

# Yakov Furmanas

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Siauliai

Lithuania

Interviewer: Zhanna Litinskaya

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*Yakov Furmanas lives not far from center in a five-storied building of the soviet times. His apartment is large and light and well -furnished. The owner meets the style of the apartment. In spite of his age, he looks very good, has a neat hair-do and elegant house clothing. When I came in he was sitting in an arm chair in the drawing room. His calm and serene wife, a Lithuanian, served tea to us. Yakov looks young for his age. When he starts talking, I understand that the years have left the imprint. Yakov often could not recall the simplest things, the names o his close people and relatives. Nevertheless, his story seemed very interesting to me and even unique- the story of the person from rich family who actually rejected his class. Yakov gladly told about his past and present, pointing out to the fact that Lithuanians treat Jews well. When I left Yakov's place, I saw a bright contrast to Yakovs' story- demonstration of the fascist party in Lithuania on the occasion of the Victory day 1 they were dressed in black suites, riding the bikes and holding flags with fylfot.*



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## **My family background**

There are almost no indigenous Siauliai [about 200 Km from Vlnius]denizens. I should say that I am an indigene of Siauliai. My maternal grandfather, Mikhail Ragalin was born in Siauliai in 1870. He most likely got both secular and religious education. He was a rather modern man with democratic views. He had a wide circle of acquaintances. My grandpa Mikhail owned a large tannery in Siauliai. During the soviet time bike plant was built in place of grandpa's factory. He often went to Moscow. He had his own sales representative there before revolution 2. Grandpa was one of the richest and

the most respectable men in Siauliai. He had his own honorary seat in the synagogue. Though he was not a zealot, he sacredly followed Jewish traditions. Like many Lithuanians he wore a small beard and a nice kippa on his head.

I remember my grandma Nina Ragalina very well. I do not know her maiden name and her Jewish name. at any rate, she was Nina according to the documents. Great grandmother also lived in the house for several years. I cannot recall her name or how she looked. She died when I was five. Grandma was several years younger than her husband, but still she was the leader in family and business issues. She was tall and stately, with authoritarian character. Her adult kids strictly obeyed her. Like all Jewish ladies she covered her head. When she walked to people, she wore a wig, at home she had a lacy kerchief. Grandma ran a big house, where a large family lived -children and grandchildren. Grandma died shortly after grandpa. Both of them died in middle 1930s.

Mikhail and Nina had 5 kids- two sons and 3 daughters. All of them got good education. The eldest Meyer Ragolin, who was about five years older than mom, was grandfather's right hand in business. During the last years of grandfather, Meyer actually ran the factory, which was demised to him after grandpa's death. Meyer had a Jewish wife and a son. I do not remember their names. All I remember that his son, my cousin, was several years older than me. Meyer and his wife perished in Siauliai ghetto during occupation. Their son survived. He is currently living in Israel.

Mother's sister Rachil was born after Meyer. She married a dentist, Jew Ruderman. He practiced medicine in Lithuanian town Utena, and Rachil moved to him. In several years the Rudermans family moved to France, where aunt's husband opened up a dental office. They did not have children and she helped out her kin a lot.

Younger sister Nina also moved to Rachil in France. She finished dentistry department and also opened her own dental office. She married a local Jew and gave birth to son Abram. Nina also made very good money and invited younger brother Meishe to come. He came in France with his wife Margolina. He worked as a dentist's assistant for couple of years. All my relatives apart from mother's elder sister Rachil, survived occupation in France and lived a long life. Aunt Rachil and her husband died in late 1930s in Paris.

My mother Anna Ragalina was born in Siauliai in 1890s. she got a good education for that time- she finished Russian lyceum. She was fluent in written and spoken Jewish, Russian and Lithuanian. She was very witty and grandpa decided to involve his favorite daughter in business. He even took her on business trips. During one of such trips in Moscow mother met my father.

My paternal grandpa, born in 1860s, was the merchant of the fist guild [3](#). He lived with his family in Moscow. His name was Dovid Furman. I cannot recall grandmother's name. Dovid was a very wealthy man. He owned stores and he was somehow connected with Mikhail Ragalin. Father had only one brother Ilia. He reached 100 years old and died in Moscow in 1990s. During soviet time Ilia worked as an accountant in some soviet enterprise. I had been friends with his son Eduard. I went to Moscow with my wife and Eduard with his wife and two sons came to see us. Several years ago Eduard died having survived his father by less than a decade.

As far as I know, paternal grandmother died very young and grandfather remarried. He had two or three daughters in his second marriage. They were half sisters to my dad. I knew only Rachil, a

lonely old lady. I called on her when I was in Moscow. Grandpa died in late 1930s and we found out about it only after Lithuania was annexed to Soviet Union [4](#). Before 1941 our Moscow relatives did not communicate with us, because they lived in the USSR and in those years to have relatives in the bourgeois country it was dangerous for them [5](#).

My father Nuchim was born in Moscow in 1890s. Upon graduation from lyceum, he became a merchant and started helping father. My parents got married in Moscow in 1915. Though, both families- father's and mother's were rather modern, the wedding was Jewish. Parents were wed in chuppah in the central Moscow synagogue. In 1916 I, Yakov Furman, the first-born came into the world. Lithuanian ending "as" was added to my last name when parents moved to Lithuania. When the revolution was about to start my sagacious parents did not think twice and moved in Lithuanian town Siauliai, where mother was born.

Siauliai was a rather big city with developed industry. Tannery and footwear production were the most developed here. Most factory owners were Jews. The largest tannery belonged to the richest Jew of Siauliai- Frenkel. He was a very modest man. His clothes were not posh, but expensive. He chose London for permanent abode. He came in Siauliai almost every month for his managers to report to him. Plant managers were also Jews. Frenkel was the most respectable man in town. He was actively involved in charity. He mostly helped Jewish community, but he also gave monetary assistance to Russians and Lithuanians, provided money for town's needs. He made part of his house, which looked more like a palace, into the premises of Hebrew lyceum. He founded and sponsored nursery home, where old paupers, Jews lived, and a canteen for poor Jews. Frenkel owned some trading companies. He built a rather large synagogue for plant workers. There were other rich Jews in town apart from Frenkel- factory owner Mureck Khrazinskiy, owner of soap making plant Zifa, bankers, merchants. Almost all stores in downtown pertained to Jews. Simpler Jews were concentrated in the market area. Those were craftsmen- cobblers, tailors, glazers, watch menders etc. there were several synagogues in the town and almost all Siauliai Jews were religious. Some of them were pious, others paid a tribute to the traditions like my grandpa Mikhail. On Saturdays, grandmother attended synagogue and took his honorary place.

Upon return from Russia, my parents started living in grandpa's big house. Grandpa opened a large leather store, where father also was involved in business. In spite of good money in the family and prosperity, father felt himself a stranger. He grew up in Russian capital, where Siauliai. He had to go to synagogue like everybody did, but he was a modern and democratic man in his heart.

## **Growing up**

I was the first child in the family. In 1919 a girl Irina was born and in 1921 my younger brother Dovid was born. The house, where we were living, was very large. It was one-storied mansion, where grandparents, our and Meyer's family were living. Before departure for France, uncle Meishe with his family and aunt Nina were living here. Each had his own apartment here consisting of several room- drawing room, parents' bedroom, study. Even I, the youngest, had my own large room facing the garden. There was a large kitchen with a huge stove, on which housekeeper cooked meals for the whole family under the supervision of mother and grandmother. The three families got together at the table. A large Russian stove [6](#) was in the kitchen, nice tiled heating stoves were in each room. We had all conveniences in the house, which was very rare. We had a toilet and a bathroom in a separate corridor. The water was pumped from the well and it was

distributed between bathroom and kitchen. We had an expensive, nice solid furniture. I remember carved cupboard and a wardrobe, nice beds with the tester, sofas, a huge table with velvet cloth, pictures and Chinese porcelain vases. There was a large garden, where I spent my childhood. There was an orchard with apple, pear trees.. In summer and spring mother cooked jams, I still remember that sweet aroma which was felt in every room. There was also a husbandry -chicken and geese. Housekeeper took care of all chores, but at times we hired people for harvesting.

Our house was breathing with Jewish culture. The food was cooked by kashrut. There were separate dishes for milk and meat, even separate utensils which were never mixed. It was even stored in different drawers. Chicken, geese and other poultry were taken to shochet. His shichta was next to synagogue in the downtown. It was close by. we bought meat at the slaughter house, there was a special Jewish Siauliai slaughterhouse, where cows were killed in line with kashrut, and blood was drenched so that the meat became kosher. We never had pork at home, though w always wanted to taste pork ham and sausage, sold by Lithuanians, but there was not way to do that.

Saturday was the most important day of the week. Factory was closed on that day as well as other Jewish places. Lithuanians, who worked for grandpa, had a Sunday off as well. On Thursday challachs were baked in oven for Sabbath. On Friday everybody was busy mother, grandmother, Meyer's wife, housekeeper. All of them were getting ready for Sabbath. Our house was always clean, but it was sparkling on Fridays. There was starched table cloth. The table was laid with challachs, wine, festive dinner. Grandpa and uncle Meyer went to the synagogue. At times my unreligious dad joined them. We were looking forward to see them back. When the first evening star appeared in the sky, grandmother being the eldest woman in the house, prayed and lit candles on the antique sconce. On Saturday we had the tastiest dishes. The mandatory dishes were gefilte fish, chicken brother, boiled and friend chicken and all kinds of tsimes. All of those dishes required heating. Thus they were served by a Lithuanian housekeeper. The most important Sabbath dish was cholnt- meat with beans and potatoes, which was kept in heated oven since Friday. On Saturday adults did not work. They spent time having conversations, took walks on the Broadway, in the park with their children and families. In general, it referred mostly to rich Jews like our family. As for poor Jews, they also had to celebrate Sabbath, but they did not have money for it. There was a special charity committee and my grandpa was also a member of it. On the Sabbath eve, some of the Jews came over to us and got necessary things -money and products. I had never seen those people as they came from the back door. Our housekeeper and grandma fed them there.

We had a posh celebration of all Jewish holidays at home. On those days my father, and later I obligatorily went to the synagogue. On Jewish holiday Rosh Hashanah everybody went to the synagogue and on that day shofar were blown, which made the air of festivity. Fish was served on that day and the head of the family -grandpa- ate the head of the fish. After his death, uncle Meyer did. There were a lot of deserts- all kinds of cakes, pies, imberlakh and tsimes. On Yom Kippur, adults fasted and even kids were given scarce food. On Yom Kippur each was given a poultry- boys were given a rooster and a girls were given a hen and we went to the shochet, who made kaporez rite- rotated the hen with while saying a prayer. -I liked autumn holidays. Sukkah was set up in the garden. If the fall was warm, children had meal there with the adults. If it was cold, we stayed in. Grandparents and the rest members of a large family had meals there for a week being shrouded with warm blankets. Simchat Torah was the most mirthful holiday. I will always remember those

festive with the dances and songs around the synagogue on that day. We played treylakh on channukah and ate tasty potato latkes and doughnuts with jam during the holiday period. Besides, the adults – grandparents, uncle and aunt gave us money the so-called channukahgelt. Purim was also very joyful. I remember the carnival- the so called Purim spiel when I was a lyceum student. The tastiest were pies with poppy seeds- hamantashen, the deserts – the presents which we took to each other – shelakhmones. We experienced all those things in my childhood. When Purim was over, we started getting ready for the most important holiday of the year- Pesach. I did not take part in any preparation, but I remember that the house was shining. There were lacy tablecloths, the silver was shining. Huge baskets with matzah were brought from the synagogue. Pascal dishes were taken from the garret- set of dishes, tableware, antique china, crystal goblets and tots, kitchen utensils. Grandpa carried out the first seder. He reclined on the head of table, read prayers and was the leader of the holiday. He hid matzah under pillow, some of the younger kids found it, and got the present for it. We asked four traditional questions about the holiday. First it was my task and when Dovid grew up, he started asking question. When grandpa died, uncle Meyer started carrying out seder and took up the responsibilities of the head of the large family. The table was laid with all traditional hagad dishes as well as the most scrumptious dishes cooked in our house. We made our own kosher wine and drank it. We filled the whole glass with wine for the prophet Iliagu and waited for the whole day for him to come in. It turned out in the morning there was less wine in the glass and we thought it was Iliagu who drank it. When grandpa was alive, he made sure that all Jewish traditions were unconditionally observed. I remember circumcision rite for my brother. A man from synagogue did it better than any surgeon would do. Grandpa taught me to write in Ivrit. I was not a bad student. When I turned 13, it was grandfather who led my bar mitzvah. He checked my knowledge which I got from the tutor. We had a grand celebration of my bar mitzvah. I got on the elevation in synagogue and read an excerpt from Torah which I learnt by heart. The table was laid at home and relatives and friends were invited. I knew the prayers and I was supposed to pray like a man. Now grandpa made sure every morning that I put the teffilin on my hand and prayed before going to the lyceum. Though, he also spurred me on with money. He gave me one lita a day for a good behavior which implied praying.

After grandpa died in early 1930s, Jewish traditions were not as ardently followed. Now father went to the synagogue only on big holidays. Kashrut was observed of course, but as far as I could see, father could break the rules when he was not at home, in the company of his friends. Now mother showed her posh plaits to the world and stopped covering her head. On course, on Saturday parents did not work and got together at the family table like they used to. Of course, celebration of holydays was not as grand, but still it was done the way grandpa Mikhail liked. Now, the whole family went to the cinema. There were three movie houses in Siauliai. We loved movies. At that times there were mostly mute movies. I often watched Russian movies. My father and I enjoyed them. We were subscribed to Jewish papers and Russian newspaper Izvestia [one of the most popular communistic papers in the USSR, issued in the period of 1917- 1980s, with the circulation exceeding eight million copies]. Mother loved reading Russian novels. She finished Russian lyceum, where she got used to Russian literature.

I was enrolled in Hebrew lyceum at 8. It was the lyceum in Frenkels yard that I was talking about. The new premises were underway with construction, which was also sponsored by Frenkel. My grandpa Mikhail crammed me for the lyceum. When I was about to enter it, I had already known the basics of. The teaching was in Ivrit. We studied all compulsory subjects – physics, chemistry,



mathematics, German and English, Latin, in a word the whole course of lyceum, which was secular since its founder was a layman. We did not study Judaism, but we studied Jewish history. We marked Jewish holidays. There was a drama circle where we staged the plays of Jewish playwrights. I found no interest in that. I was dreaming about entering the history department at the university. We had to pay a tuition so here only children of well-off people studied here. There was only one student from a poor family, my friend Berman. His mother worked in the cafeteria of the lyceum and her son was exempt from tuition. I had another friend Shichman. I also made friends with Frenkel's grandson, who was my namesake- Yakov. We had been friends all life long. We always kept in touch and wrote to each other. Even now he is sending me letters from London. I was friends with Dora Mordel, the daughter of the lyceum principal. I did well, I only got good and excellent marks. We had a daily and ceremonious uniforms., the latter was rather expensive. I studied in the new premises in my last two senior grades. The new building was not far from train station. My siblings also studied in new premises.

Mother tried making me study music, but I was flatly against it. There was time when music teacher came over to us, but I refused from playing gamut. French Madam Furshe came to teach me French as at that time my aunts and uncle were living in France and my future was associated with that country. There were a lot of political movements at that time- there was Zionists [7](#). There were also underground communists in town. I would not join any of them, though my father supported the left ones, though he belonged to the class of exploiters so to say. It seemed to him that what was happening in the USSR was wonderful and enjoyed reading Russian press. I was a good boy and friends even mocked my proper behavior. I remember seeing Dora off after prom 100 days before graduation. I decided that I should kiss her not matter what on our way home. I postponed it and postponed as long as we were approaching her house, and could not decide on making the first kiss. Though, just before graduation from the lyceum I met another girl. Her name was Lilia. We had a mutual feeling and I kissed her finally.

In 1932 I finished the entire course at the lyceum - 8 grades. Aunt Rachel, who was living in Paris did not have children and insisted that I should come to Paris. They promised to provide for my living and tuition expenses. My parents did not think for a long time as I was going to a big city, to my relatives and in summer 1932 after graduation I went to Paris through Poland and Germany. When I got off the train, I saw my aunts- Rachil and Nina with their husband and uncle Meishe. If it was not a huge city around me, I would have thought that it was Lithuania as I was given such a nice and warm welcome. It's hard for me put in words what I felt at that moment. I was struck with Paris. I fell in love with it instantly.

Aunt housed me in her huge apartment, having given me a separate room. She received me like a son. She took me shopping, having dressed me with French elegance, though I had pretty good clothing before. To my shame, in spite of classes with madam Fursje, I understood nothing and could not say a word in French. I started attending French courses. Owing to my knowledge in Latin and some basic knowledge I was taught at home, I became fluent in French rather quickly. I had a great living. I was fully provided by aunt, and my parents also sent me the money. The family of Rachil was very modern. Nobody observed Jewish traditions here. Though, the products and many other goods were purchased in the Jewish block in Paris (there was a street where only Jews were living, unfortunately I do not remember its name). There were Jewish stores, kosher cafes and restraints, souvenir workshops owned by Jews. We often went here for a walk, to go to kosher café.

We also walked in the synagogue, which was on the same street. It was very rare, and it was not on holidays or Sabbath or holidays. Though, the biggest Jewish holidays were celebrated at Rachil's place. As a rule, on Pesach one Jewish couple from Paris and our relatives came over. Only French was spoken in aunt's place, though everybody knew both Russian and Yiddish very well.

I entered dentistry department of Paris university and continued the family dynasty. There were a lot of foreigners enrolled for a course- a lot of people from Africa, Arabians, Asians. I was struck by the democratic relationship there. Nobody cared what nationality people were. People were appreciated by the personal traits. e.g. I was friends with the student from Albania. We had been bonded for five years of study. He often called on us and he was always cordially received. We traveled a lot. Paris was shown to me. We also went to other cities. I attended all historic memoranda, I became Louver habitué. I fell in love with France, in its democratic spirit. I still consider the years in Paris to be the best in my life.

All those years were afflicted by the fascism regime. Germany was close by, and of course France was also imminent with danger, but nobody could picture what atrocities fascists would be capable of. It was a crystal night [8](#) and many Jews were leaving Germany. My uncle, Rachil's husband, received fugitives from Germany. He helped them with money, found lodging for them. He was aware of what Hitler had in store for our nation. In 1937 I graduated from the university and had the internship in the private clinic. Uncle and aunt insisted that I should stay in France. There was a way I could get French citizenship and I had to serve in French colonial troops for that, i.e. in Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco. I had to serve for a year or two to become a citizen of France. I missed my parents. I had not been in Lithuania for five years. Besides, I promised my girlfriend Lilya that I would be back. We had warm platonic feelings.

In spring 1937 planned on returning. Again I was to go through Berlin, but I had to wait for the train. During the passport control, I was fairly treated as they took me for Lithuanian, not for a Jew. I was given a warm welcome at home. It was sad that grandpa Mikhail died when I was away from home, and grandmother also died in several years after him. My sister graduated from the lyceum and worked in some organization. Brother Dovid was the student of the senior grade. I occupied the room at home which I had since childhood. I was well-off from material standpoint, but loafing was not accepted in our family. Everybody was supposed to work, so I also got a job at the dispensary of the Jewish Healthcare Organization. The consultations were free of charge and mostly poor people came here as they did not have money for medical services, which only rich could afford. So, my income was skimpy. I could always count on father's assistance and was pleased with work- I enjoyed the idea of helping the poor and that job gave me a valuable experience.

Upon my return, "left" ideas started appealing more and more to me. I had a friend, the underground communist, who became my ideal. I was involved in underground work- took part in the meetings, disseminated pro-Communist and pro-soviet leaflets and other propaganda. In spite of the wealth of my family, I did not see any contradictions in living at the expense of somebody else and at the same time trying to reach the equality. I sincerely dreamt of the society, where everybody would be as equal as in the USSR. Though, at that time we had no idea what was going on in Soviet Union. My father knew about my passion and showed that he was displeased, but mother was indifferent to that like many other women. All she cared about was my health.

In 1939 I had to go to Germany as per request of my uncle Meyer. Some of our family companions lived there. I was supposed to get some money and documents from him. Meyer bewared going there himself as he had a typical Jewish appearance. I saw no danger in that and went there calmly. In actuality, it seemed to me that I came in a civilized country, met a Jewish companion there and took a heavy parcel from him. There was fascists symbolism everywhere, policemen had fascist fylfot,, but I was very frivolous because of my age. I got on the train the same day and went home. I do not know what happened to that man. He must have perished without having a chance to leave the country on time.

### **The Soviet invasion of the Baltics**

I was thrilled about soviet regime in Lithuania in June 1940. My comrade, a communist left prison and recommended me to the communist party. At that time the leading positions in the party were taken by the Jews, who were in the communist underground in capitalistic Lithuania. Thus, the first secretary of the municipal party community was a Jew. I joined the party very swiftly. I had a conflict with my parents in connection with that by that time our business- tannery and a store - was nationalized. Fortunately, our house was untouched, and our family and the family of Meyer remained in grandpa's house.

I was appointed the secretary in the municipal ispolkom [9](#). I was given a separate one room apartment. I was happy for it as it was harder and harder for me to get along with my parents. The apartment was in a posh building in the heart of Siauliai. It was built by one of the managers of Frenkel Mordel. With nationalization the apartments in that houses were given to the soviet and party activists. It was a five-storied building with elevators, fridges, cold and hot running water and conditioning system. I got a great apartment in that building. After nationalizations arrests and exiles came. It usually referred to people unwanted by the soviet regime - the rich, right activists, religious activists, Zionists. There were the so-called troikas, made of the representatives of the ispolkom, military and internal affaires. They acted in every part of the city and they dealt with the confiscation and deportation [10](#). There were trains which took the whole families to Siberia. It was an unpleasant episode in my biography, but I was sincere about it. I found it important and did not do anything wrong in that. Though, the conditions in the train were terrible and many people died on their way. Fortunately, my relatives were not affected by it maybe for the reason of the lack of time.

### **During the war**

Soviet regime in Lithuania was effective for almost one year and on 22 June 1941 fascists attack Lithuania, which was one of the first to take the hit. Siauliai was bombed on the first day. The first bomb was released in the vicinity of Murek's plant. Early in the morning on 22 June, I and the rest of the employees of the ispolkom was called to work. We exterminated the documents for them not to be taken by the enemy, prepared most valuable things for evacuation. We confided in the victory of USSR over Germany within several days. It was official propaganda and our inner conviction. There was a panic in town- many people were leaving Siauliai. My father called me and asked to organize some transport to evacuate the family. I was very tough saying that there would be no car and there was no reason for panicking. I did not want the town to speak that the Furmans are fugitives. Father did not call me again. On Tuesday father got some cart, put mother and siblings on it and they left Siauliai. I had no idea what happened to them until the end of war. As far



as I know, uncle Meyer did not leave with my parents. He was going to depart the day after, but on Wednesday, on 25 June Germans were in Siauliai.

The leaders, ispolkom employees got the order to leave the town two hours before the occupation. The member of the supreme council of the SSR came in a car, where I got in his car together with three more people. We headed to the Latvian border. We crossed it and we were let through fairly easily, but in about two hundred meters we were stopped by the military patrol. Our look- good European clothes, poor Russian seemed fishy to a Russian lieutenant. There was a spy mania at that time and we were proclaimed spies right away. Our documents and IDs did not convince him and he decided that it was the document were very well counterfeited.

Not far from the Russian border we were stopped by the Russian patrol not far from the Latvian border, told to leave the car, got aligned. They told us that we should be shot. Fortunately, there was a military commander of Siauliai was passing by in a car. He got out of car and managed to spot too much circumspect lieutenant. Commander put us in his car and we left with him. Taruskas left for Moscow. I do not remember in what Russian city we got on a train with the fugitives. We had traveled a long time, about three weeks. On our way we started exchanging our things for food. At the stations we got the boiled water, soup and porridge. In general evacuation was not erratic, it was rather well organized. We were bombed on our way, and some people died. We also had to make long stops letting go military trains first. In about three weeks we were taken to Cheboksary, the capital of the Chufas republic [about 700 km from Moscow], wherefrom we, the evacuees from Lithuanian (10 people), were taken to the regional center Ibresi, located kilometers in 80 from Cheboksary.

Here on the day of my arrival I went to the regional healthcare department. at that time there were very few people with higher medical education and they were very happy to see me. I was assigned the chief doctor of the hospital. Some of my friends from Lithuania also were hired by the hospital. Later we headed for the rear together. We were given lodging by the hospital. They brought us food from the canteen. We had a very hard living there. We were malnourished, which was common for that time. How could we complain, and there was no one to complain to. Besides, it was very cold there and there was not enough firewood. Chuvash republic was desolate. There were a lot of contagious diseases, especially in rural area. There were more and more sick people. The local population was nice to us, I was the only Jew there and nobody treated me differently.

I had lived in Ibresi until the beginning of 1942. In December 1941 Stalin issued the order on the forming of the 16th Lithuanian division [11](#). Lithuanians were drafted in the army from all ends of the country - from Siberia, Far East, Usbekistan. My friends and I got the notice. In early January we were sent in Balakhna, Gorky oblast, where our division was being formed. I was assigned commander of the military platoon at once. We belonged to the sanitary unit. All top Lithuanian people came to us as the governmental representative office of Lithuania was in Moscow, and then in Kazan. Snezhkus and other said ardent words and then called upon resisting the fascists and taking revenge on our humiliated motherland. We lived in the barracks, dugs-out. We were well nourished. We stayed in the training division for a about a year.

In February 1943 Lithuanian division was taken to the hardest part - the vicinity of Kursk [Kursk battle] [12](#). There were a lot of casualties. Many people were severely wounded. We practically had no time to sleep. My young ladies, the aides who took the militaries from the battle field, often

were in the leading edge. I had to make operations in the field conditions. The most important was to stop the hemorrhage, accompanying severe wounds. At times we had to cleanse up to 100 wounded. It was very hard at first as I was not used to that. It turned out that the combatant spirit considerably exceeded the level training and equipment. That is why so many people died. In a while I got used to inhuman loading both emotional and physical. I covered the territory of Byelorussian and Baltic fronts with my division. I went through entire Byelorussia and in summer 1944 I came in my Lithuania. I was lucky, I was slightly wounded for times. I got hand injury in the vicinity of Kursk. The doctor at the hospital said that I was very happy. I had stayed in the hospital in the period of utmost "heat". I got wounded for the second time near Vilnius in July 1944. I did not leave the leading edge. I wanted to go to Vilnius with my division. On the 13th of July I liberated Lithuanian capital. I was happy and frustrated at a time. I saw many survived prisoners of Vilnius ghetto [13](#) and understood that my kin was most likely dead.

After Vilnius my division liberated very many towns and cities of Lithuanian and approached my native town- Siauliai. Battles were very severe. There was a lot of bloodshed. Fascists fought desperately understanding that it was their last bulwark in Lithuania. Then our division came in Klaipeda and was renamed into Klaipeda Red Banner division. When our division was approaching Siauliai, I and one of my compatriots asked the commander to send us in reconnaissance. We wanted to be the first to enter our town. I hoped to meet some of the people I knew to find out about my family. We came in a small house on the outskirts of the town, beyond the train station. A young pretty Lithuanian lady was there and gave us a warm welcome. We put the rations at the table- American canned products and sausage, and she suggested that we should stay overnight. She lived there with her parents. When Siauliai was liberated I headed farther with my division. I could not forget that sweet young lady.

### **After the war**

I was in Klaipeda when the war was over. I was demobilized after that. I had many awards- Red Banner order [14](#), Military Merits Medal [15](#), Medal for Bravery [16](#) and a lot of medals for liberation of the towns. In 1945 I came back in Siauliai straight after demobilization. I came to the lady, whom I liked so much and settled in her place. Appeared, that she also very much waited for me and very much worried about me, it was a love at first sight. I have lodged in her house. In a while we got registered our marriage.

My wife Regina Poplaskaite was born in 1922. She came of a poor Lithuanian family. Her father was a rail worker. Nevertheless, she got a good education- finished the lyceum and studied for or three years in a commercial college. During the occupation she stayed in Siauliai. She knew many Jews before the war. She studied and communicated with some of them. That is why it was painful to watch what fascist were doing with the Jews. There was a ghetto in Siauliai where Jews were living in the inhuman conditions. Once, Regina gave bread to the Jews who were driven to work. A guy with a white strap ran up to her and she was dreaded to recognize her classmate in him, he was a polizei [17](#). He started menacing the girl, but she was not scared and rebuffed him. Since that time she had given Jews some bread and products.

I went to the ministry of healthcare and was given a good offer right away. I was employed at the sanitation department of the Siauliai ispolkom. My wife worked as the cashier at station. In a while I lived in Regina's place with her parents, who were very happy for our marriage and treated me

very well. Soon I was given a very good apartment and my wife and I moved there.

I found out about my family by hearsay. Some people said that father was executed and my mother with siblings were in ghetto. I did not know what happened to them after that. Once I came in one Lithuanian house on business and my heart jumped- I saw the candlestick with the engraving AR- Anna Ragalina. They belonged to us, mother used to light Sabbath candles on it. I understood that our house was plundered and nobody would tell me the truth.

When I had just married, when Regina and I were living with her parents, the door of our small house opened, and my mother and sister walked in. Both of them were dressed in camp uniform. It is hard to describe that meeting. It turned out that mother and sister were liberated from fascist camp Osventsim by the soviet troops in spring, but they stayed on the German territory for a while. They came back as soon as they could. They found out about my address from people. Mother told about their adversity. When the war began and I refused helping father, on the 24th of June 1941 they reached Lithuanian border and their cart was stopped by fascist paratroopers. All detained Jews were returned in Siauliai. During the first occupation days the fascists made the action here. They shot Jewish men, representatives of intelligentsia, famous people. Mother said that father was among the elected in the first row. Brother Dovid managed to get rescued. He was of lower height and he hid after the first row. Dad blocked Dovid with his body. Dovid was imprisoned in Siauliai. He was in the jail for young Jews. He could hardly leave the place. The mother and sister had to go through all adversities of ghetto and were sent in Osventsim after occupation. Only God knows, how the three of them could survive. Dovid met a German Jew Ester in the camp. After liberation they got married and left for Palestine, where they got settled in a kibbutz. Mother and sister came back in Lithuania.

They moved in with us. Irina started working as a sales assistant in the store. It was a big help during the years of starvation. My wife worked as a cashier at the train station. I had a good job and got the ration. We lived comfortably. There was a law in the postwar years, according to which Polish citizens could come back in Poland. My sister Irina had a fictitious marriage with the Polish Jews and in 1946 she and mother left there, wherefrom they moved to France. Our relatives were living there- aunt Nina with her husband and uncle Meishe with his family managed to survive.

My wife and I stayed in Siauliai. I always had high positions. I started at the sanitation department of the town. There was a lot of work right after war. There was an epidemic of typhus fever, TB, lice and all kinds of infections. Later I was in charge of the sanitation department, chairman of the Red cross, in general I tackled administrative issues. Besides, I worked part time as a dentist. I was a good doctor and had my clientele. We lived comfortably, especially taking into account the fact that mother and sister helped us- they sent money and parcels from France.

The fight with the Jewish cosmopolites [18](#), evolved in USSR, in late 1940s-early 1950, was almost unnoticeable in Lithuania. Looks like Stalin understood that Baltic countries, Lithuania in particular lived by its own laws. There were publications in press about rootless cosmopolites and doctors prisoners [19](#). I understood that it was a provocation. There were only press releases on that in Siauliai and that was it. Neither I nor other medicals were hurt because of Stalin's death in 1953.

My wife finished college and started working as an accountant. We did not have children. In 1955 Regina gave birth to her only son, whom she called Richardas. He finished school, entered the university and became a technological engineer. I got along with my son, but he was closer to mom

as he identifies himself as a Lithuanian, and of course he is a Lithuanian in his heart and in his mind. Richardas treats Jews very well. We had a good living in soviet times. Wife and I often went to Moscow. At times we took son with us. I kept in touch with my cousin Eduard and uncle Ilia (father's brother). they often came to us from Moscow. We went to Palanga together. Wife and I went to the all-soviet resorts in Crimea and Caucasus. I went to Paris twice, to see my sister and mom. Strange as it may be, I did not have any problem leaving the country. I easily got the permit in ispolkom. Sister Irina married a Jew Klotsman, who worked as an engineer at the plant. He got a good apartment and the family had a good life. They did not have children and she helped the family of her brother Dovid. Irina's husband died. Fortunately, she is still alive and living in Paris.

My brother Dovid from Israel came in Parish both times when I was staying there. Dovid had a good living after war. He was rewarded for the ordeal. He took an active part in the foundation of the state of Israel. He was in charge of a large kibutz. He is currently living there with his wife. Dovid has two children. Elder son was named Nuchim after father. He became a captain in Israeli army. Nuchim visited us in Lithuania for couple of times, I was struck by his patriotic ideas, which I consider to the nationalism. He speaks only Ivrit, good thing that I remember that language and I communicate with my nephew. Nuchim thinks the service in Israeli army to be an honor and two of his daughters are drafted in the army, and he is pleased with that Apart from Nuchim my brother has a daughter. I cannot recall her name. She married a rabbi and is living with him in New York in a rich Jewish block. They do not have a lot of kids. They have a righteous life like true religious Jews.

My brother invited me in Israel couple of times, but I did not have a chance to go to him. My mother died in Israel in the 1980s when she was visiting Dovid. She is buried there. Brother came in Lithuanian for a couple of times. We visited memorable places, as well as places connected with ghetto and occupation.

My son married a Lithuanian. He is living and working in Siauliai. Richardas works in a house building company as a technologist. Richardas has twin daughters. They recently turned 20. One of them Inga, is studying in Vilnius university, sociology department. My second granddaughter Neele left for England. She is working as a bartender there. She is going to study there as well.

I have lived in Siauliai all life long. When son grew up and got married, my wife started insisting on our moving to Klaipeda. Her sister Dana and brother are living there. In early 1990s my wife and I exchanged our apartment for Klaipeda. I had very good relationship with wife's relatives. Her sister treated me like brother. I had worked as a dentist in a clinic. When I turned 80 I ceremoniously retired. They made a nice good bye party for me. We had lived for 7 years in Klaipeda and then decided to come back to Siauliai. We sold our apartment in Klaipeda and bought one in Siauliai. We are still living in it. Taking into account that apartments in Klaipeda are much more expensive, we managed to get pretty good money for it. According to the law on restitution, I got the land which pertained to my family. It was also big money. I get a good pension as I took part in war. In general, my wife and I have a pretty good living and even have a chance to help our granddaughters. I am happy that Lithuania as well as other countries exited USSR and gained independence [21](#). Though, communistic idea is close to me. It was sad for me to give up my party membership card.

I did not observe traditions in postwar years. I held a high post. I was the member of the party, so it was impossible for me. I joined Jewish religious community in Klaipeda. There has been an active

Jewish community in Siauliai for quite a while. I also joined it. I attend all events. At times I go there for Sabbath celebrations. On Pesach and Rosh Hashanah my wife and I go there for sure. I have matzha at home. My wife supports me in everything. She goes to the community with me sometimes though she says that some Jewish ladies look askance at her and she feels it. At home we mark Jewish Pesach and Catholic Easter. My wife and I have a friendly attitude to each other. I get along with my Lithuanian neighbors. In general, Lithuanians treat Jews very well. I have lived a long life and have no regrets.

## **GLOSSARY:**

### **1 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.

### **2 Russian Revolution of 1917**

Revolution in which the tsarist regime was overthrown in the Russian Empire and, under Lenin, was replaced by the Bolshevik rule. The two phases of the Revolution were: February Revolution, which came about due to food and fuel shortages during World War I, and during which the tsar abdicated and a provisional government took over. The second phase took place in the form of a coup led by Lenin in October/November (October Revolution) and saw the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks.

### **3 Guild I**

In tsarist Russia merchants belonged to Guild I, II or III. Merchants of Guild I were allowed to trade with foreign merchants, while the others were allowed to trade only within Russia.

### **4 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.

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

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

### **6 Russian stove**

Big stone stove stoked with wood. They were usually built in a corner of the kitchen and served to



heat the house and cook food. It had a bench that made a comfortable bed for children and adults in wintertime.

## **7 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.

## **8 Kristallnacht**

Nazi anti-Jewish outrage on the night of 10th November 1938. It was officially provoked by the assassination of Ernst vom Rath, third secretary of the German embassy in Paris two days earlier by a Polish Jew named Herschel Grynszpan. Following the Germans' engineered atmosphere of tension, widespread attacks on Jews, Jewish property and synagogues took place throughout Germany and Austria. Shops were destroyed, warehouses, dwellings and synagogues were set on fire or otherwise destroyed. Many windows were broken and the action therefore became known as Kristallnacht (crystal night). At least 30,000 Jews were arrested and sent to concentration camps in Sachsenhausen, Buchenwald and Dachau. Though the German government attempted to present it as a spontaneous protest and punishment on the part of the Aryan, i.e. non-Jewish population, it was, in fact, carried out by order of the Nazi leaders.

## **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 Deportations from the Baltics (1940-1953)**

After the Soviet Union occupied the three Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) in June 1940 as a part of establishing the Soviet system, mass deportation of the local population began. The victims of these were mainly but not exclusively those unwanted by the regime: the local bourgeoisie and the previously politically active strata. Deportations to remote parts of the Soviet Union continued up until the death of Stalin. The first major wave of deportation took place between 11th and 14th June 1941, when 36,000, mostly politically active people were deported. Deportations were reintroduced after the Soviet Army recaptured the three countries from Nazi Germany in 1944. Partisan fights against the Soviet occupiers were going on all up to 1956, when

the last squad was eliminated. Between June 1948 and January 1950, in accordance with a Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the USSR under the pretext of 'grossly dodged from labor activity in the agricultural field and led anti-social and parasitic mode of life' from Latvia 52,541, from Lithuania 118,599 and from Estonai 32,450 people were deported. The total number of deportees from the three republics amounted to 203,590. Among them were entire Lithuanian families of different social strata (peasants, workers, intelligentsia), everybody who was able to reject or deemed capable to reject the regime. Most of the exiled died in the foreign land. Besides, about 100,000 people were killed in action and in fusillade for being members of partisan squads and some other 100,000 were sentenced to 25 years in camps.

### **11 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.

### **12 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.

### **13 Vilnius Ghetto**

95 percent of the estimated 265,000 Lithuanian Jews (254,000 people) were murdered during the Nazi occupation; no other communities were so comprehensively destroyed during WWII. Vilnius was occupied by the Germans on 26th June 1941 and two ghettos were built in the city afterwards, separated by Niemiecka Street, which lay outside both of them. On 6th September all Jews were taken to the ghettos, at first randomly to either Ghetto 1 or Ghetto 2. During September they were continuously slaughtered by Einsatzkommando units. Later craftsmen were moved to Ghetto 1 with their families and all others to Ghetto 2. During the 'Yom Kippur Action' on 1st October 3,000 Jews were killed. In three additional actions in October the entire Ghetto 2 was liquidated and later another 9,000 of the survivors were killed. In late 1941 the official population of the ghetto was 12,000 people and it rose to 20,000 by 1943 as a result of further transports. In August 1943 over 7,000 people were sent to various labor camps in Lithuania and Estonia. The Vilnius ghetto was liquidated under the supervision of Bruno Kittel on 23rd and 24th September 1943. On Rossa Square a selection took place: those able to work were sent to labor camps in Latvia and Estonia and the rest to different death camps in Poland. By 25th September 1943 only 2,000 Jews officially remained in Vilnius in small labor camps and more than 1,000 were hiding outside and were gradually hunted down. Those permitted to live continued to work at the Kailis and HKP factories

until 2nd June 1944 when 1,800 of them were shot and less than 200 remained in hiding until the Red Army liberated Vilnius on 13th July 1944.

#### **14 Order of the Combat Red Banner**

Established in 1924, it was awarded for bravery and courage in the defense of the Homeland.

#### **15 Medal for Military Merits**

awarded after 17th October 1938 to soldiers of the Soviet army, navy and frontier guard for their 'bravery in battles with the enemies of the Soviet Union' and 'defense of the immunity of the state borders' and 'struggle with diversionists, spies and other enemies of the people'.

#### **16 Medal for Valor**

established on 17th October 1938, it was awarded for 'personal courage and valor in the defense of the Motherland and the execution of military duty involving a risk to life'. The award consists of a 38mm silver medal with the inscription 'For Valor' in the center and 'USSR' at the bottom in red enamel. The inscription is separated by the image of a Soviet battle tank. At the top of the award are three Soviet fighter planes. The medal suspends from a gray pentagonal ribbon with a 2mm blue strip on each edge. It has been awarded over 4,500,000 times.

#### **17 Lithuanian Polizei**

It refers to the local Lithuanian collaborators of the Nazi regime. Subordinated to the Germans they were organized as a police force and were responsible to establish Nazi control in the country. They played a major role in carrying out the destruction of the Lithuanian Jewry.

#### **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.