Individual Lives, A Common Story
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In the fall semester 2014, a group of students from Brandeis University participated in a project called “Individual Lives, A Common Story” at the Hebrew Rehabilitation Center (HRC) in Roslindale, MA. This project was part of a special course led by professor Irina Dubinin, the director of Russian language program at Brandeis University. The practicum is based on principles of experiential learning which emphasize connecting the knowledge received in the classroom to real-life issues that exist in our society, and allowing students to reflect on the knowledge gained from real-life experiences. During the semester, five students who grew up in Russian-speaking families in the U.S. were engaged in an intensive language practice while interviewing the elderly residents of the HRC about their lives. The interviews were then discussed with the instructor who helped students understand the historical and cultural contexts of some of the events mentioned by the elders, analyzed and transcribed. This collection features five oral histories collected by Brandeis students in the fall of 2014. The following students participated in the project: Dennis Averin ’17, Kristen Foaksman ’17, Anna Mukhina ’16, Michael Vilenchuk ’16, and Ryan Yuffe ’15. The oral histories recorded by these students include tales of a pre-war childhood, of war and evacuation, of life in a ghetto in the Nazi occupied Ukraine, of return to the demolished cities after the Victory, of life’s joys and challenges, of the births of children and grandchildren, of anti-Semitism and friendship between people of different ethnicities, of love and dedication to one’s profession, and of emigration. A major theme that is visible in all stories is the Great Patriotic War (the part of WWII fought largely on the Soviet territory), and many of the interviewees divide their lives into two unequal parts - before and after the war. For the students, oral histories told by the elders served as illustrations to the dry historical facts they learned at school, but often these stories taught them something new, something they were not even aware of before the start of the project. We are grateful to all participants of the project and hope that this collection of life stories will serve as a proof of Yevgeny Yevtushenko’s words that “no people are uninteresting. Their fate is like the chronicle of planets.”

In the fall semester 2014 we had a unique and valuable opportunity to learn first-hand about the lives of the generation of Russian speakers who survived World War II, experienced hardships in Soviet Russia, and eventually emigrated to the United States. We had weekly meetings with our elderly friends when we talked and shared experiences. We hope that the life stories we present in this collection will help bridge the intergenerational gap and foster a better understanding of the older generation by college-age readers.

Anna Mukhina
“Though I have had previous experience working with the elderly, they would only provide a few isolated stories and insights into what life was like in the early USSR and during the war. My time with Esfir, during which she agreed to share her personal stories, was truly an eye-opening experience, and I learned much about history, heritage, and the harsh realities people faced in that time. I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to have known Esfir and her story. I hope that through our work together it will live on, and a part of history will be preserved.”
Kristen Foaksman

“This was an amazing experience for me. Words cannot describe how much this meant to me. It was both very interesting and profound to converse with my interviewee. Elderly people need this attention. They have so much to tell you, but it takes the right person to get some of them to open up, and I feel that I have accomplished that with my interviewee. Elderly people are living historical artifacts, full of wisdom... It practically feels like he is another grandfather to me, even if we aren’t related.”

Michael Vilenchuk

“HRC provides a unique opportunity for collecting oral histories of immigrants from the former USSR. This process is long overdue, and I’m glad I had a chance to make my contribution. My interviewee remembers so much at her age of 84! A person who survived the German occupation in a ghetto in Ukraine is a living piece of history. Due to my lackluster proficiency in Russian, I was initially hesitant to participate in the practicum, but I enjoyed spending time with Dora, and the experience helped me improve my Russian.”

Dennis Averin

“Participating in an experiential learning practicum at the Hebrew Rehabilitation Center in Roslindale taught me that everyone has a story, and no matter how unimportant they may think it is, there is at least one other person who will listen and enjoy it. The time I spent with Maria on Fridays when she was telling me various stories and anecdotes, was a joyous one and renewed my appreciation of spoken word history. Over the course of the practicum my relationship with Maria changed from biographer to friend. To this day I still continue to visit her and call her when I can.”

Ryan Yoffe

“Having never volunteered with the elderly, I didn’t know what to expect at the HRC. But after 4 months of speaking with Aleksandra about her life, I can say that I would not trade this experience for anything else. Her stories threw me back into a much different time, one that is hard to imagine today. In America, Aleksandra’s generation is referred to as “The Greatest Generation.” Though an immigrant to this country, she keeps strongly to this epithet. I hope that through our work together more people will hear her story. It is one that needs to be heard, and without which we will slowly lose grasp of our history and heritage.”
Maria Veniaminovna Tovbeyn, nee Neyman, an Odessa native, was born on December 4th, 1921. Her mother, Rosalia Isaakovna Neyman was a housekeeper. According to Maria, at that time women often did not work; they looked after children and managed the household chores. Her father, Veniamin Osipovich Neyman, was the director of a brewery.

Maria was born and raised in the city center before the war. She recalls growing up in a very beautiful three-story house. The family had a large room in a communal apartment in which, according to Maria, there lived “a real commune” — 24 people in total. Maria remembers that people were from different social classes (“a lawyer together with a villager”), but they all lived amically and equally frugally: “we lived modestly without upgrading apartments or buying new cars, and this way we had enough money. Life was modest in the pre-war period, and people lived more simply.”

Maria says that during her youth it was common to hire private tutors for young children so that they would learn languages. This did not cost a lot of money: “one didn’t have to be super rich to raise children like this.” Odessa was an international city; people of many different nationalities lived there, including many elderly Germans and the
Because of the war, she had to postpone her studies for 4 years. At the Institute, in addition to German, Maria studied English and still remembers something from the stock of knowledge she attained then.

Maria had many friends from school, from the first grade to the last: “School for us was a holy place. There I had true friends. We all dispersed to pursue higher education, but the friendship remained.” Maria says that during her childhood and adolescence they all read a lot — “unlike now.” Her parents had a friend who had a fantastic library, and Maria often went there to read their books. According to Maria, “youth was wonderful!” The great tragedy of Maria’s generation was the war: all the boys in her class were killed at the front, except for one.

Maria was 16 years old when she met her future husband, Mark Solomonovich Tovbeyn. When they met, he was 24; he was finishing his studies at the Institute of Engineering and Water Transport in Odessa (in the Department of Mechanics). His father died early, and Mark’s mother did not work, so he and his older brother had to earn a living from a young age. In the summer of 1937, Mark worked as a counselor at the camp where a friend of Maria’s was spending the summer. When Maria came to visit her friend in the camp, she met Mark. They dated for three years before the war.

“Thank God everything was fine with my family! Everyone was alive and healthy.” Maria heard about the repressions and even knew a family that was affected by the Stalinist terror: her classmate’s stepfather who was the head of the Agriculture Department at the Regional Party Committee of Odessa was arrested. His wife was also imprisoned, and their daughter was sent to an orphanage. Some years later, the mother was rehabilitated and took her daughter back from the orphanage. Maria was friends with this girl and saw her after she returned to Odessa, but they never discussed the details of her fate.

Maria didn’t personally experience anti-Semitism and says that before the war there were no problems: “We could be accepted to any institute, and in general, everything was fine.” According to Maria, “this thing” started in the postwar years: “First, there was a rumor that there were fewer Jews fighting at the front. In the beginning, there was societal anti-Semitism, and then it spread up the public hierarchy. Humanities institutes stopped accepting Jews although technical institutes still accepted them.” Maria recalls that many Jews had to move to other cities in order to have a better chance to be accepted to an institute or university, but reiterates that she herself was not affected: “I worked at a school for many years; the children’s parents came from different walks of life — there were urbanites and villagers, there were many different nationalities, — and I never heard a single word about any anti-Semitism.”

Maria’s husband had no problems at his work either. He was a member of the

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1 In the Soviet Union, higher education was provided by institutes, which specialized in specific fields, or universities.

2 Although there was no official numerus clausus in the USSR, young Jews seeking admission to prestigious universities and institutes were routinely denied acceptance despite brilliant achievements in the entrance exams. Many had to go to smaller and less prestigious institutes to have a better chance at being accepted.
Communist Party; as a seaman, he was allowed to travel anywhere in the world. Maria’s daughter says that she too experienced no anti-Semitism in school, and that even her son, Alexei, did not know it at school or in the army.

When the war began, Maria was 19 years old. It reached Odessa in August 1941, but Maria says that they felt the war in the city on its second day because of the bombings. However, people had the time and opportunity to evacuate in an orderly manner, contrary to the towns located along the border in Ukraine whose citizens had to escape on foot or in horse-drawn carts amidst complete chaos. Maria says that the evacuation was formally organized and that it was “universal”. Maria’s father was given permission to evacuate his family, and so the mother and daughter left to be farther away from the front lines. The father stayed in Odessa to protect the city as a member of the Home Guard.

Maria recalls that people evacuated on freight trains: “the cars were awful; a mass of people, straw on the floor, and as for food — my father gave us only some crackers. The railroad was all clogged; the trains waited for hours at the stations; people did not know where they were going...”

Two days after the departure from Odessa, the train was bombed for the first time, and it was by far not the last. When bombings occurred, the train would stop, and everyone would jump out of the cars and hide wherever they could. Maria recalls how one night when the train was bombed, she and her mother were hiding under a bush, crouching under a black umbrella. They thought that this way they would be invisible to tracer bullets and escape death: “It was terribly naïve!”

After 6 weeks on different trains, they finally reached Kalmykia (a distance of 795 miles which during a peaceful time would take less than a day to travel). There they settled in the homes of local residents. After Odessa everything seemed strange and “wild” to Maria: “Odessa was a great city, with theaters, institutes, many beautiful houses, and cultured people. And here in Kalmykia there was wilderness, poverty, illiteracy... All of it was like a primitive society.” She and her mother, like all the evacuees, were assigned to the construction of the railroad. Maria says that during the war there were not enough tools, not even shovels to build the railway. By some miracle, she and her mother were offered a job accompanying a shipment of tomatoes to the Shartash station near Sverdlovsk, and Maria agreed because she knew that the family of Mark, her future husband, was evacuated to the Sverdlovsk area. Maria knew that her husband’s elder brother was evacuated to work in Sverdlovsk, and she hoped to find Mark himself through his brother.

At the very beginning of the war, Mark’s Institute was re-organized into a military school in Odessa, and then all the students were sent to the rear to Sverdlovsk. Mark went through military training at the school and was made a lieutenant. Throughout the war, he taught at this military school.

In Sverdlovsk, Maria found Mark’s mother, Rosalia Moiseevna Tovbeyn, and moved in with her. Maria recalls that the conditions were terrible. Everyone lived together in one room, there was rarely enough food: “There was bread and potatoes. Sometimes we peeled potatoes, fried the potato skins with onions and ate them. This was one dish. The potatoes themselves were boiled and eaten separately. And the water, in which we boiled the potatoes, was also eaten...”

Sverdlovsk is a major city located in the middle of the Eurasian continent on the border of Europe and Asia (before 1924 and after 1991 the city was/is known as Yekaterinburg).
as soup. It was a horrible time... But we all adapted and tried to survive, and to support each other."

With the help of Mark’s brother who worked somewhere near Sverdlovsk, Maria was able to find Mark in the town of Sukhoy Log. He sent her an invitation (special permission was needed for someone to live in a military town), and she moved in with him after they were married on November 23, 1943. Maria recalls that the conditions were not appropriate for a celebration: “a small village living in poverty was an awful place to be wed!” At the wedding, there were four guests, and the wedding dinner consisted of boiled potatoes and sauerkraut.

After the wedding, Maria went to work at Mark’s military school as the deputy administrative assistant. She was hired to such high position because she was the most educated among the military wives who were all illiterate or semi-literate women from the villages, according to Maria.

At the beginning of the war, Maria’s father enlisted in the Home Guard to defend his home city. After the surrender of Odessa to the Germans in October 1941, the militia disbanded, and her father set out to re-unite with his family. He knew that his family was near Sverdlovsk, but it took him many months to get to them. He had to walk most of the way, in the winter, along the frozen Volga River. When he got to Sverdlovsk, he was exhausted and very sick. Maria says that her father never told them anything about the war. He died shortly before the Victory, at the age of 47. He had a bad heart.

When Odessa was liberated in April 1944, the military school where Mark and Maria worked, returned to Ukraine. Coming back was difficult: the city laid in ruins. The beautiful house in which Maria had lived before the war was destroyed by bombs. Maria and Mark celebrated the Victory of 1945 in their hometown, and despite the fact that Odessa was severely damaged, they were happy.

Their daughter was born on October 7th, 1945. She was named Eleanor, or Nora, in honor of Maria’s deceased father whom everyone in the family called Numa.

Maria says that the postwar period was hard: “hunger and devastation everywhere.” She remembers how after the war people were united in friendship and helped each other. Housing conditions were not very good. Maria, her husband, their daughter and Maria’s mother all lived in one room measuring 26 square\(4\) meters in a communal apartment: “Life is life, and things happen, but there were no quarrels with the neighbors... only good things come to mind. Our Russian neighbors treated us with black cakes made of nettle. There was no envy or hatred among us.”

Life gradually improved. Maria returned to college, completed her studies and began teaching German first at the military school (where

\[4 \approx 230 \text{ sqft}\]
return to most of all, is her childhood, adolescence, the pre-war years in Odessa.

After emigration, Maria had the opportunity to travel even more, and she has visited many countries in Europe; she visited the famous theaters in Austria and Germany, but she could not find a more beautiful theater than the Odessa Opera House. A few years ago she was in Odessa and was disappointed in the city: “The city seemed foreign; the people were not the same...”
Aleksandra Pavlovna Lifshitz was born in Voronezh on August 15, 1915. She is now ninety-nine years old. Aleksandra has a good sense of humor. She likes to add quips and jokes to her stories. For example, she says that her mother had two smart daughters, and the third one who was an economist (this is how she describes herself). In another story, Aleksandra says, laughing, “I was a beautiful blonde girl! At least, I heard that I was beautiful... The key word is ‘was’!!!”

Aleksandra was the youngest of three sisters. Her mother and father were born and raised in Ukraine, and it was there that they married. Her father courted her mother for a long time, but could not gather the courage to propose. People even started asking her father: “What for are you messing with this girl?! To marry... not to marry... Leave her alone if you aren’t going to marry her.” And her father finally made up his mind. They had a traditional Jewish wedding.

Aleksandra does not remember all the details, but some relative of her father named Boris who lived in Voronezh at the time invited Aleksandra’s father and his family to move to Voronezh. This relative had higher education, and he was quite a wealthy man. Aleksandra’s father learned the pharmaceutical profession from Boris and, thanks to this, was subsequently able to maintain a home pharmacy. Aleksandra’s mother worked as a teacher.

Their family kept kosher. Meat and dairy dishes were stored separately, and the food was always kosher. The family celebrated all the Jewish holidays and observed the Sabbath. Aleksandra says that her father was “devout” and that to even say the word ‘pork’ in their house was “worse than to have a gun.” Her mother was secular, but nevertheless observed the Jewish traditions and laws. Aleksandra believes in God and celebrates all the Jewish holidays.

Aleksandra met her future husband, Aaron, one summer when both of them were vacationing in the country. Aleksandra’s family and Aaron’s sister, Paulina, had dachas (Russian summer houses) next to one another. Paulina invited Aleksandra to her dacha, and there was Aaron. The young people “very quickly found lots in common.” Aleksandra’s father immediately liked Aaron because he was also religious and observed Jewish traditions. Aaron, like Aleksandra’s father, went to the synagogue to pray. Aaron was born in Poltava, Ukraine. By profession he was a dental technician and worked in that field for many years, not counting the war when he was lighting at the front.

Aleksandra admits that Aaron was her first and only love. They married when she was 25 years old. In Voronezh, they first had a traditional Jewish wedding in the synagogue with the chuppah. Then, after some time had passed, they obtained a marriage certificate from the civil registry.

Aleksandra and Aaron had no children.

Aleksandra speaks Russian and understands Yiddish; her sisters knew Russian, Yiddish and Hebrew. At home they all spoke Yiddish, but with Aleksandra they spoke only in Russian. She says the explanation for this is that the 1920s and 30s were marked by clamping down on...
Aleksandra was evacuated along with her factory to a Bashkirian village in 1941. She was given permission to evacuate her close family members as well, and so the entire family got out of Voronezh before the Nazis came. At first, her father did not want to leave, but when they threatened to leave without him, he agreed to go. People were being evacuated in train cars used for transporting cattle; Aleksandra and her family were sharing the train ride with at least 50 other people. The car was very cramped and cold, and on the way to Bashkiria, the child of Aleksandra's sister Raya caught cold and died.

Aleksandra recalls one frightening moment during the evacuation when the train stopped and Aleksandra and her sister Manya went to get hot water. When they returned, the train was already gone, and they were left with nothing but their kettle - without any documents, not knowing what to do. For a week they searched for the train, and by some miracle they were able to catch up with their family. Aleksandra says, “Can you imagine this reunion? They nearly lost their minds worrying about us! They had thought that we were lost forever... But when we met, our joy was limitless.”

Aleksandra says that during the journey, their train was bombed many times. At some point part of the train was destroyed, but fortunately, nothing happened to Aleksandra and her family. The Germans bombed the front of the train while Aleksandra and her family were at the end of it: “Our train was bombed all the time. We somehow got through it. How we survived - it’s a miracle!”

In Bashkiria, Aleksandra and her family were placed in a small room in a house which belonged to a Bashkir woman named Fatima. Fatima had two children and two goats. Fatima’s husband was fighting on the front lines, and Aleksandra believes that he was killed in the line of duty.

Life in evacuation was very difficult because they had barely any space to live, practically no place to sleep, and there was little food. Aleksandra’s parents could not

Aleksandra likes to repeat the words of a famous Soviet song about the war: “The town was bombed, and it was announced to us that the war had begun.”

2. A city of about 280,000 located 480 kilometers (300 mi) south-southeast of Moscow.
The first time Aleksandra came to Moscow was when the war was still going on. Her sister was assigned to accompany some prominent wounded Colonel General who was sent to Moscow for rehabilitation. Aleksandra went with her sister. Raya settled in Moscow to work at a hospital and did not return to Bashkirkia. Aleksandra also moved to Moscow after the war. She worked for some time at a factory in Moscow (she doesn’t want to specify what exactly the factory did) and then retired.

Aleksandra started working for the Red Cross when she was a young girl. In the first grade, she and her friend served as nurse assistants at the school. Their duties included checking the cleanliness of the other children’s hands. During the war, she organized blood drives at her workplace. It was a big job because thousands of people donated blood, and Aleksandra was assigned to keep records of every donor and to give them blood donation receipts. In this way, they all aided their comrades fighting at the front lines.

After the war, Aaron returned to the profession of a dentist, which he loved, and in his free time served in the Choral Synagogue in Moscow as a gabbai. Aleksandra says that the synagogue always remained active and never suffered

work by this point, but all three daughters went to work. Raya worked in a hospital (she was immediately appointed the head of the district hospital because there were no other specialists in the village), and Manya found work at a school. Aleksandra worked as an inspector for the regional economic committee that inspected the work of collective farms. She was given a horse-drawn cart and a Bashkir driver who did not speak much Russian (“I have no idea how we communicated!”) to ride to the collective farms and collect reports of the work completed. Aleksandra says it was always a very unpleasant job because all Bashkir farmers recorded lower yield than they collected and argued with her when she pointed out discrepancies. The work was difficult and ungrateful. She rode out in any weather — even in rain and snow, sitting on the open cart. Once, the horse kicked and accidentally smashed Aleksandra’s face, and the driver had much difficulty stopping the blood.

Aleksandra likes to recall how in Bashkirkia she was invited to a Muslim wedding. She did not really want to go because she did not know the local traditions, but she was told that she could not refuse because it would seem very disrespectful to the bride and groom as she was invited as an honorary Russian! At the wedding, everything was unusual (for example, everyone sat on the floor), Aleksandra and the hosts barely understood each other (Bashkirs spoke very poor Russian), and Aleksandra was not very comfortable.

The husband of her older sister, Manya, was killed in action during the Winter War of 1939–1940, and the husbands of Raya and Aleksandra went to fight the Nazis at the front lines in 1941. Raya’s husband was killed, but Aaron, Aleksandra’s husband, made it through the war and returned home. He fought on the Ukrainian front in the infantry. He returned from the war with wounds and 8 medals and military orders.
from attacks or destruction (apart from a couple of incidents when the windows were smashed).

After retirement, Aleksandra continued to work for the Red Cross as a volunteer. In total, Aleksandra was with the Red Cross for 40 years! Her service to the organization was rewarded with the medal honoring Doctor Pirogov, the founder of the Red Cross in Russia, and memorial lapel badges. Moreover, Aleksandra has medals for her work during the war which she received in the 1950s. According to her, at that time, the Soviet Union passed a law under which the contribution of people who worked at military production facilities in the rear to the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany was honored in the same way as the actions of the front line fighters. Aleksandra says, “the front could not fight without the rear, and the rear could not exist without the front; and so people like me received the status of veterans of the Great Patriotic War.” In total, Aleksandra has 8 official awards.

Aleksandra recalls only a couple of instances in which she and her husband experienced anti-Semitism or oppression. She remembers that during the Great Terror, the facility where she worked started firing its Jewish employees, but Aleksandra was not affected. She thinks it’s because she worked as an economist, and her work was very important for the factory.

Another incident happened at Aaron’s workplace. One day a representative of the Party’s Regional Committee came to the dental clinic where Aaron worked and instructed the director that he was to fire all Jews who worked there. But at that clinic all the employees were Jews, and the director himself was also a Jew, though the representative of the Regional Committee did not know that. The director told him that he would do everything as he should, but in reality did not do anything.

Aleksandra and Aaron, as well as Aleksandra’s sisters and their children, decided to emigrate to the United States after the collapse of the USSR. They arrived in Massachusetts 20 years ago. They all lived in the same house in Lynn, her sisters on one floor, and Aleksandra and her husband on the other. Aaron was busy in the synagogue, and Aleksandra occupied herself with housework and keeping a kosher kitchen. When Aaron died in 2010, Aleksandra was unable to live alone for very long and moved into the Hebrew Rehabilitation Center. She is very grateful to the Center’s employees for their care and attention.

Although Aleksandra likes America, and her husband loved and respected this country, they would have liked to live in Moscow, in the Soviet Union: “The Union was good. It defeated Hitler! If I were asked: what do you want — to live again in the Soviet Union or somewhere else? I would say: I want the Soviet Union. It was a country that was friendly with everyone.”
Dora Aronovna Furman was born on March 26, 1930 in the village of Olgopol, in the Chechelnik Raion of the Vinnitsia Oblast in Ukraine. Dora’s parents grew up in poverty and did not go to school. Rosa, Dora’s mother, was born in the village of Sobolevka (in the Teplyk Raion of the Vinnitsia Oblast) on March 5, 1910. She was the eldest in her family. There were four other children in the family (three sisters and one brother). One of the sisters died during the Civil War: a stray bullet hit her when she was standing on the street. Rosa’s parents died when she was still very little, and she was brought up by her mother’s sister in Olgopol, which is why Rosa always indicated Olgopol as the place of her birth. Dora’s mother was only 4 years old when World War I began, and 7 years old when the Revolution took place, and the Civil War began. Because of the social upheavals, Dora’s mother could not go to school, but her younger sisters and brother were more fortunate. By the time they had grown up, the situation had stabilized, there was an opportunity to attend school, and they all received a good secondary education. One of her mother’s sisters, Tanya, lived in Riga, her brother Volodya lived in Kiev, and her sister Rachel lived far away - in Novosibirsk.

Dora’s father, Aaron Furman, was born in the town of Bershad (in the Vinnitsia Oblast, called the Podolskiy District before the Revolution) in April of 1908. He also grew up in a poor family and did not go to school. He was a baker and later managed a bakery.

Dora’s parents were very kind to other people; they helped everyone who needed it, despite their own difficult financial situation. They set a good example of kindness and compassion for Dora: one should always be nice to people and help those in need. For example, Dora’s mother fed the family of one of Dora’s friends whose father was arrested; in another instance, during the terrible famine after the war, she gave bread to a starving Ukrainian who would pass their house. When this period of hunger ended after a few years, Dora’s mother was at the market one day, and a Ukrainian stranger who was selling tomatoes beckoned her to his stand and handed her a whole basket of tomatoes. The mother had nothing to pay for it, but it turned out that it was that starving Ukrainian lad - he wanted to repay her, good deed for good deed. Dora’s father also helped people: he always brought bread from his bakery, and not only for his own family, but also for his neighbors.

Dora was named after her mother’s brother, David, whom she did not know and had never even seen. Up until 5 years old, Dora knew Russian and Ukrainian very poorly; she learned them well later, in school. At home, she spoke only Yiddish. Dora’s parents spoke Russian and Ukrainian, in addition to Yiddish.

Dora has a younger brother and sister. Her brother, Peter, was born in 1935.
After finishing school, he went to study in Novosibirsk and stayed there. He was married to a Russian woman who died at age 38 when their sons were 12 and 3. In the 1990s, Peter emigrated to Israel with his sons. The eldest son later returned to Novosibirsk, and the younger became a doctor after having served in the Israeli Army. He moved with his family from Israel to Canada because it was difficult for them to live in Israel. Dora’s brother still lives in Israel. Dora’s younger sister was born after the war, in 1948. She also lived in Novosibirsk, but every summer she took a vacation to visit Dora in Tiraspol. She had a Russian husband who was a military helicopter pilot. Dora’s sister and her husband also emigrated to Israel following their son, where her sister died at age 62.

Dora’s sister’s husband returned to Russia after the death of his wife, but his son stayed in Israel.

Dora says that her childhood was difficult: her parents did not spoil the children and did not spend much time with them. They were too busy with the everyday problems of life: how to feed and clothe their children. She learned to read and write only when she went to school; at home, nobody taught the children literacy (the parents themselves were semi-literate). She recalls that she had difficulty with math and physics, but she always loved Russian literature very much.

According to the treaty with Germany, Romania received the territory between the rivers Dniester and Bug; Romanians have called this area “Transnistria” (Transdniestria). The occupying forces established the command point in Olgopol and a Jewish ghetto. The center of the town, inhabited mostly by Jews, was fenced off with barbed wire, beyond which they were not allowed. Dora says that when the Germans organized the ghetto, they first gathered all the men and shot them, but there were few men, because many went to the front lines when the war started. Dora’s father was also drafted into the army in 1941 and served until the very end of the war as an aide to a chief of staff. Dora’s future husband, the 12-year-old Peter, was married to a Russian woman who died at age 38 when their sons were 12 and 3. In the 1990s, Peter emigrated to Israel with his sons. The eldest son later returned to Novosibirsk, and the younger became a doctor after having served in the Israeli Army. He moved with his family from Israel to Canada because it was difficult for them to live in Israel. Dora’s brother still lives in Israel. Dora’s younger sister was born after the war, in 1948. She also lived in Novosibirsk, but every summer she took a vacation to visit Dora in Tiraspol. She had a Russian husband who was a military helicopter pilot. Dora’s sister and her husband also emigrated to Israel following their son, where her sister died at age 62.

Dora’s sister’s husband returned to Russia after the death of his wife, but his son stayed in Israel.

According to Dora’s stories, before the war, the town had one library, located close to the school, but there were no reading rooms. All Jewish schools were closed in 1937, and Dora went to a school where all subjects were taught in Ukrainian, and Russian was taught as a second language. In school, there were children from Jewish, Ukrainian and Russian families. All the children were friends with each other, and “no one bothered anybody”: they all walked, danced and played together before and after the war.

The Great Patriotic War

When the Great Patriotic War broke out, Dora was 11 years old, and her brother was 6. She just finished the 4th grade. Olgopol was occupied by German and Romanian troops from July 26, 1941 to May 22, 1944. Dora, like her husband, Leonid, as well as hundreds of their Jewish neighbors, survived the three years of occupation in appalling conditions. Dora’s education was interrupted for 3 years, and she went into the fifth grade at the age of 15, “an overgrown child”, in her words.
old Leonid, who was their neighbor, was not with the men who were shot. Despite the fact that he was tall and big, they managed to pass him off as a girl, tying a handkerchief around his head. Thus, the Germans did not notice him.

All the Jews in Olgopol were ordered to wear the yellow Star of David. Dora remembers that one young man made a metal star for himself, so that it shined and was more visible. Dora says that in the ghetto, there were not only local Jews from Olgopol. Jews were brought there from the Oblast, and in the autumn of 1941, many Jews from Bessarabia were transported to the ghetto as well.

Dora says that she, along with her brother and mother, lived in a small house with a dirt floor, where there were only two rooms (“a small bedroom and another room”). The ghetto was small (consisting of 2 fenced-off village streets), so there wasn’t enough room for all the Jews rounded up there. People helped each other however they could. Dora recalls that “everyone took someone in (from the group brought from Bessarabia), 2-3 people each.” Dora’s family also sheltered two young women in their small house:

Dora and her mother watered flowers and cleaned the offices. Her brother was too young for forced labor. Leonid drove the Romanians around town in a carriage attached to a bicycle.

Dora says that they were helped very much by Ukrainian friends, a family by the name of Shiropanovskiy, who brought them food to the ghetto: “These friends lived next to us my entire life, and because of this they helped us.” They did this in the dark hours, so the Romanians would not see: “They could not go into the ghetto, but they passed food through the barbed wire at night.”

There was never enough food, and Dora, taking a great risk, would sometimes go out of the ghetto in search of food. She did not look like a Jew, so it was easy to present herself as a Ukrainian girl, wearing a kerchief on her head. The chance to get out of the ghetto existed thanks to one acquaintance (he was a Russian or a Ukrainian), who was a neighbor of the family before the war. He worked as a policeman and let Jews out of the ghetto so they could go to the town’s market. After the liberation, he was arrested on charges of collaboration with
the occupiers, but “all the Jews in Olgopol came to his defense and gave witness testimony that he helped the inhabitants of the ghetto.”

Once during one of these expeditions for food, Dora was discovered by a Romanian (Michal) from the Headquarters. Michal beat Dora severely because she had snuck out of the ghetto and called her “zhidanka” (a yid). She burst into tears and ran away from the market, and told her mother she would never go out again. Dora also sold bagels made by a local baker in the infirmary constructed in the territory of the ghetto (as strange as it sounds).

In 1943, there was an Italian military unit stationed in Olgopol. Dora recalls: “The Italians were wonderful. They set up a kitchen and lined up all the Jewish children and gave them food, every single one, and me as well... I was 15 years old. Every day they came and brought food in kettles - pasta with sauce and other stuff.”

To the question of what the most frightening moment in the ghetto was, Dora responds: “The entire time was frightening. We lived as if on a powder keg. They can round us up, they can shoot us. At any moment they could send us away. The whole time we were waiting for something to happen; we were never calm.”

And to the question of whether there was a joyful moment during her life in the ghetto, Dora says: “When we were liberated. That was the most joyful moment.”

1. Soviet test pilot, crew commander of the aircraft, made the first non-stop flight across the North Pole from Moscow to Vancouver in 1937.

2. Military pilot, Hero of the Soviet Union, who in spite of his disability (due to severe injuries, both legs had to be amputated at the knee), flew with prosthetic limbs and downed seven Nazi aircraft after his injury (a total of 11). She was a fighter in a Soviet resistance group, which operated at the rear of the Germans in 1941. She was captured by the Nazis, brutally tortured and hunged. She is the first woman to be awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union during World War II.

to school. Dora (as well as Leonid) was overgrown for the 5th grade at age 15. When her youngest sister was born in 1948, Dora babysat her after school. When she had free time, she and her friends liked to go to a dance club. The headmaster would make them leave, but they would return again. Dora danced all the popular dances of the time - tango, waltz, polka, krakowiak, foxtrot. She also sang very well and participated in the school choir. Unfortunately, when she had her tonsils removed in 1958, her vocal chords were affected, and her voice was ruined.

Dora says that her heroes were Valery Chkalov and Aleksei Maresiev, and her favorite film was a movie about Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya. She loved going to the movies (in Olgopol there was one cinema), but at home they did not even have a radio or an antenna for a long time.

Dora concedes that in her youth she was very beautiful, and that many boys wanted to be friends with her. She remembers that for a year she dated a Ukrainian named Kolya Glushko who was 8 years older than her. He played the accordion, and Dora danced, and however long she danced, that’s how long he played. Dora says that he was a good man;
he even knew Yiddish because he always lived among Jews. Kolya’s mother did not want Kolya to date Dora because she was Jewish though Dora’s parents did not care. In the end, they broke up because Dora had a jealousy fit: he attended college in another city and was unable to come home for the fall break in October, but Dora did not want to understand and refused to date him anymore.

Leonid was friends with Dora since childhood and, according to her, always tagged along with her. He cared for her from their early years and finally won her over (Dora laughs at this point). They married in 1952 and have lived together 62 years by now, and Dora says that they do not even fight.

After the war, Dora went to Chernovtsy to apply to the university, but was not accepted. During the application process, one of the administrators pointed out that she was Jewish, and they failed her on one entrance exam. In Chernovtsy, Dora was staying with Uta, one of the women who were taken in by her family during the ghetto. Uta married after the war, and as she and her husband had no children, they took Dora in as their own. Uta’s neighbor in the communal apartment was a Russian prosecutor (who had a Jewish wife). When he learned that Dora was not accepted to the university, he called his friend, the director of the Teachers’ Institute, arranged for Dora to be accepted into the Institute with the grades she received attempting to enter the university. It was a salvation for Dora because otherwise she would have had to return home, and her family did not have the money to send her somewhere else again.

Dora first enrolled in the history department, but then transferred to the department of Russian philology because the director of her former school in Olgopol convinced her (when she was home on vacation) that schools devote fewer hours to teaching history whereas the Russian language lessons are taught every day.

**Humorous and not-so-humorous incidents related to Jewishness and Dora’s appearance**

Dora says that she did not look Jewish and wore a braid like a Ukrainian girl. Therefore, both Jews and non-Jews often mistook her for one of their own, or, conversely, perceiving her as an outsider. Some cases are curious while in others one can see a widespread everyday anti-Semitism in Ukraine and in Moldova. Here are some of the incidents retold by Dora:

When the head of their student organization recorded the names and nationalities of the members, Dora told him that she was Jewish. He thought she was joking with him, and she had to prove that it was the truth.

Dora was friends with a couple of guys when she studied in Chernovtsy. One of them did not know that Dora was Jewish, and once on the way to visit her, this young man kept hugging his friend about why he goes to see “that shiksa.” When they arrived at Dora’s, she said to this guy, “My dear Senya, I am not a shiksa, I’m Jewish!” Dora once went to a cobbler to get the heels on the shoes fixed, and he refused to take the order, citing a lack of time. His wife, sitting by his side, reproached him in Yiddish, and he responded to her, also in Yiddish, “I’m not going to take a work order from this shiksa!” Dora laughed and said: “I am not a goy-ka!”

Once, on the train, one service man was smitten with Dora, and as a joke their conversation turned to the subject of marriage, and he said that he would marry
In 1965, the family moved to Tiraspol in Moldova. Leonid worked at the cannery as the chief of the thermal power plant, and Dora went to work in a kindergarten, first as a teacher and then as the headmaster. A few years later, Leonid became an inspector at the State Technical Oversight Committee and worked in this position for 30 years before emigrating to the United States. After the kindergarten, Dora worked at a school, then at a vocational college, and taught both Russian and Ukrainian.

In 1993, Dora and Leonid emigrated to America where both of their daughters already lived. They now live at the Hebrew Rehabilitation Center in Roslindale, MA.

Anyone, except for a Jew. Dora jokingly asked him if he would marry her, and the military guy said that he was ready to do that right that moment. Dora had to disappoint him.

In general, when Dora came to visit people, in any company, she immediately warned everybody that she was Jewish, so that people wouldn’t put themselves in an uncomfortable situation: “You know they always say something about the Jews: some say flattering things, others - not so flattering...”

After graduating from the Institute, Dora was assigned to work in the village of Kadobovtsy, in the Chernovtsy region of Ukraine. She taught the 5th, 6th, 7th and 8th grades, and the eighth graders were almost the same age as her (“overgrown children” after the war). Dora says that their parents did not want to send their children to school: “These are forgotten Ukrainian villages. Parents wondered why this schooling was even necessary.” Dora rented a room in the house of a Ukrainian family. They were very nice people and cared for her. For example, when the hostess cooked borsch for tractor drivers, she would fish out the best pieces of meat and give them to Dora. Everyone loved Dora in the village because she was unpretentious and friendly with people. Many guys tried to date her and woo her, but within a year after graduation, Dora married Leonid. They married in 1952 when both of them came home on vacation. By that time, Leonid had also graduated from a college in Odessa and worked for a year as an alcohol technician in the Tatar Republic. After the wedding, Dora and Leonid spent another year living apart because neither he nor she could be released from their workplaces. An inspector from the Education Department who knew Dora well helped settle this issue. As a result, Dora and Leonid were able to start living their lives together. They moved to the city of Khotyn in the Chernovtsy Oblast and were assigned an apartment there. Leonid worked as a chief mechanic for a distillery, and Dora worked as a teacher.

Professional Life

Dora in Kadobovtsy, 1952

Dora and Leonid in 1962

Dora and Leonid in Tiraspol

In 1993, Dora and Leonid emigrated to America where both of their daughters already lived. They now live at the Hebrew Rehabilitation Center in Roslindale, MA.
in Belarus, in the city of Bobruisk. He had two brothers and two sisters, and he was the youngest child in his family. Before the war, Mikhail spoke only Yiddish at home, at school he studied in Yiddish and Russian, with his wife he spoke both languages; with their children, he spoke exclusively Russian and only sometimes Belarusian.

Throughout his life, my father observed some Jewish customs, and in the Soviet Union, people who did so were oppressed. My father was the head of production at a chemical factory. My father was a good production manager, but the City’s Communist Party Committee learned that he does not work on Saturdays, and my father had to leave his job.”

Mikhail’s father had to find a new way to support his family. With the help of his friends, he bought a horse and got a job transporting various goods. After Mikhail’s father left the chemical factory, they started experiencing problems with production: the new manager could not cope with the task. And so Mikhail’s father was invited to return. He agreed on one condition: that he would be allowed to not work on Saturdays.

Mikhail remembers his mother, Braina, in this way: “My mother was very kind, very family-oriented, and she loved and respected my father very much. He was like God to her... my parents died very early. My father died at the age of 57, and my mother died at 60. After the death of my father, my mother lived alone for 6 more years. She felt that with her husband’s death, everything was gone... life was gone.”

The family was poor, but Mikhail did not think too much about that: “[We] had our own farm, yard, garden. We kept a cow, something that could help provide for us. We were not rich though no one was aware of it, because we never complained about life. It was difficult at that time, during the pre-war years...” They had to save money on many things, and the younger children wore the clothes of the older ones: “Since I was the third boy, I got secondhand clothing from my older siblings. I was always wearing...
and lived there, and then they moved to Belarus where his whole family lived. And since he came from capitalism, that meant he was a spy. Everyone was suspected of espionage. My father also spent 6 months in prison. That is, he determined my measurements just by looking at me and without any fittings stitched a suit for my size; and for me, a new suit - it was, all in all, excellent. I was proud that I was able to teach somebody math.

Mikhail’s family was affected by the Stalinist repressions in the most direct way: “Oh, it affected the entire Soviet Union! It was in 1937. My uncle, my mother’s brother, was sent to prison, and he was killed there during an interrogation. Finished off. My uncle was accused of having lived in a foreign country. He married a girl from Lithuania and passed the exam with flying colors. Her father was very happy, came to my father and said: “How much should I pay you?” My father said: “We are used to helping people without being paid.” The girl’s father was a good tailor. A few days later he brought me a new suit. That is, he determined my measurements just by looking at me and without any fittings stitched a suit for my size; and for me, a new suit - it was, all in all, excellent. I was proud that I was able to teach somebody math.

Several themes can be traced in the story Mikhail tells about the war years: the horrors of bombings during the evacuation; the difficulties of life as an evacuee; the agonizing uncertainty about the loved ones from whom they were cut off by the war, and the constant hard work.

“When the war started, I was going on seventeen. That summer I worked in a Young Pioneer camp (parallel to my studies at school, I played in a brass orchestra, on the trumpet). The Young Pioneer camp was in the forest, to the east of the city. I was actually outside of the city, and parents were in the city, my older sister and brother were studying in Minsk and were finishing medical school that year.

It was on Sunday. People started arriving in the camp and telling us that there had been a bombing that night. We heard the bombing in the forest, but
we thought it was some kind of military exercise... Everyone was being taken out of the camp. Parents came and took away their children.

At this time, my sister came back home from Minsk and saw that the house was closed, and no one was there. She guessed to go look at my father’s workplace. My father worked in the eastern part of the city where we all gathered to leave. We were just about to leave when she appeared. Had she come five or ten minutes later, we would have separated! We left without much. My mother grabbed a bag with a loaf of bread and a packet of sugar. We left with virtually no documents. We assumed that we would return the next day. But we were unable to return...

From historical accounts, we know that Bobruisk was captured by Nazi troops on June 28, 1941, just 7 days after Germany invaded the Soviet Union. Only a small percentage of the city’s Jewish population managed to evacuate; Mikhail and his family were among them. “Going back to the city was impossible, everybody was moving east, away from the city. The whole road was packed with people walking away, and we walked 60 kilometers to the next town... On the way, we were joined by another brother of my mother’s with his children and the wife of another brother [who was imprisoned for “espionage”]. It was hard - we had to carry the children for 60 kilometers.”

Here is how Mikhail remembers the bombings: “A mass of people is walking, and German planes are flying over and shooting into the crowd with machine guns. To the right and left from the road there is the forest. Everyone flees into the woods. Everyone runs away from the road because the road is being fired on, and then someone shouts: ‘Son! Mom! Dad!’ People are trying to reconvene. In general, there was a terrible panic, and people got lost looking for each other. Some were hurt, some were killed... it was a terrible sight, and an awful journey.”

Mikhail continues the story of the evacuation: “Despite all difficulties we made it to Rogachev in 24 hours, and there a train had already been prepared to take refugees out of there. We rode the train for a couple of weeks, and we did not stop at the terminals or the stations because it was dangerous - they were bombed — we stopped right in the middle of the fields. We traveled this way for three weeks until we reached the Tambov region. Poletayevskaya Village Council was a big village. There my sister was immediately given a job. There were not enough doctors because many were drafted into the army. The medical station where my sister was assigned to work had one-room living quarters for the doctor, and we all settled in that room together. Somebody brought a load of straw, put sheets on top, and there we all slept on the floor. The collective farm provided for us: our family was given a bucket of milk every day, a loaf of bread and wheat. We were not starving any more. People [in the village] sheltered my uncle and aunt. We all worked on the harvest. We lived there for a few months: July, August, September, October and half of November.”

To the anxiety associated with the life of refugees and new evacuations were added worries about the fate of loved ones with whom any contact was severed by the outbreak of the war. Mikhail’s middle brother remained in Leningrad where he was drafted into the army in 1940. It would later become known that he was in Leningrad throughout the entire war and survived the Leningrad blockade. Of the older brother and the husband of Mikhail’s older sister, who had both been drafted into the army when the war began, there was no news. By happy coincidence, Mikhail’s older sister unexpectedly ran into a cousin of her husband who knew the address of the field unit in which he was serving. Finally after six months of searching, Mikhail’s sister’s husband was found, and six months later Mikhail’s older brother found his family in the evacuation.

For Mikhail’s family, 1941 was a year of constant movement. In November, the family had to evacuate again, because “our troops kept retreating and now they were approaching the Tambov region.” Since by that time Mikhail’s older sister had received a letter from her husband in which he gave the address of a woman in Omsk where he used to rent a room and where he sent his monthly military ration cards, the Fabrikant family decided to go to Omsk: “Trains ran with much difficulty and very irregularly. We were traveling in cars normally intended for livestock. We got to Chelyabinsk with great difficulty and could not go further because my mother became seriously...
ill. We lived for a couple of weeks in Chelyabinsk. We arrived in the apartment in Omsk at the end of November, and the owner of the apartment already had about 30 refugees living with her! It was negative 40 degrees Celsius¹, and we were without a single coat, without warm clothes, my sister was in sandals... The owner gathered old jackets, hats, and felt boots to give to us.”

Mikhail’s childhood ended with the outbreak of the war. His older brothers were drafted to fight at the front, and shortly after his eldest sister was also called up to the army from Omsk (since she was a doctor). Mikhail (who was not yet 18 years old) and his middle sister went to work at a munitions factory that built engines for heavy bombers: “My sister worked on a machine tool... As a boy, I was given a more difficult task. I worked for a year and a half and then was involved in a bad accident. I had a broken leg and a hip fracture, and ended up in the hospital. I was put into a major cast under anesthesia, and for two months I lay in bed in that cast. Physically I was unable to do heavy work anymore. That’s how I became a dependent who received 400 grams of bread a day. When I worked, I received 600 grams of bread, one and a half times more, and at that time the difference was significant.”

After his recovery, Mikhail enrolled in a medical school. When Belarus was liberated, his parents left Omsk, and later Mikhail transferred from Omsk to the Minsk Medical Institute as a fourth-year student. Mikhail’s hometown, Bobruisk, was destroyed beyond recognition. From his story it becomes clear that the fact that their house remained standing is a miracle, as well as the fact that no one had taken the house away from them: “Our house was in its place, untouched, but other people were living there. They happened to be decent people, we lived together for some time, then they got an apartment and left. Our home was returned to us.”

What did Mikhail feel on Victory Day? “Of course, it was a joyous feeling! And first of all because people were not being killed any more. And those who survived lived amicably together. But there were very few survivors. In our institute in Omsk there were only 11 men... My brothers and sisters returned from the front, but the relatives [who stayed in Bobruisk and other cities], they all died: some under the German occupation, some died in the ghettos, some were killed at the front...”

Mikhail lived with his wife, Zinaida Lazarevna Fridland (whose Jewish name is Zelda), “66 years and six-tenths of a year.” She was born on January 19, 1924, and was the youngest of three daughters. Mikhail and Zinaida knew each other before the war. As children, they lived close to each other, and their older sisters were friends.

During the evacuation, Zina’s family ended up in Uzbekistan, and there she was admitted to medical school in the city of Ferghana. In her second or third year of studies Zina transferred from Uzbekistan to Moscow and graduated from the medical school there. Here is how Mikhail talks about their reunion after the war: “We met at the mandatory medical practicum in Bobruisk. It was the summer of 1946. I asked her if I could borrow her practicum report journal to copy, and she obliged. A year later, before graduation, Passover was in April, and it so happened that I came home to visit my parents, and she came home too. We met in Bobruisk, spent one evening together, then another... My parents were supportive, and I liked her so much. We got married in 1947, and in 2014 she died. It’s only been six months since I lost my wife... We lived together, respected each other. We have two sons and two daughters-in-law, a granddaughter and three grandsons.”

Mikhail is very proud of his profession and talks at length and with love about his work as a doctor and about his life in various places where he lived because of his work: “In 1947 I became a doctor. I was assigned to a regional hospital where I became a surgeon. There was so much to do that I was working day and night. The war had ended, but the consequences of the war were very heavy. Our regional center was pretty much destroyed. We were given a room, the length of which was

¹ The two scales, Celsius and Fahrenheit, meet at minus 40.
me to do surgeries. I went to work in an outpatient clinic, and then started working as a resuscitator/anesthesiologist. I finished my career as the head of the anesthesia department in an intensive care unit." In total, Mikhail worked as a doctor for 42 years.

It is interesting that in spite of being so busy, Mikhail found time for his interests outside of medicine: "I enrolled in a correspondence degree program in the department of physics and mathematics. I didn’t want to part with mathematics and physics. But I had no time to study, and I was dropped from the program. So I remained a doctor/surgeon.

Mikhail has a favorite hobby that brings him great pleasure even now: "I began to sing when I was 48 years old. Our hospital has hired a music director [from the music school] to train hospital employees to sing in a choir that would represent the hospital in amateur competitions. He kept talking me into joining his choir. He liked the way I sing, and in the end, he dragged me into it." These days Mikhail continues to sing as a member of the choir at the Hebrew Rehabilitation Center.

Mikhail and his wife started thinking about emigration from the USSR in the 1980s. At first, they thought about moving to Israel, but their family was already partially in America (one of the nephews emigrated in the 1980s). Mikhail explains the reason for their emigration: "The reason was that we did not live very well in the Soviet Union. That may be more due to our ethnicity... I did not personally suffer [from anti-Semitism], I had my position and I worked, but there was anti-Semitism... it could be felt in the atmosphere. When we emigrated, we first went to Italy. We could not go straight to America, and we were questioned, ‘what kind of refugees are you if you had such prestigious positions [both head doctors]?’ Then the caseworker for our elder son wrote to one of the senators: ‘They are being kept from re-uniting with their family.’ And after a while we were allowed in.” Mikhail and his wife arrived in the United States on October 28, 1989, two weeks before his 65th birthday: ‘At first we lived together with my eldest son in Sharon. They had a one-bedroom apartment, but it was big. Seven months later, we got an apartment in Newton. We lived in Newton for seven years. As we were getting older, and the apartment was far away from public transportation, we got on a waiting list for Ulin Housing in Brighton. We lived in Brighton for 16 years, then my wife fell ill, and it was difficult for me to take care of her, so we had to come live here [in the HRC]. Here, of course, it was easier. But my wife lived here for only six weeks. A month and ten days. We arrived here on February 3rd this year, and she died on March 13th. Now I am all alone.”
Esfir Naumovna Reisman was born in 1921, but her father registered her year of birth as 1920. For some reason, he “decided to register me and my sister Bronya as twins, but something did not work out, and as a result, she was recorded as born in 1923 (as she was), and I was recorded as born in 1920.”

“I was born in Belarus, [possibly in the village of Komarin], in the region which before the war was called the Polesia Oblast1 and was later renamed2. When I was 6 or 7 years old, we moved to another area of the Polesia Oblast. At first, my father, Naum, worked as an ordinary farmer like everyone else; then he was elected chairman of the collective farm, and up until the war, he was the chairman. My mother worked as a milkmaid. The collective where we lived was called “The International”3 (originally, it was a farmers’ cooperative association), and the village was called Savichi. The collective farm was located on a former estate, far from the village. There were four children in our family: three daughters and one son. The eldest was Raya, then me, then Bronya, then Boris. And now I am all alone...”

When asked what she remembers from her childhood, Esfir says that when her mother went to work gathering the flax on the farm, she took with her all three daughters. She told the other female farmers that she was unlikely to gather as much flax as they because she “was not very accustomed to this kind of work,” and therefore, hoped that her daughters would help. Esfir says that she and her sisters took turns harvesting flax when their mother needed to rest, and in the end, it would turn out that her mother’s harvest was sometimes even higher than those of the others. This was a running joke in the collective. The rest of Esfir’s childhood was “like that of any other child: we would come home from school and go out to play.”

To the question of which Jewish traditions were observed in her family, and which holidays were celebrated, Esfir replies that the family was already assimilated enough when the children were small: “My mother did not even remember when to bake matza... We did not celebrate any Jewish holidays. My mother did not want us to envy the other children, so we celebrated everything that Russians celebrated: we painted eggs, baked pies...” Esfir says that on the collective farm they were practically the only Jewish

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1 Oblast is a type of administrative division in the USSR and post-Soviet countries. It may be considered analogous to the word ‘province.’

2 The Polesia Oblast of the Belarusian USSR existed from 1938 to 1954. It was abolished during the re-organization of the administrative division of the Byelorussian SSR, most of its territory became part of the Gomel Oblast, while the smaller parts were added to the Minsk and Mogilev Oblasts.

3 According to the State Archives of Belarus, possibly “The 3rd International” (http://fk.archives.gov.by/fond/103747/)
family, there were no other Jews, and their neighbors were Belarusians. In spite of this, Esfir always knew that they were Jews, and her parents spoke “the Jewish language” at home (“not Israeli Jewish, but old Jewish... my mother’s mother’s tongue... Yiddish”). Her parents were literate in Yiddish. When the elder sister emigrated to Israel, Esfir’s mother wrote answers to the letters coming from there because she was the only one who could write in the Hebrew alphabet. At home Esfir spoke “whatever language” – Belarusian or Yiddish. Esfir can still speak Yiddish though she does not know how to read and write in that language because her elementary education was conducted in Belarusian (up to grade 7) and then she continued studying in Russian (up to grade 10). With friends, she usually spoke Belarusian or Russian. Esfir says that many people wanted to speak Russian well and tried not to switch to Belarusian during the conversation, and her cousin, who was sent to a Jewish school, even ran away from there because he did not understand anything in Yiddish, but knew Russian well and was an excellent student.

At the age of eight, Esfir started school. She had to walk two or three kilometers to school because it was in the village, and they lived on the collective farm, in the estate’s manor, some distance from the village. All the children walked to school from nearby villages on their own. “Friendship was the key: we specifically planned to walk together because there were only boys from this one village, and we were all girls.” After completing the seven mandatory years of school, Esfir went on to receive a complete secondary education in a Russian school in Komarin (a settlement where her grandfather and uncle lived) because, according to her, she was of light physique and would not be hired by the collective. Her sisters were big and did not want to continue schooling after the 7th grade, so they could work on the farm and earn money.

An interesting fact is that Esfir’s father was transferred to another farm to serve as the chairman because there were some difficulties with the organization there, and her father had proved to be a very good chairman (they did not want to let him go at the old collective farm). The problem was that at this collective most of the young workers had left for the city, and the older population did not want to work. On the collective, there were several Jewish families, and the district administration had hoped that Naum, being a Jew, would be able to build relationships with these Jewish families and organize the work of the collective farm. It so happened that three years before the war, the whole family moved with the father to another village in Belarus, while Esfir went to Smolensk to study at the West Agricultural Institute at the Department of Animal Husbandry (she chose this profession because “she was accustomed to farming”). She completed three years before the war broke out.

Esfir remembers that in school and at her institute there were people of different nationalities always co-existing amiably, and that neither she nor her family had ever experienced harassment because they were Jews: “There were about 15-20 Jews at the institute, but we never felt any anti-Semitism.”

The town of Smolensk4 was occupied by German troops on July 16, 1941, less than a month after the war began. Esfir talks about turmoil and confusion which affected all the residents of Smolensk. She was finishing her third year at the institute and was on a practicum in a village (possibly Zhuravka) 20 km from the city. She remembers taking an exam

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4 Smolensk is located 378 km southwest of Moscow and is one of the key defensive points on the way to Moscow.
on horse breeding while the other side of the city was being bombed. She had to walk the distance from the village to the city twice, first with her uncle (who taught physics at the institute) to find out what was happening and what they should all do (given that German aircraft had already been sighted above the village), and then to deliver the news to her aunt (who stayed in the village) that she needs to take her young children and immediately return to Smolensk. At that time it was already dangerous to make this trip alone and on foot, and the patrol that stopped Esfir at the exit from the city was surprised by her bravery. Esfir says that she simply had no other option: she had to go and not be afraid or give up.

Esfir returned to the town with her aunt and the children (a boy about 7 years old and a girl of 2 or 3) in carts, which were distributed by the collective farm chairman for women and children. Esfir says that it was very scary and difficult for them to make the right decision - to leave or stay. Many decided to leave, but many remained in the city. Her uncle arranged the evacuation of his wife, children and his niece with the families of other employees of the institute. All men of military age, workers of the institute, including Esfir’s uncle, went to the front. Initially, Esfir along with her aunt and the children were evacuated to Michurinsk where all the evacuees were placed in apartments, but the conditions there were harsh because there was no work, and there was nothing to eat. Her aunt tried to trade some personal items for food, while Esfir stayed at home with the children. Then they moved to Saransk at the invitation of her uncle’s brother, who worked as the chief surgeon of a hospital in Mordovia. Esfir wanted to join her parents in Uzbekistan where they were evacuated (they had time to leave word of this in Michurinsk), but her aunt persuaded her to stay to help with the children. Her uncle’s brother, the surgeon, slept at the hospital because he worked day and night, so Esfir, the children and her Aunt Rosa lived in his apartment with his daughter, a girl of 11 or 12. In Saransk, Esfir worked for about a year as a cloakroom attendant while at the same time looking after her Aunt Rosa’s two children as well as her uncle’s brother’s daughter. These children became very accustomed to Esfir, and it was hard for her to leave them. Aunt Rosa, according to Esfir, was an alarmist, and it was difficult for the children to be with her. Esfir, on the contrary, was always able to calm them down. She often took them out for walks in the hospital’s courtyard, and the wounded soldiers (who missed their children back at home) often treated “her” children with sugar. Esfir says that now it seems funny, but then it was so touching that it moved her to tears (because there was not enough food, and sugar was given to soldiers so that they would recover faster, and they shared this great delicacy with children).

Esfir’s luck brought her to Uzbekistan to reunite with her parents. Her uncle’s brother, the surgeon, assigned her to accompany a wounded soldier who was being transported to Uzbekistan. They traveled together to the station of Serov where she said goodbye to her ward. Where to go next, she had no idea... By an incredible happenstance, Esfir was helped by an old acquaintance of her parents: “This woman comes up to me and says, “Where are you from?” I say: “From Belarus.” She asks: “And where are you going to?” I reply: “To my parents.” She looks at me and asks, “Are you by any chance a Reisman’s daughter?” It turned out that this woman, a Jew, was

5 Michurinsk — a science city, the All-Russian Center of Horticulture, the administrative center of the Michurinsky Raion in the Tambov Oblast (founded in 1635; until 1932, the city was called Rezayev).

6 The city was founded in 1642, and was the capital of the Mordovian Soviet Socialist Republic (part of the USSR); now the capital of the Republic of Mordovia; it is located 642 km southeast of Moscow.
from a neighboring collective farm in Belarus, and that she was friends with Esfir’s family. Esfir spent the night at this woman’s house. Then the woman’s sister drove her part of the way, but to get to the collective where her parents were, Esfir had to go even further. There was no means of transport, and so Esfir went on foot: “What else was there to do? I learned to walk ...” Along the way she met a fellow farmer from Belarus who lived in the same house as her parents in Uzbekistan. From him Esfir learned the exact address. “I had only opened the gate to enter the yard, and my mother ran towards me shouting and crying. They no longer expected me - a year had passed [since the war began], maybe more ...” From the stories of her relatives, Esfir learned of the difficulties they had fleeing from the Germans. Her father had to evacuate the collective farm. He gave out the farm’s horses and carts to the members of the collective, and everyone fled. Her father had to wait for his mother who had not wanted to leave her farm and tried to sell the cattle. When they left, the Germans were already bombing the area. When the carts of refugees reached Chernigov, the bridge across the Desna river was destroyed, making crossing of the river impossible. The Soviet troops were rapidly restoring the bridge and asked for help from the refugees. Bronya, Esfir’s younger sister, went as a volunteer to help the soldiers. Later the soldiers came to her father specifically to thank Bronya and helped all the fleeing farmers to cross the river. After that the refugees went to Kursk or Voronezh (Esfir does not remember exactly) where they were loaded onto a train, and Esfir’s family along with many other Belarusian farmers who could not be drafted were evacuated to the collective farm in Uzbekistan.

Esfir says that in Uzbekistan her father was valued very much for his knowledge of the land and livestock: “My father knew everything and could do anything.” The daughters, along with their father, cut the grass on the farm with scythes better than anyone else could. However, the family decided that they should look for higher paying jobs, and all four children went with their father to work at the mercury mines that were located 20 kilometers from the collective farm. “We were given work and housing. My sister worked as a norm setter, and I worked in the department of technical control. My brother worked in the mines with geologists to determine the presence of mercury in the ore. My father worked on the collective at the mines, but my mother was ill and she did not work. At the mines, we lived in a family residence, and we all slept in the same bed. Everyone worked well, we were all marked as the hardest working members of the organization, and my brother was even a Stakhanovite. For our good work, they gave us living space in a building which housed the library. One room was the library, and the other was ours. At the mines, there were Koreans, and Russians, and Jews. There were all types of people, and we all lived together with interest and friendship. My older sister Raya even married a Polish Jew there.”

After the liberation of Belarus, Esfir and her sister Bronya decided to return to their homeland to see how things were. When they came to the collective farm where their father was the chairman before the war, they were met by an old neighbor who was very happy to see them: “He started hugging and kissing us. I was embarrassed, but he said: “Don’t be shy! We are all one family! We lived together our entire lives!” However, Esfir and Bronya decided not to stay at that collective and went to Bragin (a

1 In Soviet history and iconography, a Stakhanovite following the example of Alexei Grigorievich Stakhanov, employing hard work or Taylorist efficiencies to overachieve.
settlement and administrative center in Belarus). “There were no longer any Jews there, so we went to Bragin, we were taken in by a relative, and we found work in an accounting department.” Then came their parents and Raya (the eldest sister) with her husband and child. She went to work in the NKVD, and their father and mother went to work on the collective. Raya’s first child, a girl, died at the age of 2 from a childhood illness.

Then Raya and her husband moved to Vilno where their two sons were born, and then to Poland because the husband was a Polish Jew. Finally, the family moved from Poland to Israel. By profession Raya’s husband was a hatter and made excellent hats and caps. Esfir says that despite the fact that their father did not want Raya to marry a Polish Jew, Raya’s husband was a very good man and a good husband.

Esfir met her husband after the war in Belarus. He was from Moscow and worked as an engineer. He had been married before Esfir and had a son (the son died, but it is not known exactly when). It so happened that he lived next door to Esfir’s relatives whom she often visited with her sisters. They did not have a big wedding or celebration: “it was not the right time.”

Esfir moved several more times with her family. At one time, she lived in Petrikov (on the Pripyat River in the Gomel region of Belarus), where she worked as a livestock specialist, but the work was hard: Esfir had to do a lot of walking from village to village, checking the well-being of the cattle. Then the family moved to Kiev where first Esfir’s brother settled with his wife. Later he was joined by Bronya and her husband, Esfir and her husband, and their elderly parents.

Esfir and her family immigrated to America (most likely, in 1992) at the invitation of her brother. At first, they came to Ohio where they were given a subsidized apartment. Esfir’s husband died in Cleveland a few years after emigration, and then Esfir moved to Boston alone to live with her brother and son who worked as a programmer. “Before we came to America, we knew nothing about it. We knew that the country exists and that people lived better there. My brother said that he lived pretty well. We went because it was better here.”

Esfir says that in America they received compensation from the German government for damages during the war. “The Germans took everything, all the furniture and things we had owned when we left Belarus. We were reimbursed approximately 500 dollars.”

Esfir says that between the Soviet Union and America there was a big difference: “the life philosophy there was ‘find it and get it’, and over here it’s “go and buy it.” A very different mentality... Here, people are wonderful and friendly. People who you don’t know say hello to you. Everything is done for the people... something that Russia doesn’t have. I miss only my relatives and friends, but everyone is dispersed now all over the world. I don’t miss anything else. There was little joy... The most happy memory I have is before the war when I was young, when I was a student. But during the war everything changed.”
My mom was right when she said that all people in Odessa are related to each other. The world is such a small place that you do not know where and when you may meet a fellow countryman. This is exactly what happened with me.

In September 2014, I started going to the HRC with other Brandeis students to collect life stories of the HRC residents. I was assigned to interview Maria Tovbeyn. Four months later, on December 4, when I was at Maria’s birthday celebration, I learned that Maria’s daughter Nora is the best friend of my aunt who lives in Israel! This is how it happened: my aunt called from Israel to wish Nora’s mother Maria happy birthday. During this conversation, Nora told her friend, my aunt, that her grandmother and Maria reminisced about the old days. We looked at the pictures in Maria’s family album, chatted, and, like real people from Odessa, found much in common. I am very glad that fate brought me to Maria. She is a wonderful and warm person. She is very educated and surprisingly strong-willed. I’m grateful for the opportunity to spend quality time with her. She loves me like a grandson and I love her back. I plan on visiting her in the future. I really hope that I can give my dear Maria a big hug on her 100th birthday!
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