

# Shahne Berznitskiy

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Vilnius

Lithuania

Interviewer: Zhanna Litinskaya

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Shahne Berznitskiy is the eldest and the most honorable member of the Jewish community of Lithuania. It was not that easy to make an appointment with him - he was either rehearsing in the choir or performing some social work. Shahne lives in a modern three-room apartment. There is a mess in his room, which is characteristic of elderly people - a lot of journals and newspapers - but still the floor and furniture are clean and not dusty. Shahne is a short agile man with young-looking eyes. I cannot even say that he is an old man, as he looks at least twenty years younger than his age. He gladly started to tell me his story. Of course, a 93-year-old man cannot recall everything, but the details of his story about Jewish life turned out to be very interesting. There are a great many recollections from his long life.

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## **My family background**

All my ancestors are from a town called Veisiejai, located in the south of Lithuania, not far from the border, about 100 kilometers from Vilnius. The town was small. In the period of the 1920s-1930s, when I began perceiving the outside world, there were about a hundred Jewish families in Veisiejai, numbering a little less than a thousand people. All of them could fit in one large synagogue, where almost all Jews got together on Fridays, Saturdays and on holidays. The synagogue was on Synagogska Street. It was a rather large and spacious two-storied log-house of simple construction, like most buildings in Lithuania. It wasn't spared by the fire in the middle of the 1920s. At that time more than half of the buildings burnt down to the ashes. Religious Jews put money together and built another synagogue.



There was a large Catholic cathedral in the heart of the town as most of the population of Veisiejai consisted of Poles. The town also had Lithuanian and Jewish inhabitants. There were stores, workshops and groceries not far from the cathedral in the central part of the town. They belonged to Jews, as most of them were craftsmen – tailors, cobblers, glaziers and retailers. Most of the stores in town were owned by Jews. There was also a Jewish intelligentsia – the dynasty of the doctors Kuklyanskiy, teachers of the Jewish school, insurance agents. There was no lawyer in town, but one of the town-people, a Jew called Levinson, had an unfinished juridical education and he helped writing letters or filing a claim when needed. Jews were in the trade business as well. The town stood on the bank of a big lake, where there was a lot of good fish.

My maternal grandfather, Velvl Fleisher, was a fisherman. He was born in 1846. In his adolescence Velvl was a very good fisherman. With time he became the manager of a large fishing cartel, consisting of over 50 people. He knew the behavior of fish, where it was in summer and where it hid in winter, and almost all the time he could determine the time and place for angling. My grandfather was probably the most experienced fisherman in Veisiejai, as two competitors – fishing enterprises – tried hard to hire him. He had a rather big boat, a solid wooden vessel, which was on the bank, near my grandfather's house. Velvl lived in a small wooden house, which he had built when he was young. It consisted of three small rooms and a kitchen with a stove, which was used for heating and cooking. When I was a boy, only Grandfather and Grandmother Mihle Fleisher and their elder daughter Esther lived in the house. The rest of the children were scattered all over the world.

Mihle, who was about ten years younger than her husband, was practically illiterate. She was a housewife and took care of the children, which was customary for Jewish families back then. Both Velvl and Mihle belonged to the middle class, though not to the upper. They were religious. At that time all middle-class families, including the Fleishers were religious. Mihle didn't appear in public without a wig and Velvl always wore a cap or a hat. Of course, he put on a kippah and tallit when he went to the synagogue. Without knowing how to read Mihle learnt all the prayers by heart and sometimes said a prayer holding the prayer book upside down. Grandfather wasn't very literate either. He only went to cheder. He knew how to read, though he had no time for that. Grandfather had to work hard to earn bread and butter for the family. During the fire Velvl's house burnt as well. Grandfather managed to reconstruct it once again in the same place. He didn't live there for a long time. He died in 1928. Grandmother Mihle survived her husband by 13 years and lived to see the Great Patriotic War [1](#). She was murdered by fascists during one of the first actions in the town in summer 1941.

Velvl and Mihle raised their children in the Jewish tradition – the boys went to cheder and the girls were not pampered with education, as they were supposed to help about the house and it was much more important for them than being literate. Mother's elder sister Esther [Berznitskaya, nee Fleisher], born in the 1880s, was married to my father's brother. At that time it was customary for Jews to have pre-arranged marriages with brothers and sisters, as they believed that such type of families had double ties and were stronger. Esther's husband, Mihal Berznitskiy, left for America to seek his fortune shortly after the wedding. Esther and her husband lived separately for ten years. Mihal went from one town to another, looking for a job. He managed to stash some money for his family. He was a smith in Veisiejai. He tried many professions in America and finally became a car mechanic. Esther and her son Sender were waiting for better times. They lived with Esther's

parents. Finally Mihil thought his nest-egg to be enough for Esther and their son to come to America. Probably Mihle and Velvl had other children, but I don't know anything about them. Esther died after the Great Patriotic War, but I don't remember when exactly.

Two of my mother's sisters, Zlata and Reizl, also left for America when they were young and single. Zlata and Reizl embarked on their journey on their own. They got married in the USA and settled there. I don't know their husband's names. They were pretty well-off. They raised several children, but I never saw them. I cannot recall their names either. I remember that my mother also had two brothers, Alter and Noex. They also immigrated to America. That's all I know about them. Thus, it turned out that out of all the siblings only my mother stayed in her native town in Lithuania.

My mother, Perl Berznitskaya, nee Fleisher, was born in Veisiejai in the 1880s. Mother finished a Jewish elementary school. She was literate and knew how to read and write. Before getting married she helped her mother about the house like most Jewish girls. I don't know exactly how my parents met. More than a hundred years have passed since that time. It was mostly likely that all Jews in Veisiejai knew each other. They were religious, went to the same synagogue and met there on Sabbath and holidays.

My paternal grandfather, Aaron Berznitskiy, born in Veisiejai in the 1850s, was a smith. My paternal grandmother's name was Haya-Sura. I didn't know my grandfather, as he died before I was born. Haya-Sura lived in our house after Grandfather's death. She was a true Jewish grandmother – a petite, neat old lady with a kerchief on her head. Grandmother was very religious. She prayed every day, observed all Jewish traditions. After my grandfather's death the house was bequeathed to my father, who was the eldest and had his own family.

As I've already mentioned, my father's brother Mihil married my mother's sister Esther and left for America. Mihil made good money in America. He survived his wife Esther by many years. He celebrated his 100th birthday and died in the 1980s. Father had another brother, whose name I don't remember. He also went to the USA, when he was young. He worked in the USA as a builder. He had a tragic fate. When he was working on the construction of a skyscraper, he fell from a high altitude and died. That's all I know about him.

Apart from the three sons, Haya-Sura and Aaron had two daughters, Lyuba and Rohl. Lyuba, born in the 1890s, married a horse dealer. I cannot recall his name. Lyuba and her family lived not far from Veisiejai, in the small Lithuanian town of Lazdijai [100 km south of Vilnius], where her husband was from. Lyuba, like almost all Jewish women of that time, was a housewife. She gave birth to children and raised them. She had many of them: five daughters and three sons. Only two elder daughters survived, thanks to their beliefs. They were convinced Zionists [2](#) and left for Palestine in the 1930s. The boys, Meisher, Yankel and Velvl, started helping their father from a young age. They also became horse dealers. All of them, the three sons and three daughters with their families, and Lyuba and her husband, perished during the occupation. They were shot with the rest of the Jews of Lazdijai.

Rohl, who was two years younger than her sister, married a Jewish lad from Veisiejai – Benjamin Ruth. Benjamin was a baker. He owned his own bakery in Veisiejai. Rohl and Benjamin had two sons and two daughters, Esther and Bella. All of them, but Bella – Rohl, Benjamin, the boys and Esther – remained here during the occupation and perished. Bella managed to leave Lazdijai and went into evacuation. She was the only one of Rohl's family to survive. She became a doctor, came

back to Vilnius after the war and worked as a doctor. Bella died in the 1980s. She remained single.

Grandfather Aaron was a religious man. As a matter of fact, all Jews from small towns at that time were religious. I should say that all my father's siblings and their families were very religious people. They thought Jewish laws and traditions to be sacred. They observed the kashrut and holidays in accordance with the tradition. It was customary for the boys in Jewish families to acquire a rudimentary Jewish education. My father and his brothers started to go to cheder in their early childhood.

My father, Itshok Berznitskiy, was born in Veisiejai in 1880. He studied the Torah and the Talmud in cheder. He was also taught prayers in Hebrew. Apart from cheder, Father also went to the Jewish elementary school. It was common for Jewish people to get married at a young age. My parents got married in 1900, when they were twenty. I was never told about their wedding. It goes without saying that they had a traditional Jewish wedding – under a chuppah in the only synagogue of the town. The wedding party was arranged in the house of Grandfather Velvl, on the bank of the lake.

After the wedding, Perl and Itshok settled in the house of Grandfather Aaron. Father was a smith. He and Mihil were taught this craft by Aaron. Grandfather Aaron had an occupational smith's disease. His lungs were filled with metal dust. He understood that he wouldn't be able to live a long life and opened the secret of his skills to my father. Grandfather Aaron died in the 1900s. Father became the owner of the smithy.

## **Growing up**

In 1901 my mother gave birth to a daughter and named her after my father's sister Ester. In 1903 Yankel was born and in 1906 Sheina followed. In 1910 mother gave birth to a son, Isroel. I was born in 1913. The youngest child of the family, my brother Iosif, was born in 1918, when my mother was forty.

I was born in Veisiejai on 15th May 1913. I remember myself at the age of five or six. We lived in the house of Grandfather Aaron. Grandmother Haya-Sura changed places: either she stayed with us or at Rohl's place. I remember our old house. It was a large log house. The logs grew dark with time. There were three or four rooms in the house. Our family was large, so three or four children slept in one room. The solid wooden furniture went with the style of the house. My father inherited it from Grandfather Aaron. Our house burnt down during the fire. It happened in the late 1920s during the time when the synagogue burnt down as well. Father built the house on the same place. It was smaller than the previous one, but it was made from brick.

Since my childhood I liked to visit my father in his smithy. There were more smiths in town – my father, Leizer, Shmuel Bolushanskiy and Leib Aenakh. Each smithy was at the corner of one street in the central part of the town. Smiths made good money as they had a lot of work, especially on market days: Tuesdays and Fridays. On those days a lot of people came into town from adjacent farmsteads. Lithuanians and Poles came to sell milk, curds, sour-cream, meat, vegetables and buy necessary goods. They also went to the smithy. Some of them had to order horse-shoes either for their own horse or for one on sale. In winter there were orders to fix sleighs and in summer for carts. In a word, there was a lot of work for the smiths. There was no rivalry among the smiths of the town. There was no adversity but friendship. Father often marked Sabbath and holidays with his fellow-smiths. They got together for lunch and went to the chestnut alley on the square, not far

from the cathedral, and sang old Jewish and modern Bund [3](#) songs. I went there with my mother and brothers. Mother crooned with father and I listened. I still remember one of those songs [the interviewee is singing in Yiddish and translating into Russian]: 'The smith is standing by the furnace, doing his work. The sparkles are flying around. He is thinking of a bright future. Life shall be good. He is gleaming with perspiration, but he does not feel sweat streaming down his forehead and eyes - he is singing a song about a bright life.'

At the age of six or seven I started helping my father with work: hold the horse's leg or some bigger metal part. I enjoyed looking at the funny sparks, flying from the anvil. Father seemed to me like a warrior from a fairy-tale. My elder brother Yankel was father's apprentice. I learnt how to speak Lithuanian in the smithy. I also understood Polish. Only Yiddish was spoken at home and many town Jews didn't even know any other language. Lithuanians and Poles often came to my father, so I learnt the language rather swiftly while communicating with them. It helped me when I entered the Lithuanian lyceum.

Father worked hard, but his job was lucrative. He provided for the whole family of nine - himself, Mother, Grandmother and five children. We had a big husbandry. There was a pen in the yard, where mother kept a cow. When my brother and I were a little older, we were sometimes asked to shepherd the cow. We had our own dairy products and didn't have to buy non-kosher milk and butter from peasants. There was a horse in a special pen behind the house. Father often harnessed it and went to other towns, mostly to Seirijai and sometimes to Lazdijai. There, Father purchased materials for his work: metal of different shapes. Father usually loaded the whole cart and took the materials to his smithy. When he ran out of them, he was on the road again.

Our family lived comfortably. There was enough money for food, clothes, even for the education of the children. The eldest daughter Ester went to the Lithuanian lyceum. Ester didn't marry young. She got married in 1936. When she was single, she helped mother about the house. My sister Sheina finished only two or three grades of the Jewish elementary school. It seemed enough for a Jewish girl from a small town. Sheina also started helping Mother about the house. There was a lot of work: buy products, cook food for nine people, do the cleaning and laundry. The latter took most of the effort, as my father, and later on my elder brother Yankel, came back from the smithy in filthy, sooty clothes. There were a lot of clothes and linen. There was no running water in the house. The well, from where drinking water was taken, was rather far away. Usually the girls soaped the linen at home and then took heavy buckets with linen to the lake for rinsing.

Our family was traditionally Jewish. When Father was alive, all Jewish traditions were observed at home. Father was very religious. He prayed daily, though he didn't have an opportunity to go to the synagogue every day. On Friday and Saturday he and Mother always dressed up and went to the synagogue. Starting early in the morning on Friday everybody in our house, especially the ladies - my mother and sisters - were getting ready for Sabbath. Kosher chicken was ready to be cooked. As a rule my elder brother took it to the shochet. Later on, I started doing that. The house was immaculately clean by Friday evening. There was no dust. The wooden floors were shining. A starched snow-white table-cloth and the silver candle-holder with the candles were placed on the table. For Friday my mother baked delicious challah from light white dough. The wine on the table was also home-made. In our vicinity some of the Lithuanians managed to grow grapes. They brought it to Father as a payment for his work and Father made wine himself. If Jews didn't have their own wine, they bought it from a Jew who made it, as that kind of wine was considered kosher.

On Fridays and Saturdays my mother tried to put scrumptious dishes on the table. First of all, a fisherman's daughter knew how to cook gefilte fish. There was always fish in our house. Grandfather Velvl brought it to us. On Saturday our table was adorned with beautiful pikes. As a rule Mother made broth from fatty chicken and boiled kneidlakh in it. For dessert we had imberlakh – a dish from dried sweet carrots and ginger and all kinds of tsimes <sup>4</sup>. Mother cooked carrot tsimes from potatoes and carrots and plum tsimes in fall. Plum tsimes was also cooked from potatoes and fresh plums, I think.

On Friday evening we got together at the table and waited for Father. He joined us, when he came back from the synagogue. Mother lit the candles when the first star appeared in the sky and Father said a prayer over the challah and wine and then we started our meal. The dishes cooked for Sabbath were taken by my mother to the Jewish bakery owned by Rohl's husband. All neighbors took their pots with chulent there. Chulent is a traditional Sabbath dish made of meat and potatoes. All neighbors took their chulent to the bakery. In the warm ovens of the bakery the food stayed warm until Sabbath day. When Jews were on the way from the Sabbath service in the synagogue, they went to the bakery to take their chulent home. Father liked it when we, the boys, went to the synagogue with him. When I was a child, I often carried Father's prayer book. After the Sabbath feast my parents went to the chestnut alley. Jewish families got together there to sing songs. They sang separately, but sometimes also in chorus. In summer we went boating. Those festive Sabbath days were light and joyful. I will always keep them in my heart.

When I turned 13, I had my bar mitzvah. I got ready for that in advance. Father hired a teacher for a couple of weeks who was teaching me how to properly put on the tefillin. He also taught me several prayers and a passage from the Torah. All relatives got together in the synagogue and I went through the ceremonious bar mitzvah ritual, marking my adulthood. Since that time I went to the synagogue with my tallit and tefillin like my dad. He made sure that we went to the synagogue. We were young and not always willing to go there, but the times were different. I cannot say I was truly religious. My brothers and I were just obedient sons. I wouldn't have dared to disobey my father.

The kashrut was also observed at home. We couldn't even think of pork. Mother made kosher meat, putting it on boards with special grooves wherefrom blood was trickling down. Poultry was butchered by a shochet. There were separate dishes for dairy and meat dishes, starting from silverware and up to cutting boards and large pots.

All Jewish holidays were marked at home. I will try to remember them. The first one was Rosh Hashanah. People got ready beforehand. The house was cleaned, the furniture was polished, and old things were thrown away. Stoves were whitewashed like before Pesach. My parents and I went to the synagogue in festive attire. People blew the shofar in the synagogue. Apart from common and festive dishes, apples and honey were on the table. Yom Kippur was to follow in a couple of days. I took a rooster and went to the synagogue on that day. The rabbi rotated the fowl over my head and read a prayer, performing the kapores ritual. On the eve of the holiday we had a substantial dinner. The next day adults and children fasted all day long.

Sukkot was after Yom Kippur. A sukkah was made in the yard of each Jewish house. Father made the stands for the sukkah, which were used every year. He brought fir-tree branches from the forest. For the whole week we had meals in the sukkah in spite of cold weather in those fall days.

The most mirthful holiday was Simchat Torah. On that day Jews were through with the annual cycle of Torah readings and started a new one. That was a joyful holiday with songs and dancing. On that day Jews took the Torah scroll from the synagogue and carried it around the building in a mirthful procession. The Torah teacher from the cheder gave small Torah scrolls to the best student. He was lucky to get a tiny Torah scroll and take part in the holiday with the adults.

I also remember Channukah. It was a favorite holiday for all children. First, we didn't have to go to school for eight days. We played with the spinning top, and ate scrumptious potato latkes. Secondly, adults gave us channukah money. On that day we went to see Grandfather Velvl and Grandmother Mihle and they gave us money. There was a chanukkiyah in our house. It was a special candle-holder, where a new candle was lit every evening. Those candle-holders were put on the window-sill. Chanukkiyahs lit the dark December nights in our small town. The next holiday, Purim, was marked by the entire town. On that day Mother baked more than usual, as it was customary to take presents, the so-called shelakhmones, to friends and pals. Presents were brought to us as well. On that day mother baked hamantashen – poppy pies of a triangle shape.

The most thorough preparation was for Pesach. The entire house was whitewashed, stoves were cleaned and whitewashed. Chairs and benches were taken out and scraped. Clean curtains were hung on the windows, table cloths were changed. Paschal dishes were stored in the garret. They were used only on Pesach. Copper dishes were taken to the smithy to make them kosher. Father did it for all dwellers of the town. Right before the holiday my father got rid of the so-called chametz, the remnants of leavened bread. A large hamper with matzah was brought from the synagogue. Matzah was eaten instead of bread for the entire eight-day Paschal period. On the day of the first seder my father, clad in festive tallit, was reclining on the pillows at the head of the table. Mother had a festive kerchief on her head. She and my sisters laid the table. Apart from the traditional dishes, indicated in the Haggadah, there was an abundance of scrumptious things: fish, fatty stew, chicken broth, fried chicken, tsimes, kneidlakh, cake from matzah flour. Either I or my younger brother Iosif asked the four traditional questions about the holiday and looked for the afikoman, a piece of matzah, hidden by Father in the pillows. The entire festive period was marked in our house. On one of those days, we went to Grandfather Velvl.

In summer, fifty days after Pesach, we celebrated the holiday Shavuot. On that day God gave the Jews the Torah. As a rule people eat dairy dishes and patties with curds on this holiday. Mother made curds pie and put something resembling a ladder from batter on top of the cake. Mother explained to me that it was the ladder to Heaven, to God.

I spent summer with my friends. I walked around the town barefoot. We went to the lake, to the forest. We picked berries: bramble and bilberries. There were a lot of those kinds of berries in the northern part. Then mushroom season came and we went to the forest with the punnets again. I had a lot of friends. Most of them were Jewish guys, but some of them were Lithuanians and Poles. We got along very well. Kids didn't differentiate between nationalities, they merely kept friends.

At the age of six I went to the Jewish elementary school. The school was accommodated in two rooms of the synagogue. All subjects were taught in Hebrew: geography, biology, all kinds of songs and stories. We also studied the Lithuanian language. I did well at school and the four school years were easy for me. I wanted to go on with my education after finishing elementary school. By that time my eldest brother Yankel had finished school and was helping Father. The middle brother,

Isroel, entered the Realschule [5](#) in Kaunas. There was no Jewish lyceum in Veisiejai, just a Jewish elementary school. I entered the Lithuanian pre-lyceum school. It was easier for me to study as compared to other Jewish guys, as I didn't merely learn Lithuanian at school lessons, but also by means of communication. It was easy for me to enter pre-lyceum school and I did well there. My studies lasted four years. Having finished that school I went to Lazdijai, as there were no other institutions in Veisiejai. There I entered the Lithuanian lyceum. It was a state lyceum. I don't think the tuition was high. Father regularly gave me money either personally or via other people from time to time. For the time of my studies I never felt a bad attitude towards me. There was no anti-Semitism, none whatsoever. During the theological class we also studied the rudiments of Jewish religion. I lived in the place of my aunt Lyuba. She treated me as her own child.

1930 was the year of tribulation. Since that time, I think, my childhood was over. Father got sick. He was afflicted with lung cancer: an occupational smith's disease. There was no hospital in Veisiejai. Usually people went to have treatment in Alytus or Lazdijai. Mother took my father to Germany, to Konigsberg. Even now I cannot get how she, a simple Jewish woman, communicated with German doctors. Her knowing Yiddish was of big help. Father was operated on and Mother was told that he would live only a couple of weeks. She came back with Father to Veisiejai, where he died two weeks later. Mother didn't want to hurt us by seeing our sick father. She wanted us to remember him young and beautiful. We, the kids, came back to our native town only to attend Father's funeral. It was a real Jewish funeral. Father was on the floor covered with straw and all of us were sitting around him in shivah. Everybody's collar was ripped. Father was taken to the cemetery on the boards. He was wrapped in a shroud. He was buried in that shroud.

After Father's death my brother Yankel took up father's business in the smithy. We had to keep going and so Mother opened a small, almost tiny grocery store. We, children, were all over Lithuania. By that time Isroel had finished Realschule and he was invited to teach there. Iosif also left for Kaunas and began studying in the Realschule again. Upon graduation Iosif was offered a job in Klaipeda.

I didn't go back to the lyceum, as I had to work and help out my mother. My uncle Benjamin gave me a job in his bakery. I became a classy baker within a year and a half. I had a secure profession. I worked as a baker in different Lithuanian towns for several years. As a rule I went to work for a Jewish bakery, rented a room or a 'couch' in a Jewish family's place and lived pretty comfortably. I worked in Alytus, Lazdijai and other towns. When Iosif was offered a job in Klaipeda, he invited me there. We found lodging for the two of us. I worked in Klaipeda for a couple of months. It was the year of 1934.

After Father's death Jewish traditions were still observed in our family and holidays were marked. We, children, gradually digressed from Jewish traditions. We were attracted by a new life, new ideas and prospects. While Father was alive, we regularly went to the synagogue and prayed with him. After his death each of us started going his own way. At that time I had my own political views. Since my adolescence I was a member of the Zionist organization Maccabi [6](#). I decided to get ready for repatriation in Palestine. Back in that time many young Jewish people left for Palestine to build the Israeli state. My brother Isroel shared my beliefs. He and I joined Hashomer Hatzair [7](#), which prepared young people for repatriation. My brother and I went to a small town called Ionava. A Jewish kibbutz was founded there. We stayed there for a year and a half. We learnt how to till the land and grow different grains, work on the farm and other practical work. I liked the



way of life in the kibbutz. It was a commune. We received no money, but we lived together and had similar clothes and felt like a stalwart team. In 1936 my training was over and I was ready to repatriate to Palestine. I didn't manage to leave, as I was drafted into the Lithuanian army that year.

I went to Veisiejai to say goodbye to my mother and sisters before leaving for Marijampole. I served there for a year and a half. At that time my mother lived by herself. My elder brother Yankel left for Kaunas. He was invited there by Isroel, who continued working in the Realschule. There was an opening for a teacher specializing in blacksmith's work and Yankel left for Kaunas, leasing his smithy to the neighbor. In a while Yankel got married. His fiancée Golda, a Jewish girl from Marijampole, moved to Kaunas. In a year Yankel and Golda had a daughter, Liza. That year, 1936, Ester got married as well. Her husband, Alter Aronovich, was a butcher in Veisiejai. Ester and her husband moved into the house of Grandmother Mihle. She gave birth to a daughter. Sheina was married to a guy from an adjacent small town. I don't remember her husband's name. Sheina and her husband also settled in Veisiejai. They had two children – a boy and a girl. I don't remember their names. In the late 1930s Isroel also got married. I liked his wife, a Jewish girl named Charna, very much. Isroel lived in Kaunas with Charna. In 1941 Charna gave birth to a boy [Aaron].

My younger brother Iosif and I were still single. My service in the army was rather quiet. Anti-Semitism didn't reign in the army at that time, though it was gradually emerging under the influence of fascist organizations in Lithuania. In the army I joined an underground communist organization. Like many people I was attracted by the ideas of all-in-all equality, brotherhood, liberty and welfare, preached by the communists. We were involved in propaganda, told about life in the USSR, building socialism, wherein all nations were equal. At that time I knew nothing of repressions, arrests and politics in the Soviet Union [see Great Terror] [8](#).

### **Soviet Invasion of the Baltics**

In 1938 I was demobilized. I lived with my mother for a couple of weeks. Then I decided to move to a larger town. Jewish life in my native town seemed too insignificant for me. I went to work as a baker in Prienai. At the same time I kept on being involved in my underground activity. My main task was agitation and propaganda of the Soviet way of life. That's why when the Soviet regime was established in the Baltic countries in 1940, I joyfully welcomed it [see Occupation of the Baltic Republics] [9](#). As soon as the Soviets showed up, the Party wasn't underground any more. I was elected the secretary of the party organization. Now I could openly carry out my party activity. Upon the arrival of the Red Army I dealt with supply for the army for a while. I organized the supply of products and bread to the militaries as well as their accommodation. When all those issues had been tackled I took up the organization of training for young Lithuanian communists. Out of all my brothers only Iosif and I were members of the Communist Party. When the Soviet regime was in power, he was offered a job with the KGB [10](#). He worked as a guard of important party activists and state officials.

### **During the war**

The Great Patriotic War was like a bolt from the blue for us as well as Soviet citizens. I understood that Jews and communists were to leave for the rear as soon as possible, as it was well-known that fascists exterminated them in the first place. On the first day of war a party activist from Marijampole came to Prienai and ordered everybody to stay in order to resist the enemy. Our party

organization was at a loss. We went to the commandant's office to find out how dangerous it was. The private of the Soviet army stood sentry. It turned out that he was guarding an empty building. The military commandant of the town had already left towards the East. We decided to escape. We had been walking for a long time, when we saw a train ready to depart in one of the stations. A crew of workers was repairing it. I saw a soldier, who had died from the fragment of a shell, by the train station premises. Soon the train was repaired. We took a locomotive that was eastbound. We were on the road for quite a long time. We were bombed on our way. We changed trains in Belarus and went further on. I knew nothing of my siblings, mother and grandmother Mihle.

We came to Gorky oblast, the town of Kulebaki [about 400 km from Moscow]. We got off the train in a rather organized manner. We were housed in a local dancing club. We were given a modest, but substantial meal: soup and porridge. They even gave us some products. Russian people received us very hospitably. They treated us with compassion. We didn't stay in the club for a long time. We were given lodging in different apartments. I and three more Lithuanian guys were given lodging by one of the hosts, whose name I don't remember. He, his wife and two daughters moved into a poky room and gave us four guys a big room. On the first night the hostess gave us food to eat. She took motherly care of us. We were working at the train station from dawn till night. Our work was hard. Sometimes we had to work night-shifts. We received workers' cards [see card system] [11](#) for which we were given scarce food in the canteen. We were almost starving. If the hostess hadn't given us food, it's hard to imagine what would have happened to us. We went to the military enlistment office a couple of times asking to be drafted into the acting army. As soon as they found out that we were from Lithuania, they sent us away. At that time citizens from the territories annexed to the USSR, were not drafted into the army. In early 1942 we found out that the 16th Lithuanian division [12](#) was organized in the town of Balakhna, Gorky oblast.

We said goodbye to the hosts and left for Balakhna. The four of us were admitted to the division. Here I met many of my acquaintances from Kaunas and none of them knew anything about the fate of my kin. Our division was formed within a couple of months. The first battle I participated in was the Kursk battle [13](#). It was a dreadful battle. I was there as a private. Many soldiers were killed in action. There were many of my pals and friends. I was unscathed. After that battle I was promoted to the rank of sergeant. Shortly after the battle I was called to the commander of the unit. It turned out that they had found out from my records that I was a baker, and they sent me to the regiment bakery. Since that time I was baking bread for the soldiers. Of course, I didn't take part in the battles on the leading edge, but my function was also difficult and hazardous. In spite of the weather, time of the day and vicinity of the enemy, we always had to install stoves, find firewood and bake bread for the soldiers on time. Sometimes it was raining cats and dogs, we were being bombed, but still we had to go on with work. Thus I remained a baker in the First Baltic Front [14](#) till the end of war. Here I joined the Party deliberately. At that time I believed in the ideals of communism and wanted to take part in the formation of the most impartial society in my country.

In fall 1943 I was informed at the headquarters, located five kilometers from the bakery, that my brother was awaiting me. I went there without knowing even who of my brothers had found me. It was my favorite younger brother, Iosif. He was still working with the KGB and came to the front as a security guard of the chairman of the Council of Ministers of Lithuania. He decided to visit the militaries of the Lithuanian division. My brother found me with the help of the documents of the division. I was overwhelmed with joy. We were talking for a couple of hours. I found out about the

fate of my relatives: It turned out that on the first day of war the wives and children of NKVD [15](#) officers were sent to the rear. Iosif managed to make evacuation arrangements for the families of our brothers Isroel and Yankel – Golda with little Liza and Charna with little Aaron, who was only a couple of months old. My brothers were not let on the train, as there was an order for all able-bodied men to stay for the defense from the enemy. Fortunately, Mother was on a visit in Kaunas at that time. She was also evacuated. She was alive and healthy. She lived with Charna and the children in Kirov oblast. Golda, Yankel's wife, died of typhus fever in the first year of war and Mother brought up her granddaughter Liza. Nothing was known about my brothers Yankel and Isroel, my sisters Sheine and Ester and their families, and my grandmother Mihle. In accordance with the data from the NKVD almost all the Jews on occupied territories underwent cruel tortures and were murdered.

I said goodbye to my brother and went to my military unit. It was dark and I got lost in the forest, without knowing which direction to walk. I fell into a ditch filled with water. I was drenched and freezing. Finally I saw lights. It didn't take me long to decide to move towards the lights, as I had to get dry and warm. If those lights were coming from Germans, I would have to take it. Luckily these were our tank troops. They had me sit by the fire, gave me some food to eat and vodka to warm up. At dawn I saw my bakery. It wasn't very far away. It turned out that I had been passing by it at night, but it was disguised with branches and I didn't recognize it.

When the spring of 1945 came, our unit was in Latvia. On 5th May, when the Reichstag was captured and our country was the winner, one of the large German military units, positioned in Latvia, was not willing to give up. There were skirmishes, fights, battles. People died. Finally German truce envoys came to our headquarters and declared their capitulation. The commander of the rear, the Lithuanian colonel Mikutis, received them. He agreed meeting German representatives in the place where capitulation documents would be signed. Our interpreter was killed shortly before this event. Mikutis assigned me as an interpreter, as I was the only one in the regiment who could understand German, owing to Yiddish. So, we went to the Germans. All of a sudden, three German tanks arrived in front of us. We were still with fear. We thought we were to die at the very end of war. The tanks stopped in about ten meters in front of us. Tank operators opened up the hatches and got out. One of them took his white shirt off and tore it making a white flag out of it. After a while two officers came on bikes and escorted us to the German general. The driver and I stayed outside. Mikutis and another officer entered the German headquarters dug-out. After a couple of minutes the personal aide of the German general came out. It turned out that the German general had met our officers amicably. There was vodka in the glasses on the table. There was no food as they had been besieged for a long time. I took out two loaves of bread, which I had taken for our trip, and gave them to the Germans. The general and other officers, who so affably met the visitors, were taken captive. I don't know what happened to them. Probably they were doomed for execution as most of the top-rank officers. Soon after that the long-awaited Victory Day [16](#) came.

When the war was over I served for another half year. Our unit was in Latvia for a while. Then we came to Vilnius, where we were quartered. I was demobilized in fall 1945. I had to look for a job, an apartment – in a word, start a new peaceful life. My brother Iosif was living in Vilnius. He came back there with the Lithuanian government. He got a nice apartment consisting of several rooms, in the center of the city. He accommodated there all our relatives who survived that terrible war. Mother,

who came back from evacuation, where she raised Yankel's daughter Liza, whose mother had died in evacuation, lived in this apartment as well as Charna, the widow of my brother Isroel, who perished in Kaunas ghetto [17](#), and her grown-up son Aaron, and I.

Iosif found out about my siblings from the sources of special departments. Isroel perished in Kaunas ghetto during its liquidation in 1944. Ester's husband, Alter Aronovich, escaped from Veisiejai at the very outset of war, having left Ester and the children with Grandmother Mihle. Ester couldn't leave Granny as she was bedridden and would have died of hunger. Ester, her children and Grandmother Mihle as well as Sheina's family were murdered during one of the actions in Veisiejai. They said Grandmother was taken to the execution in the blanket. My father's sisters Lyuba and Rohl and their families perished during one of the actions in Veisiejai.

My eldest brother Yankel was the only survivor out of our entire kin. He was also in Kaunas ghetto. A couple of months before the end of the war he was taken to one of the concentration camps in Germany. Yankel managed to escape during the transfer from one camp to another. He jumped from the car in the darkness, landed in a pit filled with water and remained unnoticed. When there was no peril, he knocked on the door of a remote house on a farmstead. The hostess of that house was a German lady, whose husband was killed in action. She sheltered Yankel either out of pity or out of being aware that her action would do her good, when the approaching Soviet troops arrived. Upon the arrival of the Soviet troops Yankel was interrogated by the KGB for a couple of months. Strange as it may be, they believed him and let him go. He came to Vilnius in late 1945. After a while Yankel got married again. His second wife was a Jew from Poland. At that time our relatives in the USA, Uncle Mihl and Aunt Esther, started looking for our relatives who had survived the war. Mihl found Yankel, processed a visa for him, and soon Yankel and his wife left for the USA. His daughter Liza also joined him in the early 1950s. Yankel had another daughter in America. She was named Rohl. Yankel lived a long life and died in the 1980s. His daughters are still living in America.

### **After the war**

I found a job with a state supply company, Gossnab, in Lithuania, where I worked all my life. I supplied the light and food industry with electric appliances and other materials. I liked my work. I took frequent trips all over the USSR. I visited many plants, met people and made friends. I got along with people. There were Lithuanians, Poles and Russians among my friends. I never felt any anti-Semitism. Even in the hardest times for Soviet Jews – the flagrant cosmopolite processes [see campaign against 'cosmopolitans'] [18](#) and the Doctors' Plot [19](#) in the late 1940s, early 1950s, only lazybones didn't stigmatize Jews. Even in that period of time I didn't suffer. Stalin's death in 1953 was sorrowful for me as for almost all Soviet people. For a couple of hours I was in an honorable sentry by the leader's portrait. Apart from my main job functions I was also involved in social and party work. For a couple of times I was elected secretary of the party organization of our department. I was involved in trade union work.

I had to think of my personal life as well. I liked some Jewish girls. I also had pals, with whom I spent time. None of my temporary girlfriends aroused such deep feelings or affections as I felt for Isroel's widow, Charna. In the postwar years we lived in one apartment and Charna treated me like a brother. She also had suitors. I liked my nephew Aaron, Charna's son. I didn't want Charna and Aaron to leave our family, so I proposed to her. My action corresponded to Jewish traditions: the younger brother should marry the widow of the elder brother. Charna agreed and in the late 1940s

our marriage was registered. Charna [nee Pressman] is two years younger than me. She is from the Lithuanian town of Moletai [60 km from Vilnius]. Charna's parents, her brothers and sisters – I only know the name of her younger sister Nehama, as we keep her picture – perished during the occupation in Moletai.

After a while I got my own apartment. In 1952 our son Ilia was born. We had a happy life together. Charna was a true wife and friend. I didn't differentiate between Ilia and the older Aaron. I loved them equally. I did pretty well at my job, while Charna was a housewife and raised the children. In 1956 there was a big sorrow in my family. Aaron had dreamt of a bicycle and I gave him a new shiny bike. The boy went outside with it and fell down. The trauma was very serious; his spine was injured. Aaron stayed in bed for three months, but all efforts by doctors were futile. Our son died three months later. I still cannot forgive myself for giving him that bike, as that present led to my son's death. Charna took his death very hard as she had exerted her every effort to save the boy during the war. Afterwards, she completely devoted herself to the upbringing of our son Ilia.

My mother, who lived with my younger brother Iosif after the war, also took that loss very hard. She was sick for a couple of months. She passed away in 1962. Though neither my brother nor I were religious and had stopped observing Jewish traditions a long time ago, Mother had a Jewish funeral. She was buried without a coffin, like my dad. The prayer was read at her funeral.

After the war Iosif was in charge of the administration department of the Council of Ministers of Lithuania. He took care of the premises, the car fleet. In a word, he was irreplaceable. He wasn't affected by anti-Semitic campaigns either. My brother Iosif was married. He lived with his wife Gita for many years. In the late 1980s Iosif and Gita left for Israel. Gita died a couple of years ago. Iosif is still alive and kicking. His children, Yunona, born in the 1950s and Alexander, born about ten years after her, live in Vilnius and work for the Jewish community of Lithuania.

Charna and I had a wonderful life together. Charna was a housewife as my salary was enough for a moderate, but comfortable living. We had a lot of friends. We went to the theaters, the cinema. Usually the three of us went on vacation to Palanga. Sometimes we were given trade union trip vouchers to the South-Crimea or Caucasus. I was an ardent sportsman, played tennis, skied. In 1970 we got a plot of land. Since that time the orchard, planted by my wife and I, is a comfort and a hobby at the same time. Unfortunately, my Charna died in 2002. I cannot overcome such a loss.

My son Ilia was an excellent student. Since childhood his artistic talent was noticed. Having finished school Ilia pretty easily entered the Vilnius Construction Institute, the architecture department. Upon graduation Ilia worked in his specialty. Then he was carried away by an interesting project: animation cartoons. At present Ilia is a recognized master of animation. In 1980 he married a Jewish girl, Elene. In 1982 Ilia's and Elena's son Daniel was born. When Daniel turned 15, his mother decided to take him to Israel. Ilia wasn't willing to go to Israel and for his wife to avoid complications, they got divorced. Daniel and his mother immigrated to Israel, where they are still living. My son and his ex-wife have their own lives, but they are still friends.

Ilia has dual citizenship. He lives in the USA and teaches animation at the New York Academy of Arts. Ilia is a professor. He has apartments in New York and in Vilnius. He often visits his native town. He has a lot of work here as well as creative plans. Ilia makes films in Lithuania. He has a lot of friends. My grandson Daniel, being a citizen of Israel, also came back to Vilnius. He followed in his father's footsteps. He graduated from the Academy of Arts. Daniel does not have a job yet. I

hope he will continue his father's work.

I am old as the hills, but I'm still healthy, energetic and young in my soul. I'm a very active person and I'm not ready for eternal peace yet. Since the time when Lithuania became independent [see Reestablishment of the Lithuanian Republic] [20](#), we – having lost belief in communist ideas, a huge multinational socialist state and many other things – gained independence and the freedom of choice. The most important is that Jewish life revived in our country. Many people found themselves. During the postwar period, I, an active member of the Communist Party, couldn't have thought of marking Sabbath, not working on Saturday, eat matzah on Pesach. I'm currently an active member of the Unified Jewish Community of Lithuania. I sing in the choir of the community. I dance in spite of my age. I take part in all events, mark Sabbath and all Jewish holidays. I'm constantly busy. Apart from social events, I take care of the orchard, planted by Charna and I. I have a lot of friends among the Jews of the community and non-Jews as well. I met a wonderful Russian woman, Kira, in a bus. She is also keen on horticulture. She and I go to the orchard, to the cemetery, to the graves of our close people. I plied Kira with love for the Jewry. She studies Judaism and celebrates Sabbath with us on Friday.

I visited my brother Iosif in Israel. He is the only person, connecting me with my childhood and the past. My brother and I are bonded. We keep in touch in spite of the great distance. I hope to be able to go to Israel over and over again to see my brother.

## **Glossary:**

### **1 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.

### **2 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.

### **3 Bund**

The short name of the General Jewish Union of Working People in Lithuania, Poland and Russia, Bund means Union in Yiddish). The Bund was a social democratic organization representing Jewish

craftsmen from the WEstern areas of the Russian Empire. It was founded in Vilnius in 1897. In 1906 it joined the autonomous fraction of the Russian Social Democratic Working Party and took up a Menshevist position. After the Revolution of 1917 the organization split: one part was anti-Soviet power, while the other remained in the Bolsheviks' Russian Communist Party. In 1921 the Bund dissolved itself in the USSR, but continued to exist in other countries.

#### **4 Tsimes**

Stew made usually of carrots, parsnips, or plums with potatoes.

#### **5 Realschule**

Secondary school for boys. Students studied mathematics, physics, natural history, foreign languages and drawing. After finishing this school they could enter higher industrial and agricultural educational institutions.

#### **6 Maccabi World Union**

International Jewish sports organization whose origins go back to the end of the 19th century. A growing number of young Eastern European Jews involved in Zionism felt that one essential prerequisite of the establishment of a national home in Palestine was the improvement of the physical condition and training of ghetto youth. In order to achieve this, gymnastics clubs were founded in many Eastern and Central European countries, which later came to be called Maccabi. The movement soon spread to more countries in Europe and to Palestine. The World Maccabi Union was formed in 1921. In less than two decades its membership was estimated at 200,000 with branches located in most countries of Europe and in Palestine, Australia, South America, South Africa, etc.

#### **7 Hashomer Hatzair**

'The Young Watchman'; A Zionist-socialist pioneering movement founded in Eastern Europe, Hashomer Hatzair trained youth for kibbutz life and set up kibbutzim in Palestine. During World War II, members were sent to Nazi-occupied areas and became leaders in Jewish resistance groups. After the war, Hashomer Hatzair was active in 'illegal' immigration to Palestine.

#### **8 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.

## **9 Occupation of the Baltic Republics (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania)**

Although the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact regarded only Latvia and Estonia as parts of the Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, according to a supplementary protocol (signed in 28th September 1939) most of Lithuania was also transferred under the Soviets. The three states were forced to sign the 'Pact of Defense and Mutual Assistance' with the USSR allowing it to station troops in their territories. In June 1940 Moscow issued an ultimatum demanding the change of governments and the occupation of the Baltic Republics. The three states were incorporated into the Soviet Union as the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republics.

## **10 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.

## **11 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.

## **12 16th Lithuanian division**

It was formed according to a Soviet resolution on 18th December 1941 and consisted of residents of the annexed former Lithuanian Republic. The Lithuanian division consisted of 10.000 people (34,2 percent of whom were Jewish), it was well equipped and was completed by 7th July 1942. In 1943 it took part in the Kursk battle, fought in Belarus and was a part of the Kalinin front. All together it liberated over 600 towns and villages and took 12.000 German soldiers as captives. In summer 1944 it took part in the liberation of Vilnius joining the 3rd Belarusian Front, fought in the Kurland and exterminated the besieged German troops in Memel (Klaipeda). After the victory its headquarters were relocated in Vilnius, in 1945-46 most veterans were demobilized but some officers stayed in the Soviet Army.

## **13 Kursk battle**

The greatest tank battle in the history of World War II, which began on 5th July 1943 and ended eight days later. The biggest tank fight, involving almost 1,200 tanks and mobile cannon units on both sides, took place in Prokhorovka on 12th July and ended with the defeat of the German tank



unit.

#### **14 First Baltic Front**

'Front' was the largest Soviet military formation during WWII; all together 52 'fronts' were established, each bearing the name of a region, city, or another geographical term of their location. The First Baltic Front was established in October 1943 to support operations aimed at the liberation of the Baltic Republics and Belarus; it existed till March 1945.

#### **15 NKVD**

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

#### **16 Victory Day in Russia (9th May)**

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

#### **17 Kaunas ghetto**

On 24th June 1941 the Germans captured Kaunas. Two ghettos were established in the city, a small and a big one, and 48,000 Jews were taken there. Within two and a half months the small ghetto was eliminated and during the 'Grossaktion' of 28th-29th October, thousands of the survivors were murdered, including children. The remaining 17,412 people in the big ghetto were mobilized to work. On 27th-28th March 1944 another 18,000 were killed and 4,000 were taken to different camps in July before the Soviet Army captured the city. The total number of people who perished in the Kaunas ghetto was 35,000.

#### **18 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'.

#### **19 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.

## **20 Reestablishment of the Lithuanian Republic**

On 11th March 1990 the Lithuanian State Assembly declared Lithuania an independent republic. The Soviet leadership in Moscow refused to acknowledge the independence of Lithuania and initiated an economic blockade on the country. At the referendum held in February 1991, over 90 percent of the participants (turn out was 84 percent) voted for independence. The Western world finally recognized Lithuanian independence and so did the USSR on 6th September 1991. On 17th September 1991 Lithuania joined the United Nations.