

SOVIET JEWISH CULTURE

Recovering Jewish Daily Life in the Soviet Union Before the Holocaust

Joseph

I used to live in a place called Kvadrakovo. It was a big town, in the province of [Skversky](#) ([Skvirsky](#)) outside of [Kiev](#). If you add up the entire population of Kvadrakovo: Jews, Ukrainians, Russians, and Polacks, all together there were roughly eight thousand inhabitants. The town was fairly industrial. There was a very large sugar factory, a wine-vodka distillery; there were mills, and a cloth factory. In the center of this town there was a so-called “bruno”—a market, kind of like a supermarket today. The landlord Zheltomsky built it. The town had a few synagogues. And one synagogue was particularly interesting. It was called “The Prisoners’ [Synagogue].” It was located not far, literally twenty steps, from the jail. The jail housed both political and everyday criminals. On Saturdays and holidays, the Jewish prisoners were allowed to go to synagogue under supervision. Jews without synagogue, this could not be. There weren’t a lot of Jewish prisoners. A few were political. The political ones were already sent to far-away prisons. And locally, there were some that were arrested for some kind of swindling. We lived pretty close to the prisoners’ synagogue.

My father went to the synagogue. He didn’t go every day, but he went without fail on Saturdays.¹ And he took us with him, even when we were already grown up. We knew the language [Hebrew]. He wasn’t a fanatic, but he followed all the customs formed over the centuries. That means on Friday evenings, there was a big supper. A prayer was said. He prayed every day. And of course we celebrated holidays, like Lending Day and New Year,²

¹ **Saturday -Shabbat** Hebrew (from shavat, “cease,” or “desist”), day of holiness and rest observed by Jews from sunset on Friday to nightfall of the following day. The time division follows the biblical story of creation: “And there was evening and there was morning, one day” (Genesis 1:5).
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² **New Year - Rosh Hashana** (Hebrew: “Beginning of the Year”), Hashana also spelled Hashanah, or Ha-shanah, also called Day Of Judgment, or Day Of Remembrance, a major Jewish observance now accepted as inaugurating the religious New Year on Tishri 1 (September or October). Because the New Year ushers in a 10-day period of self-examination and penitence, Rosh Hashana is also called the annual Day of Judgment; during this period each Jew reviews his relationship with God, the Supreme Judge. A distinctive feature of the liturgy is the blowing of the ram’s horn (shofar) as prescribed in Numbers 29:1; the notes of the shofar call the Jewish people to a spiritual awakening associated with the revelation to Moses on Mount Sinai. During the Additional Service in the synagogue, the shofar is sounded after the recital of each of three groups of prayers.

Rosh Hashana is also known as the Day of Remembrance, for on this day Jews commemorate the creation of the world, and the Jewish nation recalls its responsibilities as God’s chosen people.
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etc. Trefnovaya week. We celebrated holidays such as Passover,³ Trinity Sunday, New Year's of course, Lending Day. And then came those, historical holidays like Hanukah and Purim. We usually celebrated them at home. Well Hanukah⁴ was not especially prayerful, but we got together and talked. We followed everything that was dictated by tradition. I didn't eat what a Jew wouldn't, for example, cutlets fried in butter. Because it is written in the Bible: 'Don't boil a goatling in the milk of its mother' [Exodus 23:19]. We stuck to traditions like that.

In my first years, my parents and I lived in a village. I was born in the village of Sobolevk. There were thirty three Jewish families there. Jews didn't have the right to own land there. But, there was a farmstead, a little house with a big kitchen, a garden, everything was there. Well, my father worked for the landlord. He knew farming well, and forestry. Then he had some dealings with the forestry business. Under the Soviet regime, he worked as a planner at a factory. I had three brothers; two of them are now deceased, and a sister, who is deceased as well. My sister passed on already, in the old days, finishing gymnasium. It was something like 1920. And then we had a teacher and a heder. In the heder they taught us the Hebrew language. We also studied the Five Books of Torah [The Five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy]. The older ones preceding the Gemara.⁵ And then some pieces of the Talmud.⁶ At that time it was already a novelty. There was already a

³ **Passover**, Hebrew Pesah, or Pesach, in Judaism, holiday commemorating the Hebrews' liberation from slavery in Egypt and the "passing over" of the forces of destruction, or the sparing of the firstborn of the Israelites, when the Lord "smote the land of Egypt" on the eve of the Exodus.

The festival thus marks the first and most momentous event in Jewish history. Passover begins with the 15th and ends with the 21st (or, outside of Israel and among Reform Jews, the 22nd) day of the month of Nisan (March or April). On these seven (or eight) days, all leaven, whether in bread or other mixture, is prohibited, and only unleavened bread, called matzo, may be eaten.

The matzo symbolizes both the Hebrews' suffering while in bondage and the haste with which they left Egypt in the course of the Exodus. Passover is also sometimes called the Festival of Unleavened Bread.

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⁴ **Hanukka** ((Hebrew: "Dedication"),)also spelled Hanukkah, Chanukah, or Chanukkah, also called Feast Of Dedication, Feast Of Lights, or Feast Of The Maccabees, a Jewish observance commemorating the rededication (164 BC) of the Second Temple of Jerusalem after its desecration three years earlier by order of Antiochus IV Epiphanes; the Syrian king was thus frustrated in his attempt to extirpate the Jewish faith. Though modern Israel tends to emphasize the military victory of Judas Maccabeus, the distinctive rite of lighting the menorah (q.v.) also recalls the Talmud story of how the small supply of nondesecrated oil—enough for one day—miraculously burned in the Temple for eight full days until new oil could be obtained. Beginning on Kislev 25 (in December), Hanukka is celebrated for eight days; during this time, in addition to the lighting of the ceremonial candles, gifts are exchanged and children play holiday games. Copyright © 1994-2002 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

⁵ **GEMARAH** The discussion of the Jewish legal opus, the MISHNAH, with which it forms the TALMUD. The term is from the Aramaic word *ge mārā'*, meaning completion, but it is used also in the derived senses of tradition, study, or even Talmud. In the technical sense the Gemarah is a commentary on the Mishnah.

KRINSKY, R. "Gemarah." *New Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 6. 2nd

ed. Detroit: Gale, 2003. 124. 15 vols. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Thomson Gale.

⁶ **TALMUD** The term "Talmud" (Heb. *talmûd*, teaching, learning, from the verb *lāmad*, to learn) designates the authoritative body of post-biblical Jewish laws and traditions, consisting essentially of two parts: an older nucleus, the MISHNAH, compiled toward the end of the 2d Christian century, and the commentaries on it, the GEMARAH, which has two forms—the Palestinian, compiled toward the end of the 4th century, and the Babylonian, compiled at the beginning of the 6th century. As a vast collection of

teacher who taught Russian language in that very heder.⁷ The school was run through donations. They taught Russian language there, arithmetic, everything.

I went to the heder. It was free, because the community supported it. And my brothers and I studied in the heder there too. Although we learned Russian in school, at home we spoke only in Yiddish⁸ with a little Russian. Hebrew, of course, wasn't used, because not everyone knew it well enough. Then too, it's one thing to rattle something off, and a different matter to build a phrase from your head. These are different things. And so Yiddish was the language at home. A few families, prosperous people, spoke Russian. For example, there was a madam in the Galpereen family, she had already finished studying at the gymnasium under the tsar's regime, and their family spoke Russian. I entered into the gymnasium in 1916. I didn't finish the heder. The thing was that we didn't have a gymnasium. So then we needed to go to Kiev, where we had acquaintances. We went. I passed my exams and went. I was ten years old, but I was well-prepared enough. I remember this moment. I was with my brother, together with my older brother—he was badly injured in the war and died in 1970. We went to this gymnasium in Kiev, and were accepted.

On the first day, there weren't lessons yet—it was a great day—I stood with my brother. At this time lots of kids were crowding around. They extended to the walls and to the church. My brother and I were taken aback. "Good gracious, they're going to baptize us now." We barely escaped alive. When we told our father, he said "We don't need this disturbance." He took us back to our town and found us a private teacher. He knew educated people. By that time, in 1917, it was already possible to enter [schools] freely, so I went to the gymnasium of Mr. Starushenko, who was one of the heads of anti-Semitism in Kiev. He was the head of the

various sayings of numerous RABBIS (Jewish teachers) over a period of at least six centuries, the Talmud is basically a recording in writing of traditional oral law.

SCHUBERT, K. "Talmud." *New Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 13. 2nd ed. Detroit: Gale, 2003. 742-747. 15 vols. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Thomson Gale.

⁷ HEDER (Heb. חֶדֶר; lit. "room"), the common name for the old-fashioned elementary school for the teaching of Judaism. The name first occurs in the 13th century. The *heder* was distinct from the *talmud torah*. Whereas the latter was a communal institution maintained by the community for poor children whose parents could not afford tuition fees, the *heder* was a privately run institution, the teacher receiving his fees from the parents. It was generally housed in a room in the private house of the teacher, called the *rebbe* (Yiddish form of "rabbi") or *melammed*. Usually three classes were held concurrently; while the teacher taught one the children in the others went over their lessons. The age groups were from 3-5, 6-7, and 8-13.

Rabinowitz, Louis. "Heder." *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Eds. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. Vol. 8. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007. 752. 22 vols. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Thomson Gale.

⁸ A vernacular language used by Ashkenazic Jews. A language based on Germanic dialects infused with Hebrew and loanwords from areas in Europe in which it was spoken, Yiddish is the vernacular used by Ashkenazic Jews since the European Middle Ages. As Hebrew became primarily the language of liturgy and religious scholarship, Yiddish, by the end of the eighteenth century, emerged as the vehicle for the expression of secular literature, drama, poetry, and popular literature. By the nineteenth century, Yiddish was established as the language of a secular European Jewish culture found mainly in Eastern Europe.

SIMON, REEVA S. "Yiddish." *Encyclopedia of the Modern Middle East and North Africa*. Ed. Philip Mattar. Vol. 4. 2nd ed. New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004. 2399-2400. 4 vols. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Thomson Gale

gymnasium. Then there was also a private gymnasium. He said, as long as I'm living, not one Jew will cross the threshold of my school. We were the first Jews. We determined that they were going to baptize us, so we left. That's it. With that, our epoch finished. Then we opened our own gymnasium. And then came the civil war, ⁹ [pogroms](#), ¹⁰ war, and everything.



[The victims, mostly Jewish children, of a 1905 pogrom in Yekaterinoslav](#)

During the civil war, we left our town, where many people died in one day There was this Maruska gang. It was somehow known that a kind of Maruska was the head of this gang. Very many people died. The town was almost burned down. So we went to [Berdichev](#). That city is known for being Jewish. ¹¹ We started by heading to the nearest railway station, which was about fifteen kilometers away. We hired a horse and went. We got there and went to Berdichev, where we lived in rather difficult material conditions, because there wasn't any work to be found. My father settled in a little somewhere. And then from there we left for Kiev because our house had already burned down, the whole thing. I lived in Kiev until 1929. In 1929, I left for Moscow. A friend of mine was there. My parents didn't leave Kiev, I left by

⁹ **Russian Civil War** (1918-20), conflict in which the Red Army successfully defended the newly formed Bolshevik government against various Russian and interventionist anti-Bolshevik armies_
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¹⁰ **Pogrom** (Russian: "devastation," or "riot"), a mob attack, either approved or condoned by authorities, against the persons and property of a religious, racial, or national minority. The term is usually applied to attacks on Jews in the Russian Empire in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Russian central government did not organize pogroms, as was widely believed; but the anti-Semitic policy that it carried out from 1881 to 1917 made them possible. Official persecution and harassment of Jews led the numerous anti-Semites to believe that their violence was legitimate, and their belief was strengthened by the active participation of a few high and many minor officials in fomenting attacks and by the reluctance of the government either to stop pogroms or to punish those responsible for them. Copyright © 1994-2002 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc._

¹¹ **BERDICHEV**, town in the historic region of Volhynia, now in Zhitomir district, Ukraine.. Berdichev had become an important center of Volhynian Hasidism in the last quarter of the 18th century. As the town grew, a number of noted scholars served as rabbis of Berdichev, including Lieber "the Great," Joseph "the Harif," and, from the end of the 18th century until his death in 1809, Levi Isaac of Berdichev. In Russian and Jewish literature and folklore, Berdichev epitomizes the typical Jewish town. All Jewish cultural activities there were suspended before World War II. Ettlinger, Shmuel, Shmuel Spector, and Avraham Yaari. "Berdichev." *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Eds. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. Vol. 3. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007. 402-403. 22 vols. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Thomson Gale

myself. Then my brothers came to stay with me. I'm the only one still left from my big family, not counting the young. From the older generation, I'm the only one left.

When we lived in Berdichev, we didn't have our own house. We rented an apartment. The apartment was converted from an old hotel. My brother and I, we slept in one room. We had a little library there. And guests came— to the "hotel", they ate dinner—well, there was a kitchen, so there you have it. Everything was neat. The house was well-built. It wasn't ours, we rented it, we didn't own our own. And then my grandfather and grandmother on my father's side lived in the village, where I was born.

In 1917, my grandmother died, and by then there was no one left. There were three Jewish families. None of them remained. And in the town, there were approximately three thousand perhaps three and a half thousand Jews. A saddlemaker lived below our apartment. The owner of the building lived on one side of the house. He had a little store with all kinds of sweets there. Then soda water came along. So, it meant that there was some commerce there. The majority of it was concerned with trade and handicrafts.

My mother didn't work. There were four people in our family. And more truthfully there were even six, because two of my first cousins lived with us. Their family lived somewhat far from town, and they needed to go to school. And, moreover, company came. My father was very popular in town. So people were always coming to get advice and to chat in general. Jews love to chat. They talked about business and they talked about memories. And they always argued that things were better before—children were better, bread was better—everything was better. And in reality, during the years of the civil war, life was very difficult. Every day there were bandits, gangs, damned if I know who they were, bandits or what. It was a difficult period that we survived though. When Soviet power was established, all of these bandits were liquidated, and then life somehow became more tranquil. But by then, the number of Jews remaining there were few. Some left, some were killed. Many Jews are trying to forget the Soviet period. But I don't believe this. This was a period: it was our people, it was our language, it was our literature.

I read a lot of Jewish literature. And now I own books in Yiddish. I read Mendele Mocher Sforim,¹² and Sholom Aleichem.¹³ Stuff like that. At that time some journals were

¹² Mendele Moykher Sforim

born Nov. 20, 1835, Kopyl, near Minsk, Russia [now in Belarus] died Dec. 8, 1917, Odessa [now in Ukraine] also spelled Mendele Mokher Seforim, pseudonym of Shalom Jacob Abramowitsch Jewish author, founder of both modern Yiddish and modern Hebrew narrative literature and the creator of modern literary Yiddish. He adopted his pseudonym, which means "Mendele the Itinerant Bookseller," in 1879. Copyright © 1994-2002 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc..

¹³ SHALOM ALEICHEM (Sholem Aleykhem; narrative persona and subsequent pseudonym of Sholem Rabinovitsh (Rabinovitz); 1859-1916), Yiddish prose writer and humorist born on February 18, 1859 (old style; March 2, new style), in Pereyaslav Together with Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh (often misidentified as his fictional narrator, Mendele Moykher Sforim) and I.L. Peretz, Shalom Aleichem is regarded as one of

published. I read the magazine *Literator* in Yiddish. We also received some Russian ones at our house. *Niva*¹⁴



was one of those journals. It was printed before the revolution. They had already begun to publish contemporary journals.

the three major classical writers of Yiddish literature. He rapidly achieved widespread popularity with the reading public, though it took him longer to achieve lasting critical acclaim.

Denman, Hugh. "Shalom Aleichem." *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Eds. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. Vol. 18. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007. 378-389. 22 vols. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Thomson Gale.

¹⁴Niva 1870-1918 Sankt Peterburg -popular weekly illustrated magasin for family reading. JB.

I did a good bit of reading in Hebrew. We studied Hebrew at the heder. But it wasn't much. Because the teacher had old-fashioned beliefs. He believed, that the khumesh (Five Books of Moses) was the foundation of everything, and this is how he taught us grammar. We somehow felt scornful about this matter, but we taught ourselves in our own group. Therefore I'm not bad at the language. And now I have books in Hebrew.

Did we have a group? Who joined it? There were few girls. Well, who joined? Boys who were like us did. There were children of craftsmen. They had other inclinations—to master the skills of their fathers. But we had a different inclination. All the boys in this group were Jewish. There were few Russians. They were there, but they weren't close friends. With Jewish friends, we mainly spoke Yiddish. There were a few, so to say, from aristocratic families, by then even if they knew Yiddish, they considered it unworthy and switched over to Russian language. Then, when Ukrainization began¹⁵ —and we lived in Ukraine, we sometimes used the Ukrainian language.

Of course, now, I haven't used Ukrainian in many years. But it is actually similar [to Russian]. Bread [khleb] is "khleeb." Then it's separate - individual words only, and then you have to rebuild it a little—"ee" instead of "yeh", "p" instead of "v." Well, those who knew Hebrew sometimes gathered simply for practice and conversed. We studied Hebrew because a national feeling still remained. Moreover, in the period of banditry, when you were Jewish, it meant you were doomed. There was that psychology. Now of course, it's already incomprehensible for our people, and we grasped then how to survive. Because, you know, it was such a moment, when bands flew in and 400 people were immediately killed.

Our family was saved because we left. We moved at first to Berdychiv, then to [Zhytomyr](#). Then when things quieted down a little, we returned and the house had already been completely burned down. So, we moved in with my grandmother. My grandfather on my mother's side worked at a sugar factory for 55 years. The whole family, all of his sons, everyone worked at this factory. My uncle, Pinya was a machine-mechanic at the factory. He went through the whole war from 1914 to the year 1918. Then, when the civil war began, he even headed a detachment against banditry. And in 1929, he left for America. I have cousins there in America. I don't know, we don't have any kind of relationship. Some are still living now, others aren't of course.

I could never agree that Jews are the most chosen people, or that in them lives the "quintessence" of our whole planet. I don't agree with this. I read a lot in those years, I've read a lot in my life. I respect German philosophy and literature, and French, and Arabic as well. Every group brings some piece to the general depository of culture.

¹⁵ **Ukrainization** Soviet policy, implemented in 1920s in Ukraine, which forcefully promoted Ukrainian language and culture in order to strengthen Soviet regime in this territory.

Well, of course certain customs, like circumcision,¹⁶ you could say, came to an end. This was already happening in the late 1920s and it ended in the 1930s. The older generation kept quiet, they didn't do anything. And then the older generation by this time had already passed on, and with it, this custom—law, not custom—but law.

On Hanukkah and Purim¹⁷ we played games [traditional gambling game with *DREIDELS*, which is played during Hanukkah, and traditional theatre productions—*PURIMSHPILS*—performed on Purim]. We even made our own cards, they weren't suitable. We did the alphabet. It means, 11 letters, well-decorated. And those were cards. We played with them. We played for just a little money, but all the same. What kind of money did we have? Kopecks then. We were boys. Where did they get the money? I do not remember.

In my childhood, if your parents punished you, then it was your mother. It had to be this way. She'd give such a smack; father less so. If something wasn't completed, when something was broken, etc. But you know, there were those families where they beat their children. We didn't have that. Bitterness, there wasn't any. Mother too. Well, for a punishment, you know, she'd give us a scolding—unpleasant—mother worried, we loved her very much. She died in 1941 on the eve of the war. I wasn't even able to go to her funeral. That was an era, what kind of era was it? I worked then as a boss in the administration of the board of engineers, the second construction administration for city building. A plasterer came to me looking for work, and he was hired. He was a strong and literate man, and a good worker. I received a telegram from my father that mother was very sick. "Try to come." They wouldn't let me go. Why wouldn't they let me? It turns that it was this very man. He was a member of the party somewhere far away in Ukraine. Then, over there, something unceremonious happened: somebody said something wrong or somebody spoke against Stalin.¹⁸ And he left from there. He came to us for work. He was literate and well read. He, as it happened, came and began to talk. If I touched on something political, he said immediately, "Not a word about politics. Were you there? I was there." And our ChK [Extraordinary

¹⁶ **CIRCUMCISION** the practice of cutting off of the prepuce of the male, which originates in the God's covenant with Abraham (Gn 17.10-14; Ex 12.43-48; Lv 12.3).

¹⁷ **Purim** Hebrew: "Lots", English Feast of Lots, a joyous Jewish festival commemorating the survival of the Jews who, in the 5th century BC, were marked for death by their Persian rulers. The story is related in the Old Testament Book of Esther.

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¹⁸ **Stalin Josef** born Dec. 21 [Dec. 9, Old Style], 1879, Gori, Georgia, Russian Empire died March 5, 1953, Moscow, Russia, U.S.S.R.

Russian in full Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin, original name (Georgian) Ioseb Dzhugashvili secretary-general of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (1922-53) and premier of the Soviet state (1941-53), who for a quarter of a century dictatorially ruled the Soviet Union and transformed it into a major world power.

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Commission],¹⁹ who was with the subway construction [company], said to me, you won't be going anywhere now, because we will interrogate both you and him. I was called four or five times to the ChK. Such conversations I had with them! We didn't touch on politics. But they knew me, that I wasn't a liar. Still, I went to Kiev. I received a telegram from there from our administration that said, "Leave quickly and urgently," because some kind of trial had started. I said, "Father, what should I do?" He said, "It hurts my very soul that you have to leave at such a difficult moment. But in these circumstances you need to do it." And I left. I came, they called me again. With that, the affair ended. Some people were exiled somewhere, and he went missing the same way. But I went to the funeral of my father. He died in 1947. He died in my arms.

In our family things were arranged like this. My mother was in charge of household affairs, and my father took care of questions regarding our education and economics. When my sister finished gymnasium, still in the 1930s, in our fourteenth year in Ukraine, she was already able to participate in questions about education. Then she left for Kiev, entered into Kiev University, finished it, and died in 1945. Gradually, the whole family passed on.

I think that my father was more religious. On Friday, the first thing that my mother carried out was lighting the candles.²⁰ To keep track of where she laid the matzoh,²¹ so as not to lay bread there.²²

On holidays guests came. Guests came, we went as guests, they came to us. There was a circle of people, relatives.

When Soviet power arrived, we perceived it, at first, as bringing rights for Jews. You know a Jew wasn't able to own a plot of earth [within the Pale of Settlement Jews were not allowed to own land]. Then, it had already begun, and trade was liquidated, and things became

¹⁹ **Cheka** also called **Vecheka**, early Soviet secret police agency and a forerunner of the KGB. Copyright © 1994-2002 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

²⁰ **Lightning Shabbat Candles** Just before the advent of the Sabbath on Friday evening, the mistress of the house prays for her family as she kindles two candles in honor of the day: one candle represents the prohibition of work, the other the positive injunction of Sabbath joy and tranquillity. JACOBS, LOUIS. "Shabbat." *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Ed. Lindsay Jones. Vol. 12. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005. 8256-8258. 15 vols. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Thomson Gale.

²¹ **Matzo** unleavened bread eaten by Jews during the holiday of Passover (Pesah) in commemoration of their Exodus from Egypt. The rapid departure from Egypt did not allow for the fermentation of dough, and thus the use of leavening of any kind is proscribed throughout the week-long holiday. The Passover ritual requires that Jews eat matzos at least on the first night of the celebration. Among observant Jews it is customary, however, to eat matzos throughout Passover. Copyright © 1994-2002 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

²² The night before Passover a search for leavened products (*bedikat chametz*) is supposed to be conducted in each Jewish household. The head of the house reads a blessing (*על ביעור חמץ* - *al biyur chametz*, "on the removal of chametz") and proceeds to search everywhere to make sure that no products which are forbidden for Passover period remain in the house .

bad. But when the NEP²³ appeared, then large businesses spread immediately, factories were leased, and so on. People revived somehow. There was something to live on. Until then, people lived very terribly in the first years.

Our family began to live better. Well, at first, at least. The children were grown up, my sister was already able to give lessons. So little by little we managed. My older brother could already participate in the workforce, and he received some kind of job.

In the town there were such public debates. They discussed the Zionist²⁴ struggle. Not everyone was agreed with this. Because they believed that the priesthood, which was on this earth, didn't exist now and could not exist. There were those who spoke against the Jewish religion: not against the very substance of it, but against the abundance of traditions and restrictions. You know, Jews have 613 restrictions and permissions.²⁵ Six hundred thirteen are counted officially. So the people were constrained. This is forbidden, that is forbidden. There was the word "forbidden" and there was the word "allowed." This is

²³ **NEP** the economic policy of the government of the Soviet Union from 1921 to 1928, representing a temporary retreat from its previous policy of extreme centralization and doctrinaire socialism. The policy of War Communism, in effect since 1918, had by 1921 brought the national economy to the point of total breakdown. The Kronshtadt Rebellion of March 1921 convinced the Communist Party and its leader, Vladimir Lenin, of the need to retreat from socialist policies in order to maintain the party's hold on power. Accordingly, the 10th Party Congress in March 1921 introduced the measures of the New Economic Policy. These measures included the return of most agriculture, retail trade, and small-scale light industry to private ownership and management while the state retained control of heavy industry, transport, banking, and foreign trade. Money was reintroduced into the economy in 1922 (it had been abolished under War Communism). The peasantry were allowed to own and cultivate their own land, while paying taxes to the state. The New Economic Policy reintroduced a measure of stability to the economy and allowed the Soviet people to recover from years of war, civil war, and governmental mismanagement. The small businessmen and managers who flourished in this period became known as NEP men. But the NEP was viewed by the Soviet government as merely a temporary expedient to allow the economy to recover while the Communists solidified their hold on power.

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²⁴ **Zionism**, the Jews' movement of national liberation, holds that the Jews constitute "a people, one people." Founded in 1897 by Theodor Herzl (1860-1904) to establish a Jewish state, Zionism created the State of Israel in 1948. The Zionist movement therefore identified the Jews as a political, not solely a religious, group, and maintained that the Jews' problem was a political one. They held that anti-Semitism was deeply embedded in Europe and that the Jews had to evacuate Europe to save their own lives. Building a Jewish state in Palestine formed the principal goal of political Zionism, which achieved success in 1948. Zionist thought extended to political questions on the definition of the Jewish people and the description and meaning of the history of the Jewish people. Zionism formed one of the principal sources for the definition of Jewish thought and scholarship in the first half of the twentieth century.

Neusner, Jacob. "Zionism." *Contemporary American Religion*. Ed. Wade Clark Roof. Vol. 2. New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 1999. 799-801. 2 vols. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Thomson Gale.

²⁵ According to rabbinic tradition there are 613 commandments in the Torah. Some of these laws are directed only to men or to women, some only to Kohanim or Leviyim (members of the tribe of Levi), some only to those handling (growing, eating, etc.) produce from the land of Israel, and many laws were only applicable when the Temple in Jerusalem existed. Less than 300 of these commandments are still applicable today.

http://www.important.ca/jewish_judaism_laws_prayers.html 07.08.07.

allowed. Already at that time, the youth, felt just a bit of Marxism.²⁶ In that time there was literature. Bukharin²⁷

was already well-known, you understand. And they already gathered and discussed this. And by then, these discussions were from the Marxist point of view. There were a few people who were put away for politics. These very people were prisoners in jail.

There generally weren't any theaters or amateur performances. There was a good hall in the city. Sometimes there would be some sort of local concerts there. Sometimes people came from Kiev. Then there was a big sugar factory. Near it there was also a sort of club. Then the Soviet power made up its mind, and destroyed the factory. And they distributed it, whatever materials remained there, they distributed to the state farm. The factory didn't stand. And the factory fed a thousand local people, because beets went there, firewood went there, everything went there. It was a very large enterprise.

²⁶ **Marxism** a body of doctrine developed by Karl Marx and, to a lesser extent, by Friedrich Engels in the middle of the 19th century and consisting originally of three interrelated ideas: a philosophical view of man, a theory of history, and an economic and political program. Copyright © 1994-2002 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc

²⁷ **Bukharin Nikolay Ivanovich** born Oct. 9 [Sept. 27, Old Style], 1888, Moscow died March 14, 1938, Moscow Bolshevik and Marxist theoretician and economist, who was a prominent leader of the Communist International (Comintern). Having become a revolutionary while studying economics, Bukharin joined the Russian Social-Democratic Workers' Party in 1906 and became a member of the Moscow committee of the party's Bolshevik wing in 1908. He was arrested and deported to Onega (a region near the White Sea) in 1911 but escaped to western Europe, where he met the Bolshevik leader Lenin in Kraków (1912) and worked with him on the party's newspaper Pravda ("Truth"). In October 1916 he went to New York, where he edited a Leninist newspaper, *Novy Mir* ("New World"). After the February Revolution of 1917, Bukharin returned to Russia. He was elected to his party's central committee in August, and, after the Bolsheviks seized power, he became editor of Pravda. In 1918, when Lenin insisted upon signing the Brest-Litovsk treaty with Germany and withdrawing Russia from World War I, Bukharin briefly resigned his post at Pravda and led an opposition group, the Left Communists, which proposed instead to transform the war into a general Communist revolution throughout Europe. In March 1919 he became a member of the Comintern's executive committee. During the next few years he published several theoretical economic works, including *The Economics of the Transitional Period* (1920), *The ABC of Communism* (with Yevgeny Preobrazhensky; 1921), and *The Theory of Historical Materialism* (1921). After Lenin's death in 1924, Bukharin became a full member of the Politburo. He continued to be a principal supporter of Lenin's New Economic Policy (promulgated in 1921), which promoted gradual economic change, and opposed the policy of initiating rapid industrialization and collectivization in agriculture. For a time Bukharin was thus allied with Stalin, who used this issue to undermine his chief rivals—Leon Trotsky, Grigory Zinovyev, and Lev Kamenev. In 1926 Bukharin succeeded Zinovyev as chairman of the Comintern's executive committee. Nevertheless, in 1928 Stalin reversed himself, espoused the program of enforced collectivization advocated by his defeated opponents, and denounced Bukharin for opposing it. Bukharin lost his Comintern post in April 1929 and was expelled from the Politburo in November. He recanted his views under pressure and was partially reinstated in the party by Stalin. But though he was made editor of *Izvestia*, the official government newspaper, in 1934 and participated in writing the 1936 Soviet constitution, he never regained his earlier influence and power. Bukharin was secretly arrested in January 1937 and was expelled from the Communist Party for being a "Trotskyite." In March 1938 he was a defendant in the last public purge trial, falsely accused of counterrevolutionary activities and of espionage, found guilty, and executed. He was posthumously reinstated as a party member in 1988. _ Copyright © 1994-2002 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc

Even when we were already in Kiev, my father understood that I was an adult, I had my own way, by then he didn't force me to practice religion. And when I was 10 years old, I wasn't even able to do wear the Talos,²⁸ I couldn't carry it. On Saturdays as a boy,²⁹ I had to carry it under my arm in a little bag³⁰ and follow my father, and by then I stayed with him in the synagogue. Then when I left, I had to carry it back. I said to him, "Father, do you want to carry this bag? Jews are divided into several groups: Kagans, then the most, those Levites [members of the tribe of Levi] and simple Jews. And so, then it means on some holidays the Kagans (Kohanim)³¹ would line up at the eastern wall, Jerusalem is to the east, at the eastern wall and pray.³²

And, they had some kind of symbol, here with the hand, with the left hand they did something like this.

²⁸ **Tales TALLIT** (Heb. טלית, pl. *tallitot*; Yid. *tales*, pl. *talesim*), prayer shawl. Originally the word meant "gown" or "cloak." This was a rectangular mantle that looked like a blanket and was worn by men in ancient times. At the four corners of the *tallit* tassels were attached in fulfillment of the biblical commandment of [*zizit](#) (Num. 15:38-41).

The *tallit* is usually white and made either of wool, cotton, or silk
Encyclopaedia Judaica. Eds. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. Vol. 19. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007. 465-466. 22 vols. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*.

²⁹ It is prohibited to perform any work on Shabbat. The definition of work is broad and includes carrying things outside the house

³⁰ The respondent confuses Shabbat with a week day when a man traditionally takes to a synagogue a special bag with his *tales* and *tefillin*- two black leather boxes containing scriptural passages which are bound by black leather straps on the left hand and on the head and worn for the morning services on all days of the year except Sabbaths and scriptural holy days.

³¹ Kohanim - priests, descendants of Aaron - Moses' brother in the male line

³² The Priestly Blessing, (in [Hebrew](#): *Birkat Kohanim*, ברכת כהנים) is recited by Kohanim on Jewish holidays. In the Bible, God commands the Priests (*Kohanim*) to bless the Children of Israel.

The verses of the Priestly Blessing (*Birkat Kohanim*) are among the oldest in continuous liturgical use. The words of the Priestly Blessing come from the Book of Numbers 6:24-26.

"May the Lord bless you and keep you.
May the Lord let His face shine upon you and be gracious to you.
May the Lord look kindly upon you and give you peace."

In the time of the Temple in Jerusalem, the Priests recited this blessing every day. Today some synagogues, such as those in Jerusalem, perform this rite every morning. In other synagogues, it is recited only on the Sabbath. In the Diaspora, there are many synagogues that perform this rite only on Jewish holidays, when most of the congregation is gathered.
http://judaism.about.com/od/shabbatprayersblessings/f/bless_kohanim.htm 07.08.07



As a boy I myself also began to do it and, imagine, I'm now 94 years old and I'm doing it, and here with the right hand, which I didn't do, I can't do it to this day. It means that I got it since childhood! Many people were surprised. "How do you do that?" But I did it since I was nine years old, and I still can.

I haven't been in a synagogue in many, many years. I went to visit Moscow Choral synagogue one time. They called me and asked me to drop by to look at the synagogue from the point of view of renovation work. I am a builder. I don't want to be immodest but it was my true calling. I built for myself. I worked on so many houses that 52,000 people now live in them. [I built] all of these houses, specifically, the Palace of Culture of the factory Likhachev,



Likhachev Factory Palace of Culture

a theater in Lipetsk, a theater in Voronezh, the station "26 commissars in Baku," the station "Gostinaya" in Leningrad.

How did I choose the profession of builder? I was 16 years old. I entered into the Construction PTU [vocational technical school] in Kiev in the department of plaster and stone. I was 16 years old, I completed it. I have the union card that was given to me when I was 15 years old, in the year 1921. It remains with me to this day. And so it fell to our generation too. By the age of 16, I already had a pay book. I moved to Moscow in 1929.

My service record began in 1921 in Kiev. I arrived here in Moscow, and began working in 1929. I already had a group of friends here [in Moscow]. I went to work in construction. Because I already had documents, and I already had experience, I was able to work easily. Well, you see that I'm a literate person.

At one point it [my position] was called a foreman, now it's called an expert or a shift engineer, but then it was called a foreman. I began working in residential construction and worked there until 1934, when I switched over to subway construction. From that time on, I worked in subway construction. At first I worked as a district head, having graduated from MIIT [Moscow State University of Transportation] in the tunnels department. I was then already older, already 43. That was in 1949. After the war, in 1946, in my service record this was written: "Assigned to training at MIIT in such-and-such department." I finished the institute after three years, defended my thesis with excellence and became district head. After a year they named me head engineer, and after a few years I became the boss. Then in 1961, I became the head of the administration for special works, which did architectural-finishing work. In other words, everything that you see in the station, it was all done by our organization. Since then, and to this day, I have been connected with a group of very talented architects, with whom I worked. If there was some kind of production question, they called me, we talked things over. The connection continues to this day.

Subway construction began in the beginning of the 1930s. I began working there in 1938. Before that, I worked in residential construction. The head of this residential construction was Latzilidze Ilya Davidovich. He was the boss there, and in 1938 he also switched to subway construction, and he took the whole team with him. I retired in 1982. At home [my family] began asking me: "It's enough, truly, what are you doing, really?" And all of my friends said, "How long can you do it? And construction!"

They somehow slapped together a station, and it was necessary to what was needed finish the aesthetics. I not only had to direct the architecture, but also to correct the preparations. Therefore the team worked very hard. Now, of course, there wasn't any money. In general there was no money.

The people worked very devotedly for a ruble at that time... Meat was two rubles, and not 80 rubles, and a loaf of bread cost 25 kopecks back then.

Jews worked with me. But among those who would stand with a shovel, there were few. Among the bosses there weren't a lot, but there were some [Jews]. Well, considering the proportions in the population, the percentages matched up. Among the bosses there were two people. Then one left for a different organization, and the third one got sick. From the team with which I worked, there were a few, somehow, many died, a few left for America, one left for Canada, and a third went to Japan. The devil knows. There was a secretary. There was an artist. He really knew stone well.

When I was a boss, my parents had already passed on. When my father was still living, I visited him in Kiev, and described to him what it means to be a boss. He said, "Good, son." And when I worked, my father said, "Nevermind, work, it's good." He worked a lot. He was a very intelligent person. They didn't want to move. They were residents of Kiev, they were all

from Ukraine. They had an apartment there, friends there, everything there. It was habit [that kept them there]. And there it was necessary. In Moscow it was complicated enough because everyone had 100 obligations. Sometimes it was that, and sometimes there was no work. But father and mother both came. They always visited me.

I lived in the Maryina Roshcha [district], on October Street. October Street is not far from the Red Army Theater.



Mar'ina Roshcha synagogue
courtesy www.lechaim.ru

And then when they began to build here, they built house number five—the best house here—I received an apartment here. I lived there with my son and wife, full of bright memories. My maternal grandmother died in 1958. My grandfather was killed by her death and by the fact that he was lonely. We all left for work and he was alone. He was afraid to die in solitude. And there was this situation: his friend at the synagogue went to the toilet and died on the toilet. No one was home, and no one knew. He was fearful to the last degree. Then an older son somehow received an apartment. He worked as a boss in the planning department of a candy factory. He was given an apartment, generally. The old man went there. At there his wife didn't work, she was a housewife there.

I got married in 1929. I came to Moscow for this. We studied together in school in Kiev. And her brother studied with us. He died under Smolensk. He was in an air squadron. They shot down his plane over Smolensk.

It was a home wedding. It was back in 1929, which was a difficult year. My wife died in 1978 at the age of 70. I left for work in the morning; I always left for work early. I came home at eight in the evening, and I saw that the window was secure, it was quiet, her light wasn't burning, and I thought she was sleeping. I crossed to the other room in the two-room apartment, and lay down to sleep. In the morning I got up early. Again I saw that everything is closed, and she was already dead. Of course, it's impossible to say what caused it. When I left the prior morning, I said, "You know what, I'll come early, there's an evening meeting, I have to be there, but I'll come as early as possible."

She replied, "There's no way you can be torn away from the collective." She had a well-developed sense of collectivism, lots of volunteer work. She was member of the district executive committee council. She worked a lot along this line. "Without fail you have to persist, sort things out, lead." Maybe, if I had been home, I could have called a doctor, if I saw that she wasn't well. But no one was there, no one in the whole apartment. And that's how it happened—fate. Well, two sons. I have two grandsons and one great grandson. My great grandson is already seventeen years old. He is already a student at Moscow University in the law department. He passed his exams with high marks. He dropped out of ninth grade and said, "I'm not going to go to school anymore. It's only chatter, and they don't give us solid knowledge." And he didn't go to school. He was able to pass completely by himself, without attending classes, and to receive a good certificate for these two grades. He went to the university, did well on his exams and studied. He speaks English with ease. Why? His school organized a summer trip to England, for a few students who grasp language well. They lived with an English family for a summer. And you know, to live and converse in the language, it's worth all of a college education. On his exam he was able to speak freely with his professor in English. In general, he made an impression; they accepted him at the institute, at the university. So now he is there as a student. He'll be a lawyer. Why law? Earlier he was thinking of economics. But now very many people are becoming economists. I said to him, "Dima, Mitenka, consider this, that a lawyer must be a widely educated person in the area of history and in the area of psychology in order to understand immediately the psyche of criminals and so forth."

"Grandpa, don't worry," he told me. The other day he made this remark to me, "Grandpa, why do you wrestle with a razor? Let your beard grow. You will have a thick gray beard." And my sons, rather my grandsons, they work in two different sorts of technology firms, as engineers.

Should one's wife be Jewish?³³ I didn't think about this much. I wouldn't say that the fact that I am a Jew somehow affected my life. In the collective where I worked, I was treated with respect. And with other people, in all the years I worked, I never allowed myself to scold another person. And for us there is a long lineage. Maybe someone thought something like, "Well, here comes a Jewish mug." But, I never heard of it. Subway construction was tightly controlled by the government. There was constant pressure there, and all the time we were afraid that something suddenly wouldn't be right. It was necessary to work very attentively and to foresee what might come of it in the future, when you would do it, how it would be connected. In other words, to have a clear view of what you are doing. It's good that I came to the production line. This has meaning. You can somehow be involved, get deeper into the

³³ According to the Jewish tradition children are Jewish if their mother is Jewish, therefore in order to produce Jewish children one needs to marry a Jewish woman.

structure of this work. They worked well, I must say. Now things are becoming a little undisciplined, undoubtedly. But at that time, you knew, every person, every worker, he somehow felt the work, what needed to be done. They worked well.

The architect Aleshina Nina Alexandrovna designed nineteen subway stations, and I finished her nineteen stations. But in general, it was something like thirty stations, not fewer, including



Kuzneckiy Most

Courtesy www.metro.ru

and, Mayakovskaya, according to Trushkin's design.



Mayakovskaya

Courtesy www.metro.ru

It's true that there exists an underground passage inside, it was built as an emergency passage. And it's the same as the Belorussky Train Station and Komsomolsky Square.



Komsomolsky Square.

Courtesy www.metro.ru

We did many stations. Artists did the mosaics there. And to this day I still have connections with a few of them. One did the Sevastapolsky Station for us. He did the mosaic there. Stavastapol is his work. Then there was the artist Berlin Leonid Gregorevich. He was a talented person. He died. A lot of work was done by him. A lot. The Tomsky station, it is already quite well-known, was also done by him, as well as many others. Now they've stopped doing it. Everyone can see it, there's no money. A new boss came. Those bosses, from before, they worked in subway construction for many years, but in recent times there is a lack of money, a lack of jobs, such turmoil leads to poor condition. When somebody speaks up, the minute he cries out, it's bad for him.. A new boss came. Shtern. He is called "half-last-name." Half-last-name. Because my last name is Shternlikht, and his is Stern. Some wisecracker called him half-last-name. He is a very active person, and he has raised the mood a little bit for the collective. "We'll get by, things will look up!" he would tell us. He was the head of the Tashkent subway, and then they transferred him here. Mayor Lyzhkov (Moscow mayor) approved him. Now he's brought a few of his people from Tashkent so that he could have someone on whom to lean on. So now things are somehow improving a little.

In Moscow, before the war, there was a Jewish theater.



courtesy www.lechaim.ru

M.Chagall "Introduction to the new Jewish Theatre" 1920

I went there with my wife sometimes. She knew the Hebrew language well, too. Sometimes we went with friends. I knew Zuskin, an actor (Jewish actor and director in Moscow State Jewish Theater) I helped him do renovations to the theater. Well, it was such a Jewish theater, it was the only one. The actors were very talented, of course, and then it was silently disbanded. (J. Shternlikht refers here to the closure of the Jewish Theatre and the persecution of the prominent Jewish intellectuals in 1948 JB).

(In 1948, Mikhoels, who was the leading actor and the director of the Moscow State Jewish Theater (GOSET) was murdered by the MVD under Stalin's orders. Soon after that the theater was closed, which was followed by the arrests of the members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (also headed by Mikhoels).

There were talented people. For the productions of Sholom Aleichem (Tevye the Milkman JB) they staged spectacles. The theater was full of good actors. It was difficult enough for them, too. But all the same, there were sponsors who supported the theater. When renovations were done on it, I said to them, "Let's not skin our hides, you and I.. Well, it will be difficult. This business isn't yours." The firm was moneyed enough, wealthy. And so, we were able to do it. Then, how could I not do it? *(out of the sympathy for the theatre J.S. assisted in the reducing of the theatre renovation price)* The one theater in all Russia— and not support it *(J.S. is still talking about the Jewish Theatre)*. We completed it in 1947. Then this theater opened in a different place, they moved somewhere, and it fell into decay. Now there's no theater. They say theatrical circles remained somewhere. That isn't so.

In my town there was no theater, but during the years of Soviet Power, a choir was set up. They sang Ukrainian songs and Jewish songs, all kinds there, a medley. There was a Ukrainian section, there was a Jewish section. There was a movie theater. We watched

movies. We went to the movies there. The older generation treated it disapprovingly. But the younger generation dressed up to go. But my parents didn't scold about the [movie] theater.

In the center of town stood a church. And near the church stood a statue of Alexander II.



<http://www.bfcollection.net/cities/ukraine/kyiv/kyiv.html>

They preserved it. I'm afraid, you see, Alexander gave the serfs rights (*Alexander II emancipated the serfs in Russia in 1861*) and there serfs were granted. It means Alexander deprived something from the landed gentry. It means, it's as if these landlords, the rest of them didn't blow him up (*Alexander II was assassinated in the explosion which was carried out by the members of the radical revolutionary group*). And also, trees were posted, they also stood guard (*around the monument*).

Relations between Jews and non-Jews were individual. There were good relations between, they worked together. After the civil war things changed, and changed for the better. Many people were killed, many left. They understood that the "power" was "for" it and backed away quietly. The fights were just individual.

By all outward appearances the older Jews could really be distinguished from non-Jews: they wore kashkets (caps) small beard, caftan. But the younger generation was already ordinary looking, dressed in coats, vests, everything. If there wasn't enough money, then one went without a vest. Shoes: people wore boots in the fall, because there was so much mud. Well, it was already the period when galoshes appeared, yes. There were good shoe stores. Jews took part in these businesses.

Soviet holidays were weakly celebrated in town. The old men, they couldn't care less about all of it. However, for them, Hanukah was more important. But the youth, they still celebrated. There were already circles of Marxists, they were already celebrating differently. They celebrated all the same. On the first of May there were demonstrations under Soviet power. The state language in Ukraine was Ukrainian. In Ukraine, what was done in Hebrew were independent meetings, groups gathered there, and there were already other affairs

there. They were already determining the language there themselves. The biggest part was Russian, not Ukrainian, but Russian. All the same, Russian overpowered Ukrainian.

My relationship to Jewishness has changed now. What I now think is, "How am I Jewish? Only the fact that on Passover, I eat matzoh." Praying? I don't pray. Well, to read, that's a different matter. Suppose that I could read French, would that mean that I would become French because of it? My father did it, he was a fanatic of a sort, you know, he wasn't strict, but he carried out the fundamental regulations, of course. My children knew that they were Jews. There, you see, that's how it happens. My younger grandson, his mother-in-law and father-in-law aren't Jews. My older grandson, his wife is Olya, her father is a mixture [of Jewish and non-Jewish]. There are so few Jewish people, of course. We were raised in an environment). And that isn't here, of course. Even those Jews who come here sometimes, they also aren't full-fledged, because they don't know the language.

I spoke Yiddish with my wife. She spoke it very well. Sometimes, you know, we spoke that way so that the children wouldn't understand. It's necessary to speak [a secret language]. Another time I looked and thought, "Yes, I'll have a talk with myself in Hebrew." I speak with myself in Hebrew. Me, that's me, and him, that's him.

I would like to go to see Israel. But I imagine life there. In the press they sometimes have feature stories. And then people, friends, were there. So I have some idea. It's also difficult, moreover, that Arabs are always stirring things up. And then, international opinion is anti-Israeli. It's good that it has its own government. But apparently it's necessary for it to enter into a general system of culture. But they need to enter into a general culture, to recognize other cultures. But of course now it's changed there, because people from different countries have collided, bringing with them, their own cultures and languages.

Before the war, I subscribed to "Emes" (Der Emes (Moscow, 1920 - 1938) daily Yiddish newspaper). All kinds of interesting things were printed there. They praised Stalin there, of course. I still subscribed to Jewish journals, individual issues. They were published briefly, and then that press gradually somehow dimmed.

I wasn't a member of the party. I somehow sat in a group and talked about some political ideas.

Joseph lived in Moscow and worked as an engineer of the Moscow Metro system for over 40 years. He died a few weeks after the interview, in August 2001.