish school in our street. I went to a Russian school: we spoke Russian at home and I didn't know Yiddish. Besides, my parents wanted me to continue education after school, and this was only provided in Russian, which was the state language. The school syllabi were no different from other schools, but the teaching was in Yiddish. Many of my schoolmates came from more religious families than mine. My classmate's brother was interested in Zionism [20](#). His parents were members of this movement. They were the Lebedinskiys family. They had 3 children: son Boruch, Saul and Moisey. Moisey was my classmate and his brothers Saul and Shulia - this was how we addressed him, were also my friends. Saul had Zionist views. He said that all Jews had to move to Palestine. It only made me smile since I understood this was impossible and didn't want to go anywhere above all. Then the war began. Boruch, born in 1923, was mobilized to the front. Saul joined partisans in Kiev during the occupation and was killed by Germans. Moisey and his parents evacuated from Kiev. We met many years after the war. He had given up his Zionist views long before.

My other friend became a world-known poet: he was Emmanuel Mandel. Later he had a literature pseudonym of Naum Korzhavin [Naum Korzhavin, born in Kiev in 1925, a poet and playwright. In 1947 was arrested for poems against Stalin and his regime. 1947 - 1952 was in exile in Siberia. In 1973 was expelled from the Union of writers and emigrated from the USSR and now lives in the USA]. We were friends and attended a literature club at school. We are still friends. He visits here and then we meet. He is an old, severely ill man now. In his memoirs he writes that his grandmother and grandfather had a good knowledge of the Jewish history and rituals. His grandfather was a Jewish theologian [the interviewee probably means a learned man], a tzaddik. Some of his ancestors traveled to Palestine before the revolution, so he knew about Jewry better than I did. He told me about Jabotinsky [21](#). However, we didn't pay much attention to such things then. Here was also a Jewish theater in Kiev, a Jewish music ensemble led by Zinoviy Shulman, a former cantor, a Jewish singer. There were two wonderful Jewish singers: Naum Epelbaum and Zinoviy Shulman. In the late 1940s during struggle against cosmopolitanism [22](#) Soviet authorities destroyed all their records. My mother younger sister's friend sang in the ensemble of Zinoviy Shulman. She visited us and she had records of Jewish songs. However, my parents didn't take me to the Jewish theater or Jewish concerts. They took me to the Russian theaters to see operas. My father was very fond of opera. When I was six, he took me to the Kiev Opera Theater. The first opera I heard was Faust. We also went to see the 'Demon' and 'Yevgeniy Onegin'. My father taught me culture. Only when I grew up I understood what an interesting man he was. Mama also knew literature and music and could play the piano. She had a collection of scores. Mama was a kind person. I learned to play the piano for about two years, when my father could pay for it. Later, in the GULAG [23](#), I benefited from this ability by playing in the prisoners' theater.

In 1938 during the period of arrests [24](#), my father was arrested and executed. I got to know that he was executed only 50 years later. At that time I only knew that my father had problems at work and that he was arrested. I wished I could believe this was a mistake, they would find out and my father would return home. We lived in a communal apartment [25](#) in Kiev that we shared with two other families. When the capital of Ukraine moved from Kharkov to Kiev in 1934 [before 1934 Kharkov was the capital of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, in 1934 the Government of the USSR decided to move the capital to Kiev. All governmental structures moved to Kiev as well], 2 party officials from Kharkov became our co-tenants in this apartment. One of them Golyi, a Party Central Committee official, a decent and honest man, lived in one room, and Claudia Zakharovna, a young woman, who worked in the Komsomol Central Committee [26](#) of Ukraine, and her daughter lived in another room. We were friends. First Golyi was arrested and then, one night in summer 1938, my father and this lady were arrested. Perhaps they beat and tortured Golyi trying to make him confess who else he had involved in the anti-Soviet group and he must have named his colleagues and neighbors. The lady was released and I met with her later. Golyi must have been executed. My father was convicted of anti-Soviet activities and executed. What they wrote there was: 'for anti-Soviet activities aimed at the detriment of the economy and disruption of Soviet production'. They didn't give much thought to the wording, it never occurred to them that one day relatives would get access to these files. Besides, there were millions of innocent people put on this conveyor, exterminated and exiled without trials or investigations, so they didn't care much about definitions of crimes. Besides, what could they accuse him of? He was an honest person and a skilled employee. It was just that the policy was aimed at the extermination of the best individuals. Golyi was also innocent, but we would never be able to find out why he gave the names of his neighbors, and besides – did he? This is what I assume. Perhaps, somebody else reported on my father ... I received notifications in the 1990s. My mother and I managed to have my father rehabilitated posthumously [27](#). My mother received compensation in 1957. They issued a certificate that my father died in prison in 1952, but later it turned out this was a false certificate. My father must have been buried in Bykovnia [suburb of Kiev]. This was where mass shooting occurred near Kiev, but the KGB office stated that 'the burial location is unknown' during the Gorbachev [28](#) rule. My father's arrest brought me a lot of pain, but besides all, my schoolmates and I started thinking about life. I used to be a common pioneer before, but then my friends and I started thinking and I began to write poems. I believed my father and neighbors to be innocent people as well as many other people who were disappearing at the time. We discussed this with my friends and somebody must have reported on us. As a result, Emmanuel Korzhavin was expelled from school and so was I. We were accused of criminal thoughts. The school principal was particularly emphasizing that I was the son of an enemy of people [29](#) and was politically unreliable. My mother managed to make arrangements for Emmanuel and me to go to another school, when the war began. My father's arrest had an impact on my further life. When they were going to put me in prison, they wrote in their papers: 'Was malicious about the Soviet power for his father's arrest'.

### **During the war**

In summer 1941 mama wanted to send me to a pioneer camp. He told me she had made all arrangements, but then the war began. We evacuated with my mother's enterprise: mama, grandma, Aunt Maria and I.

We went to Stalingrad [present Volgograd, about 1000 km south of Moscow] in September 1941. There were numbers of people evacuated from Western Ukraine and Moldavia that had been recently annexed to the USSR. I saw religious Jews wearing black hats and payes. I didn't talk to them, not knowing the language they spoke. We were accommodated at a stadium. The town authorities suggested that people went to kolkhozes [30](#) to work and live there. We joined one group and went to a big village of Basovy Khutora near Kursk. They grew water melons. We were accommodated in local houses and I noticed there were no icons or crosses in them. [Christian families traditionally had icons in their homes, unless some of their members were convinced communists. Most older people in villages remained religious] Then I noticed that common farmers had typical Jewish names: Isaac, David, Abram, Sara, Dvoira. I found out this was the village where a 'subotniki' sect lived [Russian for 'Saturday believers', a group of Christian sects (dukhobors, molokans, skoptsy, khlysty etc.). They believe in incarnation of the Holy Spirit in people, reject the clergy and many rituals. They recognize Saturday as a holiday. Appeared in the 18th century]. They had a prayer house and books of prayers in Russian, but these were Jewish prayers translated into Russian. They had a day off on Saturday. These villagers belonged to the Judaic faith that they inherited from their ancestors. Mama and grandma went along well with them. Grandma was religious - she prayed in Hebrew, which they didn't know. They wore common clothes and didn't have their heads covered - perhaps, only in the prayer house, but I never went there. I don't know whether they followed kashrut. There was famine in autumn 1941. I didn't see anybody eating meat. Our food was bread and water melons and some cereals. They celebrated Jewish holidays. I remembered them fasting on Yom Kippur. I fell severely ill and was taken to hospital. Mama wrote my father's brother Samuel Sherishevskiy who lived in Bogorodsk near Gorkiy. Uncle Samuel invited us and as soon as I recovered we moved to my uncle. We stayed with him till we rented a room in a village house. Life was hard. It was cold and there was lack of food. Grandma died from pneumonia in 1943. She was buried in a common cemetery in Bogorodsk, with no rituals. I finished the 9th form in Bogorodsk.

In autumn 1943 was recruited to the army. There were 2 recruitment periods in 1943: in summer boys, born in 1925, and in autumn - the ones, born in 1926, were recruited. I stayed in a reserve unit and then was sent to the frontline forces for 3 months. Our 1st Guard Mine Brigade fought near Nevel near Pskov. [About 450 km west of Moscow]. Later this front was named the 1st Pribaltiyskiy front. Our 'Katyusha' units [The 82mm BM-8 and 132mm BM-13 Katyusha rocket launchers were built and fielded by the Soviet Union in World War II. The launcher got this unofficial, but immediately recognized in the Red Army, name from the title of a Russian wartime song, Katyusha.] were moving along the front line relocating continuously to avoid aircraft targeting. We incurred minor losses. Our unit consisted of 8 firing platoons and one intelligence. I served in the intelligence platoon. I was responsible for identifying the enemy location. I had a stereo telescope. We crawled to the spot dragging a wooden box with a telescope, then install and fix it and do the survey. Once a mine exploded nearby. The splinters broke my box and one splinter injured me in the shoulder. I stayed in hospital 2 weeks. In the army we lived in earth houses, slept on plank beds, 40 of us side by side. There was an iron stove in the earth hut. We received a ration of 700 grams of bread and delicious soup with American tinned meat and potatoes. We had winter overcoats, but they were not so warm, anyway. However, we were in a better position than infantry, who had to stay in trenches for months. I was a private. I served 6 months in the army in total, 3 months at the front line. I didn't have any awards.



I was arrested in spring 1944. It all started in the reserve unit near Gorkiy, when the KGB [31](#) special unit [responsible for checking political reliability of the troopers. There were special departments in all civil offices, army units and in prisons] reviewed my personal information and found out that my father had been arrested. They also took away from me my notebook of poems where I wrote about the hardships of life in the army. They arranged for an informer to become my friend. His name was Yevgeniy Frolov, my co-tenant in the earth hut. He also wrote poems. I was 18 and innocent and was glad to make friends with someone like me. He wrote poor poems, though. The rest of my fellow comrades were common village boys. They were not bad, but uneducated for the most part. This man started talking to me about collectivization [32](#), arrests, i.e., tried to provoke me to express my thoughts. He talked provocatively of the regime and then wrote his reports, actually presenting the situation as if I was saying whatever he told me. These reports were then presented as evidence of witnesses. I read them getting familiar with my case. These 'witnesses' wrote everything they were told by the investigation officer. Some of those guys, who were uneducated, just signed what the officer gave them. I found this out many years later, after rehabilitation. The prosecution officer interrogated some of these 'witnesses'. He asked one : 'Is this your signature?' 'Right.' ' Here you write that Sherishevskiy had similar talks with other military men.' 'What talks? - Similar, - sad the prosecutor. 'What does it mean?', - asked the witness. 'But this is what you said!' 'What I said! His is what the officer wrote and told me to sign this! I am a soldier and he is a major. If a major order a soldier, this soldier must sign'. However, talks with agent Frolov were the most exposing. In late March 1944 the special department finalized its work. He brigade headquarters arrested me. Our division officer and a major from Moscow were waiting for me there. They declared I was writing anti-Soviet poems and that I was the son of an arrested man and that I was an enemy of the Soviet power and arrested for this reason. And they presented the evidence reports to me. They invited witnesses to the earth hut, interrogated me and issued minutes. They also presented to me somebody else's poems cursing Stalin- they were illiterate poems. They were written to read the text from a mirror reflection, but the signature under them was no reflected writing, and it belonged to me. Major Kuzmin asked me whether it was my writing. I said I didn't write it. He stated that it was my signature. I said I didn't sign it. He then showed me my intelligence reports and asked me whether this was my signature. I said it was. 'And under the poem?' 'No'. 'But they are alike.' I said: 'They are, but I didn't sign this'. They also gave me a mirror to read the poem. It was cursing Stalin, but helplessly in terms of literature. I said I didn't write such poor poems and they can find mine in my notebook. They took away my notebook with poems and letters from friends. They put me in a pit and I was kept there looking disgracefully. Then they transported me to Moscow. The major from Moscow and the major - head of our special department convoyed me. They had my poems and a thick folder with minutes of interrogations and my papers. Frolov, the informer, also went with us. They had their boots, buttons and badges polished and looked very decent before going to Moscow. Frolov looked proud and had a look of dedication to the cause that he served. There were also 2 gunmen guarding me.

In Moscow I was taken to a building in Prechistenka Street - there is still a military office and a special office in this building. This was the headquarters of Moscow military Corps. The special department was on the 2nd or 3rd floor. There were cells for prisoners in the basement. I was taken to a weird cell. There was a corridor and few steel doors. There were stairs downward from this corridor. There were cement floors, cement walls and no window. There was a bulb in the corridor and the light came into the cell through a hole over the cell door. There were planks on the

floor. I saw something written on the wall: Liteyschikov Victor, 26 interrogation, 28 left and nothing else. I decided this man had been executed. A guard wearing a white winter jacket kept singing his sad steppe songs. I didn't distinguish between day and night. I didn't see the daylight. Twice a day they put a bowl of some cereal and it was impossible to know between breakfast and dinner. Nobody disturbed me. One day the door opened and I was taken up the stairs. I decided they were going to execute me. I came outside. There was a blue bus waiting at the entrance. There were other people in it. I sat by the window and was happy to see the daylight. The bus arrived at the Butyrskaya prison. There was an entry box as big as a phone booth. There was a bulb in it and a bench - no window. I was locked inside. I decided this was to be my cell. Some time later the door opened, and they brought me a bowl of skilly. So I decided, if they gave me food, they were not going to execute me right away. I filled up some papers and was taken to an investigation cell 95 of the Butyrskaya prison. There were 25 prisoners in it. Each of us had a bed: metal tubes covered with sailcloth. It lifted to the wall by the day and was supported by stools at night. There was a long table with cupping for bowls. There were no bed sheets, or a pillow or a blanket. My co-prisoners were political prisoners. I was taken to interrogations where they asked me about this poem about Stalin. I rejected my authorship. I realized they didn't have enough evidence to convict me. I said I would demand a survey to be made by experts - this was not my handwriting. One day they called me again and said that the minutes issued in my military unit were inaccurate and stained with oil from the lamp or ink stains, and that they had them retyped and wanted me to sign them. I said I would after I reread them. There was no mentioning of the poem in these minutes. They knew this was a false conviction and removed it. However, this was not the end of this story with the poem, which I realized 11 years later, when I was working on my rehabilitation. As I mentioned, this informer Frolov came to Moscow with me to witness against me, but I never saw him again. During my rehabilitation my commanding officers were requested to write references about me. They wrote that I served decently and helped those who were not as intelligent as I to deal with devices. What I found out was that in 1944, when investigation officers realized that I might protest against this poem, asked Frolov whether he wrote this. He said he did it at the direction of special authorities. He was put to prison for 3 years. I got to know about it 11 years later. He was imprisoned! I don't feel sorry for him. He said he did it at their direction to cause me more problems. How can I feel sorry for such a guy. He wrote this false paper to bury me. He came to Moscow triumphant, when I was humiliated. They promptly removed all his regalia and sent him where I was taken, only we didn't meet. What they wrote was sufficient to take me to a tribunal that sentenced me to 5 years in a camp and 3 years of limitation of my rights. I was convicted for anti-Soviet talks. His sentence started as follows: 'Feeling anger to the Soviet power for his father's arrest, Shershevskiy had wrong and critical thoughts, did not trust authorities, condemned their actions and had anti-Soviet discussions and is sentenced thereof'. Then it continued: 'For anti-Soviet propaganda expressed in anti-Soviet discussions with the military and decadent poems qualified under Article 58 Item 10 part 2, he is sentenced to 5 years in a camp and 3 years of limitation of his electoral rights with no confiscation of property due to having no property'. This was the only difference of my sentence from others - stating that I had no property. Mama didn't know about me. I wrote her from the front, but then I disappeared for 3 months. I was put in prison on 22 March, and on 12 May I was exiled. I wrote mama from the camp. We corresponded. She didn't mention at work that her son had been arrested. She said I was in the army. She burnt my letters. I was sent to a camp near Moscow. It may be still there. There was one barrack of political criminals in the camp - 200 prisoners: the barrack was divided into 2 parts - there were 100

prisoners in each part. We slept on 2-tier plank beds. There were mattresses, pillows and blankets on beds. We had to fill mattresses with straw. I received a camp robe, a jacket and ChTZ boots (this was how prisoners called these boots – abbreviation of Cheliabinsk tractor plant). They were canvas boots with knurled soles looking like tractor caterpillar. There was a plant there. The plant manufactured electric engines, electric winding for camp power plants, vehicle spare parts, cable hoists for mines, plastic plates and mugs for camp ware. Plastic was still under research and there was a department of new construction materials at the plant where they studied this plastic. There was also a special shop manufacturing handcuffs for camps. We used defective handcuffs to lock our suitcases and little storerooms. The plant was under construction building new facilities, boilers, and bathrooms. All newcomers joined the capital construction department forming crews of excavation and construction workers. I was assigned to a crew of criminals. We had to carry planks and unload railcars with chark and gravel. I got very weak in prison. I was pale, weak and had scurvy sores. My fellow prisoners asked me whether I studied at school and could draw. I said I could, though I could not. They helped me to come to work at the design office at the construction department. There were civilians also working at the plant. Director of the plant was an NKVD [33](#) major – Abramzon, a Jew and there were civilian technicians and engineers. This was the way the empire worked – it wanted its technical work resources to wear NKVD uniforms. I will always be grateful to the civilian engineer Zakhar Gurevich, a Jew, who worked in the design office of the construction department. He took my letters past the censors and sent them for me. There were many Jewish prisoners. There were Russian and other nationalities. I will tell about two Jews I met in this camp. They were workers and had been sentenced under political convictions. One of them was Abram Fux, a high-skilled gauger. He had been released, but then imprisoned again – NKVD needed his logistic skills. Another Jew was Zelik Polonskiy from Chernovtsy. He was a high-skilled bricklayer. All incentives for good work in the camp were stomach-related. They gave additional bread or cereal, called ‘cream-dish’ for good work. Zelik’s photo was on all boards for distinguished workers. He came from Western Ukraine. His mother tongue was Yiddish and he spoke fluent Ukrainian. There are lots of talks that Jews do not like workers’ professions, but these two were highly qualified workers. Here were no anti-Semitic moods among prisoners, though there were routinely matters of arguments. The management of the camp was still ‘contaminated’ with Jewish elements: major Abramzon, Colonel Zfas, also a Jew, deputy director of the camp, and there was a number of Jews among key personnel. They didn’t distinguish between prisoners, though. They didn’t dare. Medical chief Boris Feldman, major of medical service, did have a better attitude towards Jewish prisoners, though. I had scurvy sores on my feet and he helped me. He prescribed better meals for me.

I starved in the camp, especially at the beginning. Mama visited me once a year bringing food. Life was easier for prisoners from Moscow. Their relatives could visit them at weekends bringing food. In 1947 a store selling tooth powder, combs and different haberdashery goods, opened in the camp.

During the wartime we worked 11 hours per day: from 7 am till 7 pm with one hour lunch break. There were occasional days off. By autumn 1945 the work day was reduced to 9 hours. We had two days off per month. I worked at the construction design office and then went to work at the chief mechanic department. Chief mechanic was also a civilian. I copied tracings of gauges and later became a gauge drawer.

I heard about the end of the war one night in the barrack in 1945. The radio was on day and night. An officer rushed to our political barrack to find out whether we, anti-Soviet elements, were not mourning after Hitler, 'our dear chief'. We didn't mourn, we were happy. We were hoping for amnesty. There was a day off on 9 May and fireworks in the evening.

### After the war

I took part in amateur concerts writing reprises and songs. There was a cultural education unit in the camp. A civilian was in charge of it. There was also an ensemble of prisoners from Moscow region. There were professional musicians there. They toured to camps in Moscow region giving concerts. In early 1947 their truck was hit by a train and many prisoners died. I was invited to the ensemble to be in charge of the literature unit. In spring 1947 I was assigned to this ensemble. We rehearsed during the day and went on concerts in the evening. I didn't always go to concerts. I got to know that there was a camp near the Krymskiy Bridge in the center of Moscow. There was a number of camps in Bolshaya Kaluzhskaya, present Leninsky Prospekt – it's called Academstroy: all scientific institutes, big houses and the University were built by prisoners. Solzhenitsyn [34](#) was a parquet floor worker there. By the way, in his book 'Archipelag Gulag' he described a concert of our ensemble in his camp. We staged play and concerts. In 1948 Beriya [35](#) issued an order to relocate all camps in Moscow region and the central part of Russia to Siberia and Kazakhstan. Our ensemble of about 30 of us – actors, musicians and artists – boarded trucks that took us to a railway station where we filled a cattle transportation train that moved to the north, to the construction of railroad from Salekhard [about 2000 km northeast of Moscow] to Igarka [about 2800 km from Moscow], and to Norilsk [about 3000 km from Moscow], and then farther to Kolyma. [About 7000 km northeast of Moscow] – the 2nd Transsiberian railroad behind the polar circle. This must have been Stalin's idea. The railroad was to supply coal from Vorkuta to the Northern Navy and Civilian Fleet. Besides, this road might have a strategic importance considering the relationships with Americans: the Arctic Ocean was a possible area of conflicts and interests. Prisoners were taken there on barges up the river. The first to come there was a geodesic group that marked the route and installed pegs for the first settlements of prisoners. These barges also transported tools, logs and planks for construction. The prisoners installed stakes and posts and fenced the spot with barbed wire. Then they installed huge tents for about 100 people. Here were steel stoves that we stoked with coal. The next stage of construction was making earth huts. We cut turf pieces to make earth huts from them. Later we gradually constructed barracks. A lot of wood was used to make safety boards on both sides of the railroad track to protect it from snowstorms. There were plank beds made in the barracks. There were wooden poles placed on supports and there were no bed sheets available. Prisoners slept on their jackets. Security guards slept in the same tents and barracks outside the fence. A platoon of about 30 guards guarded one column of prisoners. Also a food storage building from the most solid wood was constructed on the other side of the fence. Food products were supplied to the kitchen in the rationed quantities per one day. There were political and criminal prisoners in the camp. The criminals took away clothes and food from political prisoners. I didn't have anything anyway, but they stole food from prisoners from Moscow who had some food stocks.

We arrived there on 18 March 1948. There were severe frosts. Spring starts in May there. Navigation [the period during which boats can sail] starts between 20 May and 1 June. There was a prison theater on tour there at the time, when we came. We reached an agreement with them, and they helped us to join them. We went to Abetz' town [About 1700 km northeast of Moscow], where

the construction headquarters and the theater office were located. I worked in this theater and didn't have to go to work. This saved my life. This was a big theater: a big symphonic orchestra, actors, singers, musicians, musical comedy, drama group and a variety show. We toured the camps. We traveled by train and trucks, where the railroad ended. We were convoyed by 2 soldiers and a sergeant in charge. When our guards drank too much, we took away their guns and put them in our theatrical boxes to prevent them from killing one another. Director of the theater was a civilian and its producer was Leonid Obolenskiy, a prisoner, a brilliant producer. In the nearby theater in Vorkuta Kapler [36](#) was literature manager, and in our theater I did this job. A political department supervised our activities. There were 2 supervision departments at the construction site: the political department provided overall control over civilians and party activities, and criminal prisoners had a cultural/education department. Its officers censored everything on the stage.

We were convoyed to rehearsals. We also performed for civilians and this was all Soviet propaganda that we showed. We were to raise the moral spirit of prisoners and ensure their moral and political health. There were tickets sold to performances; there were guards at the entrance, in the orchestra pit and behind the curtains watching us. We were not allowed to come into the hall, when civilians came into the theater. We lived in barracks and wore winter jackets and valenki boots [warm Russian felt boots]. There were hordes of mosquitoes and insects in summer. There was better food though. We had wheat waste cereals with chicken for a meal. This cereal tasted awful and had a bluish tint from the oxide from bowls, but there were pieces of chicken and fish in it. The theater also provided meals to us.

One design suggested construction of the railroad to the Arctic Ocean. There were prisoners brought there and earth huts constructed. We were to give them a concert. We took a plane to Obskaya in November and we were to perform two weeks for prisoners. We lived in an iced earth hut. We were to go back before the middle of December, but our plane was sent to a different location to pick up some civilians working near the North Pole and then come for us. We were waiting, but it never arrived. A day lasted 2 hours at that time of the season. The plane got into a fog and crashed. There were no more flights allowed. We stayed in this earth hut till the end of March giving concerts to prisoners and locals. The local residents were the Nenets people living in tents. We put together all miserable money that we had and bought a deer from them with its skin and horns removed. It didn't defrost and was standing in our earth hut on its four legs till we ate one leg, then another and the whole of it. We left the place in March. We arrived at Salekhard, and from there - to the construction camp. Our theater was separated, the ensemble stayed in Salekhard. By 1948 my 5 year sentence expired, but I was still restricted in my rights, and I stayed to work in the ensemble as a civilian. I didn't have a passport, but a paper stating that it had been issued under Articles 38 and 39 for passport provision. It didn't give me the right to live in Moscow, Kiev, Leningrad, Riga, in any decent town. I was paid well and could afford to pay my rent. However, I was not allowed to join trade unions or enter agreements or contracts. I rented a room for 300 rubles. There was work in Salekhard and it was paid well. However, there were no houses constructed for civilian personnel and all engineers and other non-manual workers had to rent rooms from locals.

I came to the north during the campaign against cosmopolites, and the prisoners sentenced for their participation in the Jewish anti-fascist committee [37](#) started arriving. In 1948, during



relocation from one camp to another, I met one of such prisoners. There were different prisoners. I stuck to the group of prisoners who were interested in literature, music and theater. They were educated people and I learned a lot from them. One of my fellow prisoners was Semyon Gecht, a Jew, who wrote the 'Ship going to Yaffo', published in the 1930s. [Gecht Semyon Grigorievich (1903 - 1963) – Russian Soviet writer, born in Odessa. Arrested 1944 - 1952. In his stories he describes the life of common people in Odessa and events of 1937-38 in the paradoxical and grotesque manner. His works have not been published since 1963.] There were chapters about Israel. He had never been there, but gave a great description of it. He wrote in Russian, was a friend of Babel [38](#) and told us many interesting stories. Another one was Nikolay Kruzhkov, a journalist. He told us about Stalin's anti-Semitism in the 1930s. He started working in the 1920s and his works were published under the pseudonym of Kremp. In the 1930s his manager called him and said that since he had such nice Russian surname, why did he want this suspicious pseudonym? All Jewish authors were obliged to have a Russian pseudonym. Only Mehlis [39](#) kept his surname. In the 1930s Stalin got tired of German newspapers writing that in the Soviet Union Jews were in power and that the proof of it were newspaper publications and names of authors.

From newspapers we knew about indictment of doctors [40](#) for making wrong diagnoses. We didn't believe this knowing how indictments were fabricated. In 1948 prisoners sentenced in 1937 had served their sentences and were released. Many of them stayed in the north having passports like I did. They were imprisoned again and exiled to Krasnoyarsk Kray [over 4000 km from Moscow] and farther. I knew about it. They could not allow us to return to towns and tell people about what we had been through. They arrested people for nothing, in an alphabetic order without any explanation. I realized it would take some time before they come to the first letter of my surname of Sherishevskiy. In 1953 we heard on the radio that Stalin died. I didn't feel sad about it, but I was concerned. We were all afraid of life to get worse.

Frankly speaking, I felt some concerns about the establishment of Israel. Realized what a response of the Soviet Union might be. I heard about it on the radio in our barrack in the camp in 1948. I thought it was good. Then I heard that Golda Meir became the head of this state. Then prisoners indicted of Zionism, bourgeois nationalism and cosmopolitanism started to arrive in the camp. Many people, who had a hard life in Moscow and Leningrad or lived nearby moved to Salekhard to hide away from persecution. I remember Hatenstein, a Jewish assistant professor from Leningrad – he must have been hired from his college. There was a pedagogical school in Salekhard and he went to lecture there. Many doctors moved to Vorkuta and Salekhard during the period of the 'doctors' plot' – just to live and work there.

I married Gelia Nikovina in Salekhard. She was Russian. She was born in Vologda in 1925. We registered our marriage in a registry office and began our life together. Gelia's father perished at the front, and her mother died before the war. She was the only daughter of her parents. She moved to Salekhard from Moscow. She served as a medical nurse at the front and later finished a College of Culture [higher educational institution for workers of culture and art: producers, actors, theater administration employees etc.] and had a job assignment [41](#) of a library director in the north. When she married me, she was expelled from the party, but resumed her membership after I was rehabilitated. He died from a stroke in 1989 and was buried near Nizhniy Novgorod where she was in a hospital. We divorced in 1968. We had no children. She was a nice person, but I fell in love with another woman.

After Stalin died, there was an amnesty in late March 1953. The amnesty released the political prisoners whose sentence was under 5 years. I obtained a passport and moved to Gorkiy with my wife. Mama lived in Bogorodsk in 40 km from the town. Of course, she rushed to Gorkiy as soon as she received my message. This was a warm reunion, we talked day and night for a week. I also suggested that she stayed with us, but mama refused. She had work and dwelling in Bogorodsk while we had nothing at the time and mama did not want to be a burden for men. I finished the 10th form and obtained a school certificate. In Gorkiy I entered the University, but before I sent a telegram to the Minister of Education to issue me a permit to take entrance exams since the university management was reluctant to accept my documents considering my biography and my being a Jew. The Minister sent them a directive to allow me to take exams. I passed my exams with '5' marks [top marks] and they had to admit me. I finished the philological Faculty well. I started to have my works published. I couldn't even think about post-graduate studies considering the booming state anti-Semitism. We were hard up at the time. I received a stipend and my wife received her very low salary of a librarian. After the University I got a job assignment to the 'Gorkovskiy rabochiy' newspaper ['the Gorkiy worker'], a central newspaper in Gorkiy where I worked for about 1.5 years. Then I was forced to quit, not without a Jewish context. Nobody told me anything directly, but there were no Jewish employees in central newspapers. There might have been an unspoken direction about it, I don't know, but the fact is, there were no Jewish employees. I became a free lance writer. I wrote for newspapers and TV and earned my living thus. Some time later my books were published and I joined the union of writers. I could earn my living without having to work in the office. I called myself 'a parasite with a certificate'. I didn't put down the poems I composed in the camp. I wrote them down after I was released and had them published in 1991.

In 1971 I moved to Moscow. There was terrible censorship in Gorkiy and I could hardly earn my living. In 1968 I remarried. My second wife Margarita Nogteva is Russian. She was born in Gorkiy in 1936. She kept her surname. She was a poet and a journalist with a standing in literature. We met in the university. In 1969 our daughter Debora was born. Margarita gave her this name. She was reading the New Testament and liked the image of Debora, a prophetess and poetess. [Debora is a character in the Old Testament.] So we named our daughter after the Biblical character. We decided that Debora should have the surname of her mother. My wife had a typical Russian surname and we knew that our daughter will have an easier life having her surname, it would be easier for her to enter a college and she would not face the booming anti-Semitism. We exchanged my wife's apartment in Gorkiy for a one in Krasnogorsk, near Moscow. Moscow welcomed me. I found a job to be able to support the family. I translated poems and had 50 books of my translations published. I know Ukrainian and Belarussian. I also had my poems published, but it was hard. My books began to be published in 1980 .

Our daughter married Ivan Kolomyiets and adopted his surname. Her husband is Ukrainian. Debora finished a Pedagogical College, when perestroika [42](#) began. She worked at school for over a year and also studied management. After finishing this 2-year course she received a diploma. She also studied English. She is deputy director in a private company and she is doing well. She has a daughter - my granddaughter, who is 10 years old. My daughter and her family live in their apartment in Krasnogorsk near where my ex-wife Margarita lives. Margarita looks after our granddaughter. Katia studies in a general and music school. Debora and her husband work a lot. They work in the same company. I divorced Margarita 20 years ago, there were reasons. However,

we remained in good relationships: we have a daughter and a granddaughter. After divorce I rented apartments before my acquaintance and I decided to build a cooperative apartment. [About 1 % of housing construction provided for private (cooperative) apartments in the Soviet Union. The rest of housing property was owned by the state.] We deposited the required amount and received a 3-bedroom apartment where I owned one room according to my share. We exchanged this apartment for two and I got my one-bedroom apartment in the middle 1980s.

Mama lived her life in Bogorodsk. She had her friends, a job in the town library and her apartment there. We corresponded, I often went to visit her and she traveled to visit me. Mama died from heart attack in 1973. She was 78 years old. This was her second infarction. She died instantaneously. She was buried in the same cemetery where my grandmother was buried in Bogorodsk in the common town cemetery. She requested that I didn't arrange any ritualistic funeral or placed her photograph on the gravestone.

I was enthusiastic about perestroika in the 1980s at first like many others. I had few poems about perestroika. One of them is published continuously: 'Refraction', about a direct ray that refracts and gets to wrong destinations from where it was intended. I didn't have illusions. I've never quite believed that we would manage to build a law-based state.

I didn't quite support all this excitement about Yeltsin, but I tried to enjoy the few freedoms and publish what I couldn't publish before. Thanks to perestroika people of my fate, i.e., those who were arrested and suffered during the Stalin's period got some support. The 'Memorial' community of former political prisoners was established. I was one of the first members of the working group of this society. I even have a certificate of this society issued in 1988 and signed by A. Sakharov [43](#). I am still involved in its activities. The Memorial society's goal was to restore the hidden events of the Soviet period and disclose the truth about persecution, terror and discrimination. It's a historical/literature society. The structure include few strands: uniting former prisoners and their successors having the status of those who suffered from political persecution. They have their own organization. There is also a historical unit in the Memorial, working with archives, documents, facts, memories. And there is also a legal center fighting for human rights.

Perestroika disclosed the crimes of the past - I supported this and tried to take part in its activities. However, I knew that 'one must spoil before one spins'. So, when the economic situation grew worse and people grew miserably poor, while the others grew rich, I started writing epigrams. I collected them in a book of my ironic comments regarding the totalitarian past and the forthcoming market economy and market ideology.

Publishing became easier: previously there were only state publishing houses and the ideological censorship, but when it was canceled, it became possible to publish books, but on market terms, though. A publisher either likes you and wants to earn on you and it invests in publishing you, or it has no intentions about making money on you and then you have to look for a sponsor. Everything I've published in 15 years, I did it on my expense. I had savings from my translation before 1992 and managed to publish my first book on this money. Later I had to look for sponsors. My daughter has supported me. I don't sell my books. I can afford small editions of 300 - 500 copies. I give these books to my acquaintances. Occasionally people buy few books at literary parties. I used to translate Caucasian authors, I know Georgian, Armenian and Azerbaijanian a little, but I do my translations on the basis of word for word translation, and they still have state publishing houses. I

I've kept my old ties. They published my translations in Russian and paid me.

In the 1980s many people moved to Israel and USA. There were Hebrew schools established in the town. The Jewish self-consciousness began to wake up. However, I still don't like it that Israel is not a quite secular state. There is a strong influence of religious tendencies. I've always believed that religion must have its own life, and the civil society must live its own life. However, I know that Jewish clergy [Rabbinat] often became secular leaders throughout the Jewish history. Right, our nations has been preserved through religion, though many representatives of this nation and religion adopted a different religion or professed two religions in Spain, Germany or Russia to somehow get a standing in secular societies. They openly belonged to Christianity or Islam, but secretly professed Judaism. Perhaps I am wrong, but I think that when Israel was reborn, it had to find other tightening means besides religion. A state must not be theocratic to that big extent. This kind of state allows inequality from the inside.

I've always identified myself as a Jew. My father implanted the knowledge of Jewish history and Jewish culture in me, when I was a child. Besides, this self-identification became very acute in 1933, when Hitler came to power and Europe was smashed by a huge wave of anti-Semitism. At school I suffered more being the son of an arrested man rather than being a Jew. It was the same during the war, when I was in a camp and sensed the breath of state anti-Semitism in the 1950s, - 60s, when I started working in newspapers after graduating from the university. I sensed the official trend 'to stop', to not admit, 'to not allow'. I also felt this moving to Moscow in the 1970s. Some publishers did not publish Jews in principal and openly expressed their anti-Semitic positions.

Feeling myself as a person raised on the Russian and partially Jewish culture I do not believe there exist exclusive nations. I wrote: 'There are no God chosen nations in the world, there God chosen people'. I do not believe in any exclusiveness giving one nation the right to believe they were higher and had the right to dictate. This refers to all. I also reject anti-Semitism decisively. Like any other national hostility.

## Glossary

### **1 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.

## **2 Lukianovka Jewish cemetery**

It was opened on the outskirts of Kiev in the late 1890s and functioned until 1941. Many monuments and tombs were destroyed during the German occupation of the town in 1941-1943. In 1961 the municipal authorities closed the cemetery and Jewish families had to rebury their relatives in the Jewish sections of a new city cemetery within half a year. A TV Center was built on the site of the former Lukianovka cemetery.

## **3 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.

## **4 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.

## **5 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.

## **6 Soviet/Russian doctorate degrees**

Graduate school in the Soviet Union (aspirantura, or ordinatura for medical students), which usually took about 3 years and resulted in a dissertation. Students who passed were awarded a 'kandidat nauk' (lit. candidate of sciences) degree. If a person wanted to proceed with his or her research, the next step would be to apply for a doctorate degree (doktarontura). To be awarded a doctorate degree, the person had to be involved in the academia, publish consistently, and write an original dissertation. In the end he/she would be awarded a 'doctor nauk' (lit. doctor of sciences) degree.

## **7 Keep in touch with relatives abroad**

The authorities could arrest an individual corresponding with his/her relatives abroad and charge him/her with espionage, send them to concentration camp or even sentence them to death.



## **8 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.

## **9 Jewish Pale of Settlement**

Certain provinces in the Russian Empire were designated for permanent Jewish residence and the Jewish population was only allowed to live in these areas. The Pale was first established by a decree by Catherine II in 1791. The regulation was in force until the Russian Revolution of 1917, although the limits of the Pale were modified several times. The Pale stretched from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea, and 94% of the total Jewish population of Russia, almost 5 million people, lived there. The overwhelming majority of the Jews lived in the towns and shtetls of the Pale. Certain privileged groups of Jews, such as certain merchants, university graduates and craftsmen working in certain branches, were granted to live outside the borders of the Pale of Settlement permanently.

## **10 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.

## **11 All-Union pioneer organization**

a communist organization for teenagers between 10 and 15 years old (cf: boy-/ girlscouts in the US). The organization aimed at educating the young generation in accordance with the communist ideals, preparing pioneers to become members of the Komsomol and later the Communist Party. In the Soviet Union, all teenagers were pioneers.

## **12 Denikin, Anton Ivanovich (1872-1947)**

White Army general. During the Russian Civil War he fought against the Red Army in the South of Ukraine.

## **13 Golda Meir (1898-1978)**

Born in Russia, she moved to Palestine and became a well-known and respected politician who fought for the rights of the Israeli people. In 1948, Meir was appointed Israel's Ambassador to the Soviet Union. From 1969 to 1974 she was Prime Minister of Israel. Despite the Labor Party's victory at the elections in 1974, she resigned in favor of Yitzhak Rabin. She was buried on Mount Herzl in Jerusalem in 1978.

#### **14 Five percent quota**

In tsarist Russia the number of Jews in higher educational institutions could not exceed 5% of the total number of students.

#### **15 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.

#### **16 Mendele Moykher Sforim (1835-1917)**

Hebrew and Yiddish writer. He was born in Belarus and studied at various yeshivot in Lithuania. Mendele wrote literary and social criticism, works of popular science in Hebrew, and Hebrew and Yiddish fiction. In his writings on social and literary problems Mendele showed lively interest in the education and public life of Jews in Russia. He was preoccupied by the question of the role of Hebrew literature in molding the Jewish community. This explains why he tried to teach the sciences to the mass of Jews and to aid the people in obtaining secular education in the spirit of the Haskalah (Hebrew enlightenment). He was instrumental in the founding of modern literary Yiddish and the new realism in Hebrew style, and left his mark on the two literatures thematically as well as stylistically.

#### **17 Famine in Ukraine**

In 1920 a deliberate famine was introduced in the Ukraine causing the death of millions of people. It was arranged in order to suppress those protesting peasants who did not want to join the collective farms. There was another dreadful deliberate famine in 1930-1934 in the Ukraine. The authorities took away the last food products from the peasants. People were dying in the streets, whole villages became deserted. The authorities arranged this specifically to suppress the rebellious peasants who did not want to accept Soviet power and join collective farms.

#### **18 MOPR (International Organization for Aid to Revolutionary Fighters)**

Founded in 1922, and based on the decision of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, the organization aimed to protect workers from the terrorist attacks of the Whites and help the victims of terrorism. It offered material, legal and intellectual support to political

convicts, political emigrants and their families. By 1932 it had a membership of about 14 million people.

### **19 Beilis case**

A Jew called M. 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.

### **20 Revisionist Zionism**

The movement founded in 1925 and led by Vladimir Jabotinsky advocated the revision of the principles of Political Zionism developed by Theodor Herzl, the father of Zionism. The main goals of the Revisionists was to put pressure on Great Britain for a Jewish statehood on both banks of the Jordan River, a Jewish majority in Palestine, the reestablishment of the Jewish regiments, and military training for the youth. The Revisionist Zionists formed the core of what became the Herut (Freedom) Party after the Israeli independence. This party subsequently became the central component of the Likud Party, the largest right-wing Israeli party since the 1970s.

### **21 Jabotinsky, Vladimir (1880-1940)**

Founder and leader of the Revisionist Zionist movement; soldier, orator and a prolific author writing in Hebrew, Russian, and English. During World War I he established and served as an officer in the Jewish Legion, which fought in the British army for the liberation of the Land of Israel from Turkish rule. He was a member of the Board of Directors of the Keren Hayesod, the financial arm of the World Zionist Organization, founded in London in 1920, and was later elected to the Zionist Executive. He resigned in 1923 in protest over Chaim Weizmann's pro-British policy and founded the Revisionist Zionist movement and the Betar youth movement two years later. Jabotinsky also founded the ETZEL (National Military Organization) during the 1936-39 Arab rebellion in Palestine.

### **22 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 anti-Semitic 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'.

### **23 Gulag**

The Soviet system of forced labor camps in the remote regions of Siberia and the Far North, which was first established in 1919. However, it was not until the early 1930s that there was a significant

number of inmates in the camps. By 1934 the Gulag, or the Main Directorate for Corrective Labor Camps, then under the Cheka's successor organization the NKVD, had several million inmates. The prisoners included murderers, thieves, and other common criminals, along with political and religious dissenters. The Gulag camps made significant contributions to the Soviet economy during the rule of Stalin. Conditions in the camps were extremely harsh. After Stalin died in 1953, the population of the camps was reduced significantly, and conditions for the inmates improved somewhat.

## **24 Great Terror (1934-1938)**

During the Great Terror, or Great Purges, which included the notorious show trials of Stalin's former Bolshevik opponents in 1936-1938 and reached its peak in 1937 and 1938, millions of innocent Soviet citizens were sent off to labor camps or killed in prison. The major targets of the Great Terror were communists. Over half of the people who were arrested were members of the party at the time of their arrest. The armed forces, the Communist Party, and the government in general were purged of all allegedly dissident persons; the victims were generally sentenced to death or to long terms of hard labor. Much of the purge was carried out in secret, and only a few cases were tried in public 'show trials'. By the time the terror subsided in 1939, Stalin had managed to bring both the Party and the public to a state of complete submission to his rule. Soviet society was so atomized and the people so fearful of reprisals that mass arrests were no longer necessary. Stalin ruled as absolute dictator of the Soviet Union until his death in March 1953.

## **25 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.

## **26 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.

## **27 Rehabilitation in the Soviet Union**

Many people who had been arrested, disappeared or killed during the Stalinist era were rehabilitated after the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956, where Khrushchev publicly debunked the cult of Stalin and lifted the veil of secrecy from what had happened in the USSR during Stalin's leadership. It was only after the official rehabilitation that

people learnt for the first time what had happened to their relatives as information on arrested people had not been disclosed before.

### **28 Gorbachev, Mikhail (1931- )**

Soviet political leader. Gorbachev joined the Communist Party in 1952 and gradually moved up in the party hierarchy. In 1970 he was elected to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, where he remained until 1990. In 1980 he joined the politburo, and in 1985 he was appointed general secretary of the party. In 1986 he embarked on a comprehensive program of political, economic, and social liberalization under the slogans of glasnost (openness) and perestroika (restructuring). The government released political prisoners, allowed increased emigration, attacked corruption, and encouraged the critical reexamination of Soviet history. The Congress of People's Deputies, founded in 1989, voted to end the Communist Party's control over the government and elected Gorbachev executive president. Gorbachev dissolved the Communist Party and granted the Baltic states independence. Following the establishment of the Commonwealth of Independent States in 1991, he resigned as president. Since 1992, Gorbachev has headed international organizations.

### **29 Enemy of the people**

Soviet official term; euphemism used for real or assumed political opposition.

### **30 Collective farm (in Russian kolkhoz)**

In the Soviet Union the policy of gradual and voluntary collectivization of agriculture was adopted in 1927 to encourage food production while freeing labor and capital for industrial development. In 1929, with only 4% of farms in kolkhozes, Stalin ordered the confiscation of peasants' land, tools, and animals; the kolkhoz replaced the family farm.

### **31 KGB**

The KGB or Committee for State Security was the main Soviet external security and intelligence agency, as well as the main secret police agency from 1954 to 1991.

### **32 Collectivization in the USSR**

In the late 1920s - early 1930s private farms were liquidated and collective farms established by force on a mass scale in the USSR. Many peasants were arrested during this process. As a result of the collectivization, the number of farmers and the amount of agricultural production was greatly reduced and famine struck in the Ukraine, the Northern Caucasus, the Volga and other regions in 1932-33.

### **33 NKVD**

People's Committee of Internal Affairs; it took over from the GPU, the state security agency, in 1934.

### **34 Solzhenitsyn, Alexander (1918-)**



Russian novelist and publicist. He spent eight years in prisons and labor camps, and three more years in enforced exile. After the publication of a collection of his short stories in 1963, he was denied further official publication of his work, and so he circulated them clandestinely, in samizdat publications, and published them abroad. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1970 and was exiled from the Soviet Union in 1974 after publishing his famous book, *The Gulag Archipelago*, in which he describes Soviet labor camps.

### **35 Beriya, L**

P. (1899-1953): Communist politician, one of the main organizers of the mass arrests and political persecution between the 1930s and the early 1950s. Minister of Internal Affairs, 1938-1953. In 1953 he was expelled from the Communist Party and sentenced to death by the Supreme Court of the USSR.

### **36 Kapler, Alexei (1904-1979)**

Russian Jewish screenwriter who wrote the script of a number of Soviet patriotic and military films.

### **37 Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAC)**

formed in Kuibyshev in April 1942, the organization was meant to serve the interests of Soviet foreign policy and the Soviet military through media propaganda, as well as through personal contacts with Jews abroad, especially in Britain and the United States. The chairman of the JAC was Solomon Mikhoels, a famous actor and director of the Moscow Yiddish State Theater. A year after its establishment, the JAC was moved to Moscow and became one of the most important centers of Jewish culture and Yiddish literature until the German occupation. The JAC broadcast pro-Soviet propaganda to foreign audiences several times a week, telling them of the absence of anti-Semitism and of the great anti-Nazi efforts being made by the Soviet military. In 1948, Mikhoels was assassinated by Stalin's secret agents, and, as part of a newly-launched official anti-Semitic campaign, the JAC was disbanded in November and most of its members arrested.

### **38 Babel, Isaac Emmanuilovich (1894-1940)**

Russian author. Born in Odessa, he received a traditional religious as well as a secular education. During the Russian Civil War, he was political commissar of the First Cavalry Army and he fought for the Bolsheviks. From 1923 Babel devoted himself to writing plays, film scripts and narrative works. He drew on his experiences in the Russian cavalry and in Jewish life in Odessa. After 1929, he fell foul of the Russian literary establishment and published little. He was arrested by the Russian secret police in 1939 and completely vanished. His works were 'rehabilitated' after Stalin's death.

### **39 Mekhlis, Lev Zakharovich (1889-1953)**

Soviet party statesman, colonel-general. Started as a social democrat, was a member of Poalei Zion. After the 1917 October Revolution he attained the ranks of Political Officer in the Red Army. An energetic assistant of Stalin, he was at different times minister of state control of the USSR, editor-in-chief of the most influential governmental newspaper, *Pravda*, chief of the Central

Committee of the Communist Party. Sometimes referred to as Stalin's 'alter ego', Mekhlis constantly informed on the army commanders to the Central Committee. Mekhlis died in Moscow and is buried in the Kremlin wall.

#### **40 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.

#### **41 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.

#### **42 Perestroika (Russian for restructuring)**

Soviet economic and social policy of the late 1980s, associated with the name of Soviet politician Mikhail Gorbachev. The term designated the attempts to transform the stagnant, inefficient command economy of the Soviet Union into a decentralized, market-oriented economy. Industrial managers and local government and party officials were granted greater autonomy, and open elections were introduced in an attempt to democratize the Communist Party organization. By 1991, perestroika was declining and was soon eclipsed by the dissolution of the USSR.

#### **43 Sakharov, Andrey Dimitrievich (1921-1989)**

Soviet nuclear physicist, academician and human rights advocate; the first Soviet citizen to receive the Nobel Peace Prize (1975). He was part of the team constructing the Soviet hydrogen bomb and received the prize 'Hero of the Socialist Labor' three times. In the 1960s and 70s he grew to be the leader of human rights fights in the Soviet Union. In 1980 he was expelled and sent to Gorkiy from where he was allowed to return to Moscow in 1986, after Gorbachev's rise to power. He remained a leading spokesman for human rights and political and economic reform until his death in 1989.