

# Boris Pukshansky

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Russia

Interviewer: Olga Egudina

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*Boris Efremovich Pukshansky lives alone in a small, very modest one-room apartment. He lived a very interesting life.*

*Terrible ordeal he underwent would be enough for several persons: German ghetto, loss of family, participation in battles. His work during peace time was also more than serious: he participated in creation of submarine fleet of the USSR.*

*This elderly and not healthy person immediately changes, when he starts speaking about his way through the war: he straightens his shoulders, his voice gets stronger, and here we see a brave scout who crossed front line many times.*

*Boris Efremovich did not die to the world: he is interested both in politics and the latest works of fiction, and also in people around him. But to tell the truth, contacts with people are just what he needs most of all.*



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- **My family background**

Unfortunately I know nothing about my great-grandmothers and great-grandfathers.

Therefore I'll start with the story about my grandmothers and grandfathers. First I'll tell you about my father's parents. His father's name was David Pukshansky. They said that our surname came from Puksha village, where our ancestors lived. But my grandfather and his wife Hana lived in a small Belarus town Yanovich. They had got 7 children (for those times it was not many): two sons (Afroim and Zuse) and five daughters (Frume, Sifra, Bela, Leye and Rokhl). All of them except Bela had got children.

My grandfather was born approximately in 1850, and died in 1930. My grandmother was a little bit younger. Both of them lived in Yanovichi all their life long, and were buried there. Grandfather died accidentally and tragically: he was crushed to death by suddenly opened gate. Grandmother outlived him by a short while. After their death my father's brother and his family lodged in their house.

My grandfather was one of shoppy people: some sort of chapman. He bought small items necessary in housekeeping and sold them in neighboring villages. Both my grandfather and grandmother were very religious people. I never saw grandfather without a hat. He had a big spade beard. Grandmother always wore a wig, she told me that her head was closely cropped. They observed strict kashrut, celebrated all religious holidays and Shabbath. They talked to each other only Yiddish, but thanks to their religiousness both also knew Hebrew well.

I know that my grandmother descended from a large family, though I do not remember exactly how many sisters and brothers she had got. And I can tell you nothing about my grandfather's family.

Now about my mother's parents: her father was Mates Levergant and her mother's name was Sore Isaakovna (I do not remember her maiden name). They were born in 1850s. They lived in Belarus small town Ostrovno. I do not remember his occupation, I only know that his profession was somehow concerned with wood. For a long time they had no children. But later (thanks God!) there were born my Mum and 3 more children: Berte, Gerzl and Isaak. The family of my mother's parents was very religious: they strictly observed all traditions. Grandmother and grandfather dressed as expected from religious Jews.

Yanovichi, a small town of my childhood was a real Jewish shtetl. About 80% of its population was Jewish. Even Russians in our small town spoke Yiddish well. Yanovichi was situated about 20 kilometers far from Vitebsk. There was no railroad. I do not remember any stone houses in Yanovichi, only wooden. And I do not remember that Jews in our small town had some special occupations. From my parents I got to know that in our town all doctors were Jewish (without exception), the most well-known was therapist Livshits, he was also the most respected person.

There were several synagogues (I do not know how many, but remember that not one). Grandfather was an honorary synagogue visitor. Certainly there were shochetim, all Jews asked for their assistance. Shochetim were always in popular demand.

I was born in 1924 in Yanovichi. First 6 years of my life I lived together with my parents, brothers and sister in the house of my grandmother and grandfather. You see, my father was the elder son among 7 children, and he made his duty to live with his parents and help them. Father told me that in Jewish families the elder son was allowed to marry only if all his sisters were already married or agreed with his marriage.

We lived in a big wooden house. In the court yard there were many household constructions. There were neither water nor electricity supply. We cooked meals in the Russian stove [1](#), it was also used for heating. The house was illuminated by means of oil lamps. There were no paved roads in Yanovichi.

We always had a cow and hens. Near the house there was a large vegetable garden. Vegetables from it were enough only to feed our family, we never sold them. We had no assistants at home. I remember that it were Mum and father who did almost everything about the house. When my father was little, all work about the house was made by my grandmother, and grandfather earned money (by the way, very little money).

At home we all spoke only Yiddish. Adults started speaking Hebrew when they discussed something secretly (not for children). I was 6 when my grandfather started teaching me Hebrew. But by the moment when members of our family ceased living together, I had time to learn only the alphabet. So I did not manage to speak Hebrew.

Parents were hard on us (children). Since childhood we were accustomed not to break into conversation of adults. 'Sit still and be silent' grandfather used to say, and I remember his words until now. Grandfather used to speak in proverbs. I remember some of his favorite vivid expressions: 'A liar is worse than a thief', 'Better strike, than insult', etc.

Most of our neighbors were Jews. I do not remember any manifestations of anti-Semitism in our town; of course I was a child, but I also don't remember my parents speaking about it.

I don't remember a market day in our town, but I remember very well that peasants from neighboring villages brought us different products for sale. They were grandfather's acquaintances whom he met during his trips. He had fair name, everybody knew that he would never deceive neither in the process of selling, nor buying.

Now I'll tell you about my parents.

My father Pukshansky Afroim Davidovich was born in Yanovichi in 1884. He finished only cheder. Father (like grandfather) was a very religious person. He earned his living the same way as my grandfather did: peddled wares from village to village. But after a number of years he mastered another profession: he started buying and currying leather. Besides he knew much about domestic animals: people always asked advice from him purchasing cows and sheep. He also was learned in the veterinary medicine. Neighbors often came running to him and asked his assistance in difficult delivery of a cow or in treatment of a diseased horse.

My father was exempt from military service, because according to the law elder son was not eligible for imperial army draft.

My Mum's name was Genye Matesovna. Her maiden name was Levergant. She was born in Belarus shtetl Ostrovno in 1892. She received only primary education. Marriage of my parents was partly arranged by a matchmaker. I say partly, because after their specially arranged meeting, events developed too quickly for that sort of marriage: my future parents fell in love with each other and got married very soon. Their first meeting took place on the neutral territory in Vitebsk. Wedding took place in Yanovichi in 1919, and the married couple lodged in the house of my father's parents. As far as I understand, it was not easy for Mum to live there, because Daddy had got 5 sisters, and all of them gave a hostile reception to their young sister-in-law. They all told parents on her. But Mum was a very clever woman, she carried herself with dignity and never stooped to gossip. Therefore little by little everybody started respecting her.

Financial position of our family was very modest. Father was only eager to give education to his children. He used to say that he did not manage to receive education, therefore he wanted his children to be happier from that point of view. Here I'd like to say that all children in our family received higher education (my elder brother had no time to graduate). All of us were always the best pupils wherever we studied.

When I was 6 years old (in 1930), we moved to the city of Liozno. Liozno was a regional center and a large railway junction. There my father was offered to work at a supplying center. But parents also had an idea to give their children opportunity to study somewhere. Probably, it was not so pleasant for sisters of my father (by that time they were no more young) that he left parents: they got used to the fact that my father and Mum took care of their parents. By the way, one of my father's sisters Sifra and her husband lived in Liozno. By the moment of our leaving for Liozno we were already a family of 6.

After Yanovichi Liozno seemed to us almost Paris. All the streets were paved - this fact shocked me. In general life there was absolutely different. There for the first time in my life I saw people simply walking along the streets - I never saw something of that kind in Yanovichi. Percent of Jewish population was lower, than in Yanovichi. Nobody forced Jews to settle in a certain place, but historically it happened that in the city there were districts with more Jewish and less Jewish population. At first we had no place for living. But later aunt Sifra and her family moved to Leningrad, and we lodged in her house. Her house was small and not very comfortable, therefore father dreamed to move to more suitable lodging. Soon we managed to buy our own house. It was situated not in the most Jewish district of the city, our neighbors were mainly Russians. Parents were always in good relations with neighbors: as they say, they did not argue about borders, but inter nos they spoke about neighbors not always respectfully.

Our house was not very big (we had not enough money for a bigger one), but for us it was cozy and quiet. There was stove heating and no water supply. Electricity supply appeared much later.

We had a large vegetable garden, a cow and hens. Later we even bought a pig, but only to plump it for sale (at home we never ate pork). When I grew up, it came to my mind that probably parents bought a pig to show the neighbors that they were not very religious Jews. You see, by that time Soviet authority already started struggle against religion, and it was possible to expect troubles.

When my younger brother grew up a little, Mum started working as a saleswoman in a food store. We all kept the house together. Each of us (children) had a certain task about the house, and I don't remember that some of us failed to fulfill it.

In Liozno there lived 2 or 3 father's cousins. We made friends with their children.

At home we had a lot of religious books and not many books of other kind. Most often books were brought home by my sister, who studied at a Belarus school. Her books were in Belarussian language. Later I started borrowing books at our school library.

Among us my sister was the most sociable and active. My elder brother was very clever and capable, he had pronounced aptitude for engineering. I also was not a fool, but very silent, therefore some people thought that I was unsociable. When Mum went to Torgsin stores [2](#) to sell something, she took me with her, because she was sure that I would tell nobody about it. By the

way, Mum never went to Torgsin stores in our city, we always went to the neighboring one. That was the way I went by train for the first time in my life. And by car I went for the first time very late in my life: probably already in the army. By the way, if we speak about technical achievements, I'd like to tell you that in our class only one boy had watches. Almost all teachers asked him 'What time is it now?' They had no watches.

In 1933 in Ukraine people were starving. We got to know about it, because in our city there appeared refugees from Ukraine, extremely famished. At our city it was a little bit better, but we had food card [3](#). People stood in lines to buy bread, and the ration decreased day by day. If we had no vegetable garden, we would not survive. We had to buy hay for our cow, and it was also not easy, because only a few owners sold it: every person keeping a cow wanted to keep hay.

### • Growing up

At the age of 7 I went to school. In Liozno there were 3 schools: Belarussian, Jewish, and Latvian. Running a few steps forward, I'd like to tell you that the Latvian school was closed first, and the Jewish one functioned till 1938. [In 1918 Soviet authorities permitted national minorities to teach their children at schools in their mother tongue. But in 1938 they issued an edict ordering to teach all schoolchildren in Russian.]

Parents sent me to the Jewish school. My elder brother Mikhail also studied at the Jewish school, Sofye went to Belarussian one, and my younger brother Jacob went to the Russian school, opened instead of the Jewish one. My school was very good. I remember surname of our director - Kaplan, and the head of studies - Raikhshtein. When the school was closed, they accused Kaplan of Zionism. Kaplan taught Russian language and Russian literature, and Raikhshtein was a teacher of Yiddish and Jewish literature. All subjects at school were taught in Yiddish. German and Russian languages were taught as foreign ones. I recollect my school with great pleasure. Most of all I liked mathematics, and later I took a great interest in chess. Chess became my love for ever. At present I am writing a book about chess, and I'll tell you how it began. After the death of my grandmother and grandfather, father visited Yanovich from time to time to bow his thanks to their tombs. Sometimes he took me with him.

There we used to stay at father's sister Leye. She had got 4 children, and one of them taught me to play chess. I quickly mastered this game. In the meantime the newspaper Pionerskaya Pravda [literally, Pioneer's Truth, a newspaper for teen-age pioneers in the Soviet Union] announced a chess competition, and started publishing chess problems. Together with my friend we got the feel of solving them, therefore we began sending them our decisions. I became one of the winners. After that Pionerskaya Pravda and Zateynik magazine organized a correspondence chess match. Each team consisted of 75 persons. Our team won. I was awarded a book Life of Insects. Do not ask me what connection between insects and chess was. Perhaps they wanted chess players to develop harmoniously and widen range of our interests. By that time I became much stronger as a chess player, therefore I began inventing my own chess problems.

I finished 7 classes of the Jewish school and it was closed. I became a pupil of the 8th class at the Russian school. While I studied at the Jewish school, my friends were mainly Jews. At the Russian school I made new friends, not only Jews. Our favorite amusement was football. We played everywhere: in the street, at school. We used every free minute for that purpose. Our ball was not

perfect, we played a rag ball. Once my younger brother kicked the ball and broke glass of Stalin's portrait. Mum was invited to school. She immediately replaced the glass and begged teachers not to set the affair going. At that time such child's prank was enough to shipwreck his hopes.

In our city there was a good cinema arranged in the church building (that church was closed during campaign against religion). We often watched films there, tickets were very cheap.

Parents made friends mainly with their relatives - cousins of my father. But they had little time for conversations. In 1939 my mother's parents moved to Liozno from Ostrovno. They rented a room in the house next ours. After my grandfather's death in 1940, grandmother lodged at us.

Our family went on observing traditions (as we did in Yanovichi), celebrating holidays. But nobody knew about it: neither neighbors, nor our schoolmates! Father prayed every day, but he did it at home. He did not visit the synagogue.

I remember some political events of that time. I remember well that after occupation of Poland in 1939 [on September 1, 1939 after a long political crisis, Germany invaded Poland] in Liozno there appeared many refugees (most of them were Jews). At school they recommended us not to talk to them (they were afraid of capitalist propagation). I also remember the beginning of campaign, which later received the name of Great Terror [4](#). In our city there worked an important Communist Party official Deniskevich, he was moved to Liozno from Minsk. Now I understand that his appointment to our small city from the capital of Belarus was the end of his career. A little bit later he was arrested and they instituted open legal proceedings against him. As it was customary at that time, he was accused of sabotage. [According the Soviet criminal law sabotage was considered especially dangerous state crime directed towards enfeebling of the Soviet state. During Great Terror false and ridiculous charges in sabotage were common.] I was present at the trial. Certainly I understood nothing and considered Deniskevich to be a real evildoer. He was sentenced to be shot.

My parents never went away for vacation. They worked days and nights!

Our parents never discussed politics in our presence. So I know nothing about their political views.

As I already mentioned, in our family there were 4 children. My sister Sofye was the only girl in our family, she was born in 1920. My brother Mikhail was born in 1921. I was born in 1924 and my younger brother Jacob - in 1929. We all were born in Yanovichi. Our sister Sofye studied very well, but a little bit worse than me and Mikhail. She became a student of the Pedagogical College in Vitebsk (geographical faculty). When the war burst out, she hurried up home. I'll tell you about her destiny a little bit later. Unfortunately my story will be short. Mikhail finished school in 1939. Our father had friends (Efross), whose relatives taught in Leningrad in the Technological College. These relatives often came to Liozno in summer. They advised Mikhail to enter their College. Mikhail easily passed entrance examinations and at the College had only excellent marks. By the beginning of the war he managed to finish 2 courses. Mikhail was not eligible for army draft because of a wall-eye, but he volunteered and became a member of people's volunteer corps. [During the Great Patriotic War voluntary detachments consisted of persons who were not called up immediately after the beginning of the war due to different reasons. Badly trained and poorly armed volunteers sustained great losses during fights in autumn of 1941.] In 1941 he was killed near Luga. His surname can be found on the marble board in the lobby of the Technological College



among surnames of other victims.

- **During the war**

By the beginning of the war Jacob finished 5 classes. I'll tell you about his destiny later.

I finished my school in 1941. On June 21 we had our final party. I received school-leaving certificate with gold frame which included the text that I had the right to enter any educational institution of our country without entrance examinations. I wanted to enter the Leningrad Aviation College. But next day the war burst out and changed my plans [5](#). It became clear that Germans will soon be in Liozno and it was necessary to evacuate. We kept in mind stories of refugees from Poland about barbarities of Germans, therefore we did not hesitate. First we decided to ship off only children, but Mum thought it over and said that it was not clever to separate during hard times and we should leave all together. Daddy objected (he could not leave his work), but Mum insisted. We started preparing for departure, packed up some things, and registered for departure by train leaving on July 5.

We worried about Mikhail, but hoped that in Leningrad he would be safer, than we were. On July 3 Stalin addressed people on the radio. It was his first speech after beginning of the war. He said that actions took place only on borders and they would not last long. He asked people not to give way to panic. Party authorities trusted Stalin more, than their own eyes, therefore they cancelled dispatching the train. So I consider Stalin to be personally guilty of death of my family members. On July 9 we saw a red glare over the burning Vitebsk. Later we got to know that Germans occupied Vitebsk on July 11. At that moment we understood that it was impossible to wait any more. Father found a horse somewhere, he managed to harness it and we started our way. My parents, grandmother, my sister, younger brother and I went on the cart along country roads, knowing nothing about the way, heading for the east. On the way we met other refugees, mainly Jews. Almost all Belarus Jews suspected what fate awaited them if they stayed to wait for Germans. We saw our army retreating, saw commanders tearing off their insignia (they were afraid to be taken prisoners).

Once we nearly came across a column of Germans, it was necessary to come back. A week passed since the time of our departure. Most Jews who had left Liozno, returned also. During that week the city was destroyed seriously. Our house remained safe, but we lived in it not for long: all Jews were moved to ghetto. Germans arranged ghetto in the city district where there were the poorest houses, sheds, some strange constructions. There appeared gallows: fascists executed Soviet prisoners. Order in the city was supported mainly by polizei soldiers (Russians and Byelorussians). [During the Great Patriotic War people in occupied territories called a local resident serving in fascist police a polizei.]. A German Lampert was appointed a burgomaster. [Burgomaster was the Head of the city administration appointed by German headquarters on the occupied territory]. He was a German who lived all his life long in Yanovichi and had no concern to German army.

In September during Rosh Hashanah in ghetto there happened short circuit, and the entire district remained without electricity supply. Germans considered it to be a diversion (probably it was indeed) and threatened to shoot 10 people if they did not find saboteurs. Germans came to us and chose my father, my brother and me for execution. They were already going to take us away, but at that moment my sister entered the room. The German soldier looked at her in a strange manner

and left without a word. Later we got to know that Sofye and his sister were very much alike. Here you see what a moth could sometimes turn the balance.

I started working. Nobody paid for work, we could get food only exchanging or selling something. But nevertheless it seemed to me that I would die without work. I chose the hardest work I could find. Together with several young guys we went to work on sand-pit. It was a real drudgery. Autumn was very cold, and in winter there was severe frost. We had to break to pieces sand which had turned into stone because of frost and to pour it on wheelbarrows. Later other workers had to use it sanding roads for German armies and military equipment. My chief was a person named Korolev. He played an important role in my life, but I'll tell you about it later.

We had no trustworthy information. Germans informed that the Soviet army was defeated and Moscow and Leningrad kaput. By winter time in suburbs of Liozno there appeared Soviet scouts. Step by step we got to know that the USSR was not defeated yet, it was still at war. Jews in ghetto discussed among themselves different variants of rescue. But all of us understood that if someone managed to escape from the ghetto, his family would be shot.

December, January and February were the hardest months for us. We suffered from frost. But the same was with Germans. They had no winter clothes, because they hoped to win the war before the winter. On February 23 our bomber aircraft attacked Liozno. Next day early in the morning I went to work. I worked together with my fellow countryman Isaak Tshiperson (he was 3 years older than me). Suddenly our chief Korolev approached us and said 'You, guys, go on working and I'll be back in a couple of hours.' It seemed to us strange: he never informed us about his plans. Several minutes later he came up again and said 'Today Germans will execute by shooting all Jews in ghetto.' Together with Tshiperson we took our shovels and rushed to the wood. All the day long we were walking somewhere. In the evening we found ourselves near the village where Isaak's acquaintances lived. We spent the night at their place and continued our way in the morning. Several Jews from that village joined us. We decided to make our way to our armies. Having walked about 50 kilometers, we met a group of our scouts raiding in the rear of the enemy. They told us that if went in a certain direction, we would be able to cross the front line in 2 or 3 days. They moved in the same direction.

We followed the scouts and in 3 days reached disposition of their regiment. I showed them the only document I had - my school-leaving certificate and said that I was a volunteer. And Tshiperson told them that he had exemption from military service. He moved farther (to home front). Later I got to know that he was arrested, because he told everybody about our armies retreating. And I appeared in the army. Though quite a lot fell to my share, I am happy that it turned that way. So in February 1942 I became a soldier of the rifle battalion #21 in scouts platoon of Kalininsky front. It was frosty winter. The occupied territory was supervised by Germans insufficiently: they settled down only in large cities, villages and woods were free of them. In villages there ruled polizei soldiers, and in woods there were organized partisan groups. Our scouts used to go far into the enemy rear. Our group consisted of 15 or 20 persons.

I keep in my mind the first tongue [soldiers of the Soviet army called a tongue a soldier of enemy army captured by scouts] captured with my participation. His name was Arthur Wolfmayer. We captured him near the city of Nevel. We lay in hiding in a wood, and he stepped aside into the wood to meet natural demands. There we took him. He appeared to be a roadman of German



army, and we received useful information from him. We had not only to capture tongue, but also to implement other tasks. For example some partisan groups were in fact specially organized by Germans to destabilize partisan movement. We had to find out what groups were true. Each raid lasted about 2 weeks. Sometimes we went very far beyond the front line (about 150 kilometers). During these 2 weeks we did not take off clothes, slept in the wood near the fire. We seldom took food with us: we preferred to take more ammunition. You see, local population always gave us food, though they were almost half-starving. People on the occupied territory seemed to be very confused: they could not understand how Germans managed to move forward far inland so quickly. It was also difficult for them to get used to fast and sharp division of society into partisans and polizei soldiers. People not always trusted us, they thought we were masked enemies. But in general people believed us and put reliance upon us.

Scouts were very much appreciated in the army: the command did its best not to part from them. Therefore they always tried to cure walking cases at their medical battalion and not to send them rearward. [The Medical and sanitary battalion is a separate part of the body of troops intended for its medical maintenance.] In that case after recovery the scout could make his comeback.

In our platoon there were 3 Jews and a couple of anti-Semites. One person (his surname was Mitskevich) even called me a dirty Jew. But on the whole I did not face anti-Semitism in the army.

A fight near the small settlement Blichino stuck to my memory. It was the first operation under trying conditions where we suffered bad losses. In particular, the first sergeant Skobelev (he was loved by all of us) was lost. During the operation we came across several carts with German soldiers. We rushed to the attack, but they reacted very quickly and opened fire. We managed to annihilate all of them, pick up our wounded and killed men and returned to our regiment using German carts.

At the end of December 1942 our group received a task to get a tongue. We decided to take him on the big country road, which German armies moved along every day. Germans checked that road daily: they moved along it in a column of 20 or 30 soldiers and fired at woods. After checking they gave a signal that everything was clear and it was possible to begin movement. On December 30 after their signal we moved secretly towards the road and lay in hiding in the wood. We were lucky: the first vehicle appeared was neither a tank nor a lorry, but a motorcycle with a carriage. It improved our matters. We knocked out the motorcycle having wounded the driver (he died almost at once). We left him in the wood, took the documents he carried, and returned quickly.

The documents appeared to be very important, they played great role in planning full-scale offensive of our armies. For that operation I was awarded a Medal for Bravery [6](#). The army commander himself arrived to present us (we were 8) with medals. Besides medals we all were granted leaves of absence. It was unprecedented happiness, but (alas!) not for me. I had nobody to go to. I knew nothing about my relatives, except what Korolev told me that terrible February day in Liozno. I was sure that nobody from my family had survived. Later I got to know that it was not absolutely true. In a word, I refused to go home and they sent me to a recreation house. If I found myself on the other planet or in paradise, I wouldn't be shocked more: there I slept on bed sheets! You see, in fact I had already forgotten what a pleasure it was. I had 3 hot meals a day! And I spent there 10 days. To tell the truth, at the front we did not starve, and scouts received 100 gr of vodka every day. I did not drink it and used to give my portion to comrades. There were a lot of persons

interested.

The next raid of our group to rear of the enemy happened in the beginning of March 1943. That day Germans suddenly assumed the offensive. We came to be on their way and did not manage to cross the front line. Therefore we had nothing to do but lie in hiding in the wood. We heard the noise of fight, we understood our regiment participated in it, but we could not contact with them. Suddenly we saw a car, which stopped nearby. Two Germans got off it: one of them wore a leather coat, another one - a jacket and a helmet. Our commander said 'If we take a prisoner, we will be not so much ashamed of remaining aloof from the fight.' We rushed towards the car and seized the person in the coat. When we reached our regiment and interrogated the prisoner, it turned out that we took a batman, while the second person in the car was an important German general. We were carpeted for it, though the batman gave us valuable information. Yes, it was wormwood to us, too: not every day we had a chance to capture a general of the enemy army.

In 1943 our army started preparing for full-scale offensive. Therefore they began searching among soldiers people knowing German language (to interrogate prisoners immediately after capture). I studied German at school and they chose me for that purpose. They taught us German language during a month, and after that I returned to my regiment and participated in liberation of Nevel. On October 7 we took it. For that operation our division was named Nevelsky. Fighting was hard: 30 minutes of preparatory bombardment, then tank attack, then attack of infantry. During that attack I was wounded and contused. Many splinters hit my head, my eardrum was broken. At first I was taken to the medical battalion and later (as my wound was severe) to the front hospital. There I spent more than 2 months.

Being in hospital I got to know that soon after Nevel our army liverated Liozno. Before leaving hospital I asked permission to visit my native city. The city was ruined. I got to know that all my family (except my younger brother) was executed by shooting together with other Jews (fascists even brought Jews from neighboring villages to Liozno for executing). About my brother people told me the following: he managed to leave ghetto and reach the house of Zina Popova, a friend of our sister. Family of Zina gave refuge to him for one night. Early in the morning they gave him food, and he left for somewhere. He did not feel hurt: everybody understood that all the family would be executed by shooting for keeping a Jew in concealment. Nobody knew what happened to him and I did not hope to see him alive. More likely I hoped that my elder brother was alive.

After my trip to Liozno I addressed the army headquarters to find my regiment. But they took me as an interpreter, because they had a lot of prisoners and few interpreters. I worked there for a month and then was sent to the rifle battalion #103 (reconnaissance unit). Since that moment my life changed: I did not go to the enemy rear any more, I had to stay at the command post and interrogate captives. The army advanced successfully and soon liberated Vitebsk, Polotsk, Daugavpils. There were a lot of captives. It was necessary to convoy them to our prisoner-of-war camps. Soldiers informed about the following cases: an escort received 45 captives, but brought to the destination point 70 persons. You see, it happened because Germans yielded themselves prisoners at the first opportunity. Sometimes our battalion had to move forward, but there were a lot of captives and no escorts. In that case I used to appoint one of Germans the head of the group, gave him a specially worked out document, and he led his former brother-soldiers to the destination point on his own.

Later we moved to Latvia, and then to Lithuania. Therefrom we were suddenly moved to East Prussia. On January 17, 1945 we took Tilsit in stride. The city was empty; we met nobody in the streets: all citizens were evacuated far inland. The further approach to Königsberg was very hard, but nevertheless on April 9, 1945 the city was taken [7](#). Königsberg was in siege for some time, inhabitants starved, and we spoke among ourselves that it was our small revenge for Leningrad. But when our armies entered the city, we felt sorry for local residents and fed them up from our field kitchens.

In the beginning of May 1945 they put us into a lorry and brought toward Danzig. Near Putzig there was a small peninsula, which was connected with a very interesting military operation. That peninsula was 50 kilometers long and from 3 to 15 kilometers wide. German armies stood up for it. Field marshal Zaukel was in command. Our task was to persuade them to render themselves prisoners of war. On May 7 we met German delegation, headed by colonel Mangold. From our side the corps commander, the commander of reconnaissance unit (a colonel), and I participated in negotiations. I was their interpreter, but my military experience was also of great importance. First of all we wanted to know the number of German soldiers on the peninsula. To tell the truth, having heard the answer I did not believe my ears and asked again. Then I asked German representative to write it down. The number was enormous: 140,000. We immediately informed Rokossovskiy [8](#). He entrusted us with the task to continue negotiations. We came to agreement about the following: the Soviet army accepted their capitulation and the next day we would meet general Zaukel at his bunker and discuss the terms of surrender.

In the morning of May 8 we arrived to his bunker. We had to discuss technical problems of capitulation: you see, to take so great number of people prisoners was not so easy. Their weapon had to be left on the island, and we had to receive the map with instruction how to find it. Soldiers of our regiment met Germans on the isthmus and sorted them for sending to prisoner-of-war camps. It took Germans several days to leave the island. Soviet command guaranteed all prisoners life. By the way, head of SMERSH [9](#) told our chief investigator that he was in charge of Zaukel. On the island there were 12 generals, all of them were allowed to take their belonging with them. They did it, though earlier they had asseverated to be interested only in saving their soldiers' lives. We escorted all those generals to Shtezin. Field marshal Zaukel repeated all the time: 'Give information in your newspapers that I am alive. My wife in Switzerland worries about me.' You see, we were not touched by feelings of his wife. For that operation I was awarded Order of the Great Patriotic War (1st Class) [10](#). It was presented to me on May 16. In total during the war I was awarded 6 orders and more than 20 medals.

#### • After the war

After the end of the war (Berlin had been already taken) I was still on. Together with several soviet officers we worked all over Germany checking habitation conditions of barracks where our soldiers had to live. We were afraid of diversions. But they did not happen. Citizens hung out white bed sheets as signs of capitulation. So we worked all May long and the beginning of June. I was suggested to remain at military service, but I wanted to return to restful life and said that I was going to leave for Leningrad to study. During my last month in Germany I got to know that my brother Jacob was alive and lived in Leningrad. Therefore I got renewed energy to get to Leningrad.

Now it's high time to tell you about the story of my brother Jacob. You remember that he managed to run away from ghetto. Having left people who sheltered him for one night, he almost repeated my way along neighboring woods and villages. In one of those villages people told him that they had seen me there not long ago. He spent some time at a partisan group and then they took him across the front line. He went to Chuvashia in evacuation. There he miraculously met our cousin Fanye, who was evacuated there from Leningrad with her 2 children. Fanye took Jacob to her place. He was afraid to be a burden on her and started working. His work was very hard: he helped floating logs. In 1944 when Leningrad was liberated, Fanye's husband (he was at war on the Leningrad front) sent an invitation to his wife and Jacob [11](#). In Leningrad they lodged all together and Fanye helped Jacob to find work at a factory. When I arrived in Leningrad, I invited my brother to live at my place and insisted upon his studying. It took Jacob 1 year to pass examinations for 7 classes of secondary school without attending lectures. After that he entered the Motor Transport Technical School. [Technical School in the USSR and a number of other countries was a special educational institution preparing specialists of middle level for various industrial and agricultural institutions, transport, communication, etc.] He worked at motor transport enterprises and later graduated from the Motor Transport College (correspondence course). He had got a daughter Genye (she was named in honor of our mother). Now she lives in Moscow.

So, in the beginning of August I arrived in Leningrad. First of all I went to the military registration and enlistment office and said that I wanted to get demobilized. [Military registration and enlistment offices in the USSR and in Russia are special institutions that implement call-up plans.] And they answered 'Anyway this year it is late to enter a college, you'd better serve a year more.' In Leningrad there were many captured Germans who were reconstructing the city destroyed by them. My knowledge of German language was useful. I brought to rights documents of prisoners, drew up their private files. Authorities gave me a room near the city center. I got demobilized in summer of 1946 and entered the Shipbuilding College. [The Leningrad Shipbuilding College was found in 1902.]

I was taken in without entrance examinations, because I finished school having only excellent marks. At that time my school seemed to me a dream! Having finished the 2nd year, I went to work, because my stipend was not enough for living. I worked at a design office and it was not easy to combine it with my studies. During the war I forgot much I knew at school, and it was necessary to study hard. I was always hard pressed for money, sometimes it was necessary to unload cars at night to get some extra sum of money. Nevertheless I graduated from the College with distinction. Head of my design office wanted me to go on working at them. But during the procedure of mandatory job assignment [12](#) there appeared Issanin (a member of the Russian Academy of Science), who invited young specialists to work at his design office on new topic: Creation of Undersea Fleet of the USSR. He wanted to give an employment only to excellent students and took me away from my former place of work. That was the way I got to the Central Design Office #16, where I worked about 40 years. It was the only place of my work; therefrom I retired on pension in 1989. My work was very interesting, I acquired good knowledge, was self-confident, and felt to be the right man in the right place.

I had to go on business trips very often. Sometimes I visited different factories, and sometimes it was necessary to dive testing our new submarines. You should know that during such tests a submarine has to dive at its depth-limit, which is twice more than by its usual depth. It was a

serious test not only for the submarine, but also for investigators! My business trips were strictly confidential. Even my wife knew nothing about the time and place I left for. First-ever rocket launch from a submarine happened right before my eyes. It was on September 16, 1955. Here I have to say that during years of my work I never faced any manifestations of anti-Semitism. I received awards in peace time, too (I have 3 orders for my work).

Now I'll tell you about my wife. I married her in 1951 when I was a student of the 5th course. My wife's name was Sara Isayevna, her maiden name was Sheikhet. She was born in Leningrad in 1927. During the war she was evacuated and lived near Orenburg. She died in 2002, having not reached her 75th anniversary. In the year of our wedding Sara graduated from historical faculty of the Leningrad University. At that time it was extremely difficult for a Jew to be employed as a teacher of history, therefore she started working as a pioneer leader [13](#) at school. Her salary was scanty, position of a pioneer leader did not require higher education, but many teachers (Jews) had to begin their pedagogical activity that way. Later she managed to find a place of a history teacher at school.

The only son of us Mikhail was born in Leningrad in 1952. He was a very good pupil (it is our family trait). I am very glad that I have managed to implant the love of chess to him. He has the ranks of Master of Sports and Honored Coach of Russia. Mikhail graduated from the Leningrad Polytechnic College and works as an engineer. He has got 2 children: Alexander (born in 1982) and Anna (born in 1990).

We lived in harmony. I always kept in mind my parents' family as an example. We tried to spend with each other as much time as possible. While my son was little, we always rented a room in a suburb of Leningrad for summer vacation. Sometimes we went to Kislovodsk or Sochi. Very seldom I received permissions for paid trips to a recreation house at my work [14](#).

When Stalin died, I did not cry (as many others did). I was uneasy and tried to foresee the coming events. Here I have to say that Khrushchev's speech at the XX Party Congress [15](#) was not a surprise for me: I expected something of that kind and was glad to hear the truth.

Doctors' Plot [16](#) was a heartrending experience for all Jews. Nobody was in perfect security. But our director Issanin fired only 1 Jew (all heads of institutions were forced to fire Jews at that time): he was a confirmed drunkard and to my opinion the director would have fired him long before.

During events in Hungary [17](#) and the Prague spring [18](#) I was entirely on the side of Hungarians and Czechs. I was shocked that the USSR interfered in the internal affairs of other countries in a free and easy manner.

I was very much pleased with victories of Israel in its wars [19, 20]. I did my best to listen to Radio Liberty [21](#) to receive the truthful information.

I think that Gorbachev [22](#) and Yeltsin (though they were irreconcilable enemies) did much for our country. I took Perestroika [23](#) as public good.

I never thought about departure to Israel. My brother always was against it, and I did not want to separate from him once again.

Regarding my Jewish self-identification: I came back to this question only after retiring on pension. Before that we never observed traditions or celebrated holidays. And having become a pensioner, I began visiting synagogue. At present I go there 3 times a week to see Torah scroll carried out. I knew the way to the synagogue a long time ago. In Leningrad there lived my father's sister Sifra. She was an old woman and it was impossible for her to go for matzah, but at Pesach she could not manage without it. It was me who brought matzah to her. I had to buy flour and bring it to the synagogue. Later I came there again to get the product. One day on my way for matzah I met one of my colleagues who never showed love to Jews. He asked me where I was going so early in the morning. I answered 'Of course to the synagogue: where else can I go?' He laughed and said 'I don't believe you.' He informed nobody about our meeting, though in fact if he did, I would have got troubles. When many years later I told that story to rabbi, he explained it the following way: the Most High helped me, because I had told the truth. For many years I have been studying Torah without assistance at home. I got to know about Hesed Avraham Welfare Center long time ago [24](#). When I felt better, I often visited it. Now I receive food packages from Hesed for holidays.

- **Glossary:**

### **[1](#) 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.

### **[2](#) Torgsin stores**

Special retail stores, which were established in larger Russian cities in the 1920s with the purpose of selling goods to foreigners. Torgsins sold commodities that were in short supply for hard currency or exchanged them for gold and jewelry, accepting old coins as well. The real aim of this economic experiment that lasted for two years was to swindle out all gold and valuables from the population for the industrial development of the country.

### **[3](#) Card system**

The food card system regulating the distribution of food and industrial products was introduced in the USSR in 1929 due to extreme deficit of consumer goods and food. The system was cancelled in 1931. In 1941, food cards were reintroduced to keep records, distribute and regulate food supplies to the population. The card system covered main food products such as bread, meat, oil, sugar, salt, cereals, etc. The rations varied depending on which social group one belonged to, and what kind of work one did. Workers in the heavy industry and defense enterprises received a daily ration of 800 g (miners - 1 kg) of bread per person; workers in other industries 600 g. Non-manual workers received 400 or 500 g based on the significance of their enterprise, and children 400 g. However, the card system only covered industrial workers and residents of towns while villagers never had any provisions of this kind. The card system was cancelled in 1947.

### **[4](#) 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.

## **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 Medal for Bravery**

established on 17th October 1938; also known as the 'Medal for Courage', 'Medal for Valor' and 'Medal for Gallantry'. It was considered the most highly respected Soviet military medal, and was awarded to personnel of all ranks in the Army, Navy, Border Troops and Ministry of Internal Affairs troops for personal bravery in a theater of operations; in the defense of USSR borders; for performance of a soldier's duty in life-risking situations; and for activities against spies and subversive elements. Citizens as well as foreigners were also eligible for this award. This award could be received more than once.

## **7 Konigsberg offensive**

It started on 6th April 1945 and involved the 2nd and the 3rd Belarussian and some forces of the 1st Baltic front. It was conducted as part of the decisive Eastern Prussian operation, the purpose of which was the crushing defeat of the largest grouping of German forces in Eastern Prussia and the northern part of Poland. The battles were crucial and desperate. On 9th April 1945 the forces of the 3rd Belarussian front stormed and seized the town and the fortress of Konigsberg. The battle for Eastern Prussia was the most blood-shedding campaign in 1945. The losses of the Soviet Army exceeded 580,000 people (127,000 of them were casualties). The Germans lost about 500,000 people (about 300,000 of them were casualties). After WWII, based on the decision of the Potsdam Conference (1945) the northern part of Eastern Prussia including Konigsberg was annexed to the USSR and the city was renamed as Kaliningrad

## **8 Rokossovskiy, Konstantin Konstantinovich (1896-1968)**

Marshal of the Soviet Union (1944), Hero of the Soviet Union (twice in 1944, 1945). Born into the family of a railroad man in Velikiye Luki. In October 1917 he joined the Red Army. During the Great Patriotic War he was Army Commander in the Moscow battle, commander of the Bryansk and Don fronts (Stalingrad battle), Central, Belarussian, 1st and 2nd Belarussian fronts (Vistula\Oder and Berlin operations). From 1945-49 chief commander of the northern group of armed forces. From 1949-56 Minister of National Defense and deputy chairman of the Council of Ministers of the PRP. From 1956-57 and 1958-62 Deputy Minister of Defense of the USSR.

## **9 SMERSH**

Russian abbreviation for 'Smert Shpionam' meaning Death to Spies. It was a counterintelligence department in the Soviet Union formed during World War II, to secure the rear of the active Red Army, on the front to arrest 'traitors, deserters, spies, and criminal elements'. The full name of the entity was USSR People's Commissariat of Defense Chief Counterintelligence Directorate 'SMERSH'. This name for the counterintelligence division of the Red Army was introduced on 19th April 1943, and worked as a separate entity until 1946. It was headed by Viktor Abakumov. At the same time a SMERSH directorate within the People's Commissariat of the Soviet Navy and a SMERSH department of the NKVD were created. The main opponent of SMERSH in its counterintelligence activity was Abwehr, the German military foreign information and counterintelligence department. SMERSH activities also included 'filtering' the soldiers recovered from captivity and the population of the gained territories. It was also used to punish within the NKVD itself; allowed to investigate, arrest and torture, force to sign fake confessions, put on a show trial, and either send to the camps or shoot people. SMERSH would also often be sent out to find and kill defectors, double agents, etc.; also used to maintain military discipline in the Red Army by means of barrier forces, that were supposed to shoot down the Soviet troops in the cases of retreat. SMERSH was also used to hunt down 'enemies of the people' outside Soviet territory.

## **10 Order of the Great Patriotic War**

1st Class: established 20th May 1942, awarded to officers and enlisted men of the armed forces and security troops and to partisans, irrespective of rank, for skillful command of their units in action. 2nd Class: established 20th May 1942, awarded to officers and enlisted men of the armed forces and security troops and to partisans, irrespective of rank, for lesser personal valor in action.

## **11 Official invitation for residence in Leningrad**

after the lift of the siege in Leningrad in January 1944, the city authorities established temporary restrictions on the evacuated citizens' return home. These restrictions were caused by considerable destruction of available housing and municipal services and acute shortage of housing. For entry in Leningrad, it was necessary to have an official invitation of a ministry, plant, establishment, or a member of the family residing in the city. Such an invitation was called 'a call-in'.

## **12 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.

### **13 All-Union pioneer organization**

a communist organization for teenagers between 10 and 15 years old (cf: boy-/ girls Scouts 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.

### **14 Recreation Centers in the USSR**

trade unions of many enterprises and public organizations in the USSR constructed recreation centers, rest homes, and children's health improvement centers, where employees could take a vacation paying 10 percent of the actual total cost of such stays. In theory each employee could take one such vacation per year, but in reality there were no sufficient numbers of vouchers for such vacations, and they were mostly available only for the management

### **15 Khrushchev, Nikita (1894-1971)**

Soviet communist leader. After Stalin's death in 1953, he became first secretary of the Central Committee, in effect the head of the Communist Party of the USSR. In 1956, during the 20th Party Congress, Khrushchev took an unprecedented step and denounced Stalin and his methods. He was deposed as premier and party head in October 1964. In 1966 he was dropped from the Party's Central Committee.

### **16 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.

### **17 1956**

It designates the Revolution, which started on 23rd October 1956 against Soviet rule and the communists in Hungary. It was started by student and worker demonstrations in Budapest started in which Stalin's gigantic statue was destroyed. Moderate communist leader Imre Nagy was appointed as prime minister and he promised reform and democratization. The Soviet Union withdrew its troops which had been stationing in Hungary since the end of World War II, but they returned after Nagy's announcement that Hungary would pull out of the Warsaw Pact to pursue a policy of neutrality. The Soviet army put an end to the rising on 4th November and mass repression and arrests started. About 200,000 Hungarians fled from the country. Nagy, and a number of his supporters were executed. Until 1989, the fall of the communist regime, the Revolution of 1956 was officially considered a counter-revolution.

## **18 Prague Spring**

The term Prague Spring designates the liberalization period in communist-ruled Czechoslovakia between 1967-1969. In 1967 Alexander Dubcek became the head of the Czech Communist Party and promoted ideas of 'socialism with a human face', i.e. with more personal freedom and freedom of the press, and the rehabilitation of victims of Stalinism. In August 1968 Soviet troops, along with contingents from Poland, East Germany, Hungary and Bulgaria, occupied Prague and put an end to the reforms.

## **19 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.

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

## **21 Yom Kippur War**

The Arab-Israeli War of 1973, also known as the Yom Kippur War or the Ramadan War, was a war between Israel on one side and Egypt and Syria on the other side. It was the fourth major military confrontation between Israel and the Arab states. The war lasted for three weeks: it started on 6th October 1973 and ended on 22nd October on the Syrian front and on 26th October on the Egyptian front.

## **22 Radio Liberty**

Radio Liberty, which started broadcasting in 1953, has served as a surrogate 'home service' to the lands of the former Soviet Union, providing news and information that was otherwise unavailable to most Soviet and post-Soviet citizens. During that time, the station weathered strong opposition from the Soviet Union and its allies, including constant jamming, public criticism, diplomatic protests, and even physical attacks on Radio Liberty buildings and personnel. In 1976, Radio Liberty was merged with Radio Free Europe (RFE) to form a single organization, RFE/RL, Inc.

### **23 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.

### **24 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 settleme