

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

**LYUBA B. CHERNOVA**

**B.S. Civil Engineering**  
**Kiev Engineering Institute, 1954**

BIRTH: November, 1920, Korosten, Ukraine

SPOUSE: Mikhail Chernov, 1920, Akkerman, Rumania

CHILDREN: Svetlana,  
Nathalie

PARENTS: Zelda, 1894-1975, Narodichi, Ukraine  
Boruch, 1882-1958, Korosten, Ukraine

SIBLINGS: Paulina  
Mina

MATERNAL GRANDPARENTS:

PATERNAL GRANDPARENTS:

JEWISH ORGANIZATIONAL AFFILIATIONS (IF GIVEN):

**ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

Women's Auxiliary of the Jewish Community Centers of  
Chicago

NAME: **LYUBA (pseudonym CHERNOVA)**

DATE: JULY 29, 1990

TRANSLATOR: Svetlana Berger

I was the third child in the family. Ever since I was born my father wanted to go (from Korosten) to Palestine. Because there were three little children in the family, he decided to wait a while until the children were older. That is why we stayed. My father's brother left for Palestine in 1922. In 1929 the borders were closed and nobody could leave. Because we waited, we were unable to leave.

It was against the law to leave the country from 1929 to go anywhere at all. Not only could we not leave, we had

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to burn my uncle's letters and photographs and everything else because he was a Zionist and Zionism was against the law. It was against the law to receive and send mail outside of the country. We burned all the letters and all the photographs so there were no ties with my father's brother. My parents themselves burned them. Before 1929 we were able to send and receive letter, but after 1929 we could not send letters and the mail from (abroad was not delivered). We had other relatives in Israel and couldn't write to them.

In 1937 when the arrests started, mother's two brothers were convicted of Zionism and shot to death. In order to avoid the same fate, my parents moved from Korosten to Dnepro-petrovsk, another city in the Ukraine. After my uncles were arrested, we never heard from them again.

Before I started school I remember we celebrated the Jewish holidays, but when I started school in the year 1928 the synagogues were closed and we no longer celebrated. We didn't even know the Jewish holidays existed anymore. We

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didn't have any Jewish foods. We didn't have any matzo until 1980.

A long time ago I remember going to Jewish weddings or funerals. Circumcisions were not done because they were against the law. The laws were very strict. Everybody knew it, and was afraid to break them.

I always knew that I was a Jew only because there was such anti-semitism everywhere that let me know that I was a Jew. That is why my parents put me in a Jewish school in the town for the last years that the school existed. I graduated from the Jewish school. I attended from 1928 to 1938 and the school was then converted to a Russian regular school. All the lessons were in Yiddish, but the program was the same as that in the other schools. I graduated with a medal for high achievement; only two in my graduating class received this.

That is why I could easily get into the institute without having to pass any exams. This is customary when you graduate with honors. Our class began with forty people. When I graduated, there were nineteen people in the

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class. Only those who studied very well would continue for ten years of education.

I could not join Komsomol, the Communist youth organization, because my father was considered to be a property owner and only children from workers' families were accepted. My oldest sister left for another city and was able to enter Komsomol there but when she came back and had to register, they found out who she was and they expelled her. She got upset because all the doors were closed to her from that time on.

She went to work and got a job but her reputation was 'spotted'. My other sister and I knew we would not be accepted and didn't even try to join. When we had to fill out an application for a job or whatever, we were asked if we were members or not. And if we were not, the doors also were pretty much closed. My sister was expelled from Komsomol in 1934, before my father had given up the factory in 1928, but he was still considered bourgeois and not of the working class. If he hadn't turned the factory over, we would not have been accepted in school.

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In 1933 ... in the middle of the night, somebody burst into the door and started searching through the house for things and looked through everything. It was the secret police. They were looking for gold and jewelry and money. We had nothing in the house because at that time they always put everything into the business. After my parents turned over the factory we really did not have anything because everything was gone and my parents were working and sold a lot of things in order to be able to eat.

They didn't find anything, but even so, they arrested my father. He spent six weeks in jail and then my mother decided to buy some jewelry and say it was hers. And maybe hide it in the ground somewhere and then invite these people in, and say, "I'm sorry. This is where I hid it and you can take it now." And she bought (the valuables) from someone else. My father was then allowed to go.

During one year it happened several times, when someone burst into the house and were trying to look for things. The secret police thought that the bourgeois people hid their money even though they had turned in the factory, turned in their property, they thought they still

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had money left over. It was done so everybody would be on an equal basis, so nobody would be richer or poorer than anyone else. Those who had businesses or property before, those were the families (that were searched).

There were about 40,000 people in Korosten and maybe 80% were Jewish. (Kiev was very close to Korosten, about seventy miles.) After my father turned over the factory to the state, he stayed on as a technical advisor. In 1937 my parents left Korosten to avoid arrest. They left the house, left everything, and mama and papa moved to Dnepropetrovsk. Nobody knew that we were leaving, because we didn't tell anyone. But I stayed behind because I was studying in school. I lived with my older sister in our house.

In 1938 my parents decided to sell the house. My mother came and in one day sold it, and nobody knew about it. They signed the papers over to the buyer and sold the house. Maybe it was sold for maybe \$10,000. (It would be considered a small house by American standards but there it was a good house. A Jewish family bought it.)

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My older sister and I stayed at neighbor's house until I graduated and then we moved to Dnepro-petrovsk and joined the family. That is where I went to the Institute. My family bought another house in Dnepro-petrovsk. (Where there weren't that many Jews.) There were a lot of factories, a lot of metallurgy.

When I started Institute it was the first time I learned the Russian language. I knew Russian very well, but the terminology of different subjects like chemistry and physics I knew in Yiddish and that was a little harder, but I studied very well.

We read in the newspapers what was happening in Europe but we were not worried. The Soviet Union was very bright, very strong. In any war the Russians would win and we were not worried. We always believed that if a war would break out, the enemies would be beaten in their own land, not on Russian soil. On June 22, 1941, the radio announced that the war started but after two weeks bombs began dropping. We left before the Germans invaded. Those who stayed behind were not seen again. They were the people who were killed in places like Babiy Yar. It was thought that



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Dnepro-petrovsk was far from the borders and the Germans would never get there. We had relatives from other cities who came and stayed with us until we thought it was time to leave. We left in August, just a couple of days after the Germans entered the city.

We took only necessities with us. We traveled by cattle train. We thought that the Germans would be stopped right away and wouldn't get very far so we didn't think of going further into the country. We went to a Filonovo, a small village, a railroad stop, in the countryside between Stalingrad and Moscow. We stayed there until July of 1942. We worked on a collective farm and gathered vegetables. My middle sister was a teacher in school, my older sister was a bookkeeper there. Many people had gone to the front and they needed people. My mother and father worked with me. We didn't starve. We had taken clothes, so we had enough.

The bombs started dropping at that time in 1942. It was not like a big city where they would come and drop the bombs in one area. Here, when there was an air raid, all of a sudden there would be a huge number of planes, all

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directed on this small railway station. The sky was blackened, and everything was just wiped out. After two days of bombing, with all the other people we left. We walked because the railroad was bombed out. We went on to the next railroad stop. We were heading north to Kamyshin.

From there we took the same cattle train. Some trains were blown up completely. A lot of people died, but our train got through. We took a train to Middle Asia to Turkmanistan. We arrived in October. The trip took two months because it was a cattle train and sometimes we stayed in the railroad station a few days.

Though we experienced bombing in Kuibyshev (a city on the Volga), when we got to Middle Asia, it was safe. Our family was able to stay together. My father took charge. We had a good solid family. Our hard situation brought us together even more. We were there with only strangers. We went to Taschaus because we had a cousin there.

Our parents stayed there until 1943, and when Dnepropetrovsk was liberated, they moved back. I stayed in different places until the end of the war, where I could stay

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on the job. In Turkmanistan, In Taschaus, my parents were working even though anti-semitism was already very high at that time. It was still wartime and they still needed workers, hands, a lot of people to do different jobs, so it wasn't a problem for Jews to get a job.

I went to Hodjely as a civil engineer. I did this work in Taschaus, but this was a job where I could really utilize my professional education. I remained in Hodjely until the end of the war, 1945. That is were Mikhail and I met. We worked in the same place. He was my boss. He was a senior engineer. I was just a staff engineer. We met in 1944 and were married in Hodjely in 1945.

I had a small apartment and that's were we had the wedding. It was very modest. I couldn't even buy a new dress. There was nothing in the stores for sale but there were a lot of men's ties. I bought thirteen ties and made a dress of them. I was very thin. I opened them up and made a skirt from them and made a blouse from the lining. It was handwork which I did in the evening after work.

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Svetlana, my first child, was born in 1946. We had moved back to the Ukraine, to Kilija. She was born in the hospital. There was no electricity so they used kerosene lamps. A nurse helped me, an older woman who was very nice. I worked until the last day. The baby was healthy. She was a big girl, almost nine pounds. I had been very active so the delivery was not too bad.

I was in the hospital for six days. We were living with my mother-in-law then. I stayed home for one month.

In Kilija I was a staff engineer, doing construction planning, a lot of paper work. This was the project of rebuilding the grain storage elevators that Mikhail supervised. In 1947, we moved to Izmail and in 1949, we moved to Kiev. Until 1952 I continued to work in the building of grain storage facilities.

I went on to continue my education in 1951. Because I hadn't completed my education in Dnepro-petrovsk, I wished to do so, to have a better job. You needed a diploma to do better. Classes were offered especially for people working in the profession who hadn't received their diplomas yet.

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The coal industry offered these classes. Three years we attended the Institute of Civil Engineering in Kiev. Mikhail and I were in the same class. Because of the war Mikhail hadn't graduated either. We were the only two Jews in the class. Most of the students came from a city called Dombas in the Ukraine, a center of the coal industry, where there was very much anti-semitism.

There were one hundred students in the class. At first they didn't like us and they were very (hostile) to us but then when they saw what we were doing, that we studied very well, that we could be consulted for whatever, then they started to treat us better. At first they wouldn't talk to us or have a thing to do with us and wouldn't invite us anywhere. It didn't take too long before they realized that we would help them. There were five married couples in the class and we associated with them. In 1954, we completed our studies.

You can't really choose where you can go after you graduate, so they send you to a location where they think you are most needed. So, we went back to Middle Asia. We wanted to stay in Kiev but couldn't. It seemed that only

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the poor students stayed in Kiev because (people) came from various provinces to pick students, and they picked the good ones.

They gave us a choice between several places, including Siberia and Middle Asia. We went to Kok-Jangak (less than twenty miles from the Chinese border). We left Svetlana with my mother-in-law in Kiev. On Kok-Jangak, Mikhail worked in construction as a senior engineer and I worked as an expeditor. In December 1955, we were moved to Tashkent and remained there until June 1956. Natasha was born there.

They had electricity and a doctor there for the delivery. It wasn't a bad experience though it was ten years later. I was thirty-five. I went there in the evening and had my daughter in the morning. Birth control was not available in those years. I became pregnant four times between the two births. Abortion was against the law but in different cities the law was enforced differently.

In Kiev I was in a hospital. The abortions were worse than labor. Doctors performed the abortions. You pay the doctor and you get better service. Sometimes you pay a

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little more and then it becomes legal. There were years that you couldn't go to the hospital no matter how much you paid -- until 1952, I think -- and you did it at home. If it was done in the house, they you just paid whoever did it there. Even though, when it was permitted, you had to bribe someone and pay a lot of money to get a good doctor. Now they have methods of birth control - not the pill, but the uterine coil. Condoms were available sometimes. They were not advertised. My sisters also had a lot of abortions.

We moved back to Kiev, but we were sorry that we didn't stay in Middle Asia because they treated Jews better there. Even though specialists were needed in Kiev, it was hard to get a job because we were Jews. At that time Mikhail's supervisor took him back to work. I was lucky to get a job at the Institute and everybody was asking me afterwards how I got the job. I showed my passport that was stamped "Jew" and there was a lady in the Personnel Department who was very anti-semitic. I don't know how, but they took me in. I brought them my work record to prove I was a good worker and they must have agreed. My

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job was at the Institute of Kiev Project and I held the job for twenty years, until 1976.

While I worked, my mother-in-law always took care of the children. Most of the housework and cooking and marketing were done by my mother-in-law and I helped with the housework. I thought there was a good division of labor in the home. If only one person in the family had been working, there would not have been enough income to survive.

In recent years the synagogue was opened, since 1988, starting with Gorbachev's reforms. They sold the matzo in the synagogue and opened some classes for the people.

In the last years before we left the Soviet Union, there was only one synagogue in Kiev and during holiday time there were lots of people who wanted to go it but it couldn't accommodate everybody. Many times we tried to go in, but were unable to. We would just stand there outside. Only religious activities were going on nothing political.



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We thought about leaving the Soviet Union for a long time but didn't even try to do so because people who tried would lose their jobs. In February, 1989, we received the certificate from Israel. Within ten days we applied. We were ready to leave and had done everything possible (in advance) to be able to emigrate. My daughter, Natalie, and her husband, Arkady, and their two children applied at the same time.

We didn't have any family treasures and only took what we needed. We were allowed two suitcases per person. We went to Chope on the border with Czechoslovakia where we went through customs. We changed trains there and from Chope we went to Bratislava and changed trains again and continued to Vienna. We remained there for two weeks and then took a train to Rome. In Vienna we had very good living conditions and everything was very nice. In Italy we were at the campsite for a week then we found a little apartment near the city, about 42 kilometers from Rome. conditions were very good - the food and financial support.

The decision to go to Chicago was made in Kiev. Natalie's husband, Arkady, had a friend who lived in Chicago

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and had been there only about six months. He promised to send us all the documents to permit us to come to Chicago. He met us when we arrived and had found an apartment that would house six people.

From the time we left Kiev, it took two and a half days to travel to Vienna. From Vienna to our Italian destination it took almost twenty-four hours. We were in very good spirits.

Our biggest worry on the trip was whether or not we would receive refugee status. I wasn't really worried. I decided that if I would come to the appropriate people and tell them the story of my life as it really was, they would believe me. There wouldn't be any reason we wouldn't receive it. And I was right! We did not have any problems.

I think, maybe, the most important part of my story is the fact that in the USSR we were deprived of normal conditions, normal human conditions for people to live in, just because we were Jews.

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I feel my parents did everything they could to keep our family together. My children were never deprived of anything. When both my daughter and son-in-law were in school, it forced me to retire. I was fifty-five, and could have worked, but because there was nobody else to take care of the baby, I had to quit work. My son-in-law couldn't get into the university in Kiev so he went to Novosibirisk, on the east side of the USSR. That was a difficult situation but we did everything we could. This was my daughter Natasha's husband.

We have family both here and in the USSR. We hope Svetlana will come. We really hope so. We sent the documents off to Washington. It takes a couple of years now.

Of course we miss our friends. We were born there and grew up there and lived there most of our lives. It is hard to change everything. We write to our friends often. Even if they wanted to come here, right now it is difficult - you have to have relatives here. You can go to Israel, but not come to the United States.

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What is my role in the my family now? To help them, take care of the grandchildren after school. We still live with our children. That's one reason we didn't go to college here, to do this.

We want Jewish activities for our family. Our grandchildren are happy to go to synagogue on Sunday and they're looking forward to going to religious school in September.

After Shabbat dinner in June, 1989, we met some nice people and so now on holidays we all go with the whole family, all of us. I was raised traditionally, and we would like to pass this on. We are a Jewish family and we have books in Russian that explain the rituals and recipes and so on, and every Jewish holiday. That helps us know how to do some things. What to do special for every holiday. We met some American friends, volunteers. That is the family who got the book on the holidays for us. The thirteen year old granddaughter will start Bat Mitzvah class with their thirteen year old daughter.

We hope the grandchildren will remember the Russian language. Our granddaughter is thirteen and reads; she

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will remember. The six-year-old grandson formulates everything in English already, so he probably won't.