

# Boris Girshov

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St. Petersburg

Russia

Interviewer: Vera Postavinskaya

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*Boris Davidovich Girshov is a very sociable and charming person. He is 84 years old, but despite of his age he leads an active life. He is a man of astonishing memory and humor.*

*He lives in the center of St. Petersburg in the cosy three-room apartment together with Tamara Abramovna, his wife and Eduard, his son.*

*They are very pleasant and hospitable family. Recently they celebrated the 60th anniversary of their wedding. It is a pleasure to watch them: so attentive and touching they are to each other.*

*Boris Davidovich remembers both pre-war Jewish shtetl life and his studies at the Naval Medical Academy, hard times of war and Stalin's regime, Soviet reality and the period of Perestroika. Boris Davidovich is a member of St. Petersburg religious community.*

*He lives not far from the Great Choral synagogue and visits it 3 or 4 times a week (usually in the morning). Usually it takes him about 30-40 minutes to reach the synagogue. Boris Davidovich shares with us details of his biography with pleasure.*



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## • My family background

I was born on August 24, 1922 in Usvyaty shtetl of Smolensk region in the family of David Yosefovich Girshov and his wife Rokhl-Leye. Usvyaty shtetl is situated near the borderline of Belarus (near Nevel, Velizh, Vitebsk, and Velikie Luki). At present this place is a part of Pskov region [Pskov is situated 300 km far from Petersburg]. Around Usvyaty there are a lot of lakes, small rivers, and grey boulders. The lakes are so to say interspersed among big woods and pineries. There are various fish in the lakes, and a lot of mushrooms, berries, hazelnuts, and small animals in the woods.

I know about my ancestors not so much, but some information I can share with you. My paternal great-grandfather's name was Meyer Girshov. I charted our family tree, where my great-grandfather Meyer is the eldest. I know many maternal relatives, but not very distant.

All my relatives came from Usvyaty shtetl. As Usvyaty is located between the rivers Dneper, Zapadnaya Dvina and Lovat connecting it with Riga, people there used to be engaged in rafting since old times. My uncle Ieronim (my father's brother) told me that my ancestors were engaged in rafting, too. In Usvyaty they used to form a team, collect wood, raft it and go down the river to Riga.

I remember my grandmother Rosa, my father's mother. She was born in 1868, and died in 1934. I watched her flying around the house: she was only a housewife. My grandfather Yosef Meyerovich died before I was born. My grandmother lived at her sons in Petersburg, and usually came to us in Usvyaty to spend summer time.

My maternal grandmother's name was Hana. She was born in 1880 and died in 1936. She lived in Usvyaty together with my grandfather Hachi, who was born in 1870 and died in 1930. Their family name was Brook. I am not sure that I know about my grandfather's occupation, to my opinion he was one of that shoppy people. Their family was rather large: aunt Mira, uncle Lev, Nekhama and Bekke. My Mum was the elder child.

My grandmother Hana was very religious. Many times I saw her in the synagogue. She knew how to pray and prayed with all her heart. She could write in Yiddish. Once on Yom Kipur she was praying and crying. I remember it very well (I was a boy). I asked her 'Grandmother, why are you crying? Why are you crying?' She answered 'You know, I am praying and asking God about this and that...', and she briefly told me about what she was praying for. She always observed all the rules, including kashrut. My mother was not absolutely strict: she did not eat dairy and meat together, but she was able to buy meat of the animal which had been killed not by shochet. But to tell the truth, we always brought hens to a shochet (it was my duty to catch them in the henhouse and bring to shochet). We ate chicken only on Saturday; it was celebratory dish (you can guess about financial position of my parents) only for Sabbath. Parents always arranged Seder for Pesach. I always said Fir Kasches (words of the elder son). I used to ask my father all traditional ritual questions necessary for Pesach Seder. So we arranged everything in our family, though we were not too prayerful.

And my grandmother always observed traditions strictly. She told me about the history of the Jewish people.

My paternal grandmother was not religious. She lived with her children, and they were secular people (like my father). They lived in Petersburg, where Jews were not very religious. I even do not know if my grandmother visited synagogue.

My father David Yosefovich Girshov was born in 1888 in Usvyaty. He was 13 years older than Mum. He was a decent, strict, and hardworking person, not very religious, though my parents tried to observe Jewish traditions at home, especially on holidays. When a young man, Daddy was physically strong. His comrade Petr Vladimirovich Belkin (uncle Pinya) whom I met in Petersburg, told me that Daddy showed his strength not only in fights against his coevals, but also lifting in his teeth a table with boiling samovar, bending horseshoes, etc. Every young man in Usvyaty both

Russian and Jewish knew him very well as a local Hercules.

My father participated in the World War I. He was wounded in the leg. We had a photo showing him and a few injured people sitting together and expressively pointing fingers at his wounded leg.

His character was quick-tempered and impulsive. That was the reason of his frequent quarrels with Mum. He used to punish me for my faults with a belt or lash. It was very painful and I keep it in mind all my life. Mum tried to protect me from it.

During the period of NEP 1 my parents were owners of a little store and sold small items. After abolition of NEP, Daddy worked in the regional consumers union. [The regional consumers union was a special structure for purchasing agricultural products from peasants.] At first he worked as a storekeeper, and later he was engaged in acceptance of grain which peasants handed over to the Government according to Food Tax. [In the Soviet Union Food Tax was raised from peasants in 1921-1923.]

Father was uneducated, therefore I had to help him in drawing up reports, making calculations, etc.

Father was an indisputable authority for me. First of all he wanted me to become a great guy. In conditions of our town he taught me everything, including riding a horse. He spurred me to go in for sports: I became a first-grade gymnast. Father didn't pinch pennies on my studies the violin: I took lessons at professional teacher. Father showed me to professional musicians who came to our small town for vacation. Daddy loved classical music very much, he played the violin himself, and was happy that I learned to play the violin, too. My brother Arkady also had musical abilities and father was very pleased to know that Arkady (when a little boy) got a prize at the amateur art contest.

Father sent me to the Jewish school. In addition to it I studied at cheder to acquire knowledge of Judaism, to be able to pray. Father was a real Jew and tried to accustom me to Jewish Tradition. He always observed Tradition at home. Daddy dreamed that my brother would become a violinist, and his dream came true. Jewish melodies always moved him to tears. I remember him to be very pleased when I learnt to play some Jewish melodies. Father used to invite his friends, send for me (I was always playing football somewhere in the street) and ask me to play melodies chosen by him.

Parents arranged bar mitzvah for me, but not for my brother: he was too little for the ceremony when parents left Usvyaty for evacuation.

Daddy died in 1943 in Kuibyshev [now Samara] of tuberculosis where he took his family for evacuation in the beginning of the war. As soon as the war burst out, father brought his family to the railway station and got aboard the train to Kuibyshev. He saved us, because soon Usvyaty was occupied by Germans and all local Jews were killed.

My mum Raissa Isaacovna Girshova (Rohl-Leye Brook) was born in 1900 in Usvyaty, too. Mum was a beautiful woman. Before her marriage she lived in Vitebsk together with her sisters. Her sister Mira and brother Lev lived in Vitebsk (in Belarus). There Mum worked as a shop assistant. She told me about strictness of the senior clerk at that time in compare with later period of time. At that time she was a girl, nevertheless he demanded much of her.

After her marriage Mum continued working. She worked at the factory producing soft drinks, kvass and lemonade. Mum was responsible for washing bottles. By the way at that time manufacturers used to hammer corks in the bottles. During my childhood parents (both father and mother) worked all the time.

Parents finished only primary school, so they were able to read and count, but nothing more. But they could do it both in Russian and in Yiddish. Both Yiddish and Russian were their mother tongues; they could speak and write in both languages.

The Brooks, family of my mother lived in poverty, therefore when Mum grew a young girl, she was sent to work as a shop assistant to Vitebsk. My father got to know about her (possibly he visited Vitebsk at that time, but I am not sure). Father was rather active young man and he liked my mother. When she arrived in Usvyaty from Vitebsk (probably to visit her parents), they decided to get married. Their wedding was a real Jewish ceremony: chuppah, etc. Later in my life I was present at different Jewish weddings, and I know well what it is to get married according to Jewish Tradition.

Parents did not wear Jewish traditional clothes, they used to dress like all inhabitants of our settlement.

As both father and mother worked, they earned enough money to support themselves and their children. We were provided for better than families of most of my coevals. I often invited them home and regaled them with sandwiches. It happened during hard times and lean years.

Mother was more educated, than father: she used to read books, often visited theatre. A theater company from Leningrad usually came to Usvyaty on tour in summer. Their drama performances took place in the Usvyaty House of Culture. Mother took me there with her. I remember we watched *Intrigue and Love* by Schiller, and *Romeo and Juliet*.

Father was an active member of Jewish community; he used to take me to synagogue with him; he sent me cheder (besides my secondary school), therefore I was able to read and write in Yiddish. I read Hebrew texts only in the prayer book, I could not speak Hebrew. At home we observed kashrut not strictly, though I remember my mother shouting 'Don't take it, it's dairy.' We used to eat chicken. In our community there was shochet, so we bought only kosher meat. It happened not because parents were religious, but because public opinion played dominant role. As our settlement was Jewish, people noticed, for example Yosef going out to buy meat. That was why people held dear their reputation. When Mum became an old woman, she did not observe kashrut at all: I consider it to be confirmation that she did not observe it being young. We celebrated Jewish holidays, we ate hamantashen, kneidl, kugl, matzah for Pesach, etc. We used to arrange Seder for Pesach.

Father was a member of no political organization. Mother had communist views, but she was not the Party member. She never liked Stalin and named him Cerberus. When he died, she said 'Good gracious! Why are they crying? Is it a real loss? Thank God that he died.' She never was fanatic.

## • Growing up

We did not have our own house; we rented it from a rich Jew, a smith. Jews of our settlement were handicraftsmen, shoemakers, repairers; rich Jews were owners of a mill or a smithy. Owner of our house could shoe a horse (horses were the basic carriers), repair kitchen utensils. I remember that I helped him in it. He possessed 1 or 2 houses which he leased. He invested money in houses, because at that time money quickly decreased in value. Our family occupied one of his houses, a one-storied wooden one. Father used to send me to the owner to carry him our rent. In our house there was a kitchen with a Russian stove [2](#), a dining room, a hall, some sort of sitting-room and a small bedroom. In winter we heated stove only for cooking, therefore it gave little heat. In each room there was a round furnace, and in the bedroom there was a small stove bench on which it was possible to lay and get a warm. The furniture was poor: an expandable square table in the sitting-room, ordinary chairs, stools, iron beds. Parents slept on wooden beds. There were also a wardrobe, a sideboard for plates and dishes, a table for me and my sister where we did our homework in turn. There was no water supply, so I used to bring water from neighbors' well, or sometimes from the lake. Parents also brought water from the well.

We kept no animals. We had only a vegetable garden. Together with my sister we had to dig it up, take manure from neighbors' cow and fertilize. We had 6 vegetable beds. We ate onion, carrots, beet, and cucumbers from our vegetable garden, and had to buy all the rest foodstuffs.

In Usvyaty there was a Jewish community, all Jews knew each other, everybody knew the way of neighbors' living and the way they observed Tradition. From my point of view our family was well-to-do. In 1933 and 1934 we did not starve, while many people in other parts of Russia did. At that period father worked at grain warehouses. We were not hungry; Daddy was one of the synagogue donors (I saw him making a donation to it). During holidays Jews also visited houses to collect donations for the synagogue (to engage a cantor or to pay synagogue maintenance costs), and father always gave money. He was among those people who supported the Jewish community of Usvyaty.

Father was in touch not only with Jews, and mother communicated mainly with Jewesses. In Usvyaty people lived alternately, but the Jews lived close to each other. All Jews were handicraftsmen. The Russians did not have such masters; they all went to Jews for repair. At school I had both Russian and Jewish friends, but my best friends were among my relatives.

My relatives were also handicraftsmen. For instance, in Leningrad our relative Zalman was a tailor. He was a real master: Leningrad actors and representatives of rank and fashion ordered suites at him. One of his suits was shown at the exhibition that took place in Paris. He was awarded some prize for it. That was the level of skill!

We met relatives on holidays or other local events, sometimes visited each other to have a talk. Mother used to be in touch with our neighbor who had a cow. We bought milk from her.

I did not go to the kindergarten. Father kept an eye on me: if I forgot myself in playing, he called me and pressed to make my lessons. First years at school I studied not well, but beginning from the 5th form till the finals I was an excellent pupil. I made progress in mathematics and physics, I studied honestly. At first our school was Jewish, but later it became a Russian one. When the school was Jewish, all subjects were taught in Yiddish, teachers spoke only Yiddish.

At school I liked mathematics most of all. Our teachers were very good. I remember a teacher of literature: he was a professional actor, but worked as a teacher (unfortunately I forgot his name). During his lessons he used to recite prose and poetry. He not only read Pushkin [3](#) or Lermontov [4](#), but performed characters as an actor, so that his lessons turned into literary performances. A teacher of physics was very good, too. I liked physics and mathematics; I studied them at home on my own. If I was not able to reason out the answer to a mathematical problem, I could not sleep. At home I assembled an electric engine without any assistance; it functioned after switching on the current. At home we had a radio center. Together with my friend we put an antenna on the roof of our house. We could listen to Moscow radio broadcast: news, concerts. At that time it was uncommon. In our settlement the only one loud-speaker was placed in the window of the local Communist Party committee, people used to come up to the window and listen to the radio. And when I was born, there was no electricity supply in Usvyaty.

Neither teachers, nor pupils of our school demonstrated anti-Semitism. In our class there studied both Jewish and Russian schoolchildren, number of Jewish children was less.

I came across manifestations of anti-Semitism in Usvyaty when I was a little boy. There lived Terekh, a Russian muzhik, a drunkard. When he got drunk, he bothered Jews with the following words: 'You, dirty Jews, we will kill you!' And so on. I keep it in mind since my childhood. I asked my parents about him, and they explained to me that he was only a drunkard. Our Russian neighbors also considered him to be only a drunkard.

At our school nobody ventured to behave that way.

The same was in Academy: neither teachers, nor cadets were anti-Semites. And there were a lot of Jewish cadets (25-30%).

Once again I came across manifestations of anti-Semitism here, in Leningrad and also during Stalin's state campaign of anti-Semitism, but I'll tell you about it later.

Musicians from the Leningrad Conservatoire used to come to Usvyaty to spend summer vacations. I often stood near the windows of their houses and listened to professional musicians playing the violin or the piano. It was interesting for me. I remember that one day my father got acquainted with a Conservatoire teacher and brought me to his place for trial. I played some pieces, he advanced several remarks and said that I was not yet ready to study at a conservatoire. He also gave me some recommendations regarding my musical studies.

My school friends were both Jews and Russians. After school together with classmates we used to go to the cinema, discussed films, went to skating rinks, dancing (in senior classes we danced foxtrot, Cracovienne, waltz, etc.).

I was an athlete, I went in for gymnastics. When I arrived in Leningrad, I took part in competitions and got 1st sports category. At school we were trained by our PT teacher after school. I also was interested both in football and volleyball. But gymnastics was my favorite kind of sport. Once in Usvyaty I appeared on the theater stage and performed exercises on horizontal bar. I was a Komsomol member [5](#).

At school we had a musical orchestra, which I participated in. Sometimes I even was in the driving seat, because I was more advanced in music than other children.



I was brought up in the Soviet spirit and could not imagine another order of things.

I never spent vacations in pioneer camps. I spent it at home, sometimes visited relatives in Leningrad. In summer I used to gather mushrooms and berries in the wood.

I remember that I saw a motorcycle and a car for the first time in my life in Usvyaty. We ran following it. It happened when I was a pupil of primary school. Later big lorries appeared in our small town. Only big brass came to our town by cars. My first trip by car happened when I went from Usvyaty to Nevel (to the railway station). Earlier people went there by horse (about 40 km). My trip by car happened in 1935-1936. The same year I went by train (for the first time in my life) to Leningrad, being a schoolboy. We went there on vacation to watch theater performances and visit museums.

According to historical data Usvyaty settlement was regularly demolished during different battles. The last war destroyed almost all its houses, including that of mine. Orthodox church, a fine sample of architecture was ruined. Only the central square with several houses (shops) on it and a two-storied white house (a manor) remained safe. That manor housed our school. At present a Memorial in honor of battles of the Great Patriotic War is situated there.

Before the war burst out, population of Usvyaty was about 5,000 people, now it is much more. Before the war most citizens were Russians and Byelorussians. There were also a lot of Jews. Their life was very similar to the life of Jews described in stories by Sholem Aleichem [6](#).

I also remember seasonal fairs in Usvyaty. Many people came there by horses, brought various goods: vegetables, fruit, hens, geese, ducks, wooden and ceramic hand-made goods, etc. They bought food for winter. At home people made sour cabbage, cucumbers, packed apples and other fruit into boxes. Together with my sister Nina we actively participated in the process.

When our brother Arkady was born, Nina became a real nanny for him. In fact she was the only one who took care of Arkady, because parents were busy at work.

Parents had got 3 children, I was the eldest (born in 1922), and my sister Nina (Nekhama) was born in 1925. We studied at the same school. She actively helped mother about the house: tidied up rooms.

### • During the War

In 1941 she was 16 when the war burst out. Together with parents and our brother she left for Kuibyshev. In Kuibyshev there lived my mother's aunt Blume Rosenfeld (a sister of grandmother Hana). At first my parents lived at hers, later they rented an apartment. Soon (in 1943) father died of tuberculosis. Mother was still a young woman (43 years old); she worked as an unskilled laborer at a warehouse. In Kuibyshev my sister finished school and entered the Pedagogical College (faculty of foreign languages). Her profession was a teacher of German language. The College did not stop studies notwithstanding severities of war. Nina graduated from it and became a good teacher. She spoke fluent German (I guess because she knew Yiddish), and started working at a Kuibyshev school as a teacher. They sent her to a German school, where German children (children of people sent to Kuibyshev from Germany on business) studied. She taught them different subjects in German: geography, history, Russian language. Later that school was closed, and she

worked at ordinary secondary school teaching German language. She was a good teacher, and was considered an authority. They often sent her to Germany as a head of school delegations.

In Kuibyshev my sister got married. Her husband is Zakhar Solomonovich Braynin (we call him Zolya). Their son Sasha was born approximately in 1950. Sasha became a doctor. He graduated from the Medical College. He took his doctor's degree and at present works in Kuibyshev (now Samara) as a therapist. Nina's husband is a press photographer. He worked in Pravda and Izvestia newspapers and also in local newspapers. He had a photo laboratory, worked at theatres of Kuibyshev, made highly artistic photos and photo advertisements. At present together with my sister they live in Israel. They left there in 2000, being already pensioners. In Israel they live in Ashkelon.

My brother Arkady was the youngest child in our family: he was born in 1935. Since his childhood he was aptitude for music. When a child, he played balalaika and guitar (he managed without any assistance), and at that time he even was not able to climb onto the chair.

When parents came to Kuibyshev, they sent him to musical school (it did not stop studies during the war time). There he studied in the violin class. He achieved much success in it and was their best pupil. His teacher invited my mother and said 'If you want Arkady to become a musician, it is necessary to bring him to Leningrad or to Moscow. In Kuibyshev we cannot give him education of proper level.' I lived in Leningrad and Mum brought him to me. At that time he was a pupil of the 4th or 5th class. I brought him to musical school at Conservatoire and they admitted him, because of his absolute pitch. That was a boarding school. He finished it and entered Conservatoire. Mother supported him financially and he worked part-time.

I was not able to give him financial assistance him, because I had already got family. But he often visited us. He never was hungry. He graduated from the Conservatoire and was invited to work at the new Novosibirsk orchestra. He left for Novosibirsk, and he still lives there and plays at that philharmonic orchestra. Though he is already 70 years old, they don't permit him to retire. He is a very conscientious person. He helps the conductor to rehearse young musicians. Arkady is also very responsible. He often goes abroad on tour with his orchestra; he likes to travel all over the world. He has got a son and a wife. His wife is not a musician, therefore it is hard for him to have no close friend to talk about music. So when we meet, we talk about music day and night long. My brother's wife is Russian. Her name is Galina. Their son Dmitry was born in 1965. Galina worked as a personnel manager at a large enterprise in Novosibirsk and she still works, though she is a pensioner. Their son graduated from a Novosibirsk college as a physicist, but at present he is engaged to business. His family is well-to-do.

When a teenager, I was strong. I prepared myself for military service. I studied very well and got excellent school-leaving certificate. The local military registration and enlistment office offered me to enter a military school, but I decided to have higher education, therefore I left for Leningrad where there were a lot of military educational institutions.

My relative uncle Ieronim lived in Leningrad. He helped me very much. Together with him we visited different military educational institutions, but everywhere they admitted only servicemen. By chance we got to know that the Naval Medical Academy was opened for everyone. We went there and handed in documents. There was a large entry: 20 persons per 1 place. It was necessary to pass through 13 examinations. I managed to do it and received good average mark. I also



managed to get a pass examination in health (50% of entrants were eliminated by the medical board). It was enough for me to enter the Academy.

So that was the way I became a cadet of the Naval Medical Academy. When I was a student of the 1st course, Daddy came to Leningrad. That meeting was our last one. I keep it in mind most probably on account of the following. I remember that he came to me depressed, because he had lost his wallet. He was going to give me some money, but failed. Moreover, I had to give him money for return ticket (and my stipend was rather scanty). Till now I remember his wails apropos of this.

In 1941 the war burst out, by that time I finished the 2nd course of the Naval Medical Academy. As Germans quickly approached Leningrad, Voroshilov (commander of the Leningrad military district) ordered to raise a brigade of marines consisting from underclassmen of military educational institutions, including our Academy, Frunze Military School, Dzerzhinsky Military School, Kronshtadt Military School, etc. The brigade was quickly created and we were brought to the Luga firing line near Gostilitsy. We started preparing for defense. For the company they gave us rifles (model of 1891), several submachine guns, hand grenades and bottles with Molotov cocktail (to fight against tanks). The Luga firing line was situated about 100 kilometers far from the city. We dug entrenchments, implemented close reconnaissance. Germans located us and bombed several times. Then we were brought into action. Our brigade suffered heavy casualties: Frunze, Dzerzhinsky and Kronstadt battalions were annihilated. My first battle I remember till now: explosions of bombs and death of my comrades around me. It happened in August or September 1941.

Our Academy was to be disbanded, but our chief Ivanov Alexander went to Moscow and obtained permission to keep its status. By that time cadets of the 4th course quickly passed their examinations and became professionally qualified doctors. The Academy chiefs tried to evacuate them, but on their way across the Ladoga Lake their barges turned turtle because of the storm. All of them were drowned. The chief of Academy received Stalin's order about evacuation of thy rest cadets to Kirov. Therefore they took us away from the Luga firing line and urgently brought to Leningrad. Preparation for evacuation began. It happened in 1942, Leningrad was already besieged [7](#) and each of us received 125 gr. of bread per day. We crossed the Ladoga Lake on foot (40 km to Kobona village). We were 300. Later we were ordered to reach Kirov any way we could: on foot, by autostop, by train. Some of us walked to the railway station where hospital train was formed. Chief of the train took us as hospital attendants. We reached Kirov a month later (by the beginning of February). A lot of cadets went home. In Kirov we were placed to the rooms of the Kirov Pedagogical College. All military registration and enlistment offices received the following order: **ALL CADETS OF THE NAVAL MILITARY ACADEMY HAVE TO REPORT FOR THE ACADEMY IN KIROV IMMEDIATELY.**

Soon all cadets gathered in Kirov. We started our studies. After the 2nd course we had to do practical work afloat. I was sent to the Black Sea Navy (Sukhumi and Poti [8](#)). I served on board the ship Krasnaya Abkhasia. It was a part of the separate battalion of gunboats. These ships were used for creeping and transportation cargoes to front lines, because they were able to approach coast without mooring.

We were appointed medical assistants. Besides creeping we several times went to Malaya Zemlya near Novorossiysk where our soldiers fought battles a outrance. During one night we had to bring there reinforcements, ammunition, etc., and take injured soldiers therefrom. We had to manage everything before dawn. Once we stayed there too long embarking injured soldiers and at dawn Germans started bombardment. Krasnaya Georgia, a ship of the same type got a shell-hole and went down before my eyes.

In 1944 after I finished the 3rd course, we were sent for practical work as assistants to doctors in medical and sanitary battalions and front hospitals of the Leningrad front and Northern fleet. I got to the front hospital of the Leningrad front. There were 3,000 beds. It was situated in Leningrad in the building of Suvorov Military School. There I was seriously trained in surgery.

They brought us 100-300 injured people a day. In operating-room there were 20 tables. We worked sorting injured people, assisting during operations and dressings supervised by more experienced doctors. They put into our hands only initial treatment of wounds, immobilizing of extremities, putting in plaster, etc. We did not make abdominal operations. I remember that I had to take care of a soldier with a wounded knee. The knee joint was open, facets of femur and shin-bone stuck out. A doctor approached us and said 'It is necessary to amputate the leg!' And I managed to do it for the first time in my life. Till now I remember all stages of that operation: fixing tourniquet, cutting muscles up to the thigh-bone, pulling muscles aside, sawing the bone, loosening the tourniquet and making ligature. Then final removal of the tourniquet, additional hemostasis, and final stump formation. You see, I was impressed so much that keep all details in my mind till now.

Every day injured soldiers from our hospital were transported to the railway station and sent to the east of the country by hospital trains.

### • After the War

As the war was coming to an end, we did not go to Kirov any more. Cadets of our course were left in Leningrad and started preparing the Academy building for active functioning (it was situated opposite the Vitebsk railway station). We were told off to do duty around the city or in the Academy, repaired damaged buildings and apartments where our professors and teachers lived.

In 1944 in Leningrad I got acquainted with my future wife Tamara at the dancing-party at the Technological College, where she studied. She came to Leningrad from evacuation and became a student.

In May 1945 I went to Samara to visit my mother (each of us got a fortnight holiday for hard work in Academy restoration). During the war we corresponded with Mum. I did not meet my father: tuberculosis killed him in 1943. When I came to Samara, I found out that my Mum had been sent to the local timber industry enterprise (to Samara suburb). I went there to find her. I wanted to take her with me to Leningrad. And I managed to find her! What a joyful meeting it was! And they let her go before the end of my vacation.

Later I returned to the Academy for studies. In October I took my finals and was sent to prophylactic medical examination. They diagnosed tuberculosis and placed me into the Naval hospital in Izhora. I already knew about that diagnosis: when I did my practical work at the front hospital, I had a special entry in my sanitary book (results of x-ray test). So if I became an officer,

they could send me on board a ship to serve as a doctor, but being an ordinary cadet I had to be demobilized because of my disease. By that time the war was already finished, and our group was supposed to be sent to Pacific fleet. I asked Tamara whether she would go with me to the Far East (as an officer's wife). Tamara refused flatly, and I made my decision. I was demobilized, received a diploma and status of disabled soldier of the Great Patriotic War. After that I arrived to Kuibyshev (to my Mum) and started my medical practice as a civilian physician.

In Kuibyshev circumstances were against my intention to work as a surgeon. There were a lot of tubercular patients, and lack of physicians. I decided to devote myself to phthisiology. I was sent to the T.B. prophylactic center (doctor Yakobson was its head). I quickly mastered the basic method of treatment: artificial pneumothorax. 3 months later I was appointed the head physician of another T.B. prophylactic center. They placed a room at my disposal, and I ate out (in the center). I worked much: I was the only phthisiatrician there, other doctors were therapists. They were not able to implement the procedure of artificial pneumothorax. I also made pleural punctures.

### • **Marriage, children and recent years**

I am sure that if I continued my medical practice in Samara, I would have become an outstanding phthisiatrician. But my Tamara remained in Leningrad. We lived apart during a year, and I did not want to rest satisfied only with her letters. So at the end of 1946 I moved to Leningrad and we got married.

There I started working as a phthisiatrician in the hospital at T.B. prophylactic center. There I met Rotenfeld, a radiologist. He became my teacher both in medicine and in life. He was born in tsarist Russia. He told me about establishment of Soviet power, about soviet leaders. Rotenfeld used to listen to western broadcasting stations, and I read our newspapers. He demonstrated me barefaced lie in soviet newspapers, he engrafted dissident ideas in my mind. So long before the Doctors' Plot [9](#) I was filled with anti-Soviet ideas. You see, our talks were a weight on my mind, but did not surprise me.

He used to say 'It'll be even worse. This country is alien to us, our country is Israel, we have to go there.' At that time I was still a young doctor. I always felt like a Jew, though I lived in the family of veteran Bolsheviks. In the USSR when everyone was afraid of everything, I used to visit synagogue on holidays. Only my wife Tamara knew about it, and her parents didn't. My wife didn't accompany me to the synagogue. As for me, I understood religious essence of Jewish holidays.

I was a qualified doctor. I had serious surgical practice at the front hospital. Phthisiology required surgical skills, and I managed. The head physician of our clinic was Konstantin Andreev, a real Russian intellectual. During the period of Doctors' Plot he was brave enough to give jobs to professors and assistant professors fired from different institutions. At our clinic there was a nurse, who was a secretary of the local Communist Party organization. We were on familiar terms with her. She told me that they called her in and asked 'When will you stop giving jobs to Jews at your tubercular clinic ? Tell the head physician that it is a scandal to invite fired Jews!'

To tell the truth the invited doctors were among the best doctors of the city. I was lucky to be engaged in research work under their supervision. An assistant professor Bergman gave me a topic for my dissertation. I wrote an abstract and reported to professor Tsigelnik. Tsigelnik gave me good

references and said 'Do you know who you are?' I answered "Yes." Tsigelnik 'I can do nothing for you. If you wish to become my postgraduate student, get your own way, go ahead! I gave you the testimonial - that's all I can do for you.'

I carried my documents to the personnel department, they looked through them and said 'Boris Davidovich, go on working, and we have to send your documents to Moscow for approval. We will inform you in case of affirmative reply.' You know, they have been considering my documents till now.

As you know, I got acquainted with my wife, Tamara Gershtein in 1944, when she was a student of the Technological College and I was a cadet of the Academy. One evening the Technological College arranged a party for students. Because only girls studied there (most guys were at the front line), they invited cadets from our Academy. And we (200 young people) came to them (marching in well ironed naval uniform). We stood on the one side of the hall, and girls stood on the other one. I looked round and saw a pleasant looking girl. I invited her to dance (I was not shy at all). We danced and danced, and I did not want to let her go. But I had to return to the ranks. I asked her about her telephone number, and she gave it to me. Well, we got married in 1946.

Her parents were veteran Bolsheviks, they started their activities before the October Revolution of 1917. Her father's name was Abram Rafailovich, and her mother's name was Berta Abramovna. He was born in 1897, and she was born a little bit later. Father died in 1976, and mother in 1973. They were devoted to communist ideas, knew almost nothing about Judaism. My wife's mother Berta Abramovna was a Communist Party member since 1920. Later she worked as a director of a canteen. She finished a secondary school, and her husband got higher (he was a lawyer).

We lived together with them in their apartment. Therefore I was not allowed to discuss my anti-Soviet moods at home. We were in good relations with my wife's mother, she called me her son. They always lived in Leningrad. My wife's father worked as a public prosecutor of the Baltic fleet and a public prosecutor of the October railway (major-general). They lived in a smart apartment on Vassilyevsky Island. On holidays Tamara had an opportunity to watch military parades on the main square of Leningrad (only VIPs and members of their families could be invited there).

In 1937 my father-in-law was read out from the Communist Party. They dismissed him from everywhere: they alleged him to be in touch with an enemy of people. He remained free and alive by a miracle. He got frightened to live in a general's apartment, therefore he changed it for two rooms in a communal apartment [10](#), where I got acquainted with them later. Tamara was the only daughter in their family. She was brought up in the communist spirit. Her father's friends were veteran Bolsheviks, too (they used to play cards together). My wife's father survived a serious heart attack at the age of 60. He stopped working, though he was a legal adviser at several organizations. At the 19th CPSU Congress his reputation was restored.

Abram Rafailovich had got 5 brothers and 1 sister. They were engineers; builders of ships, hydroelectric and thermoelectric power stations. One of them was lost together with his family during bombardment of Leningrad. The sister was a dentist, she lived in Serpukhov.

Berta Abramovna had got 4 brothers and a sister. One of her brothers was a pilot. All of them were participants of the Great Patriotic War, were on the front line. After the end of the war they were administrative workers. Her sister Vera spent 10 years in prison as a wife of the enemy of people.

At present only her cousins are alive and live in Israel.

My son Eduard was born in 1947. At that time my wife was a student of Medical College. It was me who convinced her to change future profession from a specialist in chemical agents and explosives she was going to become studying at the Technological College. I considered it to be not adequate for a female. Later my wife graduated from the Medical College and worked all her life long (more than 40 years) in the hospital.

Our son graduated from the Shipbuilding College, because at school he was fond of ships modeling. He worked as a design engineer. When Perestroika came, it became impossible to make both ends meet. He entered the College of Culture and became a producer. His family life was not successful. He got acquainted with a girl in Crimea and brought her to Leningrad. Soon our grandson Konstantin was born. Eduard lived with his wife and son some time, but soon they broke up.

Under the communists I celebrated Jewish holidays by myself visiting synagogue. At home we did not think about Jewish problems. Regarding Jews my views and views of my mother-in-law were more concurrent: she was a Jewess brought up in Ukraine according to Tradition. In his young days in Saratov my father-in-law witnessed Jewish pogroms, but those pogroms impelled him to become a communist. During the Great Patriotic War he was a divisional public prosecutor.

My father-in-law died and I started thinking about Jewry more and more. Before his death I visited synagogue only on holidays, but after his death I visited it regularly. Now I visit synagogue on week-days, too.

At home we observe some Jewish traditions. For Pesach Tamara makes kneidlah and other Jewish dishes, but stuffed fish is my point of honor. It became mine after the death of my mother-in-law (she used to make it herself).

After Stalin's death and I was a leading doctor at our T.B. prophylactic center and when our head physician died, they invited me to the local Board of Health and appointed me the head physician (to fulfill his duties). A year passed, but I still was a deputy head physician. I addressed the chief of local Board of Health with a request to solve my problem, because I worked both as a head physician and a clinic manager. At the local Board of Health they assured me that the local CPSU committee would never approve my candidature. They also said that the local Board of Health would better search for other candidature. You see, it was an essentic manifestation of anti-Semitism.

I was a fan of Israel from the moment of its emergence. During the Six-Day-War [11](#) I did not sleep at nights: I listened to the Voice of America [12](#) and other broadcasting stations. A friend of mine secretly tried to persuade me to leave for Israel, but I knew that Tamara would never go there. It was impossible for me even to hint at it. You see, she is a Jewess by birth, but not by conviction. At home I have got Torah, but when I ask her to read it she refuses flatly.

I never visited Israel, but know about it more than my sister who lives there!

After 1989 our life changed for the better. I feel like a real Jew, I regularly visit synagogue, I cut the string. All my Jewish friends whom I know since our studies at the Academy are informed about my visits to synagogue, and they show jealousy of me. When in the synagogue there is nobody to recite the Kaddish, they call me 'Berl ben Dovid!'

Sometimes I am invited to participate in different events organized by our community. Once I visited the new building of the Jewish Community Center in Raznochinnaya Street. My wife is a client of the Drugstore program of the Hesed Avraham Welfare Center [13](#). It is very important for us. I am not a client of Hesed, because according the Hesed criteria my pension is too large.

I am sure that Jews of St. Petersburg differ much from those Jews I knew earlier. They (and my wife, too) are assimilated, including people who visit synagogue. At present they are money-minded, they think only about food-packages, meals, etc. I visited the St. Petersburg Center for Jews - Disabled Soldiers and War Veterans, but met there only assimilated people trying to pose as Jews. I guess that something important has disappeared, just like Jewry of the Eastern Europe after Holocaust.

- **Glossary:**

### **[1](#) NEP**

The so-called New Economic Policy of the Soviet authorities was launched by Lenin in 1921. It meant that private business was allowed on a small scale in order to save the country ruined by the Revolution of 1917 and the Russian Civil War. They allowed priority development of private capital and entrepreneurship. The NEP was gradually abandoned in the 1920s with the introduction of the planned economy.

### **[2](#) 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.

### **[3](#) Pushkin, Alexandr (1799-1837)**

Russian poet and prose writer, among the foremost figures in Russian literature. Pushkin established the modern poetic language of Russia, using Russian history for the basis of many of his works. His masterpiece is Eugene Onegin, a novel in verse about mutually rejected love. The work also contains witty and perceptive descriptions of Russian society of the period. Pushkin died in a duel.

### **[4](#) Lermontov, Mikhail, (1814-1841)**

Russian poet and novelist. His poetic reputation, second in Russia only to Pushkin's, rests upon the lyric and narrative works of his last five years. Lermontov, who had sought a position in fashionable society, became enormously critical of it. His novel, A Hero of Our Time (1840), is partly autobiographical. It consists of five tales about Pechorin, a disenchanted and bored nobleman. The novel is considered a classic of Russian psychological realism.

### **[5](#) 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.

## **6 Sholem Aleichem (pen name of Shalom Rabinovich (1859-1916))**

Yiddish author and humorist, a prolific writer of novels, stories, feuilletons, critical reviews, and poem in Yiddish, Hebrew and Russian. He also contributed regularly to Yiddish dailies and weeklies. In his writings he described the life of Jews in Russia, creating a gallery of bright characters. His creative work is an alloy of humor and lyricism, accurate psychological and details of everyday life. He founded a literary Yiddish annual called *Di Yidishe Folksbibliotek* (The Popular Jewish Library), with which he wanted to raise the despised Yiddish literature from its mean status and at the same time to fight authors of trash literature, who dragged Yiddish literature to the lowest popular level. The first volume was a turning point in the history of modern Yiddish literature. Sholem Aleichem died in New York in 1916. His popularity increased beyond the Yiddish-speaking public after his death. Some of his writings have been translated into most European languages and his plays and dramatic versions of his stories have been performed in many countries. The dramatic version of *Tevye the Dairyman* became an international hit as a musical (*Fiddler on the Roof*) in the 1960s.

## **7 Blockade of Leningrad**

On September 8, 1941 the Germans fully encircled Leningrad and its siege began. It lasted until January 27, 1944. The blockade meant incredible hardships and privations for the population of the town. Hundreds of thousands died from hunger, cold and diseases during the almost 900 days of the blockade.

## **8 Black Sea Navy**

A constituent part of the Russian Navy, it was founded in 1783 and took part in the Russian-Turkish wars in the 19th century. It played a very important role in World War I: over 180 various battleships pertained to it. They bombarded the coastal fortifications of the Central Power, such as Varna and the Bosphorus. In 1905 there were riots in battleship 'Potyomkin' and cruiser 'Ochakov', which impacted Russian history further. Navy men not satisfied with the tsarist regime supported the Revolution of 1917 extensively. During World War II the navy took part in the defense of Sevastopol, Odessa, the northern Caucasus, Novorossiysk, the liberation of the Crimea, Nikolayev, Odessa and took part in the Iasi and Kishinev operations. After the war the Black Sea Fleet made enormous technical advance and complied with all international standards. The arsenal consisted of the most powerful carrier decks, nuclear war heads etc. After the break up of the Soviet Union (1991) Russia and the Ukraine commenced negotiations on the division of the Fleet and finally in 1995 a treaty was signed. As a result the larger part of the fleet was taken by Russia because the Ukraine was not willing to possess nuclear armament after 1991. At present both the Russian and the Ukrainian fleet are based in Sevastopol (on Ukrainian territory). According to the treaty the Russian navy is leasing the port until 2017; the Russian fleet is gradually being moved to Novorossiysk (port on Russian territory).

## **9 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.

## **10 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.

## **11 Six-Day-War**

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

## **12 Voice of America**

International broadcasting service funded by the U.S. government through the Broadcasting Board of Governors. Voice of America has been broadcasting since 1942, initially to Europe in various European languages from the US on short wave. During the cold war it grew increasingly popular in Soviet-controlled Eastern Europe as an information source.

## **13 Hesed**

Meaning care and mercy in Hebrew, Hesed stands for the charity organization founded by Amos Avgar in the early 20th century. Supported by Claims Conference and Joint Hesed helps for Jews in need to have a decent life despite hard economic conditions and encourages development of their self-identity. Hesed provides a number of services aimed at supporting the needs of all, and particularly elderly members of the society. The major social services include: work in the center facilities (information, advertisement of the center activities, foreign ties and free lease of medical

equipment); services at homes (care and help at home, food products delivery, delivery of hot meals, minor repairs); work in the community (clubs, meals together, day-time polyclinic, medical and legal consultations); service for volunteers (training programs). The Hesed centers have inspired a real revolution in the Jewish life in the FSU countries. People have seen and sensed the rebirth of the Jewish traditions of humanism. Currently over eighty Hesed centers exist in the FSU countries. Their activities cover the Jewish population of over eight hundred settlements.