

Yakov Honiksman

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Lvov

Ukraine

Interviewer: Ella Orlikova

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Yakov Honiksman, a Professor of History, lives in a cozy apartment in one of the nicest districts of Lvov near the Polytechnic College where he taught history of economy.

There are many history books in his apartment. Yakov

always reads lots of books. He is an author of a book about the Holocaust in Lvov region. He is a scientist and a very busy man. He still works a lot, writing books and studying historical sources. Therefore, I could hardly convince him to spend more time with us since it was a problem for him to find time for this interview in his busy schedule. He has the selective memory of a man of science. He doesn't keep in his memory, anything he believes to be insignificant. Yakov has a distinctive manner of speaking, but he has a strong Polish accent. Yakov and his wife Rita are very nice and hospitable people.

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My family background

Lublin town, where my parents lived, is one of the oldest Polish towns - it was mentioned back in the 10th century - on the Bystrzyca River in the southeast of Poland. The first information about Jews goes back to the 14th century. At that time a district where Jews settled was founded: Piaski żydowskie ['Jewish sands' in Polish]. Jews were tradesmen and craftsmen: tailors and leather specialists. Gradually the size of the Jewish population increased and at times it constituted almost half of the population of the town. Big, beautiful synagogues were built. Lublin was called 'Yerushalayim de Polin' - Polish Jerusalem. Jews owned bakery and leather industries that were the most profitable of all. Throughout the history of Jewish residency in Lublin there were anti-Semitic demonstrations, Jewish pogroms and periods of unfriendly attitudes of the Polish population. At the time when I was born, in 1921, the Jewish population constituted 37,337 Jews, 35 % of the population.

My paternal grandfather came from the small town of Krasny Stav in Lublin province. People told me that residents of this town were beekeepers. By the way, Jews kept bees and sold honey during the period of feudalism. I guess, my great-grandfather was in this business. His last name Honiksman, or Ghoniksman in Polish, comes from 'honik' - honey and 'man' - man. I transliterated

this last name into Russian as Honiksmán. At the end of the 18th century Jews got their last names from the Austrian Government [Editor's note: Yakov has studied the history of Polish Jews all his life. This is literally what he said, although it is anachronistic]. Wealthier Jews could pay for more beautiful names like Goldman, Zilberman, Rosenthal and poor people got simpler names like Schwester [Smith], Portnoy [Tailor], Stoliar [Joiner] - after their profession, etc. My grandfather died long before I was born. I visited Krasny Stav only once in my life when I was a boy and I didn't care about history then. I don't remember any relatives on my father's side, I don't even remember whether I ever met any of them. In my family we never mentioned my father's relatives.

I am a son of Samuel, Jewish name: Shmil, Honiksmán, born in the town of Krasny Stav near Lublin, in 1885. My father couldn't read or write and I believe he didn't even go to cheder where all Jewish boys studied, as a rule. He was a very religious person. He knew many prayers by heart, but he couldn't read his prayer book. My father didn't know how to sign papers and he wrote some sort of o-shaped signs. He came to Lublin when he was very young. He became a cabinetmaker's apprentice. My father was a failure in life. He was poor and often had no job, although he was a good cabinetmaker. He was an amazingly honest and decent man, but he often got into unpleasant situations due to his illiteracy.

I remember, he got an order from a rich Polish master to make a few new pieces of furniture for his rooms. My father took me with him. I was ten years old. I polished some items of furniture the whole day until I fell asleep. At night my father woke me up. As he was taking apart an old table, he unscrewed a leg and found it was a hiding place with valuables, diamonds and gold. My father sent me to the master and gave him everything he found. I remember it as clearly as if it were today: the master gave my father ten zloties. This was also a lot of money for us, but now, after I've lived a long time, I think that being as desperately poor as my father was at that time, I don't think I would demonstrate such utter honesty regardless of my conviction that one cannot touch what belongs to someone else.

My father got married in 1916. I don't know what my father first wife's name was. Their son Haskel was born in 1918 and shortly afterward my father's wife died of typhoid. My father's situation was miserable. They lived in a small room behind a partition in the shop where my father worked. My father had to find a wife immediately since he couldn't cope with the baby alone. The owner of the shop introduced him to a young woman, my future mother: Mina Grinberg, whose Jewish name was Mindlia.

My mother's father Moisey Grinberg was a rabbi in the small town of Ostrow Lubelski in Lublin province. I guess my grandfather was born in the 1860s. I saw him only once when I was four years old, but I remember him well. He was a tall Jewish man with a big half-gray beard. He was handsome. My grandfather was a rabbi of Hasidism [1](#). He seemed mean to me, as he looked at me in a way that made me feel awkward. Since then I've never really liked Hasidim. I believe the family was very religious, but I know no details. We traveled on a cart to see my grandfather through some woods, through the night. When we arrived in the morning a noisy bunch of Jewish people met us. I remember it well. Ostruv-Lubelski was a small town. I remember a small house that we entered to say 'hallo' to grandfather. I don't know how so many people could fit in it. They laughed and joked and seemed to be taking no notice of my grandfather's strict expression. They spoke Yiddish.

My grandfather's wife died long before I was born. They had many children. I remember his beautiful daughters, but I don't remember their names. His younger daughter was getting married when we were visiting, but all I remember is the noise and enjoyment. This was the last time I saw my grandfather. He died in 1933. I remember his daughters visited him in Lublin. They got married and moved to America in the 1920s. Their brother Max Grinberg, born in 1890, I think, was a tailor. He must have been a good tailor. He moved to New York, USA, when I was born. There he became an activist in the Communist Party. He was an optimist and believed in the Soviet Union. He sent us 5 or 10 dollars on holidays. In 1939 we lost contact with him. My mother told me that my Grinberg cousins were some high-ranking officials in Odessa. In the 1980s I found out that there were party officials with this last name, but I don't know whether they were our relatives. They disappeared. I searched for information about them and it turned out that they were exterminated in 1937 during the period of Great Terror [2](#); they were exterminated by Stalinism.

My mother was a very beautiful woman. She was born in 1894. Her father gave his children good elementary education. My mother could read and write in Yiddish, knew Hebrew and could understand and speak Polish. She said that they had a teacher from cheder and then they had another teacher that taught them Polish, German and arithmetic. She married a Jewish man from Odessa in 1914. They had a traditional Jewish wedding with a chuppah and rabbi in Lublin. In 1914, when World War I began, my mother's husband was recruited into the army. I guess he didn't have secondary education. My mother heard later that he had married in Odessa. For a Jewish woman that had recently got married this was a terrible thing to hear. My mother felt hurt. However, she was a strong woman. She obtained a permit from the Austrian authorities to cross the Russian border, go to Odessa and demand a divorce from that moron. She returned to Lublin with a certificate of divorce, but she couldn't expect to find a good match. She worked as a seamstress in Lublin for several years and was glad to get a chance to marry my father, a cabinetmaker that had no education and had a baby. I loved my parents and they loved me even more. My parents had a traditional Jewish wedding with a chuppah and a rabbi in 1920.

My mother treated my father's son Haskel with warmth and when he grew up there was understanding between them. Occasionally, when my mother had some free time I saw her reading books in Yiddish. Unfortunately, I never took any interest to ask her what she was reading. My mother's attitude toward religion was more like a tribute to traditions. She followed everything as required by Jewish rules. But when it was a question of something that was necessary for her children my mother could violate any rules or bans. I started to develop tuberculosis and somebody told my mother that I needed to eat pork. She bought cheap ham remains at the market. I liked bread and ham. She would stand in front of me so that my father didn't see what I was eating. She went to the synagogue at Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashanah and Pesach and I remember she blessed and lit candles every Saturday [Sabbath].

My older brother Haskel became enamored of revolutionary ideas when he was very young. He left our home and traveled on his own business. My father often had to search for his whereabouts. He joined the Communist Party of Poland when he was very young. We had our home searched twice. They didn't find anything, but we were told that he was involved in illegal activities. He had some education, but I don't know any details. Later he attended some course at university. In 1937, war in Spain [Spanish Civil War] [3](#) began and Haskel volunteered to go to the war. Shortly afterward we came to know that he perished. My father went to the synagogue and someone there said, 'Shmil,

your son is gone.' Father asked, 'How did he die?' There were shoemaker, tailor and other trade union newspapers in Yiddish. Some newspaper wrote that Haskel Honiksmann had perished in Spain in September 1937. Since my father couldn't read, someone else read this to him. He came home and told us this sad news.

Growing up

In December 1922 I, Yankel in Jewish, Yacob in Polish, Yakov in Russian Honiksmann, was born. My younger brother Mordekhai [in all languages] followed in 1925. I already studied at cheder. Then I went to a Polish elementary school. My brother also went to cheder and to the same Polish school. We looked much alike. My brother studied well and could have grown into a very decent man.

My sister Faina, Fraida was her Jewish name, was born in 1928. She was a very nice and kind girl. She was always with our mother. In even the hardest times, my mother tried to make her something fancy, altering old clothes to make lovely outfits. When circumstances parted us in 1939, she was studying at the 2nd grade of a Polish school.

We lived in Shyrokaya Street in the Jewish neighborhood near the synagogue. This street as well as many others, was destroyed by Germans in the 1940s. I remember a big yard with large three-story buildings around. At least they seemed big to me. There were stores and sheds in this yard and we lived there in a room that wasn't designed as a dwelling. We were very poor and didn't have enough food. My mother went to the Jewish community, which provided free meals. My mother brought some rice boiled in beef broth - of course, it was kosher food. I still remember this soup - it was very delicious. Our mother watched Mordekhai and me eat.

Every Friday evening our father covered us with his tallit to bless us. This was a tradition and he always followed it. [Editor's note: this is not the Jewish tradition, but that is what Yakov said.] My mother was the head of the house. She felt her superiority since she was educated and could sign her name while our father had no education whatsoever. I felt more respect towards my mother. I took after my mother. We had a quiet family. There were no arguments. Our father didn't drink. On holidays only, he drank a 50 ml shot of kosher wine. We understood that a Jewish man should keep up standards. Of course, our mother wasn't happy when our father lost his job, she would say, 'Shmil, why aren't you working?', but he just did what he could. Our mother didn't like it that he couldn't provide for the family.

I went to cheder at the age of three. My first teacher's name was Yankel and I also remember my prayers. I remember how I failed to get to the toilet and dirtied myself on the way home. This painful studying lasted until I reached the age of six or seven. It was difficult to study at the age of three. We had classes from 9am to 2pm. Then we had two hours for lunch and then studied from four to seven. We couldn't wait until a day was over and we could go home. We didn't have a carefree childhood. I had a bright memory and at six I knew half of my prayer book by heart. My father was very proud of me. He was very religious. He could only speak Yiddish and could not read. He was so proud, he made me read to his acquaintances. They nodded their heads saying 'alter kop' - an 'old head' in Yiddish [Editor's note: Yakov's father was proud of him and emphasized that he was far advanced for his years]. My father always took me to the synagogue with him. At 13 I had my bar mitzvah in the prayer house where men gathered for ceremonies. My father introduced me and I spoke on the subject of some Biblical story. [Editor's note: it is on the bar mitzvah ceremony that boys are first called up to read from the Torah and then they have to give a

lecture about a given section of the Torah.] Everybody liked it and my father was very happy. When my Polish improved I began to help my father do shopping at the market.

When I was six or seven my father decided that I should go to the yeshivah. There was a yeshivah in Lublin with Rabbi Mayer Shapiro at its head [1887- 1934]. He was an outstanding scientist. My father sent me there since they provided meals. I did well at this school. However, since my stepbrother Haskel was under the influence of communist ideas, he thought that I needed to have a general education and my mother listened to his opinion. A year or a year and a half later she sent me to a Polish school. I began to live a dual life. At 7am I left for the yeshivah and at 2pm I arranged my payes behind my ears with invisible hairpins and put my yarmulka in my bag to avoid any mockery from my schoolmates and went to the Polish school. Of course, this dual life couldn't last long. Haskel insisted that I left the yeshivah. When I was ten I quit the yeshivah and just attended the Polish school. My parents had no objections to this. They gave me an opportunity to make my own choice.

I liked studying at this school. There were four Jewish pupils in my class. The rest of my classmates were Polish. Polish children openly mistreated us. I was shortsighted and wore glasses. I sat at the first desk in class. I shared my desk with a short Polish boy. His father was a policeman. My family was poor and when my father bought me a notebook it was quite an occasion for me. The boy messed up my notebook and it happened several times until I began to fight with him. Other boys began to shout, 'Why are you fighting here? Go into the yard' in Polish. We went into the yard where we continued fighting. Other Polish boys shouted, 'Mariam, beat this zhyd' [kike]. Other Jewish boys hid away. When I became desperate I grabbed a piece of steel and hit the boy on the head. He fell down bleeding and a teacher called an ambulance for him. The director of the school called me to his office and said, 'I hope I will not see you again at this school.' I was twelve then. What was I to do? My parents thought I should study a profession, but my father couldn't help me to find a craftsman that would teach me. He only spoke Yiddish and there was no way that somebody in a well-standing shop would even talk to him.

I took my school certificate and went out looking for a job. I had excellent marks in my certificate and spoke fluent Polish and a leather craftsman employed me in his shop. This leather craftsman was a Jew. His name was Zygmunt Zygielwarc. My brother Haskel said to me, 'You are a genius and need to continue your studies.' He talked to my master and I was allowed to continue my studies. I went to the first evening school for working people in Lublin to complete my secondary education. I lived at home. This leather craftsman lied to us. He agreed with my father that I would work as an errand boy for a year until he approved my contract and forwarded it to the chamber of crafts and commerce, but I worked for him as an errand boy for four years and he paid me peanuts for my work.

My father had no luck with his jobs. We didn't pay our rent for four or five months and based on a court order, we were evicted. The owner of our dwelling was a wealthy Jew. My father begged him to let us live in this room, but he refused. An officer of the court and a policeman came to throw our belongings into the yard. We lived in the open air in this yard for three months. My mother earned some money by doing laundry for our neighbors. In 1937 my father rented a room from a 70-year-old Jewish man. He leased his room to us under the condition that my mother would look after him and we would pay 15 zloties per month. We hoped that this room would come into our possession if he died. We had a room in a Polish district, in 86, Krul Liatoshynski Street. This house

is not there any longer. Poor Polish workers lived in this district.

My brother Haskel was a communist and brought communist books to our home. We enjoyed reading those books. I worked for this leather craftsman for four years until he fired me. I was 16. My master had three or four apprentices. On 1st May I decided to make a speech and told them that they shouldn't work on this holiday, but go to the working people's demonstration. I made a very emotional speech, but other employees laughed at me and weren't interested at all. However, I continued to demonstrate my revolutionary spirit. At last my master lost his temper and said, 'Just get out and I hope I will never see you again - we could all be arrested for this.'

At about the same time, in the middle of the 1930s, I gave up going to the synagogue. I had observed all holidays and fasted before and had gone to the synagogue with my father, but then I said, 'Father, I'm not going to the synagogue tomorrow,' and the next day was Yom Kippur. My father asked me why and I told him that I didn't believe in what was written in the religious books. I began to prove that there were many discrepancies in the Torah. My father told me to get out of the house. In a couple of days my mother found me at the home of some acquaintances and took me back home.

In fall 1936 I began to attend a school for people working at the plant. My master fired me right before my exams in May 1939. I had another year of school, but I had no money to pay for my studies and so I quit school. Wherever I went to study afterwards I told people that I had a secondary education.

During the war

I had to look for a job. On 1st September 1939 World War II began. Hitler attacked Poland. Of course, we understood that it was inevitable. We read the newspapers and knew about the tension, Hitler coming to power and his attitude toward Jews. All poor people had big hopes for the Soviet Union and so did poor Jewish people. Polish newspapers wrote about Stalin's terror and the famine in 1933 [4](#), but we believed it was bourgeois propaganda intending to blacken the Soviet reality. We only believed what the Communist Party said. All poor people believed that the Soviet Union was paradise on Earth. My friends and I attended underground party meetings and distributed communist flyers and newspapers. We dreamed about communism and equality. However, I didn't continue with this kind of activities since I was busy with my studies and earning money for bread for the family. I remember my mother's brother Max Grinberg wrote us that he had to go to Birobidzhan [5](#) where people had a just and happy life. I wanted to move to America and wrote him that I wanted to study in America. I hoped to make a good life there after I became a leather craftsman, but he kept saying that it wasn't a good idea. All poor Jewish people thought the same. I was a very active and emotional youth.

On 1st September 1939 our town was bombed. Our small house caught fire. This was at Rosh Hashanah. Older people didn't do anything about it. They kept sighing and praying and I yelled 'Don't pray, just fight the fire!' We 15 and 16-year-olds carried in buckets of water until the fire died down.

Later, it was Sukkot, Soviet troops arrived. How happy and euphoric we were. The first thing they did was loot the Jewish stores. They forced store-owners to open their stores in order to buy what they wanted. We were surprised since Jews weren't allowed to work on holidays. Since nobody

knew what Soviet money looked like we accepted some bond paper notes. We didn't understand what was going on, but we still believed that everything was for the better. All Jewish families were overwhelmed with joy. We were happy to live under a red banner.

Our joy faded when in October 1939, under the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact [6](#) between the USSR and Germany, Lublin became a part of Germany. On 17th October Soviet troops left the town and German armies invaded the streets. Germans captured Jews in the streets and sent them to work. I was also captured and taken to work. We loaded furniture from wealthier Jewish families and it was removed to a storage facility. But we were very surprised that when it was time to get a meal we were made to stand in different lines: for Polish and Jewish people. Polish workers got enough bread while we didn't. In a few days we were allowed to go home. My mother said that I had to get away. My friends and I decided to leave.

I remember Pinia Goldberg, my friend. His father was a tailor. He made clothes for villagers. His family was very poor and Pinia had as strong faith in the Soviet Union as I did. However, I was more handsome and active and girls liked me more. Pinia's sister, a dressmaker, was married to a barber. They had children. Their family was poor. We formed a group of 20- 30 people and started moving to the east. There was another assimilated Jewish family with us. I liked their daughter Esther. She was a beautiful girl and had a beautiful voice. She sang on the local radio. We were friends and she joined me. She had a beautiful face. She was 17, the same age as I was.

We were planning to cross the Bug River to get to the Soviet Union. We walked, but after three days the girl fell ill and became feverish. In three days we had to return home. My mother told me again that I had to get away. I regret so much that I left the girl, my brother and sister in the town. They should have come with me. We would have gotten through all the disasters. I left home again on 23rd October 1939. I had a certificate from the evening school with me and when I was stopped I explained that I was heading to my uncle in Brest [a town in Belarus on the border with Poland 180 km from Lublin]. Many people, Jews for the most part, were moving to the east. We walked at night and during the day we found shelter in the woods or abandoned sheds. It was getting colder and it got dark early. I don't remember how long our trip was, but it seemed very long to us.

We reached the Bug River. Someone from our group made arrangements for us to cross the river on a boat that belonged to a Polish villager. I had a gold watch that my parents had given me for my bar mitzvah and my mother had given me her gold earrings for the road. I gave all this for crossing the river. This villager and his neighbor took us across the river on their boats. We had to be very quiet since we were so close to the border. I remember that I found shelter in a chicken-coop. I remember a woman with a baby. Her baby burst out crying and we were afraid that somebody would hear us. I don't know what the mother did: she probably smothered her baby or something. I only remember that she looked terrible afterward, but nobody cared since everyone was thinking about his or her own business.

I remember that we heard patrolling soldiers speaking German. They said that anybody coming close to the river would be shot without prior notice. They left and the Polish villager told us that he had given them all he had gotten from us. We had to pay him again, but I had nothing and some other refugees gave him something for me. We reached the Soviet territory at 4 in the morning. We headed for Brest, the nearest town where we hoped to stay and get a job. We had covered three or four kilometers when a Soviet border patrol surrounded us and ordered us to board a

truck. We traveled about 15 kilometers until we reached some headquarters. The commanding officer ordered some villagers to give us food. Then he had a discussion with each of us. They asked me who I was. I showed them my employment record book and told them where I studied and worked. They asked me where I was going. I said, 'To my uncle's.' 'Where does he live?' 'In Brest.' 'What street?' '23, Pilsudski Street.' Of course, I just made it up. They told me I was free to go. They released all the younger people and we went to Brest. Later we heard that some older people had to go back and the Germans executed them as soon as they reached their territory. We walked through the night and reached Brest in the morning.

We didn't have anything with us. We were hungry and went to get free food provided by the local military. I met my friend Pinia who had got there before us. I was very happy to see him. We decided to stay together. We went to the railway station where we stayed overnight. That same night we enrolled on the list for work and in the morning we boarded a train for cattle transportation that moved off with people singing and holding red banners. They knew how to imitate a happy life of workers and peasants. In two weeks we reached Krichev in the east of Mahilyow region, about 150 kilometers from Brest. We got a bowl of soup at the stations provided by the military. I had a mug into which they poured this soup. We were optimistic and enthusiastic. My co-travelers were sent to cement plants, coalmines or wood cutting facilities. I was lucky, as I always had been.

About 25 of us moved on by truck. In the evening we arrived at 'Mayak' kolkhoz [7](#). We came to the cultural center of the village. It was 7th November [October Revolution Day] [8](#) and there was a celebration in the center and an optimistic Jewish man was making a speech in front of villagers. His speech was interrupted and we were distributed to the houses of collective farmers. I spoke some Russian that I had picked up back in Poland. My friend and his sister were accommodated in a house of a poor villager while I got accommodation in the house of the wealthiest one. Some time passed, but we didn't get any food. The kolkhoz was supposed to receive some food supplies for us, but this didn't happen. We began to harvest potatoes in a field. It was cold and we were falling ill, but we kept working. I stayed in the house of the director of the kolkhoz shop. He had a daughter. She was 15. Her name was Katia. She was a pretty, but dumb blond girl. I began to help her with mathematics and after about a week she tried to kiss me. I got very angry. Her mother had treated me so well and cared about me. The girl said, 'Mama wouldn't know.'

My friends didn't have enough food and I began to steal some from the house where I lived. Other guys decided to move on. My friend, his sister and her family also left. Later they showed up in Minsk and he found me in the late 1940s. I had some stupid argument with Katia and decided to leave them, too. I had to walk 15 kilometers across a forest. They said there were wolves there so I had matches and some paper with me. Somebody told me that if I bumped into a wolf I had to burn paper to protect myself. I got on a train at the station. There was a conductor who asked me for my ticket. I said I didn't have one. He began to yell at me, but other passengers stood up for me saying that I was a refugee and didn't really understand the language and he finally left me alone. In the morning we arrived at Mahilyow [320 km from Kiev, in the east of Belarus, on the Dnepr River]. There were thousands of refugees in Mahilyow. Somebody explained to me that I wasn't supposed to leave the kolkhoz without a permit, but that I could obtain one at the local executive committee office [Ispolkom] [9](#). I went there. There was a Jewish man at the head of this office wearing a Stalin hat [a khaki cap popular with many Soviet officials parroting Stalin]. This officer didn't even want to

see me, but there were women working there; they sympathized with me. One gave me a bun and another gave me some milk. I told them that I needed a document issued by their office, to allow me stay in Mahilyow. I was there a whole week. I slept at the railway station until those employees got him to sign this permit.

I remember that they allowed me to work as a loader at a garment factory in Mahilyow. I earned 152 rubles. I carried 10 kilogram packages to the fabric cutting shop on the third floor. There were only Belarus loaders at the factory and all other employees were Jews. I slept in old barracks 10 kilometers from Mahilyow. All refugees stayed in those barracks. It was a severe winter and many people got frost-bitten feet. I didn't suffer since I was strong. One of my co-tenants, a Jewish man from Germany, froze to death. He didn't get up one morning in December. I wrote a letter home telling them where I was. I was so concerned about them and hoped to get a letter from them, but there was none. Once I met pretty girls from Vilnius [Lithuania] at the post office. I always liked pretty girls and I began to ask them questions. They told me that there was a course where they trained teachers of history. The next day I went to this teacher's college and told them that I wanted to study. I lied for the first time, that I had a secondary education.

In late December 1939 I passed my exams successfully and was admitted to a group of rural elementary school teachers. I had to work and study. I left my barracks at 4am and walked 10 kilometers to the town where I worked from 7am 'till 4pm and then attended classes. Somebody told me to talk to the management of my college and request a stipend. I did so and was approved to receive a stipend of 175 rubles - that was more than I earned. I also got accommodation in the hostel at 39, Lenin Street. There were five other tenants in my room, Belarus boys. They never asked me about my nationality. They asked me my name. I said, 'Yasha.' I liked it in the hostel. I had a bed with a white sheet. In the morning I attended classes. I had friends and nobody called me 'zhyd.' I liked everything there. I also attended a theater studio for Polish Jews. To cut a long story short, we had a wonderful life.

I didn't have any information about the situation in Poland. In 1940 I received a letter from my mother. There was a photograph of my brother Mordekhai and a short note from my mother. She wrote that she was very happy that I wasn't with them since they were in a very tough situation. She didn't describe any details. There were many refugees at this college. We spoke poor Russian and there was a group of about 20 of us studying Russian. Our teacher was a young Jewish woman. I learned a little, but I could never tell the difference 'pisat' ['write' in Russian, stress on the 'a'] and 'pisat' ['pee' in Russian, stress on the 'i']. It was a puzzle for me. We had to take a Russian exam and I couldn't imagine how I was going to manage. I knew that at best I would still make 20 mistakes while five mistakes was the maximum. My friend Lyova Rotenberg sat with me and wrote a dictation instead of me. I got three out of five for it and passed my exam. All students left for vacations and I stayed.

The rector of my college helped me to get a job. There was a big chemical plant and a recreation center near Mahilyow. I went to work as an entertainer there. I got a wonderful meal: two eggs and bread and butter. However, since I spoke poor Russian they sent me away in two weeks since I failed to do my job. In order to continue my studies I had to take several exams. I went to the library where I learned everything by heart and recited pieces word by word at the exams. Teachers were amazed at my memory and admitted me to the second course of the Faculty of History of Mahilyow Pedagogical College. I was the happiest person in the world: I was a student,

had a place to live and received a stipend.

In fall 1940 I had practical training at school. There were young girls in the 9th and 10th grades, staring at me. Once I got a note from a schoolgirl in which she wrote that she knew that I came from Poland and that Jews were oppressed and abused there and that she was happy to meet me and hoped to support me. She was in the 10th grade and I was a 2nd year student. We started seeing each other. She was a Jewish girl and her name was Rosa Sheinina. Her father was the director of confectionery factory. Theirs was a rich family. I began to court her.

Once a teacher of mathematics, a Jewish man, asked me whether I knew Hebrew and Yiddish. I said I did and he offered me a job as librarian at the Jewish library in a small house near our college. I became a librarian and worked from 4pm. I read books and Rosa visited me there. We flirted when there were no visitors. I was happy. I had obtained a Soviet passport by then. It was a 'category 24' passport [Passport 24] [10](#) It meant that I wasn'tt allowed to reside in 24 large towns. I joined the Komsomol [11](#) and became an active Komsomol member. I liked taking part in meetings and attending parades on Soviet holidays. My friends and I marched along the main street of the town carrying red flags, portraits of the leaders and posters with communist slogans. We were proud of our country and believed that everything happening was just. I liked the Soviet system and didn't think about any difficulties or contradictions.

This was 1941. I met with Rosa and read books on history in the library. I was passing exams and everything went well. On 22nd June Lyova Rotenberg, another boy and I were taking a walk discussing Russian classics when we heard on the radio that the Great Patriotic War [12](#) had begun.

We had about five exams ahead of us. Students of our college were immediately mobilized to remove all furniture from a school in the neighborhood where they were going to deploy a hospital. We worked all night. In the morning I went to the college to take an exam in medieval history. Professor Alexandr Kogan from St. Petersburg came to me, hugged me and held me tight for some time. It turned out that all Polish refugees, German teachers and senior students had been arrested at night. I was lucky that I hadn't been in the hostel that night. I don't know - they might have arrested me, too.

I was called into our Komsomol Committee, which enrolled me on the lists of a 'fighting battalion.' We were to capture German parachutists that landed in the area. We got wooden rifles. There were 800 of us in this battalion. We were distributed in groups of three. There were many refugees from Minsk in Mahilyow and we understood that the situation was difficult. I hoped to see my friend Pinia who used to write me from Minsk, but I didn't find him. I also looked for him after the war, writing to various agencies, but I didn't get any information and never found out what happened to him or his sister.

We were sent to the woods near Mahilyow. In a week I found out that there were 24 of us left from the 800. The rest of the fighters had perished. I was so upset, especially that I had never found any parachutists. There was panic and confusion around. I saw an officer shooting two other officers who were retreating. He approached them on a truck and shot them. I returned to Mahilyow where I met Rosa's father. We went to the railway station where he put me on a train. His wife and Rosa were there already. I was evacuated with the Sheinina family. This was 5th July. Our trip lasted for about a month until we reached Chistopol' in former Tatarstan [a small town on the Kama River flowing into the Volga]. Rosa's father was recruited to the army on the way. We were

accommodated in a room. Rosa lost interest in me and I had no feelings left and I decided to go to a bigger town. Chistopol' was a small town, overcrowded with evacuated people. There was no job or place to study. I heard there was a barge from Chistopol' to Kuibyshev [today, Samara, a regional town on the Volga, about 2300 km from Kiev. During the war many governmental agencies were evacuated to this town]. I got on this barge. The only luggage I had was a suit that I put in my case. I put this case under my head to sleep on it. When I woke up in the morning I didn't find either the case or the suit there. When I reached Kuibyshev I remembered that this was one of the 24 towns in which I wasn't allowed to reside. When the barge was nearing the harbor I jumped off to avoid document control officers. I decided to find the Pedagogical College.

The Pedagogical College was located at 65, Stepan Razin Street. There were a few people unloading books and I decided to join them. I worked a little and addressed their supervisor. I said I was hungry and he sent me to their canteen where I had a bowl of soup and returned to work. We worked until evening. This same supervisor sent me to Nadia, the manager of their hostel. Nadia accommodated me in a room where I was alone; other students were still on vacation. The next day I went to work again. Then I went to get registered at the college. They admitted me to the third course. I unloaded books until the academic year began and had meals at the canteen. There was only one thing I didn't like: this supervisor Nadia came to my room every night. She was about 30 and I was 19. She was a beautiful woman, but I had other things to think about.

I became a student. I got a residence permit [13](#) to live in this hostel even though I had a 'category 24' passport and wasn't allowed to live in Kuibyshev. They stamped my passport along with other passports without taking a closer look. Students received 400 grams of bread per day. It wasn't enough for me. The academic year began and then there were six of us in the room. Four were Russian guys from the Volga and one was a Jew. His name was Fima. He was from Mahilyow. He kept himself separate and kept his own food in his locker. There was no anti-Semitism between us, but we didn't really like Fima. Once we broke the lock on his locker, got his bread and pork fat from there and ate it. All Jews forgot kashrut rules and ate what they had. When he came back he began nagging about it. We saw that this shlemazl [a weak person in Yiddish] was worthless. We had no respect for him. He perished on the way to the front later.

My other co-tenants were my friends. In fall 1941 our college began to make a wood storage for winter. We went to an island on the Volga where we cut wood and made rafts for wood transportation. A raft had to be tied to the wood underneath. We had to stay underwater for about ten minutes to make a knot. Once my safety rope broke and I almost drowned. The others rescued me, pulling me out by my trunks. I knew that other guys liked me. Once they invited me to a pancake celebration. [Editor's note: this is the Russian version of mardi-gras, it's called 'maslenitza', from the Russian word for 'butter', maslo. It is usually celebrated in the last week of February when people bake pancakes and organize all sorts of out-door activities; burning the symbolic figurine of winter. Although it is totally pagan, it prefigures the 40 days of fasting, which in turn culminates with Easter.] I had pancakes there. We also worked together in the harbor unloading melons and watermelons. We shared everything we earned or had. We lived like a commune. There were also girls that lived in the next-door room, we involved them and they cooked for us. I was happy living in this hostel. I became deputy editor of our students' newspaper, even though my Russian was poor. I shared my ideas with the editor, a student of the Faculty of Biology, and he wrote the articles.

I met a young beautiful woman at the college. Her name was Tamara and we began to see each other. Later my friends told me that she was married to Professor Aizezian, of Philosophy and that they had a child. I had a problem again. I began to avoid her, but she followed me. She was a refugee from Belarus and her husband was an old Armenian. I had an exam in June 1942. Professor Aizezian was very strict and nobody expected to get a good mark. All students wanted to get higher marks since our stipend was based on how good our marks were. I was sure that he knew that I was seeing his wife. I learned an important lesson from this man. He said only one phrase to me, 'The tragedy of history is that people that had no idea about history took to implementation of great ideas.' He gave me an excellent mark and I never saw his wife again.

We took exams for the third and the fourth year due to a ministry directive which reduced terms of studies. There were five or six young graduate men. We received our diplomas at the military registry office. We were to be sent to the Military Academy in Baku. Once I jumped off a tram between stops and was captured by a militiaman who took my passport. When they found out that I had violated my ban to live in Kuibyshev they put me on the list of the Labor army. We did any sort of hard work. I was sent to work as an equipment operator at a special expedition of the Oil Ministry of the USSR.

I had to join a field group in Kokand [a small town in Uzbekistan, 3,000 km from Kiev]. My journey there took seven or eight days until I arrived at the 'Karakum geological group.' Kokand was a small town on the Sokh River flowing into Syrdarya in Fergana region, Uzbekistan. There were few pise- [rammed earth] walled houses in the town. Uzbek people wore heavy cotton gowns and tubeteika caps that looked like a kippah to me. [Editor's note: tubeteika is a small cap worn by men in Middle Asian countries; it's very much like a kippah.] There were a few Jewish specialists who had come there from the European part of the Soviet Union before the war. During the war the population of Kokand expanded due to the arrival of evacuees.

Camels were the main form of transport. We were to collect yellow stones and some sand and send these to Moscow to be studied . We were told that they were studied to find oil and it was only 20 years later I came to know that they had been looking for uranium. In a few weeks I went into the desert in a vehicle. There were about 200 Tajik and Uzbek people there already. They were wild, uneducated people and I was to be their supervisor since I had an education. I was to explain to them what they were supposed to do. Once every two to three weeks we got food supplies and we loaded stones that we'd collected, to be taken away. Once nobody came for three or four weeks.

We were starving, but we weren't allowed to leave our work area. I took a risk, although I didn't know it was a risk. I asked the workers where they lived and it turned out that the nearest houses were 100 kilometers from where we were. I told them to bring any food they could from their homes. They returned in one week's time and the food they brought lasted for another couple of weeks. When my supervisor came and I told him what I had done, he cursed me and said that I deserved to be shot. I told him that I had to do it to save people and he replied that I could have written them off if something happened. This was when I came face to face with the Soviet mentality. They didn't care about an individual. An individual didn't matter to them.

In fall 1943 I was sent to Moscow to take secret maps there. The head of the laboratory offered me a job in his technical library. I did technical translation work, from German and Polish. I had the status of an employee on a business trip and every now and then I had to return to Kokand. In

Kokand I met my first wife. Her name was Ninel Venediktova. I corresponded with Rosa Sheinina and she gave me the address of her friend Ninel, who was a student of a teacher's college in Kokand. I fell in love with Ninel. She was a pretty Russian girl. She was 18. Her mother came from Kiev. She was a business-oriented woman. She went to the Northern areas of Russia to sell fruit from the south; her daughter stayed alone. Ninel's mother was very unhappy that her daughter's boyfriend was a Polish Jew, but when I fell ill with typhoid on my way to Kokand and was removed from the train when I fell unconscious, she took a very active part in my life. She got in touch with my management and got penicillin for me. She visited me in hospital every day.

When I recovered I went back to Moscow. I liked Moscow. I could attend lectures at university and borrow books from the biggest libraries. I met Professor Vladimir Picheta, the Academic [1878 - 1947, Soviet historian, author of works about the history of Poland, Lithuania, Belarus, specialist in Social and economic history]. He was an outstanding scientist and author of significant studies. This was 1944, when the liberation of Poland began. I wrote a very important essay for the time. There was an outstanding historian in Poland - Lelewel [Joachim Lelewel (1786-1861): Polish historian, politician and supporter of the November Uprising of 1830. He was an ideologist of the Polish liberation movement, a democrat- internationalist and founded the basics of a number of disciplines in the Polish historical sciences]. Marx was his friend. Nobody wrote about him and I decided to write an essay and showed it to Picheta. Picheta liked the essay and told me to enter his post-graduate school.

I was very weak after having typhoid and due to my health condition I was expelled from the labor troop. I wasn't allowed to live in Moscow. Ninel and her mother returned to Kiev from evacuation. I had to obtain a residence permit to live in Kiev.

I entered Veterinary College in Kiev and obtained a certificate confirming that I was a student. On the basis of this certificate I got registered at the hostel of this college. However, I took no interest in the Veterinary College. I lived in the family of my future wife in a communal apartment [14](#) in the very center of Kiev. Ninel got pregnant and we registered our marriage on 13th August 1944. I studied in college and worked as a loader at a wood-cutting facility. I wanted to be a teacher, but when I was told that a teacher earned 550 rubles per month - this was the price of a loaf of bread - I went to the university. I had an appointment with the rector of the university. He said that if I were a graduate of their university I could become a post-graduate student. During that year I passed 13 exams and got a degree from Kiev University. There was another rector though, and when I came to see him he said, 'We are encouraging national specialists.' This was April 1945, after Victory Day [15](#). For the first time I faced state anti-Semitism. I lived in Kiev for a year. I didn't get along with my wife or my mother-in-law. She used to say 'What kind of a Jew is it that cannot provide for his family?' I went to Lvov since I was told that it was easier to get an apartment there.

I arrived at Lvov on 9th May 1945. This was Victory Day. Expecting a telegram from my mother-in-law or wife, I went to the post office and received a telegram that said that I had a daughter and that she was named Victoria - 'victory' in Greek. We were overwhelmed with victory and hoped that life would improve. We believed that everything would be wonderful from then on. The situation was horrible in Lvov. People were arrested and then disappeared. I didn't understand what was going on. People were scared.

My closest ones - my father, brother, mother and sister perished in Lublin ghetto. Only few years ago I found out that they were on the lists of those exterminated in Lublin ghetto on 7th November 1942. I received a document from Lublin confirming that Mordekhai Honiksmen and Samuel Honiksmen were on the list of those that were exterminated. My mother and sister were not mentioned in any lists. They perished without being included in any lists. I don't even know where their ashes are buried.

I visited Lublin several times in the 1990s. The town had changed a lot since I was last there 60 years before. There is a multi-storied building at the spot where our house was. It became a very different town.

Post-war

In Lvov I went to work at a garment shop, but I didn't like it there. I attended the library of the Academy of Sciences. This was in 1946. I saw a man lying in a tram stop. I thought he wasn't well, but when I came closer I saw that he was drunk. He was mumbling something in Polish. I took him home where he had a big collection of Jewish books. I went to see him the next day. He introduced himself: Professor Tadeus Zadarecki. He was a Polish orientalist, a Professor of Lvov University. He owned a library and needed an employee there. He offered me a job at the library. They spoke Ukrainian there, while I didn't know a word in Ukrainian. They asked me what languages I spoke. I said, 'Polish, Russian, Yiddish and German.' They believed me and in 15 minutes I became a senior scientific worker of the Jewish department of this library of the Academy of Sciences. I quit the shop where I worked. I also lived in this library.

There were two other Jewish employees there. They told me that Zadarecki had a beautiful Jewish wife before the war. She and their child were taken to the ghetto during the war. He tried to rescue them, but they were killed in the ghetto. It was so hard on him that he took to drinking. I began to work at this library on 15th April 1946. I was happy to work there. We collected books from all the ruined Jewish houses and synagogues. We got many books from the Jewish community, which had one of the richest libraries. It's enough to say that there were 43 incunabula's [ancient printed books] before the war that were all stolen. My readers were Jewish intellectuals, writers and scientists. It was the Jewish elite.

My wife joined me in Lvov. We found a three-bedroom apartment, but we still didn't have a good life together. She didn't understand me. In 1947 I went to the Department of History at the Pedagogical College and they employed me as an assistant at the Department of Marxism-Leninism. I kept my job at the library, but my wife didn't find my earnings sufficient. We had arguments and rows with her. My mother-in-law also moved in with us. She became the mistress of our home. She was very good at making money. I left home and lived at the library.

I worked at the library from 1946 to 1948. In 1949, the campaign against cosmopolitans [16](#) began. All Jewish writers were arrested. I thought I would be arrested, too, since I knew all those people. The library was destroyed. 19 boxes of books were moved to the Academy of Sciences in Kiev. The library ceased to exist. In May 1949 I was declared a cosmopolitan at my college. I didn't know about it since it was announced at a party meeting that I didn't attend since I was a Komsomol member. When my boss saw me in college, he said 'Yakov, why are you here? You could be arrested. Go away. They've declared you a cosmopolitan. You are fired.' I lost my job and expected arrest every night.

I had a friend. He was also a Polish Jew. He worked in an archive and he advised me to get a job at the archive since I knew several languages. I went to see the director of this archive. His wife was a Jew. He looked like a typical man of half-Jewish origin. He took me to a colonel at the regional department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs where I wrote an 18- page letter, requesting them to employ me. In a month I received a permit to become an employee of the archive of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Lvov. I worked at the logistics department and had no right to enter a sensitive - secret department. [Editor's note: the secret department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs kept materials about political trials, arrests of innocent people, fabricated cases, etc. Residents got partial access to those archives only in the early 1990s.] I did more than I was authorized to and collected a big archive of files for joint-stock companies of the oil industry. I wrote a letter to the Academy of Sciences asking them whether I might write a thesis on the basis of these documents. They replied that these documents could be the basis for both scientific candidate and doctor's thesis. Later the archive got the order 'fire' with no explanation. I was fired and so was another Jew, Grossman. This happened in 1951.

I had no food and no place to live. I lived, at one time, with a Polish countess 15 years older. She was a very beautiful woman, an aristocrat. I learned a lot from her, including manners. I remember her with very warm feelings. She was an artist. I lived with her for six months. Later I heard that she was arrested and sent into exile. I lost track of her.

I found a job as a teacher of history and German language in a village in Lvov region since I couldn't find a job in Lvov. I worked there for nine and a half years. My colleagues treated me well. I became deputy director and then director of this school. I was also responsible for the collection of money for state crediting. It was a mandatory procedure, although newspapers wrote that the population gave money to their country ruined by the war voluntarily. In May, state officers came to institutions and declared how much one owed and if people refused they beat them with sticks. However, I managed to convince people. I joined the Party. I still believed in communism. I didn't understand many things, but I also needed this for my career. I became a representative of the regional party committee for collectivization [17](#). People respected me. There was another Jew - a doctor. People also respected him.

At the beginning of 1952 another period of arrests began. I was very afraid of being arrested. My wife said, 'We don't need you.' My wife and my mother- in-law spoke against me to my daughter. I was afraid that they might act against me and got a divorce. I was a bachelor for four years. I was desirable as a fiancé throughout this time.

I was glad when I heard that Stalin died on 5th March 1953. I didn't know what the future might be, but I knew that one of the greatest bandits had died. He was another Hitler, only even more treacherous since Hitler spoke directly and openly while Stalin complimented somebody and then at night this person was arrested and taken away. I had realized this many years ago, but I had remained a follower of Marxism.

Married life

In 1955 my friends introduced me to my future wife Rita Vilkobrisckaya. Her parents were Jews. She was born in 1930. She is a very pretty, nice and absolutely naïve person. She finished the Faculty of Economy at the Lvov Polygraphists College. Rita's father was a high-ranking military officer, but he had passed away by the time we met. Rita received a secular education and her

Jewish roots were abandoned. This family believed in Stalin's ideas fanatically. They said that Rita's father died along with the name of Stalin.

Rita and I were dating for some time until I asked her, 'Rita will you marry me?' and she replied, 'Yes.' We had a wedding party at a restaurant on 10th January 1956. My guests were about ten close friends and her guests were her father's former military comrades. They were Russian and there were very few Jews. Rita and I never argued. She is so timid, but she is the closest person I have. I am still affectionate towards my wife. She is so very nice and sweet. My scientific achievements are due to her. During the first years of our marital life she lived in Lvov alone and I came from the village at weekends.

I worked on my scientific candidate thesis on the subject of economic development of Eastern Poland at the beginning of the 20th century. In October 1960 I defended my thesis in Moscow. The subject of my thesis was the history of the Polish economy. I was awarded the scientific title of candidate of economic sciences. I got a job in Lvov where I became deputy director of an evening school. I gained a standing in my scientific field, but authorities kept emphasizing that they needed national personnel. There was no open anti-Semitism, but it was clear that the reason why it was so hard for me to find a job was my nationality.

Rita worked as an economist in an institute. She was fired along with 10-15 other Jewish employees. I went to see the secretary of the district party committee and asked him, 'Have you received an instruction to get rid of Jews?' He was shocked, 'This cannot be.' Our leadership didn't like direct accusation of being anti-Semitic and my wife got back her job. I couldn't find a job for about a year until I finally got a job offer. There was a vacancy for a lecturer at the Oil College in Drogobych [a small town, 100 km from Lvov; center of the oil industry]. I worked there for 17 years: as a senior lecturer and then as a dean for half a year.

Then I wrote my doctor's thesis. My wife stayed in Lvov. Her mother was very ill and she couldn't leave her. I received a small apartment, but again, every weekend and on holidays I went to Lvov. After I defended my thesis I got a job at the Institute of Social Sciences in Lvov. I worked there only a year. I was the only Jewish employee. The management tried to get rid of me. They wanted to use me in their struggle against the so-called Ukrainian nationalists. I refused to get involved in dirty plotting and they said, 'We won't be in your team.' I quit. I felt depressed; I was looking for a job again. Two months had passed when a former colleague of mine invited me to Ternopol [regional center in the west of Ukraine, 130 km from Lvov]. Again I traveled at weekends and on holidays. I worked there for two years, but I understood there was no future for me there. I wanted a promotion and was thinking about my career while I couldn't expect anything where I was at that time. Nobody offered me a promotion. I started looking for a job again. There were promises that never came true. I traveled to Poland where I read lectures.

We were an affectionate family. We traveled to the Crimea or Caucasus in summer as tourists. We enjoyed traveling. We didn't celebrate Soviet or religious holidays at home, but we had birthday parties. We got together with friends on birthdays and weekends to listen to music, discuss books. We made good money, went to theaters and to the cinema and to restaurants with friends.

I was over 50 and the situation with having no job affected my health. When I left another institution where I'd received a refusal, I fell. A crowd of people gathered and I was taken to hospital. This was my first infarction. When I was in hospital my wife brought me a newspaper

where I read there was competition for a position of professor in Lvov Polytechnic College. When I was released from hospital I went to this college where I got the job. This happened in early April 1976. From then on I worked at the Faculty of Economy of Lvov Polytechnic Institute where I taught history of economy until 1992. So I became a professor and was happy about my degrees. I was the only Jew in this faculty. I took my job very seriously and people treated me well. I always identified myself as Jew and never forgot about my origin or my relatives who had perished, but after I left Lublin I didn't observe any Jewish traditions.

When perestroika [18](#) began, Jewish life began to revive in the town. In 1985 we celebrated the jubilee of Sholem Aleichem [19](#). I was there, of course. I attended other meetings of Jewish intellectuals. The party leadership of the college reacted immediately. They were all informed promptly. The secretary of the party unit asked me, 'Have you become a Zionist? You demonstrate too much interest in Jewish life.' However, the flow of time changed all attitudes. The attitude toward Jews changed in society. I was glad about such great progress in Jewish life. I believed that Ukraine had to be an independent country to progress in its development. In 1990 I submitted my request to quit the Party. They asked me, 'Why?', and I replied, 'I disagree with the policy of the Party'. But more and more often I recall the words of my teacher Aizezian that people that make history have no idea about it.

In 1989 I became one of the founders of the Jewish Sholem Aleichem Society [20](#). I began to work on Jewish subjects. I didn't write about Jewish subjects before 1992, but now I have six books, about ten brochures and over 200 articles. My books were published and became popular. The books published by the Lvov Jewish Sholem Aleichem Society are: 'Catastrophe of Jews in Western Ukraine', 300 pages, published in 1998, 5,000 copies; 'Jews of Brody Town 1584-1944', 2001, 2,000 copies; 'Yanovskiy camp', 1996, 3,000 copies; 'People, years, events. From our ancient history', 1998, 3,000 copies; '600 years and two years', about the history of Jews in Drohobych and Boryslav, 1999, 2,000 copies, and others. I have come to the end of my life - my 80th birthday, with significant accomplishments.

I visit the Sholem Aleichem Society and Hesed - these institutions are housed in the same building. Many people are interested in Jewish subjects, even those that didn't disclose their Jewish identity in the past years. My daughter Victoria Venediktova is one of such people. She works as a teacher and I have no contact with her.

My wife and I never considered departing for Israel. I have a lot of things to do here while there I would be merely a pensioner. I am a Polish - a European Jew and I belong here.

I've always remembered that being a Jew is a great responsibility. If anybody accepts a bribe, large or small, he would be called corrupt, but if I accept one people would say 'all zhydy are the same.' I must think not only about myself, but also about my people.

Glossary

[1](#) Hasid

The follower of the Hasidic movement, a Jewish mystic movement founded in the 18th century that reacted against Talmudic learning and maintained that God's presence was in all of one's surroundings and that one should serve God in one's every deed and word. The movement

provided spiritual hope and uplifted the common people. There were large branches of Hasidic movements and schools throughout Eastern Europe before World War II, each following the teachings of famous scholars and thinkers. Most had their own customs, rituals and life styles. Today there are substantial Hasidic communities in New York, London, Israel and Antwerp.

2 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.

3 Spanish Civil War (1936-39)

A civil war in Spain, which lasted from July 1936 to April 1939, between rebels known as Nacionales and the Spanish Republican government and its supporters. The leftist government of the Spanish Republic was besieged by nationalist forces headed by General Franco, who was backed by Nazi Germany and fascist Italy. Though it had Spanish nationalist ideals as the central cause, the war was closely watched around the world mainly as the first major military contest between left-wing forces and the increasingly powerful and heavily armed fascists. The number of people killed in the war has been long disputed ranging between 500,000 and a million.

4 Famine in Ukraine

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

5 Birobidzhan

Formed in 1928 to give Soviet Jews a home territory and to increase settlement along the vulnerable borders of the Soviet Far East, the area was raised to the status of an autonomous region in 1934. Influenced by an effective propaganda campaign, and starvation in the east, 41,000 Soviet Jews relocated to the area between the late 1920s and early 1930s. But, by 1938 28,000 of them had fled the regions harsh conditions, There were Jewish schools and synagogues up until the 1940s, when there was a resurgence of religious repression after World War II. The Soviet government wanted the forced deportation of all Jews to Birobidzhan to be completed by the

middle of the 1950s. But in 1953 Stalin died and the deportation was cancelled. Despite some remaining Yiddish influences - including a Yiddish newspaper - Jewish cultural activity in the region has declined enormously since Stalin's anti-cosmopolitanism campaigns and since the liberalization of Jewish emigration in the 1970s. Jews now make up less than 2% of the region's population.

6 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact

Non-aggression pact between Germany and the Soviet Union, which became known under the name of Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Engaged in a border war with Japan in the Far East and fearing the German advance in the west, the Soviet government began secret negotiations for a non-aggression pact with Germany in 1939. In August 1939 it suddenly announced the conclusion of a Soviet-German agreement of friendship and non-aggression. The Pact contained a secret clause providing for the partition of Poland and for Soviet and German spheres of influence in Eastern Europe.

7 Kolkhoz

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

8 October Revolution Day

October 25 (according to the old calendar), 1917 went down in history as victory day for the Great October Socialist Revolution in Russia. This day is the most significant date in the history of the USSR. Today the anniversary is celebrated as 'Day of Accord and Reconciliation' on November 7.

9 Ispolkom

After the tsar's abdication (March, 1917), power passed to a Provisional Government appointed by a temporary committee of the Duma, which proposed to share power to some extent with councils of workers and soldiers known as 'soviets.' Following a brief and chaotic period of fairly democratic procedures, a mixed body of socialist intellectuals known as the Ispolkom secured the right to 'represent' the soviets. The democratic credentials of the soviets were highly imperfect to begin with: peasants - the overwhelming majority of the Russian population - had virtually no say, and soldiers were grossly over-represented. The Ispolkom's assumption of power turned this highly imperfect democracy into an intellectuals' oligarchy.

10 Passport 24

Such passports were issued to people that authorities didn't put full trust into: they were former political prisoners or those that had recently arrived in the USSR, etc. There was a note in such passports stating that the owner of that passport was not allowed to reside in the 24 biggest towns of the USSR.

11 Komsomol

Communist youth political organization created in 1918. The task of the Komsomol was to spread of the ideas of communism and involve the worker and peasant youth in building the Soviet Union. The Komsomol also aimed at giving a communist upbringing by involving the worker youth in the political struggle, supplemented by theoretical education. The Komsomol was more popular than the Communist Party because with its aim of education people could accept uninitiated young proletarians, whereas party members had to have at least a minimal political qualification.

12 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.

13 Residence permit

The Soviet authorities restricted freedom of travel within the USSR through the residence permit and kept everybody's whereabouts under control. Every individual in the USSR needed residential registration; this was a stamp in the passport giving the permanent address of the individual. It was impossible to find a job, or even to travel within the country, without such a stamp. In order to register at somebody else's apartment one had to be a close relative and if each resident of the apartment had at least eight square meters to themselves.

14 Communal apartment

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

15 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. .

16 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.'

17 Collectivization

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

18 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.

19 Sholem Aleichem Society in Ukraine

The first Jewish associations were established in many towns of the country in the early 1990s. Many of them were called Sholem Aleichem Society. They had educational and cultural goals. Their purpose was to make assimilated Soviet Jews interested in the history and culture of their people, opening Jewish schools, kindergartens, libraries, literature and historical clubs.

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