

**LINE FIVE: THE INTERNAL PASSPORT**  
**The Soviet Jewish Oral History Project of the Women's Auxiliary**  
**of the Jewish Community Centers of Chicago**

**IZRAIL BERSUTSKY**

**Economist**

BIRTH: 1929, Kotujany, near Kishinev

SPOUSE: Frida, 1929?-1989

CHILDREN: Greta Etingen, 1962

PARENTS: Leah Bershotsky, 1903-1972  
David Bersutsky, 1903-1985

SIBLINGS:

MATERNAL GRANDPARENTS:

PATERNAL GRANDPARENTS:

JEWISH ORGANIZATIONAL AFFILIATIONS (IF GIVEN):

J. C. C. WOMEN'S AUXILIARY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

**INTERVIEW WITH IZRAIL BERZUTSKY**

**TRANSLATOR: GRETA ETINGEN, Daughter**

**Interviewer: Elaine Snyderman**

I was born in 1929, in Kotujany, a village of 6,000 people near Kishinev in the province of Moldavia. About 1,000 Jews resided here. Until 1940, Moldavia was Rumania. After 1940, it became part of the Soviet Union. My father had a small business selling fur pelts that he bought from fur trappers. I went to school when I was five years old, *Cheder*, Jewish school, and started in Rumanian school when I was eight. I was the oldest and had one brother and two sisters. My brother lives in Israel today, my sisters in Kishinev.

Sometimes I went to *cheder* one day, sometimes to Rumanian school. After school I helped my parents by bringing

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water from the lake to our home. My brother and sisters also helped out. There were about two years between each of us. I helped my father and my sisters helped my mother. My father's business was conducted from our house. We made a good living until 1940, until we became part of the Soviet Union and Soviet troops occupied this territory. All private businesses were stopped. The Jewish schools and synagogues were closed. My father was employed at the same work after that, but it was no longer his business. The earnings went to the government. It was not a good time.

In 1941 the war broke out and the Germans invaded. My mother took the children and escaped to Uzbekistan but my father was sent to Siberia to a "work front" on a construction project. All the able-bodied Jewish men were sent away but the Moldavian men were allowed to remain.

My mother took us as far as the River Dnestra in Moldavia with all the other Jewish people who remained after the men left. A ghetto camp was created there. Those who could escape from this place did. Only five families from this ghetto escaped to Uzbekistan. My mother's relatives

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remained in the ghetto. Her sister, her father, and all the others. We never heard from them again.

We lived in Shorechan, a small village, for three years and we lived in the town of Fergana for two more years. When we came from our village we had only the clothes we wore. We had no money. In the small village, my mother and I worked but my brother and sisters were too small. We were given 400 grams of brown bread a day for each person by the authorities. No other food was distributed. I worked eighteen hours a day on a farm gathering cotton and also grain. My earnings were two pounds of grain a day. My mother traded this grain for milk and vegetables. Everything was government owned.

Although we were in the South, winters still were cold, the temperature falling as low as 35 degrees Fahrenheit. We lived in a one room hut made of *glina* [clay] and we had no furnishings, no electricity, no water. It had a roof and there was one very small window, but it wasn't dark during the day because we opened the door. At night it was dark. We carried water from the river, but it was polluted. We slept on hay spread over a dirt floor.

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Because of the food shortage and lack of medicine people were dying every day. It was a very bad time. There was no opportunity to observe the Jewish holidays or traditions.

My father and mother exchanged letters during this time. After the war ended, my father joined us in 1946 in Siberia, and then we went back to Kotujany in Moldavia together.

After the war, the synagogues and *cheders* remained closed. During the day I worked in a produce warehouse distributing vegetables and also went to night school. As the eldest son, I became the main support of the family. My father couldn't work very hard after the war. During the war my father suffered from malaria, which he caught in Uzbekistan, as did my brother and sister who later worked gathering cotton. My father also was not well after his work in Siberia.

I graduated from night school when I was twenty-two, the equivalent of high school. After that I moved to

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Kishinev and graduated with a Bachelor's Degree from Technical College. I was thirty years old.

I worked as a manager in a small food market, government owned, of course, like everything else. From there I went on to earn a Master's Degree in Economics. I was the first of my family to move to Kishinev and then my brother and sisters followed.

The Communist Party did not make opportunities in the party available to Jews. Jewish people were not allowed the same opportunities to achieve high positions.

In 1961, I married Frida Braunshtein, when I was thirty-three. I waited to marry until I was established a little bit. She was twenty-six and was an electrical engineer. Although I was a trained economist, as a Jew I could not achieve the position I studied for. In Kishinev I worked in a small college, the Cooperative Technicum, teaching food processing, from the raw materials to the refined product, such as how to take grain and process it into flour and then into bread.

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In 1973, my brother Chaim, left for Israel. Again, he felt his opportunities were limited, for Jews in general and the family couldn't practice the traditions of our faith. My wife was from a religious family. Her father was a rabbi and she kept up the traditions in the home. Kishinev was a small city but there was a synagogue where Jews sometimes went.

When I applied to emigrate, I was refused. My brother was allowed to go because he did not have a diploma. In 1973, the Soviet government required that Jews who wanted to emigrate had to pay for their education - 6,000 rubles per diploma. My wife and I would have to pay for two diplomas. We decided to wait until times were better to apply again. The next opportunity came in 1980.

**SECOND INTERVIEW:**

When I returned after the war, I was still able to work. I made sausages, salami, for a year. After that I worked as an expediter to ship vegetables.

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The only thing I miss about Russia is that my wife, Frida, is not here with me. My two sisters are in Kishinev and would like to come here but can't get visas. They prefer to come here but would go to Israel if they can't get visas for the U.S. My brother is happy there, but he has two children and his son sometimes can't work in Israel, but I think it is getting better there.

I hope my grandchild will be able to live better here. There are freedom and religious freedom and people are very warm in the United States.

(Greta: Some people don't realize how much help there is from Jewish organizations in America. They're very friendly, very warm people. The Jewish Family Service helped us very much for two months, they helped us pay for our apartment and our life. For us they did more things. My wife was in the hospital. She was in Resurrection and Mount Sinai. I was sick and our counselor helped us to send papers to get disability and Social Security benefits.)



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Right now, it is possible in the Soviet Union to work (after you request permission to emigrate), but I had a disability, circulatory problems. In 1980 when I was refused permission to leave, I had to give up my teaching job and took work in a food warehouse doing clerical work. I worked there until 1988.

**ADDITIONAL INTERVIEW**

(In Uzbekistan, who took care of the children while you and your mother worked?)

They took care of themselves. Everybody from their family went to the farm and left everything with her mother and they helped.

(Can you describe the work that you and your mother were doing? What the working conditions were like?)

My mother and I picked the cotton. It was very hot, and it was very dangerous. When we got a cut, we got - I don't know what - (infection?) Before we gathered, when we were doing something, we put in the ground everything that was good for the cotton (fertilizer?), and it was very dangerous for the lungs. (They put chemicals on the cotton

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and when they breathed it, it was bad for the lungs. So, were members of your family sick?) Everybody from the family had tropical malaria in Russia.

(Did you have medicine, did you have quinine or something to take?) Only for ten years. (When the children were sick, did they still go to work, with your mother?) If we didn't work, we would get no bread! (How did your mother prepare the food when you went home, to the little clay hut - it was made out of mud, wasn't it?) We had only bread. We had 400 grams bread, about one pound for each person. (Were you able to trade the bread for some other kinds of food?) No, because everybody had only bread. In summer it was much better because we could get berries, that was food for us.

Every day I had a cup of soup, it was not good soup. One person from the camp prepared the soup and the workers would stand in line for a cup of soup. When they called the workers this happened, but it was only whenever they called them all together. It was every day but not always at the same time. This happened for only two months, and I only had the cup of soup.

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(To go back to Kotujany, after the war, did you move back to the same house?)

Our house was damaged. This was done by the German soldiers, they kept their horses in the house. We did live in it, we did a general cleaning and then re-built as best we could.

(Your father came back after the war, from Siberia, from the "construction front".) First he came to Uzbekistan and found us. In Russia, they had at that time, one small town, Borubislak and they received information about Jewish people who were evacuated, everybody could do this. It was mostly all Jewish people who were evacuated.

(How long did he stay with you in Uzbekistan?) About a year. There he too got malaria. It was very hot there and our father was the sickest. He came to Uzbekistan and he worked in the chemical plant. It was a military chemical plant.

(When you got back, you had said that the population had been about 6,000 people before the war, 1,000 were

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Jews. When you got back to Kotujany what was the population after the war?)

About only one hundred Jewish people. A lot of them were killed, many of them died in camps. The population of the town was about 5,000 then. Only the Jews were gone.

(Did any of the survivors report back? Did they say what became of those Jews who were put in the ghetto before you left for Uzbekistan? There was a ghetto that they made the Jewish family from Kotujany go to, did anybody see what happened to those families. I know only a few families got to Uzbekistan but some survived anyway. Did anyone see what happened to the ones that didn't survive?)

Most of the people were killed when the German soldiers bombarded the place. They would fly over the camp and, if they saw people, they would bomb it. Only two or three families survived from the Ghetto, but from the concentration camps, nobody came back.

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(Is there some other subject that we should have talked about that we haven't? Something that you would like to share with us?)

It was very dangerous, when it was the first bombs from Germans that many people were killed. It was deadly, it was horrible. I saw how the bombs killed the people. Parts of bodies were spread all over. Many Jews were killed there. After that, there was no food.

One time in the two days they had meals, because someone from the government fixed it. We had a cup of cereal and nothing to drink. We took it on the train, with some soup and bread. Once every two days we had food. It took them one month to get there.

When we came back after the war, I could not work because there was nothing to do. Later, they took our business so I took any opportunity I could. It was some years before I got to be a food expediter.

(Did the hundred Jews remain in Kotujany? did other Jews come there, or did the hundred leave?)

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Almost everyone came back, but a few families who had lived near this place before the war, we remained.

(In 1980, when you asked permission to leave the country, you were refused, and then you had to change jobs, because you had a better job at the university. With the new job as a clerk at a food warehouse, did you have to take a cut in pay? less money for the work?) Yes. It was not just that. The job was not too interesting, it was less money but in Russia right now, money is nothing.

(Where did you meet Frida, your wife?)

In Kishinev. When I took work in Kishinev, it was in 1960. She worked like an electrical engineer. Her uncle introduced us. Her parents and my parents had friends in common. It is a long story.