Tales of love and war

By Leah Burrows
Advocate Staff

At the end of every interview session, whether they had been talking about love or loss or war, 96-year-old Mindel would look at 18-year-old Dina Kapengut and say, “You know, that’s life.”

Kapengut collected and recorded Mindel’s life story as a project for the Brandeis Genesis Institute for Russian Jewry at Brandeis University.

Kapengut was among the BGI fellows who partook in Russia as the Great Patriotic War. But often we take our own grandparent’s stories for granted, and it takes talking to a stranger to discover something that is actually part of your own family.”

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But that might not be the end of the story. Any member of the council can submit a formal request to remove another member.

J Street makes the cut

JCRC proposal keeps group in the fold

By Leah Burrows
Advocate Staff

J Street is still inside Boston’s Jewish tent – for now. After reviewing every organization under the JCRC umbrella, the JCRC membership committee is recommending that only two organizations be removed from the tent: B’hai B’rith and the Israel Histadrut Committee, according to Alan Ronkin, interim director of the JCRC. Those groups were singled out because they have little or no presence in Boston.

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Do clothes make the Jew?

By Elise Kigner
Advocate Staff

Among his favorites: the L.E.D. yarmulke that flashes customized words, and, for the more politically inclined, the Obamica and the McCippah. His kids have Dora the Explorer and L.E.D. yarmulkes.

Eric Silverman is fascinated by yarmulkes. Among his favorites: the L.E.D. yarmulke that flashes customized words, and, for the more politically inclined, the Obamica and the McCippah. His kids have Dora the Explorer and Dragon Ball Z yarmulkes.

“Do you wear this thing to say I am Jewish, but it conveys that I am as totally assimilated into TV pop culture as anyone else,” said the cultural anthropologist and
Brandeis project bridges

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Funded by the Genesis Philanthropy Group, the two-year-old institute provides scholarships and programming to Russian-speaking students. It sponsors events for students and members of the Russian Jewish community – presenting everything from art exhibits to lectures to a professional boxer.

The students who receive BGI fellowships, graduates and undergraduates, are expected to complete a community service project. This year, under Dubinina’s guidance, six undergraduate fellows decided to collect oral histories.

Knowing some conversations could be difficult, Dubinina enlisted the help of Brandeis professor Cindy Cohen, founding director of the Oral History Center in Cambridge. She gave the students tips on how to ask questions and what kind of body language to use while Dubinina worked with them on cultural etiquette. Most importantly, they told the students to listen – really listen.

“It was important for the students to know that these are not hypothetical stories. We are not discussing someone’s life like it is a novel,” Dubinina said.

Staff at the Hebrew Rehabilitation Center found residents healthy and coherent enough to share their stories.

A nurse recommended that Brandeis senior Eli Tukachinsky talk to a woman named Olga. “She has a story behind her,” Tukachinsky remembered the nurse saying.

Oral histories

The first time the bubbly, talkative, 93-year-old Olga shared her story with Tukachinsky, she told it fluently, almost practiced. She calmly told the 21-year-old about working as a field nurse on the front lines of the war, about confronting suicide after being captured by the Nazis, about the death of her husband.

“When she spoke, sometimes she would hesitate a little,” Tukachinsky recalled. “But mostly, she would speak in a muted monotone.” Except when she spoke about her husband. On those occasions, tears welled up in her otherwise bright and clear eyes.

Having never remarried nor had children, Olga was excited that at last she had someone to record her story.

But some residents took a bit of prodding. Like Olga, 97-year-old Julia Rabkin, a Brandeis senior, recalled the sadness she would feel at times visiting her partner’s small room, decorated with bright artificial flowers and family pictures. “This person had lived such a rich life and then by the end, her life comes down to one room,” Rabkin said.

Rabkin interviewed 88-year-old Aleksandra, the only non-Jewish resident interviewed. Stationed at the front on a hospital train, she witnessed death on a daily basis.

Her stories were at times painful for Rabkin to hear, but she came to realize just how long a shadow the war had cast.

“It affected the way our grandparents raised their children – our parents, who raised us in a certain way because of that,” Rabkin said. “Even three generations away from the war, I still identify with it. It still fed it. It’s part of my identity.”

Julia Rabkin

Recent works will be available for acquisition.

Exhibition previews begin Saturday May 28th.

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Dr. Avi Shainhouse is a Periodontist. He was born and raised in Toronto, Canada. Upon completing his dental training at the University of Western Ontario in 2004 he came to Boston where he worked in dental public health in Dorchester. Dr. Shainhouse completed his specialty training in Periodontics and Implant Dentistry at NYU in New York City.

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**5 lives transformed by war**

Here are edited versions of stories of Russian Jews written by fellows of the Brandeis Gene
sis Institute for Russian Jewry. They are based on interviews conducted from October through this month at the Hebrew Rehabilitation Center in Roslindale.

**Sofia: a love lost**

By Lena Vaynberg (’13)

Sofia was born in 1914 in Donetsk, Ukraine, a city on the Kalmius River that was her home until World War II. She was only 4 when her non-Jewish father remarried, her two older brothers had to move out of the house, and Sofia became the target of her stepmother’s psychological attacks. Sofia says her stepmother took away her entire childhood.

When she turned 14, her father altered her age to 16 on official documents so that she would be eligible to work. So Sofia had to balance school and a job. After high school, Sofia worked as a cashier before she studied accounting. She worked as an accountant for the entire duration of her life in the Soviet Union.

When the war broke out, Sofia was 27, and her brothers were 40 and 42. Both brothers volunteered to join the Red Army to fight the Nazis, feeling a strong sense of patriotism. Sofia left Donetsk in 1941 as part of a government evacuation of civilians.

News of losses started coming soon after the war had started. First Sofia learned that her oldest brother was killed at the front and then that her other brother had died. She was hoping that the war would at least spare her lover. The couple had met before the war and planned to marry after the war. During the war, he visited Sofia once while on leave. That was the last time she saw him. He was killed at the front.

Following the war, Sofia worked as an accountant at a geological institute in western Ukraine. Eventually, she rose to head accountant.

When Sofia was 67, she immigrated to the United States. As part of her new life, she rediscovered Judaism. Although Sofia remembers celebrating some Jewish holidays when she was a child, she wasn’t observant as an adult. In the Soviet Union, she said, people would practice religion only in secret and tried to hide their Jewish identity. She said she was lucky to have had light hair and blue eyes (right). “It was easier to live that way.”

She said. And overcoming hardship is something Sofia knows all too well.

**Aleksandra: front line nurse**

By Julia Rabkin (’11)

Aleksandra was born in Moscow in 1925, the youngest of eight children. She loved to ski, swim and read, eventually collecting more than 1,500 books of Russian and French literature. She excelled in her schoolwork and graduated from high school with highest honors.

World War II broke out just when she would have started college. Her family was split up – her father left for the front, her mother stayed home. Aleksandra had a brother. The couple had met before the war would at least spare her life. After receiving two degrees, Aleksandra started teaching at a boarding school. Aleksandra had always wanted children of her own, but the first marriage didn’t bring her any and that led to its end. Shortly after the divorce, she met her second husband, Zinoviy, a history teacher at the boarding school. At age 57, Aleksandra had a son. After working as a teacher, she was promoted to school principal. She worked in this position for 35 years.

Aleksandra and Zinoviy immigrated to the United States in 1996 to be closer to their son, who had come over a few years earlier. Zinoviy died shortly after their 50th anniversary together. Her health deteriorating, Aleksandra moved to the Hebrew Rehabilitation Center. Her son and grandson visit her often – just the right medicine for someone who spent a lifetime working with people.

**Olga: life on the run**

By Eli Tuchinsky (’11)

Olga was born in the city of Korosten, Ukraine, in 1918. At the start of World War II – the Great Patriotic War, as the Russians called it – Olga and her husband were drafted into the army and sent on separate missions. He would die in Iran, but Olga would survive, thanks to her own courage, fateful friendship and strangers’ compassion.

Olga served as a field nurse in Ukraine, carrying wounded soldiers off the battlefield to a medical station where they were treated for their wounds and underw ent operations. She became close friends with one of the surgeons, Natasha. Soon after Olga arrived at the front, her regiment was encircled by Nazi troops.
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NEWS

The enemies gathered Olga and her comrades into a crowd. Olga knew the fate that awaited her if her tactics found out that she was a Jew and a Soviet officer. But a fellow Russian lieutenant, whom she had never met before, thought quickly on the spot and tore up her insignia and documents so she could conceal her identity. She assumed a Ukrainian alias and avoided the fate of being shot on the spot.

The prisoners were forced to trek hundreds of kilometers to a POW camp, enduring frequent beatings along the way. Those who couldn’t manage to walk on their own were shot.

At the POW camp, Olga’s friend Natasha somehow managed to secure a document that would allow her to leave the camp. She didn’t want to go without Olga. The women appealed to a Ukrainian guard as fellow Ukrainians. Olga’s fluency in Ukrainian (which for her was a second native language) was enough to persuade him to let them go. Once out of the camp, the two women faced the challenge of finding food and shelter. Constant bombardment had left towns and villages in ruins. The Nazis confiscated much of the food. And many of the Ukrainian locals preyed on Jews.

Natasha, who was Russian, was determined that they stick together, whatever came their way. Olga recalled:

“I was so lucky! There are no kinder, better people in the world than Natasha. She was prepared to die with me. … I didn’t want to be the cause of Natasha’s demise. I tried to convince her to leave me alone. I told her, ‘You must leave! I will die alone!’ If you are with me, you’ll die as well. I am a Jew; a Jew, they are killing Jews!’ … But Natasha refused to leave me. So I had to run away from her. I decided to continue wandering by myself. I felt sorry for Natasha; why should she die alone?”

Olga endured two years of hiding, starvation and sickness as she wandered through Nazi-occupied Ukraine.

Many years after the war, Olga searched for Natasha through the Leningrad Military Rehabilitation and Mindel’s physical condition worsened. She moved to the Hebrew Rehabilitation Center, where she will soon be celebrating 50 years in America.

“I don’t regret anything,” said Mindel. “This is life. Efim and I lived a long life together. No one lives forever.”

Mindel’s life story was shaped by love, war and immigration. She opened her eyes and piqued my curiosity about my own family, leading me to inquire about my grandparents’ former lives in the Soviet Union.

Moisey:
always the inventor

By Karina Gaf

Moisey was born in Kiev, Ukraine. As a child, he was fascinated by the process of inventing. He loved to experiment with objects and made his first invention when he was just 6. It was a boat that could move on both water and land. Moisey’s work was shown at the Kiev Exhibition of Children’s Creative Works. Then Moisey took on magnets and electricity. He smiled at his new talent.

Moisey then had two degrees: one from the Leningrad Military School (specializing in tanks) and the other from the prestigious Leningrad Polytechnic Institute. He was the head constructor and then the director of the Technical Department in the Ministry of Transport. He was in charge of developing car diagnostic tools and maintenance requirements.

In addition to his regular job, Moisey continued inventing. He has one patented invention and more than 40 inventor’s certificates. He received a gold, a silver and five bronze medals at the Exhibition of National Economic Achievements in Moscow, a prestigious trade show held annually in the Soviet Union.

“My wife’s name was Betty,” said Moisey, with a twinkle in his eye. “You see, our love story was not simple. Betty’s first love was Moisey’s brother; she married him just before the war broke out. The brother was drafted, fought heroically at the front and was burned to death when his tank was hit by the Nazi artillery.

Because he was an engineer, Moisey was not drafted. Instead, he fought on “the labor front,” as