

Editor's note: To preserve the authenticity of this memoir, the author's words have been minimally edited

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We have been living in America for 40 years now (since 1979). Our story here is mostly typical for an immigrant family. Our older daughter Inna was born in the Soviet Union. Isaac and Rachel are born here in America. We are blessed with 2 grand kids so far. Anna and myself are retired but keeping busy with the family, our garden and political activities such as blogs.

### ***WHY I DECIDED TO WRITE THIS***

I think that it is important to write this short family history not because it is unique but because it is common. Thousands of families had similar experience while living in the Soviet Union and during the emigration process. Our experiences of adapting to a new country are also not any different from other immigrant families that came to America.

As I am getting older, I started to worry that our family history will be lost not just for my grand kids but also my kids. We saved all these – my father's old letters from GULAG, my mother's old letters and many other letters and documents and nobody will be able to read them in Russian. And I worry that history has a tendency to repeat itself for those who do not learn from it. Even family history. So I decided that I owe this to my parents, sister and to the young generation in general. I have to tell the story.



***My family today: Me, granddaughter, Sasha, my wife, Anna, Anna's mother, Sheyna, Shari, bride of our son, Isaac, grandson Ari, daughter Inna, her husband Don, daughter Rachel and her boyfriend Darren. September 21, 2018. Chicago, IL***

These are my memories and what I remember that my mom and my sister, Mifa, told me over the years. Also included are memories of some friends and relatives who were close to our family.

Unfortunately we in the family did not talk much about the past. Mifa told me that nobody wanted to talk about these dark desperate years of being the family of the “enemy of the people”. The memories were too painful. But I think it is important to know. Important to remember. Whatever I remember. In America, too many things are taken for granted. Too many things. And everybody wants a happy ending. And also I believe that life triumphs eventually though the ending is not always happy for all.

## ***HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND TIMELINE***

Most of the events described in this book occurred between the early 1900’s and the late 1970’s when we emigrated to the United States. These were turbulent and violent times that included the Bolshevik Revolution, civil war, war with Poland, Stalin’s regime, World War II and communism. Suffering was great and millions of lives were lost. Throughout the political changes and upheavals, Jews were singled out, persecuted and suffered brutality directed specifically at them.

### **Chapter 1**

#### **Memories Of Childhood**



***1930 My parents, Isaac & Riva, college***



***1948 Our family***



***1950 Our family***



***1957 Our family***

## OUR OLD HOUSE

Our old log house was what we call a duplex in America. It had a metal roof that had to be painted every other year. We lived in the smaller half. The floors were painted wood.

There was a big wood burning brick oven in the kitchen that heated the house and was used to cook. My mother's mother, Hoda, lived with us. She was cooking most of the time. Mom was working and did not have time for cooking. We kept wood for the oven in the shed in the yard. I still think that food cooked in this oven tasted better than any food made in the contemporary devices. The way it worked is when wood would burn out grandma shoved all hot coals in the corner in the back of the oven and then would put the pots near the coals and close the oven with metal cover. The oven was holding heat for a long time and maybe that is why food tasted so good.

All these years we had a cat in the house. There was a reason of course. The cat made sure we did not have mice in the house. In the winter the cat was gray because it liked to climb into the oven and get all covered in ashes.



Russian stove and oven

Pots for cooking in the oven



Pot and pot holder



## OUR GARDEN

We were growing vegetables in our garden and would store potatoes and other vegetables in the cellar for the winter. The cellar was below the kitchen floor. You lift the cover and there was a ladder. The cellar was about 5' deep and full of pickled fruits and vegetables, potatoes, preserves and other stuff we prepared for winter. Our survival depended on our garden, so it was not a hobby.

Everybody was contributing. I remember my Baba Hoda had bad legs and could hardly walk so she was sitting between vegetable patches in our garden getting weeds out.

We watered the garden and used natural fertilizer. Mom would buy chicken manure from our neighbor and we diluted it with water in big steel barrels.



We did not have running water so it was my responsibility to bring water in buckets from the public water outlet across the street that was serving our block. It took me most of the day to fill these barrels. We also collected rainwater to water the garden.

*Baba Hoda, my mom's  
Mother (my grandmother)  
1965, 88 years old*

*Grandmother Hoda and my  
mom, 1963*





It was also my responsibility to make the vegetable patches. It took me a couple of days but I didn't mind. I liked to work in the garden, I liked to see the vegetables grow and in the fall I would pull a carrot or a tomato or a cucumber, wash it and eat. So yes for me these were good memories.

We had a few fruit trees and we collected apples, pears, cherries and made preserves. Making preserves was fun for us kids. Manya and I couldn't wait to watch and to try this delicious stuff. Mom made a fire outside and put a big metal bowl with stuff to make preserves on a tripod. And we kids would sit around with wooden spoons to collect the foam from the top when it starts to boil. I remember us kids sitting around the tripod with spoons. Adults were sitting around talking. It was evening. It was so peaceful, so beautiful.

Every fall mom and grandma would make sauerkraut for the winter. They would do it in a big wooden barrel. In order to clean the barrel they filled it with water and then they would throw hot rocks that were sitting in the burning oven for a while. There was a lot of steam when a stone was thrown in the water and I loved to watch the process. Of course just by looking at the rock one would not know if it is hot or not. Being 5 or 6 years old, one time I touched one of the rocks that was taken out of the oven and burned my hand. I do not remember the details but what I do remember is from now on anything my mom or grandma or my sister did not want me to touch they would tell me "hot rock!" and I would not touch it.

### ***ME AND MY GRANDMOTHER HODA***

From what I remember my grandmother took care of me when mom was at work. I still feel guilt. Grandma had bad legs and could hardly walk and I was not a very good boy. I would do something bad and run away and grandma would curse me in Yiddish. For example one time a scrap metal guy was collecting scrap metal on the corner. He gave clay whistles to kids who brought metal things to him. So without much hesitation I grabbed a couple of good pots (we didn't have many) and ran to the scrap metal guy to get a whistle. Grandma noticed and tried to run after me as fast as she could waving her arms and yelling something in Yiddish. And of course every day she would tell everything to mom when she comes from work. Considering the circumstances mom usually was not in a great mood. So she would grab a belt, put me over her lap and gave me some lessons. With not much effect.

### ***KINDERGARTEN***

When I was 5 mom signed me up for kindergarten. I was small and shy and was sick a lot. So I did not fit in well. There were bullies just like everywhere else. Every morning I walked about five blocks to kindergarten and walked back in the afternoon. It wasn't a big deal. Many kids walked. Times were difficult and many parents did not have a luxury to take their kids. I am not sure if mom was worried. She would never tell me.

### ***PLAYING WAR AND THE REAL THING***

I spent a lot of time on the streets playing with other kids. Usually we would play war. Fighting Nazis. But somebody had to play Germans and nobody wanted to do that. So we would fight imaginary enemy.



I remember we would find all kind of bullets. But we knew what it was and accidents were rare. Every kid had a collection of bullets, helmets and other military stuff.

As I am thinking about all this now I realize what a terrible tragedy this war brought to the people of Belarus, Ukraine, Russia and to the Soviet Union. Every family in Belarus had somebody who perished in this war (every fourth person).

Americans think that they sacrificed a lot during this war. Yes it is true. Six hundred thousand dead. Everybody in America contributed to Victory. Twenty two million perished in the Soviet Union just during the war. The European part of the country was in ruins. I came to Minsk vocational school in 1962. 20% of buildings in Minsk were still in ruins.



***Minsk, Central Plaza, after WWII, 1945***



***Minsk, Victory Plaza (former Central Plaza), 2015***

There is no comparison. Totally different scale. What scares me is that people have short memories and this terrible event will be forgotten. I don't know the war. But I grew up with it. This war lived in people's hearts and minds. Broken families and broken lives. Books and movies and the games children played. All about the War. .

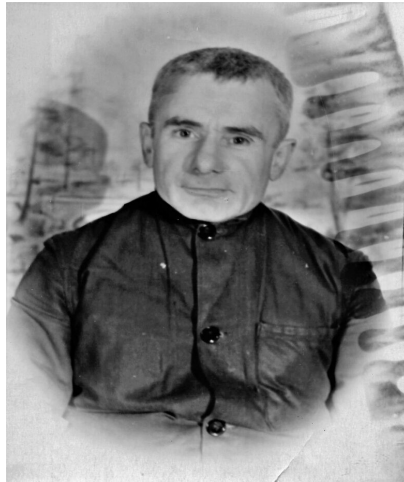
### ***ANTI SEMITISM***

There is another plague that war brought to the country – anti semitism. It quieted down for a while after the revolution 1917. But little by little this contagious societal disease started to creep up in the thirties. Jewish schools were closed. Jewish publications were shutting down. It was getting harder for Jews to find jobs.

After the WWII it got much worse. Anti semitism became an official government policy. Jewish intellectuals were publicly accused of “rootless cosmopolitanism.” Many lost their jobs. Many, like my father, were arrested and sent to hard labor camps in Siberia. Many were killed.

## Chapter 2

### My Father



*My father, 1956. Passport picture*

When they came for my father I was 5 years old. I was outside playing. Mom called me in the house. Father was there dressed in paramilitary uniform that was common at the time. Two strange men were standing behind him. Father picked me up and kissed me. And I went back outside. Father and the two men got into a car and left. The next time I saw my father was in 6 months, after he was sentenced to 10 years of hard labor. That was in city of Gomel. Mom took me to Gomel to visit father before they sent him to Station Vikhorevka in Siberia. I remember the big room, my father and two men in light suits.

Mom and father tried not to show their emotions. Mom and papa told me that father will have to stay in Homel for a while. Mom knew the man who wrote the letter to the secret police accusing my father of “cosmopolitanism”. The man lived a couple of blocks from us. Mom later told me that when he saw her walking, he would run away. Then he disappeared and I hope his Karma caught up with him.

We were not getting much help from my uncles, pop’s brothers. Everybody was afraid. But there were exceptions. Pop’s younger brother, Berul, lived in Bobruisk with his family. He was a lieutenant colonel and was a prosecutor in the Army. He helped my mom to write letters to Soviet officials asking to review my father’s sentencing.

My father, Isaac Kagan, was sent to a GULAG in Vikhorevka, Siberia in 1952 when I was 5 years old. His “crime” was being “an enemy of the people”. More about this later. I do not have many bad memories from my early childhood in Bobruisk, Belarus when my father was in the camp.

My sister was 17 when father was arrested and her memories are much different.

Mifa went to study in city of Kalinin (455 miles from Bobruisk), now Tver, in Pedagogical Institute. The reason being is because it is so far from Bobruisk. Mom hoped that nobody would check the family’s situation. In application forms Mifa stated that her father was disabled and not working.



***My sister Mifa, 20 years old, 1954***

She would not have been admitted if she told the truth about father.

In this institute was no military department so the family history checking was lax. Mifa got in with no problems. She was getting small stipend for being a good student. Mom could not support her and Mifa needed this money to stay in school.

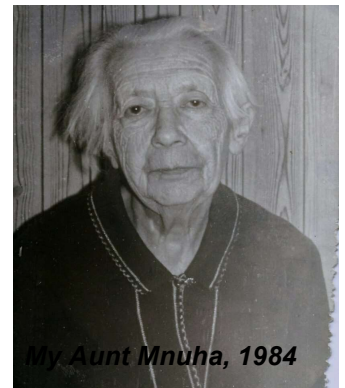
But one semester she got a "C" and stipend was cut off. Mifa would have to quit the institute if not for her Aunt Mnuha. Mnuha was a teacher and on her small teacher's salary she was helping my sister for almost a year.

Money was tight but every time Mifa would come home for a break she would bring me a gift.

I still remember some of these gifts.

Mom at that time was working at a daycare. Mifa told me that mom would not be able to keep this job if not for the daycare director. They were friends. This woman knowing where my father was somehow managed to keep mom on the job. She saved our family.

I remember our neighbor who worked with tin metal. He was making tin cans that mom used to send food to papa. I still stay in touch with his daughter Manya. Also by reading father's letters I know mom was sending him money every month. And mom also needed to support us kids. Mom had a Singer manual sewing machine and she made clothes for me. I still remember this. There wasn't much in the stores and mom could not afford to buy much anyway.



***My Aunt Mnuha, 1984***

## ***THE AREST***

### ***Memories By Our Relative Michael Goldberg***

*"Our families, Goldberg and Kagan, were not just relatives but close friends. This relationship became a foundation for a long-lasting friendship."*



*My mother's name was Riva and Nathan's mother was also Riva, but because Riva Katsnelson (Nathan's mother) was younger she was called Rivochka. We all lived in Bobruisk.*

***Michael Goldberg and his wife Valentina Goldberg, about 2008, Israel***

*Rivochka's husband Isaac Kagan was from large poor family. As I remember they had 5 brothers, they all got a good education. There was a lawyer, a doctor, and a journalist among them. Isaac graduated from the Jewish Pedagogical College. There he met Riva, his future wife. She graduated from the same college. After graduation, Isaac got a job as a journalist with a*



*Jewish newspaper. In 1930s the Soviets started to shut down Jewish cultural organizations. So the paper where Isaac worked was closed. After that he started to work in Russian language newspaper.*

*June 22, 1941 German Army invaded Soviet Union.*

*Bobruisk was a small city with a large Jewish population. On June 24 the Bobruisk population started to leave the city, and on June 26 the German Army occupied Bobruisk.*

*Our two families crossed the river Berezina on trucks provided for refugees. We were left on the other side of the river (the trucks went back to get other people). But the Germans destroyed the bridge and trucks did not come back. We continued on foot, there was a long column of refugees. After great difficulties we got to Gomel (a little over 100 miles). Rivochka's older sister Mnuha lived in Gomel. Her husband occupied high position in the Gomel's government. But they could not help us – everybody was preoccupied by their own safety. Finally we got on a freight train that was going east. After several days under German Army bombardment we got to the city Voronezh (about 450 miles).*

*My mother's sister Esther lived there.*

*After several days we moved to the village Talovaya. The war front was approaching and we were offered to evacuate to Siberia or Central Asia. We chose Siberia, and left for the city of Troitsk behind the Ural mountains. During our very difficult travels, Isaac showed heroic strength and leadership needed in such a circumstance.*

*As a member of the Communist party Isaac was given a responsibility to work in construction. Also he was responsible for collecting money needed to build tanks for the Army. Such drives were all over the country, and people gave all their savings to help the Army.*

*During this time our two families lived in one room apartment, there were 8 of us: my parents Riva and Naum, my sister Eva and myself, Rivochka and Isaac Kagan, Mifa – their daughter and Rivochka's mother Hoda.*

*Life was difficult during the war, mentally and physically. There were difficulties with food and it was hard to find a job. Everybody were waiting for good news from the war front. We discussed every announcement on the radio from the war front. Our neighbor had a radio, and we listened to the news through the wall between rooms, trying not to miss anything.*

*Rivochka's brother Rafail was drafted to the army and was sent to the front. He sent letters regularly. In winter 1943 the letters stopped coming. Later the family got the official letter about his death.*

*In spring, when the snow melted, we found his last letter on the ground near the mailbox.*

*My mother Riva worked in the hospital as a nurse, her specialty was dentistry.*

*Finally the time came when the Soviet Army started to advance pushing the Nazis to the west. The hospital was relocated further west, closer to the front. Our family moved to the Western Ukraine. But Isaac and Rivochka's family remained in Troitsk.*

*After the war, my mother was discharged and we returned to Bobruisk. Soon the Kagan family returned to Bobruisk also. Isaac Kagan started to work as a reporter in National Jewish Newspaper "Ainikite" (Unity) covering Belarus.*



*During war time the attitude towards Jews was tolerable. But after the war it became much worse. Jews were persecuted. There were cases against Jewish doctors, Jews became victims of struggle with the Cosmopolitanism, and murders of famous Jewish artists (Mikhoels).*

*Jews are being accused of sympathizing with the West and not being patriotic because the Jews did not have roots in Russia.*

**Isaac Kagan (third from the left) interviewing workers for the article in newspaper before the war, 1941**

*Isaac suspected that he was being followed. He was hiding and moving between cities. He would come to my mother's house to hide. KGB lost his whereabouts several times. When KGB representative came to the Kagan's house, Rivochka told them that Isaac is in Minsk, but she knew that Isaac actually was returning to Bobruisk at the time. She asked the neighbor to go to the train station to find Isaac and tell him about the KGB visit. The house was under surveillance, and the neighbor was arrested when she was on the way to the train station. The KGB was waiting for Isaac in the house. Isaac, on the way home from Minsk, stopped at the relative's house. They told him that KGB is waiting for him. Isaac was arrested in 1951.*

*There were two persons (Jews) who gave the false deposition against Isaac.*

*After Isaac was released from the concentration camp, he met these two on the street, and Isaac ignored them.*

*The accusations against Isaac were preposterous. There was something that he wrote in one of the articles about the workers. We are still not sure of what crimes he had been accused. He was tortured, they squeezed his fingernails. He was thrown on the back of the truck with his arms and legs tied up. They were driving on a very bumpy roads. They would put him in a steel cage in the sun for hours, would not let him sleep for several days.*

*At the beginning of his imprisonment there was the following incident – Rivochka with Mifa were walking to the train station and they passed an old castle that was used as a jail at the time. Isaac saw them and through the window bars he waved a scarf. That is how they found out where he was kept. The prosecutors were trying to create a group case in order to prosecute more people. But even under torture Isaac did not sign any false accusations. So he saved several lives. Isaac was sentenced to 10 years of hard labor in a concentration camp. (You can find information and description of concentration camps in Solzhenitsyn's book "One Day in Life of Ivan Denisovich".)*

*I saw the concentration camp prisoners in 1952. After graduation from college I was assigned a job in Siberia. The train passed station Vikhorevka where Isaac was kept. The train stopped for 5 minutes and I saw carriages loaded with different goods drawn by people instead of horses. On their backs were pieces of yellow fabric in different shapes – squares, stars, triangles, others. Isaac's health was very weak. He was sick often. In the camp he was a janitor, later he worked as a librarian.*

*In 1953 Stalin died, the process of rehabilitation (acquittal) of prisoners started right after. It took a long time to go through the appeal process. Rivochka wanted to speed it up. She got the information that Isaac's case was in the prosecutor's office of the Baltic Navy in Riga. She went to Riga and got an appointment with the prosecutor. He was very polite, he had Isaac's case for review, and promised to review the case as soon as possible. After several hours he invited Rivochka in his office, offered her chair, and asked "Could you tell me what was the reason for Isaac's conviction?" Isaac was released in 1956.*

*At that time I had a job in Minsk and it happened that I was the only one to meet Isaac on the train station. Smiling Isaac walked toward me, he had a little briefcase. He looked sick, he was troubled by heart pains. To celebrate we went to the restaurant and during the dinner he was talking about life in the camp and prison. He said that in jail he was going to sleep and waking up just with one thought – home. Isaac passed away in 1958 from heart attack and buried in Bobruisk.*

### **MEMORIES FROM MY CHILDHOOD FRIEND MANYA (who is a year older than me)**

*In 1952, someone wrote a denunciation on Isaac. The kagebisty (KGB) came one early morning in May, but that day he was with relatives in Pukhovichi (a town near Bobruisk). After a while, the KGB seemed to be gone. Aunt Riva (as I called her) decided that it would be necessary to warn her husband that he should not return home, but she was afraid to go out for fear to be watched. She immediately ran up to us and asked my mom to do it. Aunt Riva went to her home, and my mother quickly got dressed and ran to the station. When she took the ticket at the box office to Pukhovichi, she was approached from two sides. They took her by the arms and she was taken to the KGB. Questioning was led by some woman:*





**My mom (sitting left) with our neighbors: Manya (Maria, standing) and her mother Sarra. Manya's letter is attached.**

- Where is your neighbor Isaac Kagan?
  - I do not know where he is. Gone somewhere, but I do not know where.
  - Why did you suddenly come to go to Pukhovichi? And in such a hurry that you didn't have time to button your coat?
  - No, I'm not in a hurry, and in Pukhovichi I was going, because that's where my brother lives.
  - What's the name of your relatives in Pukhovichi ?
- Mom called the name and the address where she allegedly was going.

Relatives of my Uncle Borya really lived in Pukhovichi. The woman from the KGB was silent, thinking.

- How are you not ashamed? You are from a proletarian family, your husband is a working, honest man, he has excellent characteristics . And you're helping a criminal!
- No, I do not. I just wanted to go to Pukhovichi.
- All right, go for now.



**1953 I am in the middle. My friend Manya is to the left.**

Mom was released and she came home. She did not dare to go to Aunt Riva to tell her, because after the interview, it became clear that Isaac's house had been watched. My sister Dusya told this story later to Mifa as they were preparing for year end exams.

The KGB arrested Uncle Isaac in Pukhovichi on the same day and drove him to Bobruisk to see his family. He served four years in prison, came back in 1956, when Khrushchev came to power. He was already very sick, but was never talking about his time in GULAG camp. He only said that he survived and did not sign the documents on his guilt. He added: I had been given a written confidentiality agreement. And I do

not want to get sent there again. So better I do not tell.

A year after her father's arrest, Mifa (Nathan's older sister) needed to enroll in the university. But where? Who will take her? It is the same procedure everywhere you had to fill out questionnaires, and who needs the daughter of the enemy of the people?

She wrote in the questionnaire that her father was a worker but is on the disability now. It was impossible to check each student's truthfulness.

Mifa was accepted to the institute in the city Kalinin (Tver).

But to trick the KGB who may possibly make trouble for her, the family decided to tell everyone that Mifa will study in Moscow. Once, a friend of my sister Dusya said:

– “I was in Moscow, in this institute, but did not see Mifa.”

– “And what department you've been?”

– “Math.”

– “No, she's in physics.”

That was it. No one but us knew that Mifa is studying in Tver, only when she graduated from college and got a diploma could you tell the truth.

When Uncle Isaac was arrested, his brother Uncle Lev, who lived in the house next door, was afraid for himself and his family. And the fear was that, who knows for whom they come the next time. He quickly rented his house and moved with his family to the city of Smolensk. In Bobruisk, he worked as assistant principal at the school, so to get a teacher position in Smolensk was not difficult. His wife was a dentist, doctors were needed everywhere, so she found a job too. Their two girls were still in school.

## LETTERS FROM MY FATHER IN GULAG

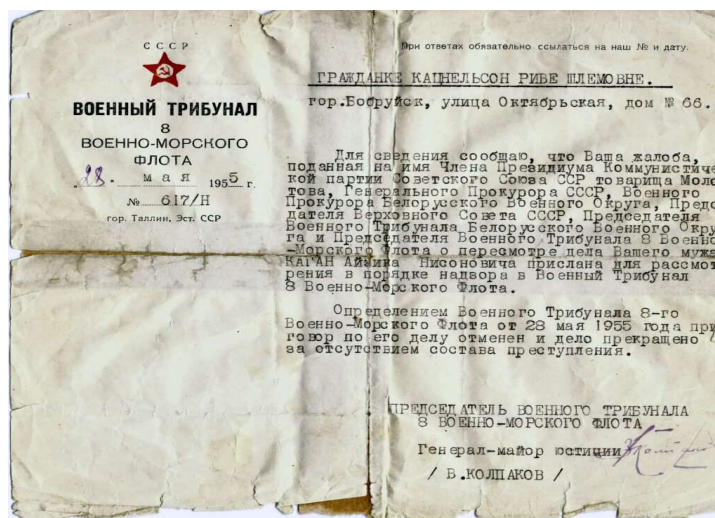
Stalin died in 1953. My father was fully exonerated and released in 1956. Please see the the translation of the official document from the 8th Navy Fleet Tribunal overturning the conviction. Below are his telegrams and letters before and after he received the news.



**Isaac Kagan, 1950 (one year before arrest)**

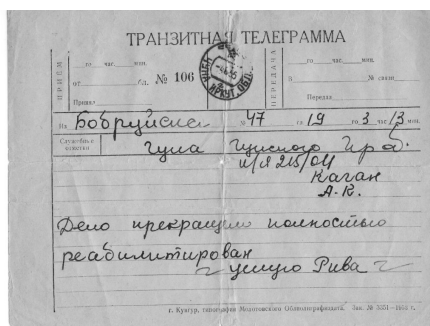


**Isaac Kagan, 1955 (one year before coming home from GULAG)**

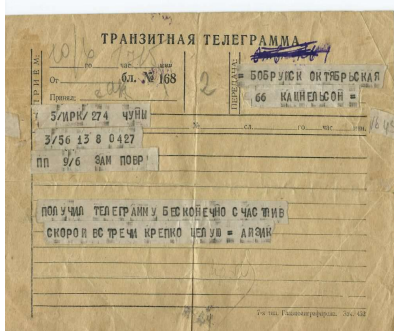


**Official paper of USSR military tribunal dated May 28, 1955 given to Riva Katsnelson.**

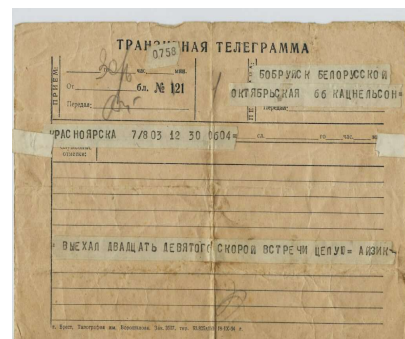
**“For your information, I inform you that your complaint sent to Member of the Communist Party Committee of the Soviet Union SSR comrade Molotov (First Vice Premier of the Soviet Union), General Prosecutor of the USSR, Military Prosecutor of the Belorussian Army (and other official offices )..... to review your husband, Kagan, Isaac Nisonovich's, case was received. As of May 28, 1955, 8th Navy Fleet Military Tribunal decided to overturn sentencing and the case is closed due to the lack of evidence of crime”.**



**March 1956. Telegram from Isaac to Riva.**  
**Got the telegram. Infinitely happy. See you very soon.**  
**Kisses, Isaac**



**1955, Telegram from Riva to Isaac.**  
**The case is no more. Fully exonerated. Kiss you, Riva.**



**Telegram from Isaac to Riva.**  
**Left on the 29th. See you soon.**  
**Kisses, Isaac.**

## **LETTER BEFORE NEWS OF RELEASE**

### **From Isaac:**

Dear Riva and kids,

The first page of the new calendar 1955 is open already. Despite the accepted rules for good wishes at the end of the letter. I start my New Year's letter exactly with these. Let this new year be the year of happy reunion, happy family life! It's really time now for it. (It is long overdue.) Although last year was so full of happy hopes of reunion; hopes that in the new year we will be together, but the time is not here yet, I guess. In reality, the time came a long time ago, but we were not successful yet in proving my innocence, although it is like proving the obvious that  $2+2=4$ .

So far, the time stretches as in the past. My head is heavy from all kind of thoughts, assumptions, dreams.

Only in my dreams at night, there are happy moments that I am finally home, next to my dear family. Everybody together, you my dear wife Riva, my dear children, myself, walking on the streets of Bobruisk, in the center – prematurely gray-haired father and mother, on each side – kids. People smile at us, friends, relatives. My happy little son, shows me his school. And suddenly, seeing his teacher he says whispering – “This is my teacher.” People say about my daughter – “How good she is, how lovely she looks.”

The blood pulses faster in my temples from such thoughts, and I feel endless happiness.

It is evening, home, everybody is here. The whole family is together at night. My son is sitting at the table and doing his homework. My good “old lady” Riva is fixing some clothes.

Grandma is busy in the kitchen. I am next to my dear wife reading a book to her aloud, combining pleasure with necessity. How wonderful everything is around me! Every corner of the house, every piece in the house has this sense of a warm feeling of family, the feeling is so warm, so joyous, we should live like that for thousands of years.

But... somebody knocked. I open my eyes, was this a dream? How fleeting was the dream!

I am forcing myself to close my eyes – come back, come back my sweet, happy dream. What a wonderful feeling I had 2 minutes ago, how good I felt!



*But I cannot fall asleep again. And again different thoughts are taking over me. I start to dream, try to continue my dream. But my heart is heavier and heavier, I feel harsh reality – my dear house, my dear family is far away, a thousand kilometers from here.*

*New Year night is here. What is awaiting me, what paths, what kind of life?*

*I am telling myself with trepidation: “My health, the most important thing, please do not let me down, help me to see my beloved wife, my dear children, my relatives and close friends.”...*

*My dear friend, New Year, please bring health and happiness to all of us, to all who are close to my heart, let our dream of our reunion become true.*

*Be healthy my dear!*

*Big kisses. Your Isaac.*

## **LETTER TO 7-YEAR OLD NATHAN**

*January 12, 1955*

*My dear son!*

*Although I have not received an answer from you on my first letter, I decided to write you a second letter. I am not upset that you did not answer me on my first letter. I know that you are very busy: you get up at 9 a.m., you have to get dressed, put shoes on, wash yourself, eat breakfast, and then do your homework while your head is still clear. And of course how can you miss playing outdoors in fresh air? It is all important. In no time you need to go to school. There are other things to do after school: wash your hands, eat dinner and of course play outside. And then again homework – reading, writing, arithmetic. And mama is always there watching that everything is done good, neat, clean. And what about reading fairy tales? You need time for all these things. Days are not long enough. How can I be upset, my dear son, knowing all of these? Of course, not.*

*When you will grow up, then you will understand a lot, and how good, nice and warm your father feels reading tiny letters from his beloved first grade son. To tell you the truth, at your age I did not read or write in Russian. It was not my fault. There was no school, especially for poor people. Nobody could afford to pay for education. Our family was big, we were poor. Your grandfather (my father) was a very sick man, and your grandmother (my mother) was sick. Of course, they worked but it was not enough. Times were very tough – it was before the revolution (before 1917), then it was civil war, destruction. Your teacher probably talked about it.*

*I remember, when I was little, there was no bread in the house. It happened very often- so what should you do? So I took a little sack and went to the fields (after harvesting) to gather rye, wheat, oats and barley spikelets. I used to put a sack on my neck, walk bare feet on harvested field and look here and there for a remains of the spikelets. The straw was spiky and they would prick my feet, it hurt, my feet bled, but I had to collect spikelets as much as I could. Because my family wanted to eat, my smaller brothers were asking for bread. Before dusk I would have my sack full, then same on second day and the third. We would dry the spikelets on the stove, beat*

*them to get grains, and to my mother's great joy would take the grain to the mill. Finally I carried flour home. My mother, my good and dear mother bakes bread. Oh, the smell of the fresh bread! How tasty the bread is when there is not enough of it! You take a piece and in a moment it is all gone.*

*We needed potatoes, but there was no money. What can be done? So, my mother would take our cloth, and her and I would go to the nearest village to exchange cloth for potatoes. You can survive without cloth, you still can use the old one, the ripped one. One day later, after exchanging cloth for potatoes we were going home. Good people gave us a horse and buggy. I was the driver, but when we were passing a corner of one of the houses, the buggy turned to the side of the house, and my mom got caught in between the buggy and the house. There was 1000 pounds of potatoes. Her head was pressed to the house at her temple. How could I, so little, turn the buggy? What should I do? Mama made hard, terrible moans. I was so scared, I screamed suddenly so loud – "mama, dear mama", with such horror, that the horse got scared and with all her force dragged the buggy in the opposite direction from my mother. I ran to my mom, her tired face was pale blue, there were tears in her eyes. I hugged her very tight, started to kiss and begged her "mama, dear mama, please live, live". She looked at me, and probably saw my very scared face washed with my tears, and started to calm me. I still remember this accident, I will probably never forget it.*

*My dear son, your father had a tough childhood. Very difficult. I am trying to remember all my childhood years and cannot come up with a happy moment. Like a dark night. Then after the Revolution when the Soviets came, our life changed. I went to school and the sun started to shine for poor people. But I will write about it next time, how I wound up at school and so on.*

*I am sending you my picture. Study well, my dear and beloved son, listen to adults, do not upset your mother and grandmother. I love you very-very much and kiss you. Kiss your mother for me many times.*

*Your father Isaac.*

### **LETTER AFTER NEWS OF RELEASE**

*So many thoughts, I do not know where to start.*

*You can imagine what I felt having received your long awaited telegram!*

*To tell you the truth, they prepared me before giving me the telegram out of concern for my heart, so that the wonderful news would not cause my heart to explode because of joy.*

*Any way, first I felt cold, then I started to profusely perspire. My heart was beating so hard that I pressed my hand over it, so that it would not jump out of my chest.*

*The telegram I did not let go from my hand. I read it and reread it. I could not even imagine going to sleep. What sleep? I am laying down and my thoughts are already far-far away, thousands kilometers away.*

*I don't even need to describe to you what I feel. I know you feel the same, my darling.*

*The truth of my innocence prevailed. I sent you a response telegram the same day. You probably got it already. Of course it will take time to get the official document about my release, but this is OK now, although I want to get home as soon as possible to my dear family.*

*I will travel through Minsk, because Minsk train comes to Bobruisk in the evening, vs. Gomel train that comes to Bobruisk at night. I will let you know the day of arrival by telegram.*

*Do not send money, I will manage. There are no obstacles when one is finally going home! I doubt there will be a happier person on the train than me. Of course not!*

*I will write you often, so that you will not be worrying about me. As I said, it is not known how much time will pass until they officially release me.*

*Hope we will get together soon. Till then my dear family!*

*See you very soon. Hello to all relatives and friends.*

*Hugs and kisses.*

*Your Isaac.*

### **FATHER COMES HOME BUT ALL IS NOT WELL**



**!1956. With my father (I am 9 years old)**

Mom told me later that when father finally came home I asked him “Daddy are you really my dad?”

Father got a job as contributor to local newspaper. He became active in school. Became school board president. I don’t remember much of these years with my father. But life got easier for mom. She was not alone anymore. And all of a sudden we got a lot of friends. In our city Bobruisk many knew my father. So we always had people in the house.

### **HEART ATTACK**

It did not last long. One evening father was in bed. He called my name. When I came to him he asked for mom. Mom came out of the bedroom with a strange expression on her face and in flat and quiet voice told me that father is having a heart attack. Being 11 it did not quite register in my head. I do not remember much about these nightmarish 4 days. Just father’s terrifying moaning and heavy breathing, going to pick up oxygen bottles, strange people in our house. Father passed away on the fourth day. It was 1958. He lived 2 years after his return. For some reason he was not taken to the hospital. I guess at that time there was not much could be done to save him. My father was 50 my mom was 47. Mom never remarried. Later on when I asked why she told me that she was afraid the step father will not be nice to us kids.



## **Chapter 3**

### **SCHOOL YEARS**

At school I was an OK student but I did not really put much effort to study. My natural abilities saved my butt (most of the time). Mom decided that after the 7<sup>th</sup> grade I will go to vocational



**1957, 3rd grade (I am 10 )**



**1962, 8th grade (I am 15)**

school in Minsk. In order to get there you need to pass the entrance exams. So Mom sent me to Minsk to my Uncle Haim, father's older brother, while I was taking the exams (4 of them). The competition was high and I did not get in. So I went to school for another year and then tried again. I got in this time. I was moving to the big city – Minsk. I will be living in a dorm. Because of my decent grades and considering the family situation (no father), I got a small stipend (30 rubles a month). That was equivalent \$30.00 at the time. Only now do I realize how hard it must have been for mom to send me away.

### **MOVE TO MINSK TO STUDY IN TECHNICAL SCHOOL**

Mom came to Minsk with me before the school start. But mom could not stay in Minsk. She had to go back to work. I remember standing alone on the train station watching the train leaving to Bobruisk. Mom was going back home. Alone on the empty platform and surrounded by the cold and indifferent space. I still remember the loneliness, the emptiness, the sadness of a child lost in a strange place. **I was 15**. But after a few months I actually started to like Minsk, my new friends, even school, also every Jew in the dorm experienced antisemitism. But that was a norm in the country.

At the time in order to call home I had to go to the central phone station in the city, request a phone call and wait until the call goes through.. Then you go in the phone booth and talk. Of course being 15 I didn't do it. And after a while I would get a telegram from mom: "I am worried. Are you OK?" Then I would go to the Telephone Central and call.

## **COLLECTIVE FARM**

One thing worth mentioning is students going to collective farms (**Kolhoz**) to help with picking crops. Mostly picking potatoes. Each year in October students are sent to a collective farm for a couple of weeks. Each student was assigned a house to stay in (2 students in each house). The owners were not too happy about it because they have to feed the “volunteers”. But they had no choice. One year our host was so mad about having us in her house she did not cook for us so we lived on milk and bread that was given to us by the authorities each day.

Each morning we would go in the field and follow the tractor that plows the potato rows. We were supposed to collect potatoes in the baskets and then empty the full basket in a pile. We were young city kids who did not feel the responsibility so we would mostly just bury potatoes with our boots without bending over much.

After the workday was over we would get together and drink local moonshine and have a good time. So we did not complain. After the collective farm experience we knew why our country (Soviet Union) could not provide food for its citizens. Nobody cared. It was not ours, not anybody's.

Everything in the Soviet Union belonged to everybody and that is why nobody cared.



**1964, Minsk Polytechnic school, going to the farm (2<sup>nd</sup> from the left)**

## **GOVERNMENT SPONSORED ANTI SEMITISM**

I always felt that I am not the same as others. I remember us kids playing on the street and a neighbor's house cleaning lady approached and started to pass candies. But to me she said that I am a Jew and I did not get a candy. And I told mom about it and she was very upset.

I felt it on the streets, in the summer camp, in technical school, in the Army. I knew that Jews are not accepted in prestigious universities. Many companies and government organizations did not hire Jews. But for some reason Jews were accepted in engineering schools in limited number. Every higher education school had a quota on how many Jews they are allowed to accept. And yet I did believe in the Soviet system for many years.

### **Chapter 4** **My mother**

When I was 3 or 4 I would wake up at night crying and mom would pick me up and the bad dream would go away.

Mom was working and Baba Hoda, my grandma was taking care of me. Grandma could hardly walk so I was doing whatever I wanted to do, spending most of the time on the street.

I was 5 and my sister was 17 when my father was arrested and mom was left with two of us. On just mom's salary, we struggled to survive.



***September 1, first day of school  
(national day), 1971***

Our vegetable garden helped to provide fruits and vegetables for the year. Mom made clothes for us. Only when I grew up did I understand how hard it had been for mom to raise two kids alone. It did not help that I was not well-behaved. But I knew mom would take care of me when I came home dirty and bleeding. She always did. Many of our relatives were afraid to stay near the family of the “enemy of the people”. We were basically alone. My sister went to college far away because mom feared for her safety as the daughter of the “enemy of the people”.

I remember crying when mom left to visit father in Siberia. Not sure why I was crying so hard. It must have broken her heart. Mom was 40 or 41. She traveled for a week in a freight train carrying criminals to jail. My sister Mifa was home during the break and took care of me and grandmother when mom was away.

Father was exonerated after Stalin died and came home when I was 8. I remember bottles of wine, vodka covering the floor for weeks. All of a sudden we had a lot of friends.

I was not used to having a father. Life changed. Mom was happy. It lasted 2 years. One evening my father was in a bed. He called out to me and asked for mom. He had a heart attack.

Bypass surgery was not an option in those years. Father was at home. I slept in the same room. Every night I listened to his labored breathing, afraid to fall asleep. He passed away on the fourth night. I was 11, Mifa was 23, mom was 47.

Mom never remarried out of concern for us, her kids. She worked in a kindergarten, then in a boarding school. Money was tight but mom made sure that her kids are OK.

I left my home in the 8th grade when I went to technical school and again when I was drafted into the army. Shortly after I was drafted, the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia. Reservists were called and our unit was next to go to Czechoslovakia. All communication with our families stopped. Later mom told me how scared she was for me.

There is so much that we kids do not understand. So much that we do not appreciate about what our mothers are going through, worrying for us. Many of us start to understand when we become parents. But sometimes it is too late. I cannot go back in time.

So in Mom’s life she was always worried about father in Siberia, daughter in Tver, son in Minsk, then in the army, and finally in America.

## **Chapter 5**

### **The Soviet Army**

The Soviet military was based on the draft system. So as soon as I graduated from the technical school with degree in optics I was drafted and sent to city of Slutsk where the tank division was stationed. I was in a special technical battalion that supported the equipment. My responsibility was to check and repair optical devices like binoculars, sights, stereoscopes and so on. The average draft term was 3 years. Of course antisemitism was there too but I got lucky. Our battalion commander was a Jew. In our unit we had to go through physical training just like everybody else. I was in good shape and did not have too many problems with that. I did not try to avoid or to skip any challenges that the army life is full of. That earned me respect from other soldiers and the officers. Some soldiers were telling me that I am more like them, not like a Jew. They considered me an exception, a “good Jew”. In the second year I was promoted to sergeant.

#### **INVASION IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA**

During my first year 1968 there was invasion in Czechoslovakia by the Soviet Union. Reservists were called in. We were moved in the forest where tents were erected for us, the regular army, and for the reservists. Reservists started to arrive and you could hear the drunken songs for miles. Everyone of them was drunk. We all expected to go to Czechoslovakia. There was not much dissent. At that time the mood in the army was “we will crush the uprising” but nobody really wanted to go.

We lived in the tents for a couple of months ready to go to Czechoslovakia. The mood was somber. During that time a few men from our unit, myself included, were sent to Bobruisk to load some supplies and while there we stopped at our house. Mom fed us, we rested and drove away. I told mom not to expect letters for a while not knowing if we will get an order to go. Later mom told me that this broke her heart. She was afraid of losing me too. But eventually we did not get the orders, our battalion did not go and the reservists were let go back to civilian life. And eventually life in our unit returned back to normal.

#### **BABA HODA PASSED AWAY**

In my second year in the army I got a call from home. Grandma, Baba Hoda died. She was 93. My commander gave me pass for 3 days for the funeral. That is when, during the funeral, I finally felt the guilt for making Baba’s life so difficult. But sometimes we understand that we hurt others too late.

#### **THE ANNA CONNECTION**

During my three years in the army I became friends with a Jewish soldier from Minsk. He is the reason I met my wife Anna. But I will explain later.



## **MOONSHINE**

There were many draftees from Asian republics. None of them was too patriotic or liked the Soviet regime too much. But of course they kept their feelings to themselves. One soldier in my unit was from Tajikistan. He was allowed 1 week leave. He came back and brought a large bottle of moonshine. Somehow my staff sergeant learned about it and came to my optical clean room to try the moonshine. And he was not the only one to find out. So the stuff was gone in a day.

## **AND OTHER BOOZE**

Now that so many years passed I can admit that I have sinned. Because of the nature of my responsibilities I had to travel to army units in and around the city (Slutsk) to work on the optical devices – inspections, testing, repairs. So I had a paper allowing me to travel free in case I will be stopped by military patrol. And other soldiers knew that and would ask me to buy wine while I was in the city. So yes I have sinned! I have done it several times. And because the officers trusted me nobody ever checked my pockets.

Another fond memory. We needed pure alcohol to clean the optics. We would order 4 times as much as needed knowing that most of it will not reach us and whatever makes it most likely will not be used for optics cleaning. The fact that I was getting the stuff contributed to better relations with some enlisted men.

## **Chapter 6**

### ***After the Army, the Job and the Disillusion***

Three years seems like a long time but in retrospect time flies fast. And so in 1968 I was discharged and returned to civilian life. Some friends helped me to find a job as a technical information engineer. I was to follow innovations in mechanical production field and to introduce them to the management.

The most important part of my job just like almost any job in the Soviet Union was to write the report at the end of every quarter outlining the successful completion of the period. Of course all this was just fiction and everybody knew that. One time I got tired of that and prepared a true report saying that we did not successfully complete the quarter. And of course I got in trouble and the chief engineer ordered me to rewrite the report. I did. That incident contributed a little bit to my decision to emigrate later on.

The job was not that difficult and I had a chance to study during work hours when I started my higher education.

## **Chapter 7**

### ***Higher Education***

In our family we did not have many debates about it because it was kind of clear that I will try to get into engineering school. So I spent summer at home in Bobruisk preparing for entrance

exams to Minsk Polytechnic Institute with major in precise measuring equipment. Night program. I will have to work and attend school in the evening. I passed the entrance exams and became a student again. I did it! My Minsk relatives helped me to find a place to rent. It was a room in the single family house that I shared with another guy. Classes were 4 times a week from 6:00 till 11:00pm. The hardest part was not to fall asleep during class. This particular experience helped me to sit through boring meetings later in life without falling off the chair. Also though it was not easy to go through this type of education it never crossed my mind to quit.

It was 5 year program and I am proud to say I did it. I graduated with pretty good grades. I want to add that it was not just work and study. We had activities and fun just like many young people. Parties, girls (not me of course – I was waiting for Anna that I haven't met yet). We spent time with friends. Went on trips like kayaking, camping and so on. There was no designated territory for camping. Anywhere in the forest we liked we would stop and put up the tent, start the campfire and prepare food. And we never forgot the booze of course.

## ***Chapter 8***

### ***Tire Manufacturing Plant***

After graduation I quit my job as a mechanical engineer and got a new job as an automation systems specialist. One of my long term assignments was tire manufacturing plant being built in Bobruisk. One of the largest and most advanced in the country. Our task was a final assembly and troubleshooting of the automatic tire assembly conveyor system in the plant.

One episode was sad and funny. The IBM computer was purchased for the plant. In the seventies it was a big deal. Very expensive. And somebody stole the hard drive. At that time the drives had a huge shiny disk. I guess that was the reason. Not sure what you do with it. But it was gone.

### ***ITALIAN TOOLS***

We worked with Italian engineering firm that designed the automatic conveyor system for the plant. In a short time all their tools were stolen. You could not buy good tools in the Soviet Union. So one can sell these for a good price. The Italians usually left their tools in a locked room but somebody broke in. Not only the tools were gone. The thief pooped on the floor right in the middle of the room.

## ***Chapter 9***

### ***Anna***

### ***HOW WE MET***

But back to a very important occurrence in my life. My army friend and still my friend, Iliya Fainberg, asked me for a favor. The family friend's daughter was coming to Minsk from Lvov and Iliya's parents asked him to entertain her. I guess a part of the reason was hope that they will like each other. But he was going out of town on the business trip and besides he had a girlfriend at

the time (she was not Jewish). So he asked me to substitute. I have to say I wasn't too happy about the deal but a friend is asking. So I agreed, but the problem was that Iliya have never seen the girl and could not tell if she was pretty or otherwise. So I came to his office where we are to meet the girl. I was nervous because in case she is "otherwise" I will be a target of a lot of jokes. So we both are peeking from behind the door waiting for her to show up. And when she walked in I felt somewhat relieved. She was OK. (Just kidding! She was cute.) Looked very young and very serious. Her name was Anna. So for next several days I showed her the city to the best of my limited abilities. I was not a history or architecture buff. But I liked the city and was enjoying showing it.



**Anna, 1975, Lvov  
(now Lviv), Ukraine**

Anna was 20 and still in college. I was 27, out of the Army, working, just graduated evening college, and a certified engineer. So I felt superior in many ways. But I am still embarrassed to admit that I was flat broke at the time and Anna paid for some of our activities (she still reminds me about it once in a while). Also after spending some time with Anna my superiority complex evaporated soon enough.

Anna left in a few days – back to Lvov and to college and I returned to my normal schedule. She wrote me a card thanking me for spending time with her showing the city. I responded. Often I was out of town on business trips with not much to do in the evenings. So we started to exchange letters. That was going on for two years. We still have these letters.

### **PROPOSAL**

Summer of 1976. I was on vacation on the Black Sea in Odessa. On the way back I stopped in Lvov (with Anna's permission). Her parents were out of town on vacation and she offered to stay in their apartment. As a modest good girl, she stayed in her girlfriend's Galina Boyko apartment (little disappointment).

So we spent a couple of days in Lvov wandering around the city, Anna would show me the city, tell history of some old parts of Lvov. We checked out bars and restaurants. Had a good time. On the train station, going back to Minsk, I proposed. I did not stand on my knee and I did not have the ring. I just asked if she would marry me. She did not hug me and she did not cry. She did not act surprised. Anna just said that she needs to think about it. And of course I did not want to be pushy. That was the bravest thing I had ever done anyway. Besides I needed to think about it too.

### **SHE SAID YES!**

By the time my train arrived in Minsk I was pretty sure that I did the right thing by proposing. So now I will have to wait. After two month of waiting I got nervous. If it takes her that long to decide she must be not too crazy about me. (Only much later she told me that she had a fiance at the time I proposed.) So I decided to call and ask if Anna made up her mind. She picked up and I asked if she made a decision. Anna said "yes". Well being stupid I asked "is it positive or

negative?" "Positive". "Positive for whom?" I asked stupidly. "For you" she said. Now after 40 years together I think she was right (that it was positive for me, I mean).

And I realized that I am almost a married man. I was in Bobruisk at the time. So in the evening I told mom that I am getting married. I need to add that mom never heard about Anna. But she was so happy that I am finally getting married that she did not even ask who is the girl and where she lives. I guess she didn't want to jinx it or maybe she suspected something. It is hard to fool mom.

## **THE WEDDING**



**April 21, 1977, Lvov, Ukraine,  
City Hall**

I will not go into details about the preparations and the wedding. Suffice to say that I was not involved in the planning process and I did not complain about it. One thing may be interesting. The wedding was scheduled on April 22 in Lvov. But this day was celebrated as Lenin's Birthday and everybody was supposed to "volunteer" their time to work without pay honoring Lenin. So, many people from Minsk could not come. Because if they will not "volunteer" they will get in trouble at work.



**April 21, 1977, Lvov,  
Ukraine, Restaurant**



**City of Berdyansk, Ukraine, 1977  
(Honeymoon)**

## **HONEYMOON**

For our honeymoon we decided to go to the city of Berdyansk on the Azov Sea. A mid-size seaport. Nothing fancy. We flew from Minsk to Kiev, from Kiev we boarded a small river cruise ship on the Dnieper River. Spent a few days on the ship. We got to Berdyansk by bus. When we got out of the bus, there were a few older women offering rents. So we went with one of them to her house. She offered a part of one of the rooms separated by a curtain. At that point we were too tired and agreed for one ruble per day. The shower was outside in a little wooden hut. Water

for the shower was on the top in a metal barrel heated by the sun. We were ready for our honeymoon!

For breakfast we were buying food at the local market, for dinner we went to local cafes and restaurants. I remember that once we asked what soups they serve. The waiter was shocked. "It is a restaurant," he said. "We don't serve soup in a restaurant!" To his understanding soup was a peasant food way below the restaurant level.

We had a quiet couple of weeks in Berdyansk. On the beach, walking around town, farmers market. On the last day we decided to spend the money we still had on a fancy dinner. We ordered char-grilled chickens, cognac, something else. We had a great time. We were to fly to Lvov next morning and we had tickets. And we spent our last money in the restaurant.

Next morning we were at the airport. Well what I call airport was a small building and not much else. A few minutes before the scheduled departure there was an announcement that the flight is canceled. No explanation, no further details. They told us to come next morning. We were in shock. We had a couple of rubles left and no place to stay.

We went back to the place we stayed and asked the woman to stay one more night. She agreed and we gave her one ruble. So we were left with one ruble. We were not in the best mood of course because in 1977 in the Soviet Union there were no credit cards. But not a big deal. One day only.

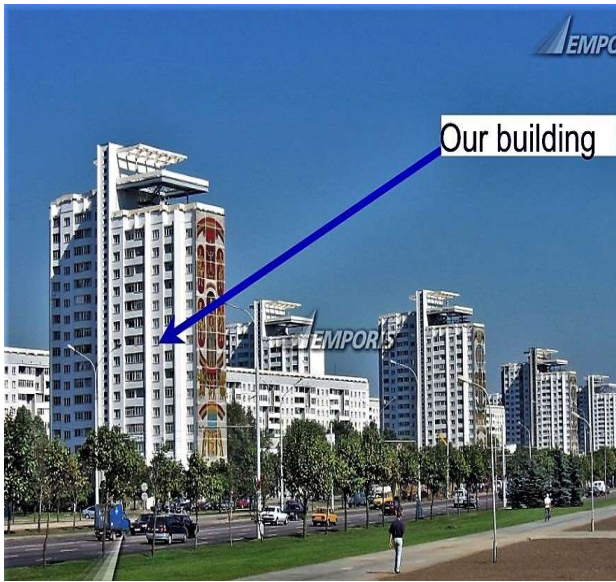
Next day we were at the airport ready to fly back. Then we hear the announcement that our flight is canceled. Again. And no further information. Now we were getting nervous. And angry. There was a plane on the runway. Anna found out that the plane is flying to Kishinev (Moldova) departing soon. That was not exactly our destination but Kishinev is closer to Lvov than Berdyansk. At this point we were ready to walk to Lvov. NO seats. Anna noticed the pilot heading toward this plane and we walked right up to him and explained the situation. Anna said that we have to get on this plane. As it turned out the pilot was a nice man and he told us to wait near the plane and he will try to help. So we were just standing there with our suitcases. Two lost miserable young kids. Finally the pilot told us to get in. We felt better. The flight attendant seated us in the flight attendant seats. Finally we were going somewhere!

The flight had one stop in city of Krivoy Rog. There was no airport in this industrial city of over a half a million people. Just a field, a wooden toilet and that was it. Plus cows in the fields nearby. In a half an hour we took off to Kishinev and got there in the afternoon. In Kishinev we had enough money (one ruble) to buy some pickles – that was our dinner. We were on a stand-by to Lvov and finally got lucky. We got on the plane and were in Lvov in the evening. The end of our exciting honeymoon.



## Chapter 10 Married Life

### NEW CONDO



***Our building, Minsk, Belaru, (Vostok 1 region)***



After the wedding I left for Minsk and my wife (sounded strange at the time) stayed in Lvov to finish college. She was working on diploma project at the time.

Two years prior I finally got the condominium. In order to buy a condo you have to apply and wait in a long line for years. Mom helped with money. All the money had to be paid in a lump sum during the purchase. No mortgages. The condo was 2000 rubles. At that time mom's salary was around 100 rubles per month.

It was a studio about 500 square feet. The main room was 360 sq. feet, the kitchen 90. There was a toilet and separate bathroom and a good size balcony. But the condo was far from ready. It took me with help of my friends a few days to clean up the place to make it livable. The builders did not bother with such details as cleaning the place. For example the toilet tank was filled with concrete. But I was lucky my place was on the second floor. The elevators were not working for two more months. This is 16 floor building. One detail – all the walls were concrete. No drywall. So putting a nail into the wall was challenging to say the least.

### **A FAMILY MAN**

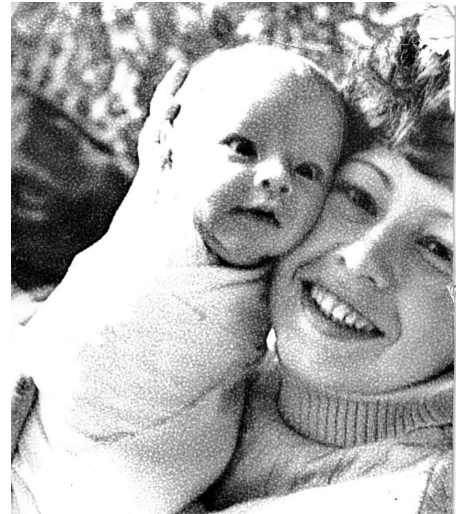
Finally I was ready for Anna's arrival. She graduated and left home in a few days after. She was 23. My relative, friend and my best man Boris Alperovich owned a car so I asked him to drive to the station to pick up my WIFE. But we mixed up the time and came an hour too early. After we found out we drove to his house and were playing cards for an hour. Then we came back and there she was. My wife (!) was standing there with 2 suitcases – all her belongings. She looked so young. Now I am a family man!

That was June 1977.

## **FIRST CHILD**

Inna was born May 3 1978. That night we had relatives for dinner. Around 11pm it started. So I ran out, grabbed a cab and we drove to the clinic. No relatives were allowed inside including husbands. No exceptions. So after the nurse took Anna inside I went back home and went to sleep. I called the clinic at 8:00 am and was told that we have a daughter. So for men it actually was much easier to give birth in the Soviet Union. You just drop off your wife and go to sleep.

Anna and Inna spent a week in the clinic. No visitors allowed inside. Anna's mom Sheyna came to Minsk as soon as she found out. We could see Anna and the baby through the window and communicate by exchanging paper notes (we still have them).



***Anna with Inna (Innochka)  
May, 1978 Minsk***

One of the problems with our condo was heat, or rather cold. Hot water radiators were used to warm the building and there were no thermostats. The radiators were built inside the outer wall. The room temperature would not go above 57 degrees Fahrenheit. So we hired a guy to cut into existing pipe in the wall and to install an extra radiator in the room. We were ready for the baby.

We did not know anything about the existence of diapers. Cheesecloth was used instead and of course we had to wash it every time. So I been doing a lot of washing. Otherwise Inna was a good baby. She slept at night. Anna's mom spent a week with us when the girls came home partly because I was working in Bobruisk at the time for a couple of months.

## ***Chapter 11 Decision to Leave the Soviet Union***

Anna and I talked about the future many times, especially after Inna was born. Anna being from Lvov had no difficulty accepting the reality that there was no future for Jews in the Soviet Union. It took quite a while for me to realize that everything I believed in was false and that the whole regime was based on misinformation and lies.

We made a decision to emigrate when Inna was about 6 month old. At that time the Soviet Union eased the restrictions on Jewish emigration to Israel. So we decided to use the opportunity. But in order to get permission to leave we needed to get an invitation from Israel. At the time (1978) Jews were only allowed to leave to Israel. So we asked our relatives in Israel to send us an invitation. We actually got two or three.

My mom was devastated when we told her about our plans to emigrate. Especially because our daughter Inna, was born. Mom was sure she will never see us again.

## **APPLICATION AND WAITING**

But to apply was not that simple. A lot of people wanted to apply and OVIR – Office of Visa and Registration had one location and was open just a few hours a week. So I had to stay in line for several days. People in line created a list and several people had to stay near OVIR at all times 24/7. We agreed to form several groups and would take turns every several hours staying on the street or on the stairwell in the building. OVIR office was in the residential building and residents were not happy about Jews hanging around their building all the time. So sometimes they would empty buckets with water on us standing in the stairwell. But that little inconvenience was not going to deter us. People were determined and this antisemitism gave just more motivation. Finally was my turn and I signed up!

Now we had to wait. We waited 6 month. The problem was that we needed some papers from work to apply. So we had to tell about our plan to emigrate. And of course that created a lot of problems for me. There were meetings condemning me for betraying the Motherland. They kept asking me during these meetings why am I going to Israel to kill Arab children. My Jewish colleagues asked me to quit because they were afraid for their jobs. Considering the situation at work, we decided that I quit my job and try to find low skill job for the time being. Unfortunately I was a marked man. When employers found out that a Jewish engineer wants a low paying job the red flag jumped up and they knew. I could not find any job and was out of work for 6 months until we got a permission to emigrate. Luckily Anna was working. At her place of work they were more relaxed about the Jewish question. And her salary also small helped us to last 6 month.

## **BAGGAGE**



***Picture for exit Visa, Anna and Inna June, 1979***

We were allowed to take baggage (to ship it). I do not remember much about the stuff we packed for shipping. But I remember we decided to buy furniture. You couldn't just go to the store and buy a good set. Somebody suggested a person to help us. We paid a woman 100 rubles tip and got the living room set for a thousand rubles. We ordered a big wooden crate and filled it full of stuff (today I would call it mostly crap). But that was all we owned and we could not just throw it away.

I don't remember the details besides that I needed to go to the border city Brest to be present during our baggage inspection. So I took a bus to Brest. I got there in the evening and customs

inspection was scheduled next day. There were many people like myself following their baggage. I found a place to stay overnight for a couple of rubles.



***Anna, Anna's mom Sheyna, Inna  
Last week in the Soviet Union.***

Locals were happy to make some extra money off Jews.



We packed two crates about 6x6x6' size each. All we owned was in these crates. Seemed important at that time. Guys at customs were having a lot of fun with these crates full of whatever stuff people thought will be needed in their country of destination. They would throw it around, show it to each other, laughing. People put some really silly things like laundry detergent in the crates. Inspectors had to show that they are vigilant so they would reject some items. And something like detergent or toilet paper would be thrown out. One of my pictures was rejected because of a bloody bandage on my head (injured in the mountains). Why? I don't know. Just in case.

I had to stay overnight. Locals were offering a bed in their houses for a couple of rubles a night. So I was staying in a house and my hostess the older woman was telling me that her son works at customs and blamed her, the mother, of being unpatriotic by letting me, the enemy, stay in her house. "But I have to make a living somehow" she told me.

In retrospect the whole baggage thing seems silly and not important. But at that time all we owned was in these crates. Except for the furniture (parts of it we still have) I do not remember much about what was in the crates. I know we sent many books and pictures. And dishes. Some of these dishes came broken.

## ***Chapter 12***

### ***America, Here We Come!***

The time came and we needed to purchase train tickets to Vienna. We had to stop in Vienna first where we would meet with Israeli representatives and let them know of our change of plans to go to America instead of Israel. I am trying to recall all the reasons why we decided to go to America, not to Israel. A large country, better opportunities. Also the way my aunt (from my father's side) was describing America she visited. Probably some security considerations. We

did not know anything about my mother's relatives at that time, so that was not a consideration. One interesting moment. When I told at work that I am leaving to Israel (we had an invitation from Israel and officially we were going to Israel) my boss took me aside. "Why Israel?" he asked. "Go to America!" I just thanked him for the advice.

The problem was that for "certain people" train seats were guaranteed just to Warsaw and then we were on our own. But we had no choice. There was no way back. We bought the tickets. We decided we will not take more than 5 suitcases with us. Considering that we did not know if our baggage will ever find us in America all our possessions were in these 5 suitcases. And Inna of course. We just could not have a lot of baggage with us because we were traveling with Inna who was one year old.



**July, 1979. Brest, Belarus.  
Border train station. Anna and  
her mom Shayna.**

Finally one day we boarded the train from Minsk to Brest.

Brest is the border town in Belarus. Anna's parents went with us for this leg of the journey. In Brest we needed to change trains to go to Warsaw.

Anna's parents, especially her mom, supported us. They always wanted to leave. They grew up before the Soviets invaded their countries. Father, Sam was born in Koretz, Poland. Mother, Sheyna, was born in Kaunas, Lithuania. So they had a much different view. For my mom our decision was a tragedy. She was convinced that if we leave we will never see each other again. And of course it made things difficult for us.

### ***ENEMIES OF THE PEOPLE***

Our train was scheduled to leave to Warsaw late at night. By the time our train arrived in Brest customs refused to inspect our luggage because it was close to 9pm when they close for the day. There was a room for mothers with babies but we were denied the room because of our status. We had to spend the night in the train station. Sleeping on the benches. We were treated as the enemies of the people and that was familiar to me. But this time I had a family of my own. And we were leaving. For good. We will be leaving soon no matter what they are trying to do to us. And that felt good.

In the morning customs opened and agents started to inspect people and the luggage.

Almost no jewelry was allowed to keep. Some adults were crying because they had to leave behind old family jewelry, wedding rings. Our wedding rings, Anna's earrings we had to give back to Anna's parents. All this belongs to the people of the Soviet Union we were told. They also checked Inna. Took Inna and Anna into a separate room and patted Inna to make sure nothing is hidden there. Enemies of the people. Again. We were treated accordingly. But finally it was over and we were ready to board the train.

Three families were escorted from the building. Ours and two others. I do not remember their faces. But the picture still vivid in my memory. Anna was 24, I was 31 and Inna was 1. And in the



two other families some were old and some very young. Armed soldiers with dogs on each side escorted us to the train. Our relatives and friends remained at the other side of the fence. I do not remember this but Anna's mom described how her daughter was waving to her and screaming, "Leave right away! Leave this country! Leave as soon as you can! They are Nazis!" As the train started to move Anna was running from window to window and kept shouting.

### ***LEAVING THIS COUNTRY BEHIND. FINALLY!***

Finally we were in the train. Moving. Leaving this country behind. Finally! I could not say "our motherland". I did not feel that. The Soviet Union never treated us as its children. More like unwanted step kids. And every minute of our life during the emigration period reinforced our belief that we are doing the right thing and we were determined to leave no matter what. I do not remember our ride to Warsaw well. I guess we were too tired. But we found out that in order to get on the train to Vienna we will have to get to another train station.

One very important thing I want to mention. Inna started to walk in Brest. So in the train she was walking all over our car.

### ***WARSAW TO VIENNA***

As soon as we arrived in Warsaw we started to look for a ride to another train station because train to Vienna was departing from the other station. We and another family found a truck driver who agreed to take us. I gave him my watch and some money. The other family paid also. I want to add that we had \$400.00 with us – maximum allowed in exchange for rubles.

So we loaded our stuff and ourselves on the pickup truck and were on our way. We got to the train station just in time. The train to Vienna was leaving in 15 minutes. Out of desperation I ran to the train conductor and offered him \$50 dollars if he lets us on the train. To my surprise he agreed and complimented me on the smart move. We barely got on the train and it took off. We had only 5 suitcases with us. The other family had about 30 suitcases and they were left behind in Warsaw.

We were so tired that we did not remember much of our travel to Vienna. We were given a separate cabin. Anna and Inna were on the bottom bench. I was on the top bench. I vaguely recall border customs agents checking our papers. Warsaw – Czechoslovakia – Austria.

But I do remember this feeling of relief when we crossed to Austria. Even the air it seems was different. Even the border agents sounded much friendlier in Austria.

### ***LIFE IN VIENNA***

We arrived in Vienna on a Saturday morning. A bus picked up all Russian immigrants and drove us to the hostel. We were assigned the rooms. Everybody was asking where to buy food. It was Saturday afternoon and stores were closing early. There was a small mom-and-pop store around the corner and we all rushed in there to buy food for a couple of days – Saturday and Sunday. A lot of food was in unfamiliar packaging but people were buying anyway. We have never seen such variety in the Soviet Union.

On Monday we were moved to a one bedroom apartment. Two families in the bedroom. Three families in the living room. Anna, Inna and I slept in one bed. In order to get to the bathroom people had to go through our room. It was never quiet enough for Inna to sleep. She had a terrible time. She was crying a lot and refused to eat. The same was during the day. Inna could not get a nap because there were people all the time. Finally because of many complaints we were relocated to a hotel and we had a room to ourselves. We could rest finally. But most important Inna felt better!

We bought an umbrella stroller for Inna and walked around this magnificent city. I don't remember many things about the details of our journey. But one moment is still fresh in my memory. It was July and it was hot. Also we did not have much money. Anna bought me chocolate ice cream. And as we started walking from the stand I dropped the ice cream! I was looking at the damn thing melting on the asphalt and felt helpless and angry. It was such a disappointment! I could feel the ice cream taste in my mouth!

We had some canned black caviar and bottles of vodka we brought with us. Many immigrants did. So a few family members, usually men, would walk the city and try to sell the goods. And we did sell most of it. Most of us the immigrant families did not have much money so that enterprise helped.

I had studied German in school and in college and slowly it was coming back. I could communicate with locals. That helped when we got lost walking around Vienna. We liked Vienna. Clean and beautiful and people are polite and helpful.

### **ON TO ITALY**

After 10 days in Vienna we were told we are going to Italy. We boarded the bus to the train station. I do not remember the details but I think we spent the night riding on the train to Rome. We arrived in the morning and boarded a bus going to the local hostel. Our luggage we left behind. It was delivered to the hostel shortly after our arrival and dumped in the big pile on the street. I remember all immigrants crawling over the pile trying to find their stuff. Locals had a blast watching this show. At first we stayed in hostel in Rome. Jewish organization gave us money and we had to find an apartment soon. Meanwhile we had a small room to ourselves which was great.

Locals considered Russian immigrants to be barbarians. And one little episode in this hostel supported this opinion. There was one bathroom for each floor. There was a bidet that is common in Europe. And one of immigrants out of ignorance pooped in this bidet. Poor janitor being an Italian was very outspoken to put it mildly about this barbaric act. He was running up and down the corridor pulling his hair and very loudly swearing in Italian.

We didn't know diapers at that time so walking with Inna in the city or shopping was like walking with a time bomb. And accidents happened in most inconvenient places. For us it was just a

small inconvenience. We were in Rome! We walked the streets of Rome! Beautiful city, strange people. Not very well behaved in our opinion. We really enjoyed our days in Rome. Everything was new and strange. Even at nights streets were crowded. You could see that these people are more relaxed, more open. Happier.

There was an area in Rome where immigrants were looking to rent an apartment that locals offered. We found the place pretty soon. Of course it wasn't an apartment. Just one room in an apartment we shared with 2 other families in Ostia, a Rome suburb. The apartment was 2 blocks away from the Mediterranean Sea and of course we would go there every day. Inna loved the sea, the beach, playing in the sand. We felt like on vacation in a beautiful resort. Our apartment was on the second floor and right below us lived a big Italian family. Every day they ate dinner outside on the patio and every day they had pasta and plenty of white wine. We liked the idea so we would buy white wine and enjoyed it almost every day. By the way the wine was very inexpensive.

While we were still in Minsk our friend who emigrated earlier wrote to us suggesting to take things to sell in Italy. Like bed sheets, cameras, tools. So we brought stuff in hopes to sell. We had about \$400.00 and could use some extra money. Every morning I would take a suitcase with things and take a bus to the market called Americana where Russian immigrants sold their stuff. There were rows of tables so I would lay out my "treasures" on one of them and wait for customers. I have to say it was surprising to me that I was selling stuff. Being a Soviet citizen and an engineer I have never done it before. And it was fun selling to the Italians. Italians love to bargain. So the guy would come up to me asking how much. And we would go back and forth. Than he would leave and come back and we would continue and actually we were enjoying the process. Eventually we would agree on the price. In a week I sold most of the things we wanted to sell.

We realized that the most important asset we can bring with us to America is the English language. Our friends that came before us told us that all the material things are not as important as our knowledge of English. Jewish organization offered English classes for Russian immigrants, so three times a week I took train to Rome for English class while Anna stayed with Inna. There were volunteers that taught the classes. I think most of them from the US. So Anna who finished an English school in Lvov stayed with Inna and I was going to Rome.

We actually enjoyed our time in Italy. I went on the tour to Florence and Venice while Anna stayed with Inna. The plan was for Anna to go when I come back. Well Anna still reminds me about it. When it was her turn we were informed that we are going to America. Finally. In some ways, we were sad to leave Italy. For the most part, we liked it there. Though some things bothered us. The main problem Russian immigrants were having is purse snatching. We were told to watch our bags at all times. From our balcony we saw an older women crossing the street. A young guy ran past her, yanked her purse and was gone before the women even could

see him. The poor woman was just standing there in the middle of the street looking around trying to understand what happened.

Also, there was a bar across the street from our apartment and all day long there were young people just sitting there. All day long. At the time, many Italians believed that Russian immigrants were leaving the Soviet Union because they did not want to work. That was so astoundingly stupid that it reinforced our not so flattering opinion of Italians.

### ***THE DEAD GRANDMOTHER***

The family that stayed in next room came from Moscow. They had a direct flight to Vienna. The woman's mother in a wheelchair was leaving with them. But she died just before the boarding started. If the family tells the authorities they would be held in Moscow and to get new tickets would be very difficult. So they loaded the dead grandmother on the airplane, put her in the seat and that is how they flew to Vienna where they buried her. There are many graves in Vienna and Rome where immigrants' parents are buried.

### ***ONWARD TO AMERICA!***

And finally the day came. We boarded the bus to the airport. One interesting moment. There was a weight limit per person on how much luggage was allowed (the flight was a charter flight). At the check-in agents were checking the luggage and also were weighing every passenger. So people would put all the coats on themselves to make the suitcases lighter. It was quite a show to watch people dressed in several fur coats in Italy in September. We didn't have much and looked normal. No fur coats.

Just a young family with a small child.

Jewish organization chartered a plane to fly all of us to New York. From there people would go to the cities that accepted them. We were going to Chicago because we were told it would be easier to find a job and because Anna's friend accepted us.

The plane was full and the flight was long – about 12 hours. Inna didn't have a seat so it was not easy for her. But otherwise the trip was uneventful. We were starting a new chapter of our lives.

## ***Chapter 13*** ***We Have Arrived!***

### ***FIRST IMPRESSIONS***

Landed in NY airport about 10 p.m. after 12 hr flight. Finally. Airport is enormous! Never seen anything like that before. Very clean. HIAS (Human Immigrant Aid Society) representative was waiting for us. Told us to follow him. Very business like. Not too many greetings, and we did not expect any. That year, 1979, about 45,000 Russian immigrants entered the USA. So for HIAS it was day as usual.

We were divided into groups according to our destination. Vast majority – NY, Chicago, also few people to other cities. Cannot tell for sure about the attitude towards us from the officials. They were affable, patient. These are the quality we were not used to in our “Homeland.” We went through customs – joke compared to what we went through in the Soviet Union. Couple of questions and that’s about it.

General feeling – uncertainty. Everything is so alien, strange – architecture, the way people dress. I did not know the language good enough to understand what people are talking about. We have read and heard a lot of terrible things about this country, and here I am, and we will have to live and get used to live with these people.

Went outside after customs, first time on the streets of the USA. First we saw – cars, a lot of cars, big cars. Probably, we looked pretty foolish staring at those long American-built cars. The bus came and a big black guy loaded our stuff on the bus. We probably stared at him. We stepped into the buses, they took us somewhere, another airport as we found out later. We were looking through the windows. All I remember – a lot of lights, tall gray buildings, wide streets, and cars, cars, cars.

At the entrance to the airport I saw for the first time multi-level garages. That is, now I know what it was, then I could only guess. Multi-level street, that was quite an entertainment. I felt myself like I am on the roller coaster. Never saw anything like that before. Well, I said that already. Second airport looked to us pretty much the same as the first one – huge, clean, polite. It was late and the place was almost empty by the time we arrived, and our steps echoed, disturbing the sleeping giant. Our luggage was unloaded outside, near a small door – baggage slide as we found out later. We were worried that somebody might steal our belongings and tried to be outside to watch it. Noticing that, a man that worked with the baggage said slightly, that “nobody needs our rubbish”. He could be right, I am still not sure if somebody would bother. But that was all we had at that time. Finally our bags were loaded somewhere. Of course we did not have any idea how the system works and where our belongings are going. We did not have much of a choice anyway.

This night we had to spend at the airport. We had not slept of course. Kids had been playing with automatic doors. To be honest I tried that a couple times myself. As one might guess, we have not seen such doors before.

Later we had put our daughter on the couch, where she fell asleep very fast. For a while we had been looking at the windows of numerous shops at the airport. Americans call it window shopping. Everything looked so nice. It was the only type of shopping we could afford at the time. So for us it did not matter that the stores were closed.

Our first night in America was more a chain of dream-like events that passed before us, and we were watching it from the outside, with interest but without participation. But it was our first contact with this frightening, different alien and unknown to us, and so inviting at the same time country, country that we have read and heard so much about, but nevertheless knew so little.



We wanted to be a part of it. We knew it will not be easy.

We had decided then to call our relatives. They had been living in NY for 12 years, but of course we had a problem, it took us some time with other's help to do it right. We picked up the phone, put the coins in it, we heard female voice, but could not understand what she was talking about, then we heard beeps. That was quite an introduction to American technology. Our call was a pleasant surprise for relatives (I hope). My wife's aunt Sofia Grossman (Sheyna's first cousin) had tried very hard to convince us to stay in NY. But we were firm in our decision to go to Chicago. I think I am glad we did. We feared this giant city. We read and heard a lot about it in the USSR. It was foreign to our feelings, to our senses. Besides, we have heard that it is much easier to find a job in Chicago, than in NY. Even now I think we made a right choice.

## ***Chapter 14***

### ***Finally To Our New Home City – Chicago!***

It was morning, sunshine, new day, and we were going to start our new life today in Chicago. About 7 a.m. HIAS representative, a short bald man, checked our names looking in his papers and gave us tickets. Then we had been told to follow him. We went through the narrow corridor, through the door opening, and found ourselves in a very large room filled with rows of soft chairs. Nice carpeting, a lot of lights. I did not realize right away that we are inside the airplane. It was DC-10 as we found out later.

One of the few things we liked from the very beginning was service. Smiling, friendly flight attendants showed to us our seats. I was lucky – got a window seat. Of course I got a full use of it. Far below on the ground I saw people with some strange looking machines moving around underneath the plane. Just below the window – a huge engine. I am an engineer, I knew this thing can fly, but still it was hard to comprehend.

In Chicago airport, when we stepped into the lobby we saw smiling faces of our friends. My wife's girlfriend, Mila Purman and her father, Misha Purman were meeting us. Last time we saw them was 2 years ago at the train station. They were leaving the USSR, and we did not know at that time if we ever will see each other again.

This time the airport looked different. Not the building, as a matter of fact all three airports we have seen so far looked the same to us. But now it was busy, very crowded. I thought of the airport in Minsk, city of 1-1/2 million. It was so miserable in comparison with these American airports. We went to pick up our luggage, trying not to lose each other and our friends. I was a little surprised when we found all our bags, but felt better. We had 4 suitcases plus 3 more bags. That was all we had to start our new life with, and \$400.00.

Again, we got in to garage building and we were stunned by that view of hundreds and hundreds of cars, floor after floor after floor, and the sizes of the cars. In USSR there was not a big variety

– 6-10 different models, the largest car was the size of an economy car in America. I am talking more about the things – cars, buildings, highways, not much about Americans. That is because we had a chance to meet people much later, and our impressions formed much later. We had fun when we drove from the garage's 5th floor, most Americans would not probably even notice, but we were thrilled by the spiral drive. Then for the first time we saw highway during day time. In our minds then it was the first symbol of the USA. I tried to get used to the fact that we are on the opposite side of the globe, and there is no coming back.

I recall a small incident on the way from the airport, my wife's friend father was very proud of his new car – Pontiac. It was pretty hot outside and he turned on the air-conditioning to the maximum to impress us (there were no air-conditions in the USSR, especially in the cars). Then he looked at us and probably expecting complements, asked if we are not too cold. He got polite answer – no, it is alright, which I think was very disappointing for him.

We were tired, but our friends could not resist to bring us to the supermarket (Dominick's). They knew what to show, they went through it themselves. We have seen food stores in Vienna and Rome, but this one was a supermarket and we now understand the meaning of the word – mountains of food, fruits, vegetables, boxes, cans, bags. Some we recognize, most we didn't. It was too easy back then to impress us.

The building where our friends rented the apartment was located on a quiet, green street. Many immigrants from the USSR lived there. Such a relief, after all the airports, highways, supermarket. It was so peaceful here. Alright, may be we will survive. But we need to get some sleep first. We did not rest for more than 24 hours, and the jet lag and time change got its effect. It was such a pleasure to stretch out on a real bed (mattress on the floor), finally. And we fell asleep as soon as we lay down. When we woke up we felt much better, and were ready to explore the outside world.

We walked to Devon Ave, the main street in the area. Suddenly it was not so quiet and so clean. A lot of small stores, colorful signs, advertisement, windows, street lights, all of which did not make much sense to us yet. We noticed garbage on the streets, to which nobody paid much attention.

People on the streets looked and dressed differently, strange to us. In the Soviet Union, in Europe, styles are more conservative, people are more dressed up, more business like. In the Soviet Union, if you go out you wear the best clothes. Here – more loose, a lot of different styles, or let us say – no styles, many are strange to our eyes. A lot of colors. The clothes looked more like rags, torn jeans or shorts, ripped shirts, awkward shoes, pony tails, beards and so on. The shirts are not tucked in and are longer than the jackets. Black shoes and pants and white socks. Old ladies wearing shower caps for some reason. So, our first impression here in America that people dress without any taste or style. Colors, styles and hats – just awful. I think it was a feeling of disappointment. Also, a lot of overweight people on the streets. And Orthodox Jews,

never have seen them before. In all black regardless of the temperature, long beards, black hats. Nobody seems to pay attention. In the Soviet Union they would gather a crowd.

People looked different not only the way they dressed. In Vienna we saw Austrians, in Italy – Italians, in the US we see Americans, but the meaning of the word is different – white and black, Indians, Arabs, Jews, oriental people. It seemed to us, as we walked the streets for the first time, that people from all around the world live here.

I am not sure where the first impression ends, little by little we got used to many things, but by far not to everything. Still cannot get used to the way people dress.

### ***MORE IMPRESSIONS***

Expensive public transportation, in comparison to USSR, outrageous. In USSR it costs 4-5 cents or about \$1.00 for a monthly pass. The service in most places here in America is usually good, probably better than anywhere else in the world: always smile, very patient.

We liked that from the very beginning. In the Soviet Union it is quite different. If somebody serves you, you feel that they are doing you a big favor and if you do not like the service there is not too much of a choice – next in line is waiting to be served.

We were lost many times in the supermarkets. It was not easy to understand thousands of different brands, names, boxes and so on. Some immigrants by mistake bought pet food instead of meat. Looks good and not expensive. I remember reading some articles about rich Americans giving food to their pets, that poor people would be glad to have, but could not afford it.

It felt so strange when we were walking on the streets at night. Empty streets, very few people, but plenty of cars. It was a sad feeling. We were used to walk everywhere, we like walking. In Russia we walked a lot, sometimes just to relax, to talk to each other. Sometimes we were walking till midnight, enjoying our slow conversations. Streets were always crowded. There was no fear to be on the streets at late hours. Most Americans picture the atmosphere on Russian streets as gloomy, full of fear, gray and foggy. It is not true, not the full truth. People are walking, laughing, hugging. The streets are bright, sidewalks wide and clean. We still miss it a lot.

We miss small and not so small parks, not the playgrounds for kids, but parks with tall trees, shady alleys with benches on the sides, fountains and people walking, sitting, talking, waiting for somebody.

We noticed the absence of the military uniformed personnel on the streets. In the Soviet Union you see people in military uniforms at any time, everywhere: on the streets, in the stores,



***October, 1979. Chicago. Our first picture in USA***

restaurants, movie theaters. Here after 5 years I can remember maybe 2-3 times that I have seen military personnel on the streets.

How Americans dressed in winter time. We noticed that people wear some type of ear covers but do not have a hat. Later we found out that these are earmuffs, to protect ears from cold. I am still unable to figure out why people here more afraid to freeze their ears then their brains. Or women with fur coats and open, light shoes. Then what is the fur for? Definitely not to protect from the cold. From the childhood we knew that the most important part of the winter clothes are warm boots and a hat. If we had to get out for a short time outside in the winter, you put boots and a hat.

Most Americans we have talked to seemed friendly, helpful, trying hard to explain directions. It was not easy with our English back then. Americans showed great interest realizing that we are from the Soviet Union, asking a lot of questions. Typical questions: how did we manage to get out of the Soviet Union?, was it difficult?, how do we like it here?, can we return if we wanted to?, why did we leave?, is it much different in here?, is it cold in Russia?, and many more. This interest to the life, to the people of the Soviet Union, desire to understand, convinced me that book like this is needed. In my conversations with Americans I did not feel hostility towards the people of the Soviet Union and it made me feel good.

We found TV commercials to be extremely annoying and silly. And a lot of them. Happy and smiling people looked so excited eating or drinking some stuff and buying something. It does not take a lot to make Americans happy I thought. Of course we started to understand commercials better with time but I still hate commercials and usually just mute the TV. But it is a totally different conversation about the consumption based society.

We were shocked at the way the train stations looked. Dark dirty and full of graffiti. Stations we have seen in Moscow and Leningrad looked like palaces.

It is hard to summarize our first impressions, we did not understand many things, criticized a lot at first, could not accept and still do not accept a good part of what we had learned. We understand more now, and do not criticize as much. There is a great deal of influence on us, from our life the Soviet Union. The lifestyle, the way of thinking and certain viewpoints because of that. And there is major difficulty to be able to maybe not accept but to understand the different mentality, the others point of view. We all got to try to do that.

### ***STARTING OUR NEW LIFE***

Our friends, Mila and Boris, were renting a 3 bedroom apartment and they gave us one bedroom. There was a mattress on the floor that we slept on. Considering that they had been in the country for just 6 months, whatever furniture was in the apartment was shipped from the USSR.

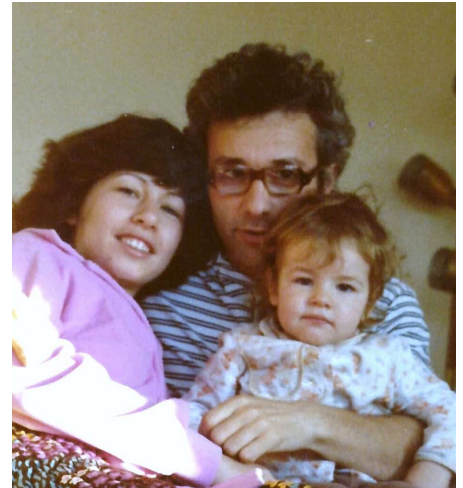


**Chicago, 1979. Anna's friend Mila with her son Eugene and Inna.**

We received a monthly subsidy from the Jewish Family Service of Chicago. Our friends as sponsors agreed to house and feed us for a month. On a third day we started to look for an apartment. Mila and Boris showed us how to find advertisements "for rent" in the newspaper. Mila would call and talk to the rental owners. We also walked the streets nearby looking for ads on the doors. Inna was with us in a little stroller we were given in Vienna by the Jewish organization. We found an apartment in two weeks. Owners wanted \$270.00/month. It was a little more than the Jewish Family Services allows but they agreed to pay. Finally we lived in our own nice 1 bedroom apartment with separate living and dining rooms on the last (third) floor. It was great! We did not have much stuff to move. Just our suitcases and Inna with the stroller. We

had a couple of dishes and pot and a frying pan that Mila and Boris gave us until we will get our own. For whatever reason for several days we did not have natural gas. I constructed a water heater from two razor blades with a couple of matches between them. The wire was attached to each blade and when you stick the wires into the electrical outlets the contraption would generate heat and boil the water. It wasn't very safe but the food was cooked.

Our friend showed where to find stuff that people would throw away. We walked in the alleys looking for furniture and other things. Also we were looking for garage sales and rummage sales in churches and synagogues. We bought a crib for Inna for \$2 (*they were asking \$3.00, but agreed to sell for \$2.00*) at a garage sale. And we found a folding table and a couple of folding chairs in the alley. Finally we were sitting on the chairs, not on the radiator. Our friends in the next apartment found the booster chair for Inna.



**October 1979, Chicago. In our apartment.**

One day somebody rang the doorbell and asked for us to come down – they were speaking Russian. So Anna came downstairs and the man in his forties asked Anna if her mom at home (she looked very young and she actually was young). So Anna replied that her mom is far away and that she (Anna) is a mom herself. They rented the apartment right below us. Their son Dan was 10 but he liked to play with Inna. Inna would go to their apartment by herself to play with Dan. One Sunday morning while we were still in bed Inna went to play with Dan but shortly came back crying. Dan's father told her that it is too early and that Inna should come back later. That was funny but of course we did not laugh in front of Inna.

Our life was getting somewhat more regular, more normal. First time in almost a year we were not in preparation to move somewhere. Inna finally could sleep normally in her own bed.

### ***FIRST THREE MONTHS***

Jewish Family Services gave us three month to find jobs. Meanwhile we were getting monthly check from them to pay for rent and food. I started to go to the English language school located in a synagogue. Anna who knew English from school was at home with Inna. Our case manager in Jewish Family interviewed both of us and helped us to prepare resumes to look for jobs. That was our goal – to find jobs as soon as possible. We looked at the newspapers jobs section every day and started sending resumes and letters. We still are very thankful to all the Jewish organizations that helped us. Of course we would not be here in America without the help and support from many Jewish organizations around the world. We did not feel alone anymore.

I had a great excuse to watch a lot of TV – it helped to understand the language. But it took us many years to start to understand what Johnny Carson is talking about. From what I remember we actually were having a good time. We studied, walked with Inna and our friends, watched TV and read newspapers. There was a little zoo in a park near Western Avenue and we, especially Inna, loved the place.

In October 1979 Anna's New York relatives invited us to visit them. We had been in America for a month. They offered to pay for train tickets. We gladly accepted the invitation. I don't remember the details. Just that it was a long ride – about 20 hours. Anna's aunt Sofia and her husband Joseph met us at the station and drove to their apartment in Brooklyn. We were impressed with the place – furniture, size, decorations. They are rich we thought.

Inna was a year and half old. She never wore diapers and was already potty trained. And that was normal for kids in the USSR. Nobody there used diapers so kids learned to go potty pretty quick. So when Inna was sitting on their couch aunt Sonya asked if Inna wears diapers and got very nervous when we said that she does not. Aunt suggested to put plastic on the couch. It was strange to us because only later on we found out that American kids are wearing diapers for at least three years.

Our relatives showed us the New York City but sometimes we were walking around by ourselves. I remember we saw McDonalds and decided to have lunch. So we walked in and asked the girl at the counter what kind of food they serve here. She looked at us like we just came from Mars.

### ***FIRST JOB***

The breakthrough came after two month. Through the employment agency I was invited for the job interview. It was the Stevens Manufacturing company near Kedzie and Peterson, about 35 min walk. But public bus was also available. The company was making machines for winding electric coils for relays. I talked with the owner to the best of my abilities and finally he offered me



an engineering job and \$17 thousand salary! That was great! I could not wait to tell Anna. I got my first job in America! Anna was happy.

I started next Monday. Stevens was a small private company not very well managed. There was no computers at that time. All drawing were done on paper. My English at the time was poor (it is not great even now) and my American engineering experience was nil. But I was happy that I got an engineering job and finally we are having income.

Anna got a job the next month with the large electrical manufacturer CP Clare also not too far from our apartment. She was working in the lab as a technician for about \$6.00 an hour.

We found an older women from the immigrant family who took care of Inna during the day. Very nice lady and she loved Inna. The money was coming in and we could afford some basic stuff like cheap furniture, some clothes. Life was good!

But soon we were introduced to some reality. I was fired after 29 days. The reason given – my poor English and the lack of experience. Because the employment agency would require the payment after 30 days I was fired just before. I was devastated. I walked home not knowing how to tell Anna. Anna tried not to show her disappointment and tried to make me feel better. At least she was working and we had income. Jewish Family stopped supporting us as soon as I found the job.

(At that time we had no knowledge about social programs in the US. It never crossed our minds that we could apply for help from the government. During the second wave of immigration in the eighties people knew much more and many physically able immigrants were on welfare. That made us angry and embarrassed for Soviet immigrants.)

Also we started to repay the HIAS (Hebrew Immigration Aid Society) the money it spent on us, about \$4 thousands. And we were glad to repay the money. That was the least we could do. Right away I started to look for a job, again. That was December 1979.

### ***FINDING CHICAGO RELATIVES***



***Lena Sherman (right), her husband (left),  
Esther (my aunt). Israel***

Because mom burned all the letters and addresses from our Chicago relatives after my father was arrested we could not contact our American relatives directly. We did know mom's sister's Ester address in Israel so we wrote letter to Carmela, her daughter.

We got response letter from Carmela within a month. With address and phone number of Estelle and Barney Ecker. It was December 1979, just before Hanukkah.

Of course we did not know any names and my English was poor but I gathered my courage and called. Woman's voice answered and I told her that we are relatives from Russia and my last name is Katsnelson (name Kagan would not be familiar to her). That voice belonged to Estelle Ecker who became our mother from now on. She showed real interest in our lives and we knew that she cared.

After I told Estelle who I am I could hear excitement in her voice when she said that she will call me back very soon. And she did. Hanukkah was coming up and she said that somebody will pick us up to take us to their house for Hanukkah party and if it's OK with us. I said yes it is fine. We did not have a car yet. I gave Estelle our address and that was it.

At that time we had no idea who are our relatives and how many. And what they do. All my mom told me is her half sister lived in Chicago at the time they communicated (before my father's arrest in 1951). On the day of Hanukkah we got a call from a man who introduced himself as Mert Brody, my relative. He said he will pick us up to drive us to Barney's and Estelle house. So Mert drove us. We knew very little about Chicago and the suburbs and had no idea where are we going.

I hardly remember the house. It was big and noisy. All looked strange. It was the first time we were in the house in America, not in an apartment. Barney came home later. He right away climbed on the couch with his shoes on. That was a little strange to us. And then he started to ask a bunch of questions. I don't remember the questions but remember it was not easy for us to answer them. It has been three month since we came and our English was poor. But we managed and also we did not feel like strangers anymore. We felt that we were accepted as the part of the family.



***In our apartment, 1980. Anna standing, Aunt Lena, Marsha, Alisa***

Estelle invited us to the dinner table. It was huge. The only dish we still remember were steaks. Huge and pink these steaks covered the whole plate. Each one of these would last us for a week! We didn't know what to do with these steaks. The meat was delicious. So we did the best we could but still left most of it on the plate.

Since then we were in contact with our new relatives. Especially Estelle. She called us regularly and was involved in our lives. We became a part of a big American family. Soon after, Barney Ecker invited me

to his company for an interview. (I did not mention before that Barney owned a big construction company M. Ecker.) The VP Earl Lynch showed me some drawings to see if I can read them. We talked and he asked if I am interested. I never worked in construction and told him that I am looking for something closer to my specialty. I liked troubleshooting, mechanical engineering and was looking for something related.

## **OUR JOBS**

Meanwhile I was looking for a job. Reading ads in the newspapers, mailing resumes. Went to a couple of interviews. One day I got a call from a company named Misomex. They invited me for an interview. Considering that Misomex was located in Rosemont and we did not have a car yet we figured how to get there by bus. It took three buses to get to Rosemont but I made it in an hour. Two men talked to me for about half an hour and at the end one of them told me that I can start next Monday. I got a job. The only thing I asked if it is possible to start after the Passover that started March 31 in 1980. They agreed and told me that the President of the company is Jewish.

I got \$6.50/hr as a service technician for the duration of three months trial period. I was trained in the shop with four guys hired at the same time. After three months I was the only one left. After the first month I started to travel with experienced technicians. I had to learn technical stuff but also the travel part was important. I had to learn everything from the airports to car rental, hotels and even restaurants. Like when waitress asked what dressing I want with my salad I had no clue. Or how do I wanted my steak done. How is it done? I didn't know. The language was still a barrier. Talking to my colleagues. Talking to customers. Especially in the south. Or in Boston. That took a while. I was doing my best to learn the trade. My background and my experience in the Soviet Union helped. And I got a raise! \$7.80/hr. We were happy. We both were working and making money!

I been told that I will start to travel on my own after the trial period. The job required driving so I needed to get a drivers license fast. I was told that if you give your instructor \$10 you will pass. So we got in the car for the driving test. I did OK but when parking the car back at the secretary of state I hit the gas pedal instead of the brake. I was lucky there was no cars in front of me. My instructor was not happy but I passed. At that time \$10 helped.

We got our first car 10 month after we came to the US. It was Chevy Nova. So without a car I had to use public transportation to get to work. And to the airport when I started traveling. Only much later I figured that company pays for a cab.

The thought of traveling for work was scary but I realized that sooner or later I will have to do this. My first destination was Dayton, Ohio. I had to install a new machine. At the Dayton airport I rented a car (for the first time!) and called customer for directions. To get there I had to drive on the highway. That would be my first time driving by myself on the highway. And of course with

my luck it was raining. I wasn't sure if I will survive but there was no choice. And I made it! Also my hand were shaking. It was great.

For the next 10 years I was on the road for 4–5 days a week. Sometime going to three customers in different states in a week. Airport – rental car – customer – hotel – customer – airport and then all over again. I always felt guilty because I think it has been easier for me than for Anna. She was working full time, taking care of Inna, and then Isaac and taking care of the apartment, and then the house. I did enjoy work most of the time and was good at it. Only twice during my first few years I did not fix the machine and to me it was devastating. Later I found out that this happens to everybody. Besides I was getting much more comfortable on the job as years went by. And my English improved. Now if people told me to take the Turnpike I knew what it means.

One day (I was in town) I came home and Anna looked very upset. There are layoffs at her company and as a junior technician she was one to go. “Do you still love me?” she asked. I actually laughed. I have been there. She smiled through the tears. And told me that she got recommendation from her boss for another company (Rauland-Borg Corp.) where the boss knew some people. So it was not so bad after all. Anna was hired within a month. She got a job as a quality control technician at Rauland-Borg.

In 1981 our relative Barney Ecker invited Anna for an interview. After the interview Barney told Anna that she is hired (if she wants). Anna told Barney that she needs to think about it. We talked and decided that it may be a good idea to work for a relative. So in 1981 Anna became an estimator at M. Ecker for around \$13 thousands/year. We were getting used to life in America!

## **OUR HOUSE**

After two years in the apartment we saved some money and started talking about buying the house. Of course we knew very little on how to do that. We talked to American relatives and we talked to real estate agents. And we started to look at different locations. We had two agents. One day one agent called us very excited and announced that he found the house for us. We went to look at the house and we liked it. It was three bedroom ranch on a dead end street in Skokie.

That was the end of the week. Next Monday I left for the business trip. Tuesday evening Anna called to let me know that the owners are in a hurry and we need to make an offer. The owners were offering owner financing at 12%. An official rate at that time was 15%. We offered \$78 thousands. Our offer was accepted and Anna bought the house while I was out of town for \$78 thousands. That was in September 1981.

We moved in shortly and had to learn everything about the house and backyard care. And about the bills. And neighbors. That was 32 years ago. We still live in this house. Isaac and Rachel are born in this house. I think we really became Americans in this house.

## **Chapter 15**

### **My Mom**



***Lena and my mom Riva, 1990, Chicago***

After 10 years in America, I went back to Soviet Union to visit.

When mom saw me she could not stop crying.

I think that is when she decided to visit us. Mom was 78 (1990).

Soon after (1992), mom and my sister with her family moved to America.

We were all together again. Our American family loved her. I think, I hope that some of her happiest years were here in America where the family was finally united. And expanded. Mom was so grateful that we were accepted as part of the big family.

By that time I got better and called her every day. Mom was 89 when she went to the hospital complaining about pain in her back. I think all the tests and tubes and more tests really affected her. After two days, mom came home feeling very weak. I visited her that evening. When I was leaving and said goodbye, she looked at me. I remember her eyes. Later, I realized that she knew.

Mom knew. She passed away that night.

What I realized that through all these hard times she was never angry or bitter.

Her smile was special and her life an inspiration.

*For more about my mom's life, see Addendum III.*

### **Addendum I**

#### ***BELARUS – THE TRAVEL BACK IN TIME***

In July of 2015, my daughters Inna and Rachel, and I visited Belarus. I flew from Chicago to Frankfurt where I met Inna who flew from Miami. Together we flew to Vilnius, Lithuania where we met Rachel who was in Europe at the time.

Vilnius is a cute old city with cozy cafes outside and a lot of churches in the old town. We all liked it but it still needs a lot of restoration. Some of the old building are falling apart.

Hotel was fine. Modern and comfortable. We walked around old town, stopped at some churches, went inside. Ate in the outside cafe. We were in Europe and we were comfortable there. But Vilnius was just a stop on the way to our destination.

## ***MINSK***

Next day we boarded the train to Minsk. Pretty comfortable with bus type seats. Many people were carrying sacks with stuff. From what we been told many people ride from Minsk to Vilnius and back to sell and to buy stuff. After about an hour we approached the border with Belarus and we were told over the speakers about the customs inspection.

Two women in uniforms walked in and started to check documents. One older the other younger. The older agent checked my girls passports. A couple of minutes for each and she stamped the passports. The younger women took my passport and started to inspect it. Several times she went through all pages, then she checked pages with the magnifying glass. She then said something to the older woman and I overheard the older agent saying “just let them go.” But the younger one checked the passport again and finally stamped it. I was ready for everything but still that was a relief.

In about 15 minutes the younger agent showed up again and asked me for my passport. She took it somewhere. Meanwhile I thought to myself: what are they afraid of? That I illegally will sneak to Belarus to stay there forever? That I will never come back to America? Why are they so suspicious of me, an American citizen? Later I talked to my girls about it and they were also baffled.

We all seriously doubted that there was influx of illegals trying to sneak into Belarus. The agent came back with my passport in about 10 minutes and gave it back to me. I felt relief because for a moment I thought that my kids will have to visit Belarus without me. Later my girls told me they were scared that they will have to go to Minsk alone.

The rest of the ride was uneventful. My friend Emil Friedberg was waiting for us at the Minsk train station. With him was our classmate Svetlana Samsonic that offered us her apartment in Minsk. It was raining and cold and we were tired and uncomfortable. And we were glad that we are with our friends.

I have seen Emil many time in these years but I would never recognize Svetlana, our classmate. We haven't seen each other for over 50 years. First thing they bragged about the new Minsk railroad station. And it is impressive. Modern, big, steel and glass. Lots of shops restaurants and people. Of course in Belarus nobody is concerned about the budget for President's pet projects. So I wonder if anybody knows the real cost of the project.



I did like the Central Station. We went outside and walked toward the metro. Again very nice station, no comparison to Chicago stations. Clean and modern. Clean and modern trains moving fast and on time. When we emigrated in 1979 there was no metro yet.

Our first impressions of locals. People don't smile, seem preoccupied and unhappy. Very seldom did we see women and men after 30 in decent physical shape. It seems there are either young people or out of shape middle-aged people. No old people or handicapped.

Finally we reached our stop and started walking to the trolley bus stop across the street through underground walkway. Most major intersections in Minsk have underground crossings for pedestrians. During our stay we have seen many people in these underground walkways selling stuff. Flowers, things for home, clothing and art.

I remember the apartment buildings of my time. But now they looked old and crude. But I didn't say anything to Sveta who was proud of recently painted building. It was five stories and of course no elevators. Only buildings over 6 floors are equipped with elevators in Belarus.

What is interesting that the entrance doors to the apartment is a double door. First you open the door that swings out and then there is a second door that opens to the inside. We were told it is for security, heat and noise insulation. Both doors have locks of course.

The apartment was large by local standards – 4 rooms. Wooden floors and pretty nice. Our host was wonderful. She prepared dinner and been very apologetic in case something was not up to our standards. We all assured her that everything was great. After this late dinner we went to our assigned rooms for the night.

One detail that I forgot and now looks strange. All condos had separate toilets. No toilets in bathrooms. I think the main reason is there is only one toilet in any apartment so if somebody is taking a shower the toilet is not accessible. The bathroom is small and there is one faucet that swings either to the tub or to the sink.

We had this arrangement in our apartment in Minsk but I totally forgot about that. But now I realized how inconvenient is this setup. My girls were really struck by this. But they were mentally prepared for the hardship and took it well.

In the morning Sveta prepared breakfast for us and she went back to her summer home (dacha) where she usually spends summer taking care of her vegetable garden. So my friend Emil is to be our assigned guide. We took metro to the center of the city.

I have to say a few words about public transportation in Minsk. Metro stations are clean and well designed. The trains are clean, fast, quiet and on time. We never had to wait more that 5 minutes for a train. Same with buses and trolley buses (electrical buses) Each stop has a display

showing when the next bus arrives. Each bus stop has a sensor under the pavement so the central station automatically updates the information.

"It is a big and modern city," my girls told me when I asked how they like Minsk that first day. And it is. Clean, big and practically crime free. The main reason for low crime rate is the President Lukashenko. He rules with iron fist and police are ruthless if they catch a criminal. Nobody has a chance to complain about harsh treatment. And people totally support that attitude toward crime. And yet my girls were saying later that the city, while being clean and modern, is boring. Gray square buildings (Soviet era architecture), few trees, people are not smiling, seemingly preoccupied. No night life.

We noted no old or handicapped people on the streets. The reason, as we found out, nothing in the city is done to help these people. Buildings up to six floors tall have no elevators. No ramps for wheelchairs in the buildings.

Streets in Minsk are wide but no tourists, not many people or cars, very few restaurants or cafes, no places for fun. People mostly dressed nice. Young people dressed in Western-style jeans, gym shoes. It has been over thirty years and the city changed. A lot of new modern buildings, new developments. Old areas disappeared. Replaced by new buildings. We walked a lot. Went to the Central plaza where all government buildings are located. Huge plaza. Under it a new shopping mall. Old Lenin statue still there. For girls that was unusual, strange. We walked to the monument, walked around it. As we were staring at Lenin we noticed a security officer that was standing a few hundred feet away was coming closer to us. These are not police but internal security people that are guarding all government buildings. We did not need any trouble so we walked away.



**Central Plaza, Minsk, 2015**



**My friend Emil and me, Minsk, 2015**

The main street in Minsk is Independence Boulevard. Very wide, very busy. We walked into the book store. Girls were curious, they like books and wanted to browse around. I remembered this store from before. But what surprised even me was that there was no air conditioning in the store. It was hot and muggy. So we could not spend much time there. I felt sorry for employees.

Usually we ate at the restaurants during the day. Dinner we ate sometimes at my classmate's apartment. Scarce bars, restaurants and cafes were usually pretty good. Especially compared to what I remember from before. Most of the dishes included potatoes. Baked, fried, and everything in between. At the end of our trip my girls told me they will never eat potatoes again.

Another common thing is the menus were great but many dishes are not available. So we would make choices and when waiter would come to our table he/she would say: this is not available, we don't have that and so on. It was not surprising to me but girls were amazed.

Before our trip I wrote a letter to the Belarus information archive asking them if they have my father's dossier. And after a month I got a positive response. But they requested proof of relationship. So I decided that I will take necessary documents with me.

## ***BOBRUIISK AND MY OLD HOUSE***

### ***ME AND MY OLD HOUSE***

We came to the gate. I remember the wooden gate but this one was metal. It was locked. I looked inside through some gaps between the gate and the poles. The house was still there. It was hard to see behind all the greenery in the yard. We knocked at the gate a few times. I was hoping that somebody will let us in. A woman appeared. Typical Belorussian small town woman rather large and simple dressed.

I explained that I was born in this house and came with my daughters so they will see the house where the family began. The woman opened the gate, let us in. She was friendly and talkative.

It was a strange feeling walking in the yard to my old house. I looked around. City park around, behind the fence. Trees and shrubs, vegetable garden almost like before, ages and worlds ago. In my childhood.

This log house, it looked so small and worn out. We walked around it. It has been 35 years and another life since I was near this home. My childhood home. All the childhood memories are here, childhood friends, my/our lives as the family of the "enemy of the people."

I thought about my childhood here. My childhood, mischievous and lonely. The enemy of the people.

This little old house looked lost, unneeded, unloved. This warm and sad feeling of seeing an old friend, now sick and depressed, but happy to see you. In my mind I could see myself running around, my mom and grandma. The past mixed with the present.

The house was divided in two parts – a smaller and a larger. Initially we lived in the smaller part.



***In my old house July 2015.  
Bobruisk, Belarus***

My girls have never seen a house this small, that old and so different. So different from their world, their places, our Skokie house. They looked around walking from room to room and I could see shock on their faces. I think they better understood how lucky they are living in a different world. How free, how open they are to the world.

This glimpse to my childhood world, for me it was somewhat nostalgic and distant, even foreign. For my daughters this world, this house, represented what could have been and maybe also a relief. They have no memories that would connect them to this place.

For me it was a glance into the past, when this house, this yard, were my world. So many memories good and bad. There was my bed on the right. There is just one bedroom in this part of the house and my parents' bed was at the other wall. The third bed mom rented. We had a couple renting a bed. They shared our kitchen and the main room.

The kitchen. I remember my grandma. To me she was always old. Baba Hoda. And she actually was. She was over 70 when I was born. Very skinny, unhealthy. She had bad legs. But she was cooking for our family - mom was always busy working full time in the kindergarten and then in place for latch kids.

I think I still remember baba Hoda cooking. It was delicious. On not so frequent occasions when I would bring good grades (A), she would cook for me a kugel. Or even better Helzel. [Helzel is an Ashkenazi Jewish dish. It is a sort of sausage made from chicken neck skin stuffed with flour, schmaltz, internal meats (chopped heart, gizzard, liver), and fried onions and sewn up with a thread. Sometimes the stuffing is flavored with garlic and black pepper. Helzel may be cooked in chicken soup or used as an ingredient in cholent. Because of its sausage shape and the flour-based stuffing, helzel is sometimes called "false" kishke.] It is in direct translation from Yiddish – chicken neck. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helzel>

### **NEW GAS OVEN**

Unfortunately the Russian oven was gone and there was a small gas range.

But I remember our old oven. It took the whole wall. There was a large cavity where wood was burning. After the wood was burned and flame expired special tool was used to move the still very hot coals in a pile in the corner. And then grandma would put pots made of iron or clay near the coals. Then the cavity being closed by a special cover and food cooked slowly for hours. Maybe that is why it was so good.

Grandma used to make a lot of stuff herself – starch from potatoes, butter from milk and some things that I do not remember anymore.

But back to our trip.

When I was around eleven, people who lived in the other, bigger part of the house moved and sold it to us. My father passed away at that time. Now we had 2 bedrooms, kitchen and the living



**Gas stove instead of our wood burning stove. July 2015 Bobruisk, Belarus**



room. We walked through this part of the house. Same people own both parts of the house now. It looked much smaller than I remembered. And in disrepair. I saw the cover to the cellar in the kitchen floor and asked the owner if he can open it for me. I still remembered going to this cellar to get stuff for mom. We had a big vegetable garden and kept potatoes and many other vegetables for the winter.



**Cellar door in my old house. The man – new owner.  
July 2015, Bobruisk, Belarus**

The oven in this part of the house was not for cooking, just for heating. It was in the middle of the house and parts of it was in every room. During our time it was covered in beautiful white ceramic tiles. Now the tiles were gone and the oven was covered by uneven stucco, probably done by owners, judging by poor quality of workmanship.

Again I felt sorry for the house. My childhood home. So many memories. I wondered if the house remembered me, the family. I wanted it to.

The girls were walking quietly from room to room, taking pictures and videos.

We walked out. The yard was full of greenery – trees, bushes, the garden. Still the outhouse in the corner and the shed for wood for the oven.

Looking at this I could see myself being a little boy running here, climbing trees, jumping over the fence to the park. Playing with friends and being at “war” with boys from a neighboring block.

I was not nostalgic. My childhood was unsupervised, not very happy maybe but free and fun most of the time. But I did cherish this visit, that looked to the past. And I was glad my girls were here with me.

I used the opportunity when we were alone with the owner’s wife and gave her \$20. She was very thankful and said that she will not tell her husband. “He drinks,” she said with a sad smile. And then, “I don’t know what would I do without him.” That statement did not surprise me. Even considering that the house was in disrepair and he lost his job. This clinical dependency – I have seen it before.

Owners gave us some berries and fruits from their garden while we were saying goodbye. I could see they were happy that we came. Brought some excitement to their life of desperation, I thought.

We walked on the streets of old Bobruisk. Came to my friend’s old house where he grew up. I remembered the house. It is two blocks away from my house. I been there many times.

Everything looked the same. Old log houses, dirt street, wooden fences. Just the gates looked different, most were metal, not wooden like before.

We slowly walked down the street looking for a another house our classmate friend asked us to find.

It was warm and quiet, surreal almost, especially for the girls who never had seen this frozen in time town. A dog or a cat wandering around, birds singing, that is about all we could hear. We

came to the railroad and started walking along the rails, then crossed it and finally found the address. Log house. My friend started to take pictures, a woman opened the steel gate, came to us. My friend explained the reason we took pictures, and the women said goodbye and went back.

In over a half of the century this part of Bobruisk has not changed. And I was having the impression that people are still the same people who lived here when I was a kid.

I suspect that this old town stuck in a time warp impressed my girls more than modern Minsk.

The town was clean and cozy. My kids were surprised to see stray dogs and cats but locals paid no attention to animals. We interested them more. There was something about us that looked different - we could see suspicious looks.

We wanted to go to the cemetery. So we went to the synagogue and Emil asked Rabbi to go with us and to say a prayer.

We took a trolley bus there and then walked to the cemetery. It is old. Lots of trees, some very old. All graves surrounded by fences. Graves very close to each other. The place is huge. Hard to navigate because of the fences.

It turns out my friend knows people working there and one of them helped us to find the graves of my grandmother Hoda and my father. Rabbi said the prayer, we put little rocks on the graves, same we did on Emil's parents graves.

I was glad that my girls visited the graves of their great grandmother and grand father. And that what they also wanted to do.



**Grandmother Hoda's grave.**  
**Picture was taken July 2015**  
**Bobruisk, Belarus**



**At my father's grave. Rachel**  
**Picture taken July 2015**  
**Bobruisk, Belarus**



**My father's grave.**  
**Picture taken July 2015**  
**Bobruisk, Belarus**



## **DUKORA**

The shtetl where my father was born. Where his family lived and perished during the war. We came here in hope to see, to find any documents, tombstones, any traces of Kagan family. We drove through town. It was clean, quiet, some stray dogs on the streets, a typical small town. Many old log houses are still there. They have seen a lot, these houses. Unfortunately the Kagan house was gone. My older first cousin, Fridrich (Fedya) Kagan, was with us and remembered the place where the house was. A different building is there now.

We came to a monument in the town center in front of the village hall. It was erected in the memory of villagers, civilians (partisans in Russians) who were hiding in the forests and fought the Nazis. My cousin recalled our grandmother's maiden name, Edelchik. Her brother fought and was killed in 1943. And we did find this name etched on the stone of the monument. We walked into the village hall in hopes to find any documents related to our family, explained the reason for our visit. A woman, president of the village was friendly and understanding. She asked the secretary to check the files but they found nothing. We tried not to show our disappointment and thanked the woman.

My cousin has been in Dukora before and next he wanted to take us to the old pre-war cemetery. Also he wanted to find the place where many Jews were rounded up and shot just outside Dukora.

He was not sure about directions so when we saw people sitting on the bench near the road (dirt road) we stopped and my cousin asked how to get to the old Jewish cemetery and the mass grave. A woman, I could not determine her age, got up and was eager to show us the way. I could see that she was drunk and judging by her appearance one could tell that it was her permanent state. Alcoholics are common in villages of Belarus.

She suggested it will be easier if she will ride with us and my cousin agreed (it was his car). Later he told us that he gave her money to buy a bottle of wine. He gave her some amount and she said to him that she does not drink cheap wine so he gave her some more. The woman showed us the ravine. Nothing unusual, grassy low place in the field. That is the place where Jewish villagers were murdered by locals who worked for Nazis. The old cemetery was nearby.

We came to this old Jewish cemetery that has been destroyed during the war. Flat grassy area with old trees here and there. Old headstones laying around. The way it was left by Nazis (or locals who worked with Nazis).



***Old Jewish cemetery, Dukora, Belarus, 2015.***

We wandered around looking at these old gray stones with Yiddish writings on them. None of us knows Yiddish so we took a bunch of pictures in hopes that back in States somebody will translate it for us. Some stones had swastikas painted in them. No doubt painted by local Nazi sympathizers. The day was bright and warm. The usual summer day. Very peaceful.

And yet this place brought sadness. I tried to imagine these people. Fathers, mothers, grand parents, children. They were alive, happy, sad, in love and loved by others. Old and young. I tried to see them, their families, full of life and happy.

It was real, in the past, not that long ago. They were just like us, and we are just like them. What were their stories, their dreams? How did they fall in love, got married, had kids. I imagine their stories are not that different from ours.

But the catastrophe happened in their time. And their dreams, their lives ended in tragedy.

Does anybody remember them? Anybody in the world knows who they were? Memories lost, melted in time. Just old gray stones laying around. But I knew that in this ravine, somewhere under the grassy field, are my grandparents.

I know very little about my father's parents, my grandparents.

My uncle and my cousin donated money for a memorial in memory of Jews murdered by Nazis and buried in this ravine and now there is a monument near the mass grave and the old cemetery.

After walking around, taking pictures (the woman was with us) we went to the car and drove back to Dukora where we dropped of the woman and started back to Minsk.

It certainly has been an experience for myself and the girls. It was sad and satisfying at the same time.

*With Fedya (my first cousin) at the  
mass grave of Jews. Dukora, July 2015*



## **SEARCH FOR MY FATHER'S DOCUMENTS**

When we were back in Minsk, we (my friend Emil and my kids) came to the information agency after setting up an appointment. I showed the paper we got from the agency and my passport. I was told to wait.

The man came out, introduced himself and asked me to come inside. In his office he said that he is sorry they could not locate my father's file but he got a computer printout stating that my father was accused of nationalism, not cosmopolitanism, as I thought. And that he was fully absolved of any crimes.

Well for me it was better than nothing. But when I told all this to my friend he got angry and demanded to talk to this man.

The same man came out and Emil told him that according to the law Belarus agencies are obligated to provide information about the victims of Stalin to their relatives. Of course we had no idea. That got his attention and he went back and told us to wait.

After about 20 minutes the guy came out and suggested to get in touch with KGB in Mogilev. The regional capital in Belarus.

To make a long story short, I did contact KGB and asked for my father's file. And to our surprise in a couple of months we did get a package from Belarus consulate in NY with documents.

Please see Addendum II for the translation of these documents.

But back to our trip.

Minsk got many war memorials. A lot. For Belarus, for people of Belarus, the War is still not over. Every family in Belarus lost a member. A quarter of population was lost to war. When I came to Minsk in 1962 there were still buildings half destroyed in the War. Tens of thousands Jews were murdered and buried in mass grave.

My friend wanted to show all this to us. All War memorials. And I understand him. Members of our families were killed in this War. We as kids were playing the War. But for my daughters all this was just history, the long gone past and they got tired to see all these solemn memorials.

They asked me to tell Emil not to show these anymore. And I did mention this to him.

We stopped at the institute I graduated, the hospital where Inna was born. We visited the condo where we lived, I think we got the right building because there are six buildings that look almost identical. So we just select one building and made a picture of all of us near it. Good enough.

To sum up our trip I think it was a good idea. My girls learned a lot, they liked the trip. But not as much as to want to come back.

### ***Epilogue***

Back to the present Fast forward to today, 2019. This year in September we will be celebrating 40 years in the United States. Anna and myself – we never, not once regretted our decision to immigrate here. Looking back we remember that life was not easy. Everything was different. People, the language, society, jobs. And yet in retrospect we enjoyed our life here. It's hard to put in words but freedom, free society feels different. I think we became more relaxed, more open, friendlier to others. We have 3 kids. Two younger children Isaac and Rachel were born here. Inna came with us when she was one year old. They are Americans of course. America is the only country they know and they love it. Inna has two kids and we have two wonderful grand kids, Sasha and Ari. Our son got married to a wonderful woman and we are hoping for more grand children. Our youngest daughter is planning to get married later this year to a great guy. As I mentioned before, we have a big American family here and we are close. Every year the family gathers for the reunion and in two years we will celebrate 50 years reunion anniversary. Anna and myself celebrated our 42<sup>nd</sup> marriage anniversary in April. I think that I am very lucky that we met in 1975 and got married two years later. We live in the same house for 38 years and love it. Anna loves gardening and is busy with it during spring, summer and fall. We have an

apartment in Florida where we go twice a year and so does Inna with family. But Sasha and Ari get bored after a week or two and would rather go to Orlando.

I love to be there (Marco Island). Love our walks on the beach, the ocean, the sunsets. We collect driftwood on the beach, we take it home to Skokie and I make some sculptures if I can figure what kind of shape a piece looks like. Before ending, I want to thank Jewish organizations like HIAS, Jewish Family for arranging our trip, for helping us every step of our journey from Soviet Union to Chicago, for helping us financially to pay rent, for organizing English classes for new immigrants. Looking back, my life has been a journey with happy times and sad times, across countries and across continents, from oppression to freedom, from dictatorship to democracy. My most important dreams have come true – my wonderful wife, healthy and happy children and grandchildren, great friends, loving relatives, watching sunsets on the beach with Anna. I am at peace.

## **Addendum II**

### **OFFICIAL GOVERNMENT PAPERS EXONERATING MY FATHER**

*Conclusions #617/H*

*by the 8th Fleet military tribunal.*

*At the meeting on May 28, 1955, after reviewing the Military Prosecutor of Belorussian Military District's appeal of the December 4 1951 sentencing by Military Tribunal of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Bobruisk Region regarding Kagan, Isaac Nisonovich, sentenced in accordance with the section 72A to 10 years of forced labor camp and to additional 5 years of disenfranchisement.*

*Found*

*Kagan was convicted by the Military Tribunal, that he while working as a correspondent of the Jewish paper "Ainikait" (Unity), established criminal connections with Jewish nationalists, writers Platner, Kamenetski and others, by whose directions Kagan was visiting different cities of the Soviet Belarus, and in his articles he reported data about conditions of after war reconstruction in Gomel, Bobruisk, Minsk, social events and others, sending this articles to the paper "Ainikait" (Unity).*

*In the Autumn of 1947 in collusion with above mentioned nationalists, he participated in organizing the Jewish literary event, that was used for purpose of isolation of Jewish population from the other nationalities of the USSR.*

*Next day together the nationalists Platner, Kamenetski and others participated in organizing the radio address.*

*After the newspaper "Ainikait" (Unity) was closed by the Soviet power, Kagan while working for the small manufacturing shop "Builder", conducted anti-Soviet political and nationalist*

*propaganda, directed against the policy of the Soviet Union. Numerous times spreading anti-Soviet nationalistic fabrications.*

*In 1945 Kagan wrote clearly nationalistic story under the name “Berka Shuhman” that was published in 1947 in collection of stories “Confident Steps”.*

*In his appeal Military Prosecutor of Belorussian Military District, asked to overturn the sentencing of Kagan and his case to be reinvestigated based on the following evidence:*

- Military Tribunal concluded that the accusations that Kagan belonged to nationalistic anti-Soviet organizations, were baseless, and acquitted Kagan in accordance with the article 24-63-1 of the 76’s Criminal Code of Belarus. Kagan was found not guilty in committing crimes in accordance with article 72 based of not-proven evidence.*
- Kagan’s conviction that he in accordance with the directions from Jewish nationalists Platner, Kamenetski and others (others are not listed) had been visiting different cities of the Soviet Belarus, had collected data and had sent it to the Jewish newspaper “Ainikait” was not proven to bear anti-Soviet nationalistic character. The information given by Platner and Kamenetski during questioning was general and did not show that Kagan had been working under their direction. It is stated in the Appeal that articles and stories sent by Kagan to the paper “Ainikait” were not requested by the prosecution, were not studied by experts to determine their anti-Soviet, nationalistic character.*
- In relation to the accusations that the story Kagan wrote as “Berka Shuhman” had nationalistic content was not proven by experts as required by law.*
- About the Jewish Literary event, Kagan was not an organizer of the event. Evidence from the case shows this evening was approved by authorities. Attending this event was the representative of the City of Bobruisk Communist Party. Accordingly, it was not established what kind of nationalistic writings were read during this event. The event participants were not questioned by the prosecution.*
- From the questioning of Tinkov and Gorski it is clear that during Kagan’s employment by the manufacturing shop, Kagan did nothing wrong, and tried to make this shop better.*

*Based on the above, and after discussing the arguments of the appeal, we agreed with the appeal to overturn the sentence. Military tribunal found that Kagan’s conviction in crime according to the 72 article of Belarus Criminal Law is baseless and not supported by the evidence, and has to be overturned due to absence of evidence of crime.*

*There is no proof that Kagan had criminal connections with Jewish nationalists.*

*In a light of above conclusions, the Military Tribunal decided to acquit Kagan of all charges.*

*Kagan himself had denied all the charges. Workers from the manufacturing shop where Kagan worked, who were questioned in the court as witnesses described Kagan on a positive side, and did not mention any anti-Soviet activity by Kagan.*

*Based on the all of the above, Military Tribunal*



## CONCLUDED

*sentencing by the Military Tribunal of Ministry of Internal Affairs of Bobruisk Region of December 4, 1951 in regards to Kagan Isaac Nisonovich, to overturn, and his case to discontinue due to absence of crime.*

*Kagan to be RELEASED from incarceration.*

### **Addendum III** **A VERY SHORT AUTOBIOGRAPHY BY MY MOTHER RIVA KATSNELSON**



***Katsnelson Family. From the left: My grandfather Shleyyme, Rafael, my grandmother Hoda, my mother Riva, Mnuha, Berl. (Esther was in Israel)***

*I was born in 1911, my grandparents passed away by that time.*

*I do not know the family history very well because before the revolution I was still very young. And after the revolution, there were so many tragic events that it was tough to talk about it.*

*My father had 5 children with my mother. The oldest, Esther, and brother Boris (Berl) were strong Zionists. In 1921 Esther left for Israel. She died in 1974. Boris stayed in Belarus to help his parents (he was the only breadwinner).*

*These were very difficult years. Civil war, Germans occupied Belarus, Poland occupied Belarus, Lubonich was neutral territory. On one side of the river Beresina were Poles, on the other side, Bolsheviks. Polish gangs terrorized Jews. They would gather Jews in a synagogue and burn their beards.*

*There was famine. Poles would come into Jewish homes and demand money and food. They killed a lot of Jews. One time they beat my father so badly that he became an invalid for the rest*



*of his life. My brother Boris did not have a chance to go to Israel. He had appendicitis, he died after surgery. It was around 1925. My father took Boris's death very hard and he died in 1928.*

*After the Polish occupation ended, we still suffered a lot from bandits. They killed whole Jewish villages. We tried to hide in nearby villages, in cellars and other hideaway places. Our shtetl survived because we organized self defense, which was organized by my brother Berl. My sister Menuha, under very difficult circumstances, graduated the university and became a teacher. My brother Rafael volunteered to fight the Nazis in 1941. He was killed in 1943. My sister Menuha died in 1986. Her husband died in 1943, he was part of the guerrilla struggle and got sick with tuberculosis. Their son Vladimir lives in Ufa (Russian Federation). He has 2 daughters and 3 grandchildren.*

*I graduated from Pedagogical college in 1930 and got married the same year to Isaac Kagan.*

*He was a journalist, working as a special correspondent in Belarus for a Moscow Jewish Newspaper. In 1951 he was accused of being a "rootless cosmopolitan." The whole staff of the newspaper was arrested. Also, all Jewish writers and artists were arrested. My husband was sentenced to 10 years of gulag and 5 years additional with no rights. He was rehabilitated after Stalin's death in 1955. He was very sick when he came home, and died in 1958.*

*My mother died in 1967, she was 90 years old. After WWII, she exchanged letters with Pesya (her half sister, Bessie Katznelson Brody, who lived in the US), but when my husband was arrested and accused of having connections to foreign governments due to the fact that we were getting letters from Palestine and US, my mother stopped all communications abroad.*

*I just want to say how happy I am that we came to this beautiful country, that our families are finally united, that we got to know our relatives. I hope that my kids will have a good life. Thank God that we came here.*



**Three sisters, from the left: Esther, Mnuha, Riva, 1964. Moscow.**

## **Addendum IV**

### **A HISTORY OF MY FATHER'S FAMILY**

Recently my cousin Fredric Kagan came to the US for his grand daughter wedding and I used the opportunity to attend the wedding and to talk to my cousin about the family history. I asked Fredric to write what he remembers about the Kagan Family and the WWII. He was born in 1935.

#### **HISTORY OF THE KAGANS BY FREDRIC (FEDYA) KAGAN**

My grandfather's name was Nissen. (*I was named Natan (Nathan) after my grandfather*).

His wife – Malke.

They had 7 children – 6 boys and a girl: from oldest to the youngest

Haim – wife – Tiba

Isaac – wife – Riva

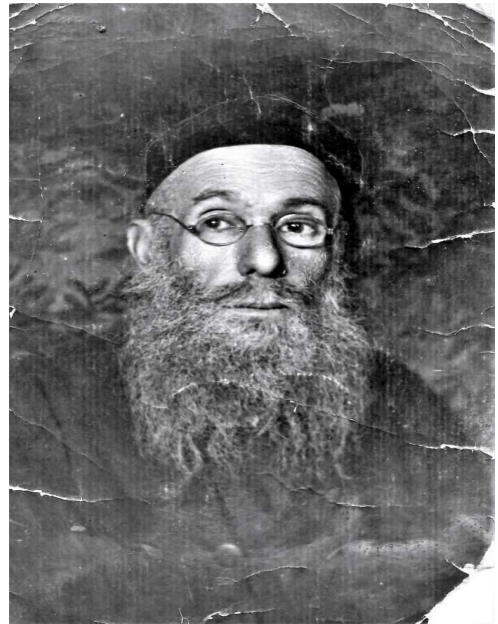
Berl – wife – Haya

Lipa – wife – Rachel

Boroch – wife – Bronya

Echa – not married

Sonya – died at 17 from heart defect



***My grandfather Nissen Kagan***

My grandparents lived in a little village (shtetl) Dukora, Belarus, 40 km from Minsk (between Minsk and Bobruisk), population about 10,000-15,000 before WWII, majority Jews. There was synagogue and Jewish school where children were taught Yiddish and Hebrew, Torah study and prayers.

My grandfather Nissen was a teacher (Melamed in Hebrew) in this school. He also tutored at home. He was very religious, was wearing kippah all the time, had a long beard. He was average height, he used to wear black suit and a white shirt. Grandfather spoke with us in Yiddish.

I was in Dukora several times when I was 5 and 6 years old (1940-1941). Every time we visited he would put his palm on my head and say a prayer finishing with Mazel Tov and ... kop.

Grandmother Malke was from well-to-do family. They had Russian Valenki (winter felt boots) manufacturing shop. My grandmother was short and plump. She worked as seamstress from home. She spoke Yiddish. One time she gave me a boy rag doll.

Polish Army came to Dukora in 1917-1918. They looted local population, they demanded gold from my grandfather, that he did not have. They beat him up, hit him on the head and he lost most of his vision. Since then he was wearing dark glasses and was walking with a cane.

In July 1941 Dukora was occupied by Nazi Germany. Local Nazi collaborators forced all local Jews into ravine behind the village. My grandfather could not walk and there was not room on

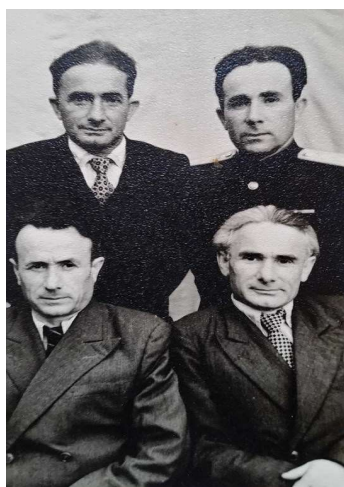
the truck. Police tied his hands to the truck and dragged this way to the ravine. He died on the way to the ravine. I am retelling it from the words of local people that I met after WWII.

Grandmother Malke was shot by the Nazi collaborators. There is a memorial now in the ravine of the mass grave. Among many others there are names – Kagan and Edelchik (grandmother's maiden name).

The house where Kagan family used to live was a log house. The house was demolished after the war because it was determined to be too old and unsafe.

The memorial stone with the names of locals who fought in the WWII is standing now near the Town Hall. There is a name – Edelchik – Malke's youngest brother, who fought Nazi occupiers in the guerrilla war and was killed. My uncle Lipa was one of the initiators of the project to install this stone. He helped to collect the information about local Jews who joined guerrilla war against the Nazis and who died in this fight. Also he collected money for the memorial. Lipa and I went to Dukora 3 times from 1946-1950. The locals remembered the Kagan family. They showed us where the house was standing. They showed us the ravine with the mass grave and the memorial. Many locals gave money for the memorial restoration.

The oldest brother, Haim, worked as a supervisor in the family business (valenki manufacturing shop). My father Berl also worked there. Haim and his brothers are remembered by locals in Dukora.



**Kagan brothers, from left to right,  
standing Lipa, Boroch  
sitting Berl, Isaac  
About 1957-1958**

During the WWII some of the brothers participated in military actions against the Nazi army. My father, lieutenant colonel, was an army prosecutor. Lipa was captain in chemical battalion.

Boroch was a major in medical battalion. Echa was a sergeant in the army. Isaac was rejected because of poor eyesight. He worked as a reporter during the war. Haim and his family evacuated. His wife Tiba was pretty and kind woman, smiling a lot, always treating us kids with sweets.



**Kagan brothers, from left to right,  
standing Lipa and Isaac  
sitting Berl and Haim.  
Right after the WWII (about 1945-1947)**

After the war Haim and his family lived in Minsk in an old house which was later demolished, and now there is a several stories high residential building. Haim and Tiba had 4 children: Misha, Boma (Abram), Gennah and Sarra. Later Misha was a director of a local cultural center. We

were friends and had drinks together from time to time. His wife Raya was a lawyer. She lives in Israel now. Misha died from lung cancer (he smoked) in Minsk in a hospital where I used to work as an anesthesiologist. Their son Urij lives in Israel. He is divorced. He has 2 children. Misha's daughter Zanna with her husband and 2 kids also lives in Israel.

Second son Boma (1932) and his wife Maya live in Petah-Tikva, Israel. He came to Israel in 1973 with his wife and 2 kids and with Haim and Tiba (parents.) In Israel Boma worked as a mechanical engineer designing military equipment. He received Presidential Medal for his achievements. The President's Award is an award conferred by the President of the State of Israel on individuals who have made an outstanding contribution to the State of Israel or to humanity, through their talents, services, or in any other form. Boma and Maya have 2 children – Yasha and Lena.

The third son Gennah with his wife Natasha are living in Chicago. They have 2 sons – Alexander and Anatoly. The youngest child, Sarrah, lives in Skokie IL with her husband Anatoly. They have one daughter, Emma.

Isaac Kagan was married to Riva Katsnelson. They met at Jewish Pedagogical College. My mother Haia Ketzluch, was also studying there. Isaac worked in Russian and Yiddish language publications, writer and poet. Isaac had 2 children – Mifa and Natan. Mifa was born in 1934, she was a math teacher in the evening school for working students. Her husband Benjamin Nissenbaum (Bonya) worked as a supervisor in a furniture plant in Bobruisk. They have one son – Arkadij. Arkadij is married to Luba and they have one daughter – Stella. They all live in Chicago area. They all came to US around 1992.

Isaac and Riva's son Natan is married to Anna Kreslya. They live in Skokie, IL. They have 3 children – Inna (Don Pankuch – husband, Sasha and Ari – children), Isaac with his wife Shari, Rachel and her husband Darren Morrissey (married October 5, 2019).

Natan and Anna are the organizing force of Kagan family. They organized the Kagan family reunion in Chicago in 2011. My son Boris came with his family to the reunion.

The third son, Berl, at first graduated from vocational school and then from law school in Belorussian University. He married Haia, worked as a lawyer. He was drafted to the military service, as military investigator, and then a military prosecutor. He participated in the war against Nazi Germany and Japan. Berl retired from the army due to his health problems. He was awarded 18 medals. Haia after graduating from the Jewish Pedagogical College worked in Jewish school as a teacher. After all Jewish schools were closed she worked as a director of a preschool. Berl and Haia had 2 boys – Fredric and Eugene (Fedya and Zhenya).

In 1941 after Hitler invasion Haia and children evacuated from Bobruisk. They lived in city of Orenburg. Fedya started school in evacuation and continued his education in Bobruisk after the

war. He graduated from Smolensk Medical School, worked as a surgeon in Bobruisk and then as an anesthesiologist in Minsk. After getting PhD Fedya was teaching in Minsk Medical School for 27 years. His wife Nina – doctor dietologist, has PhD. They have 2 children – Boris and Olga. Boris with his family lives in NJ, Olga and her husband live in Minsk. Boris and his wife Julia have 4 girls – Elana, Miriam, Hanna, Sarah. Olga (1976) is married to Alexander. She graduated Belorussian University – math and information systems. She currently teaches in this University. My brother – Eugene graduated Voronezh medical School and worked as a cardiologist. His wife – Marina. Their daughter Vicky and granddaughter Elona. Eugene died from a heart attack in 2012.

Lipa was the fourth son. His wife was Rachel. Lipa graduated pedagogical college, post graduated pedagogical school of Belarus University in Russian language and literature. Lipa was writing poems in Yiddish, but he was afraid to publish. He worked as a teacher in Bobruisk and Smolensk. His wife Rachel was a dentist. When I was studying in Smolensk I lived with Lipa and his family for a year. I am very grateful to his family for that. Lipa and Rachel had 2 daughters: Eugenia and Marina. Eugenia graduated pedagogical institute. She was married to Lenya (Leonard). Lipa's younger daughter Marina with her husband Arkadij moved to Israel. Both sisters died from heart problems. Marina's husband Arkadij works in Israel. Their daughter Zhanna – doctor of ophthalmology. She and her husband live in Israel with 2 children. In 1970 Lipa moved to Minsk from Smolensk after his wife's death. Lipa died in 1974 from heart attack. His daughter Marina transported Lipa's body to Smolensk where he was buried near his wife and his oldest daughter.



**Family gathering for Fedya's son (Boris Kagan) wedding in Minsk, 1989. From left to right: Misha & Raya Kagan, Natasha and Genah Kagan, Mifa, Fedya, Bonya, Eugene and Marina Kagan**

Boroch was the fifth son. He graduated Minsk Medical Institute. Major, worked as a doctor in the army. He was awarded 7 medals during WWII. After retiring from the army Boroch worked in Minsk hospital. His wife Bronya worked as a school teacher. They had twins – Tamara and Galya. I was often in their home. Boroch died from the heart attack around 1982-1984. Bronya with daughters moved to Israel. Both girls have families in Haifa and each has 2 kids. I visited them in 2011. Bronya was 83 at the time.

Echa the youngest brother was killed in 1942 by the Nazis.

***More information, pictures, updates, videos, references, future information, please visit  
[www.dukorsky.com](http://www.dukorsky.com) (My Journey)***



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