Moshe Hirsh Sharfstein

a *Life* story

LIETUVA 1937

1921 - 2020

Moshe Hirsh Sharfstein

A Life Story

Based on interviews conducted by Liat Hanaor
Edited by Eli Sharfstein
Translated from the Hebrew by Geremy Forman

Maagan Michael, 2020

משה הירש שרפשטיין

סיפור חיים

מעגן מיכאל 2016

For my grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and future generations.

With all my love,
Saba Grisha
Maagan Michael, 2016

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Introduction

These are the memoirs of my father – a collection of stories from different periods of his life: his childhood in the Lithuanian town of Utian (Utena), his adolescence in Kovno (Kaunas) prior to the war, World War II, his years of study at the Yiddish Theatre in Moscow, building a family, the theatre in Vilna, and immigration to Israel. The life story of a 95-year-old could easily fill a number of thick volumes. Here, my father focused primarily on the years during which his personality developed: childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. These were the years when he sought to find himself and also found his great love, which is why the book's first chapters account for such a large portion of the book, even though they deal with only a relatively brief period of his life. Many stories from his life were *not* included here for various reasons. They too will be told when the opportunity arises.

I would like to thank those at the Hof Carmel Regional Council who initiated this project. I am especially grateful to Liat Hanaor, who met regularly with my father over the period of a year, listening to and assembling his stories and giving him a wonderful sense of meaning and of being appreciated.

It has been a privilege to help my father and Liat put his life story in writing. While editing the text, I was repeatedly emotionally moved, almost as if his life was my own.

Eli Sharfstein
(son of Moshe Hirsch Sharfstein, grandson of Avrom Sharfstein, and great-grandson of Moshe Sharfstein of Utian, Lithuania)

October, 2016, Maagan Michael, Israel.

My Roots

I was born on the first day of the Jewish month of Heshvan, 1921 – the fourth and youngest son of my parents Avrom and Shayna-Basia (née Weinerman) Sharfstein. I was named after both of my parents' fathers – Moshe after my father's father, and Hirsch after my mother's father. In practice, everyone called me "Hirschkeh" (or in Russian, "Grisha").

I was born and spent my childhood in Lithuania (between Poland and Belarus) in the predominantly Jewish town of Utian (Utena, in Lithuanian). Utian is situated in northeastern Lithuania, 92 kilometers from the capital city of Vilna (Vilnius), which Jewish tradition also refers to as "*Yerushalayim Delita*" (Jerusalem of Lithuania). My mother Shayna-Basia, whose name was Yiddish for "beautiful Basia," was a seamstress. She was born in 1890 and died from a heart ailment at the age of 36, leaving me motherless at the age of four-and-a-half. My father was born in 1880 and died at the age of 58.

My eldest sister Chaya-Rayzel was born in 1911 and died in Israel in 2003. After Chaya-Rayzel came my brother Elchanan ("Chonkeh"), who was eight years older than me. Elchanan was born in 1913 and died in 1999 in Rechovot, Israel, where he lived for many years. My sister Fruma was born on the 29th of Adar, 1915 and was my closest sibling in terms of age. She passed away in Netanya, Israel in 2004. Between me and Fruma, in 1919, my parents had another daughter named Sarah-Neomi (after my grandmother) who died the following year.

My father's family had lived in Utian for at least three centuries. My grandfather and grandmother on my father's side, Moshe and Sarah-Neomi, were both born to religious Jewish families in Lithuania in 1838, and they were married by the time they were 12-years-old. At the time, when Lithuania was part of the Russian Empire, the Russian army was still suffering from a lack of conscripts, and to compensate the authorities would enlist random individuals off the street. Conscripts were required to serve in the Russian army for 25 years, and to prevent a situation in which recruits were discharged at the age of 50, they began enlisting boys at the age of 12 and 13. In Russian, these conscripts were referred to as "recruits."

As a result, when my grandfather Moshe was 12 years old, he was already in danger of being drafted. This is why Moshe's and Sarah-Neomi's families arranged for them to get married at such a young age – because married men could not be drafted. My grandfather was a hatter by profession, and my grandmother worked as a seamstress. Unfortunately, I never met either of them. My grandfather passed away in 1918 and my grandmother died in 1919, both at an old age.

I also never met my mother's father. Her family came from the city of Širvintos, approximately 50 kilometers south of Vilna. Her father Hirsch worked in agriculture. According to the stories, he died after being struck by lightning while trying to close a window during a storm. My grandmother's name was Sarah-Chyeneh. She lived with us in Utian and I knew her when I was a child. She would sit by the window reading *Tzeh Na u-R'eh Na*, a collection of Bible stories translated into Yiddish. I can remember how all the stories made her cry: from the binding of Isaac to the story of Joseph and his brothers. She already knew all the stories by heart. She went to synagogue to

pray every Sabbath, like all the other Jewish women. Another memory I have of her is from when I was learning the Haftorah of the Torah portion "*Ki Titzei*" for my bar-mitzvah. At the time, she was living with her son Reuven, and I would go over to his house so she could tutor me until I knew my Haftorah portion by heart.

My grandmother was killed during World War II, in the Holocaust, along with her son Reuven, his wife Basia, and their two daughters.

Sarah-Chyenah, my grandmother.

Moshe Sharfstein, my grandfather

Sarah-Neomi, my Grandmother

I do not know how my parents met. However, I remember with certainty that they truly loved each other. I can still remember my father's large, strong hands. He had a tattoo of a woman on one of his forearms, flanked by the Hebrew letters "*shin*" and "*bet*" – for Shayna-Basia. From the stories, I knew he had gotten the tattoo during WWI while he was serving as a medic in the Russian army and was taken prisoner by the Germans.

By the time I was three years old I could already read and write, as I attended *Heder* – a religious school for young children. When I was four-and-a-half years old, my mother died of a heart ailment stemming from a birth defect. My father took her to every possible physician in Lithuania; they even travelled as far as Königsberg in Eastern Prussia, but to no avail. I remember the day marking the end of the 30-day

mourning period at our house. I stood on a chair and said Kaddish like a grownup.

After all, I could already read and write.

My parents Shayna-Basia and Avrom Sharfstein.

I do not have many memories of my mother, but I remember that she was a good mother. She was meticulous about order and cleanliness, and she was uncompromising about the way she ran the household. After she made the beds we were not allowed to sit on them, so that the sheets would not get creased. These were attributes that my sister Chaya-Rayzel (or Rosa, as we called her) inherited from her: discipline, cleanliness, and fastidiousness.

Rosa loved our mother dearly. After she died, Rosa would take me to her grave almost every day. The cemetery was located a few kilometers from our house, and at my age I did not want to go with her, because she cried every time we went. But I had no choice. If I objected, she would always get angry and hit me. The cemetery where my mother was buried was destroyed by the Soviet authorities after the war. In its place, they built a central station for public transportation in Utian.

At Aunt Bayleh's wedding with my cousin Ephraim.
I am third from the right, age five.

After my mother died our family lacked a second income, and my father had to work extremely hard to maintain a reasonable standard of living for us. He also needed help raising the children. Temporarily and with no other choice, this role was assumed by my eldest sister Rosa. This arrangement lasted for about a year, until my father remarried.

My father married a 38 year-old woman named Liba (everyone called her "Libsheh"), a widow with six children who lived in a town called Kupiškis located 60 kilometers away from Utian. Libsheh was much younger than my father, who was 47 at the time. She was also beautiful and wealthy. She owned two houses that faced one another and were separated by a large yard containing an orchard and farm animals. I was five years old when my father remarried and we moved to Kupiškis, and my brother Elchanan joined us a few months later. He lived with me and my father in Libsheh's house for a few months, but then he moved back to Utian to continue working and studying. For a few years, he worked in a metal shop as a metalworker and also studied in a yeshiva. Later, he joined a Hashomer Hatzair *hachshara* program, designed to train prospective Jewish immigrants to Palestine in agriculture-based communal living, and in 1934 he immigrated to Palestine.

My sisters Rosa and Fruma were angry with my father for remarrying and refused to move in with his new wife. Fruma was attending a "gymnasium" (a secondary school with a strong academic focus) in a different city, but the following year she returned to Utian and moved in with my mother's sister, Aunt Hannah, who began teaching her instead of her attending school. Rosa moved to Kovna with her friends to work in a sock factory. There were few jobs in Utian, and many young men and women were making their way to the big city in search of a livelihood. A few years later Rosa married Hillel, and Fruma married Yossel sometime after that.

In Kupiškis, I first attended kindergarten and then entered the first grade, where I learned a bit of German and how to play the violin. One year later, in 1928, my father and Libsheh had a son: my half-brother, Ephraim.

My father's marriage to Libsheh did not last long. I remember waking up one morning to the sound of shouting and intense arguing. I was already about seven-and-a-half years old, and I went outside to see what was going on. My father and I lived in one of the houses and Libsheh and her children lived in the other. Each house had a separate set of stairs leading to its front door. I saw Libsheh and my father arguing: my father was standing at the bottom of the steps up to Libsheh's house, and Libsheh was standing on the steps themselves.

They stood there shouting at each other, and at some point Libsheh waved an axe at him. This frightened me, and I screamed. Only then did they realize that I was there and stopped fighting.

To this day, I do not know what the fight was about and why Libsheh threatened my father with an axe. I asked my father, and he told me that they had been arguing because Libsheh was used to educating her children with a firm hand and had hit them on a number of occasions. He disagreed with her approach to education, and this had been the source of the argument. Might there have also been other reasons? I was a young child at the time, and I had no way of knowing.

Me, my sister Rosa, my brother Elchanan, and my sister Fruma, with my father Avrom, 1933/34.

In the home in which I was raised children were never beaten. When my father would get very angry, one look from him was enough to cause me to burst into tears. He never raised a hand to any of us, with one exception, when I saw him slap Rosa. Rosa was 15 years old at the time and a member of the Hashomer Hatzair youth movement. The entire group travelled into the city to celebrate Lag Ba'Omer, and Rosa went too. However, she did not tell my father where she was going, and it was almost morning when she finally got home. When my father reprimanded her, Rosa argued with him and told him that she

was a big girl. This made my father very angry, and he slapped her. She had young, orphaned siblings for whom she was responsible like a mother, he told her. She should have asked him if she could go and when to return home. This was the first and last time I saw my father raise a hand to anyone.

My father called Libsheh a "bad mother" and said that she "did not deserve to have children at all," and other such things. This was apparently the reason for their breakup.

After my father and Libsheh parted ways, and although they did not get an official divorce certificate, we left Kupiškis and returned to Utian. Libsheh kept my father's name and his child, my half-brother Ephraim. Every month, my father went to visit Ephraim and also paid her child-support. My father was a shoemaker and did not always make enough money to make the monthly trip to Kupiškis. For this reason, he sometimes made the trip by foot, walking a distance of 60 kilometers!

The Family in 1937.

In Utian, I went straight into the second grade at the elementary school, where we studied in Yiddish. Utian had another school called "*Tarbut*" [Hebrew for "culture"] in which they spoke Hebrew, which was attended by some of my cousins who were my age. Four years and four grades later, I finished elementary school.

When I turned 11, I wanted to attend the Lithuanian gymnasium, but my father would not allow it. He wanted me to study at a yeshiva to make sure I knew Hebrew and could effectively navigate "the black dots," as he used to refer to Hebrew vocalization marks. A small yeshiva had just opened in Utian, and I studied there until I completed three Talmudic tractates. After a year and a half, I decided I had had enough. It was time to get a job.

Boys and Girls

Like most people, I too had close childhood friends with whom I played as a boy and spun dreams for the future. Only one of them is still alive today: my cousin and dear friend Haim Kuritzki. Haim is ten months my elder, and I spent my entire childhood and adolescence in Utian and the surrounding area with him and his brother Moshe. When Haim and his three siblings – Moshe, Chaya, and Sarah – moved into one of the two houses that belonged to my family, we became even closer and felt like true siblings. I spent most of my time with them and with another three good friends – Itzkeh Weinerman, Itzkeh Gurwitz, and Motkeh Idels. Together, we ran through the forests and the fields, waded in the river that cut through the town, and swam in the lakes of Utian (which I describe in greater detail below). We knew every street in our town, and we went everywhere.

Moshe, who was one year, one month, one week, and one day younger than Haim, died of tuberculosis before the war. Itzkeh Gurwitz fled the Nazis deep into the Soviet Union and made it to the city of Tashkent, where he died of a heart ailment, far from his homeland. Itzkeh Weinerman survived the war, started a family, and returned to Utian. His family was the town's only Jewish family after the Holocaust. A small number of Utian's Jews who survived the war settled in Vilna and Kovna. Almost every year, we would travel to Utian to commemorate the town's Jews. After the ceremonies and the visit to the cemetery, we would gather in the Weinermans' yard and reminisce.

I taught Motke Idlis's friends to play the mandolin, and by the age of 12 we had already started to smoke. He immigrated to Israel in the 1970s and settled in Raanana, where he lived until he died.

My photo album contains a special picture from before the war: a photo of us five bosom buddies taken on a hill overlooking Utian. After the war, there were only three of us, and during one of my visits we took a photo in the same location.

In Utian, we grew up too quickly. By the age of 12 or 13 we were already working to help support our families, who were all on a tight budget. We had no secrets from one another. We talked about everything: about the past, about the future, and, of course, about girls.

Speaking of girls – my cousin Tzila, with whom I grew up and played when I was just a young boy, continued to be my closest friend even into adolescence. Her friend Raynkeh Segal was also in our group. We were members of Komsomol (the Communist youth organization), and we attended underground meetings together and posted manifestos against the regime. There was another girl named Peska Schuster whom I knew, and I even went out with her. Though I cannot say that I loved her deeply, we were a couple and we may have even gotten married had it not been for the war. When I was 16, I told my sister Rosa about Peska and that I planned on marrying her. My sister fainted on the spot, and when she regained consciousness she commenced shouting at me: "No! No! No!!!"

The original photo from Utian before the war.
From right to left – Standing: Itzkeh Weinerman, Moshe Kuritzki, and Haim Kuritzki. Kneeling: Moshe Sharfstein and Itzkeh Gurwitz.

The reenacted photo taken after the war, in the 1950s.

The string orchestra.
From right to left: Motkeh Idles, Haim Kuritzki,
me, and Moshe Kuritzki.

Peska and her family did not survive the Holocaust. They were rounded up by the Germans and the Lithuanians, along with all the other Jews of Utian and the surrounding area.

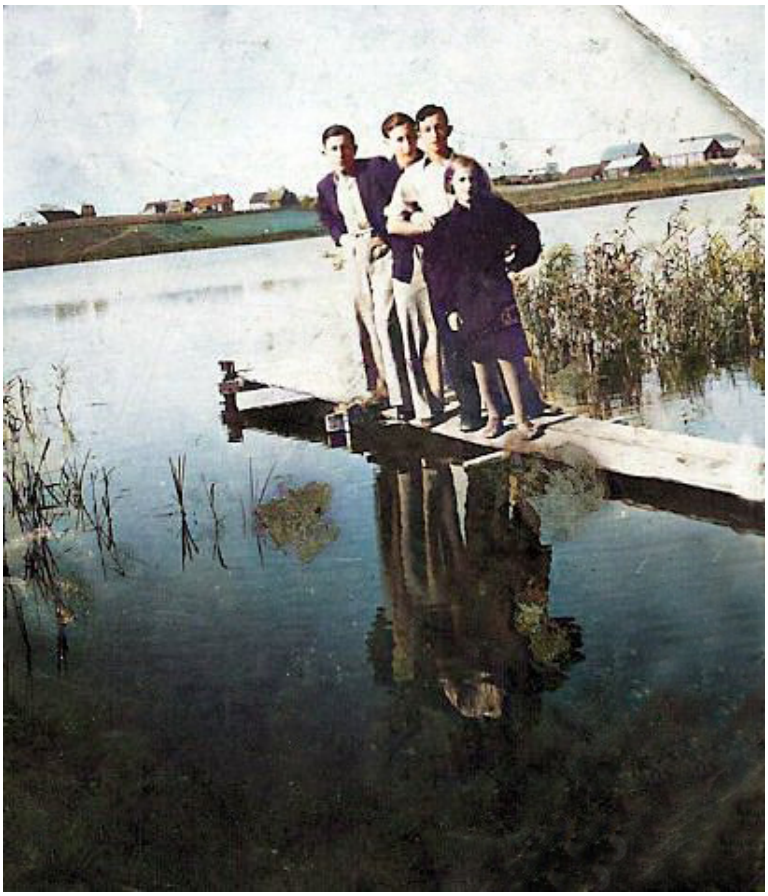
The site where the Jews *of Utian and the surrounding area were murdered.*

Mira, Liuba, Eli, Danguole, and I. Utena, 2013.

The Lakes of Utian

Utian had two lakes. The first was called "Utian Lake," because it was located close to town. The second was called "Raesha Lake," named after the forest by which the lake was situated.

While men and women elsewhere in the world were already bathing in bathing suits on mixed beaches, we in Utian went swimming in our birthday suits – men on one side of the lake, and women off the opposite shore. And when a male swimmer would 'mistakenly' come too close to the women's side of the lake, the women's shouts and curses could be heard all the way over on the men's side and would cause a real commotion!



On an improvised jetty on the lake. From right to left: Sarah Kuritzki, me, and Moshe and Haim Kuritzki.

My older brother Elchanan taught me how to swim at Utian Lake by towing me out to the deep part of the lake, leaving me there, and yelling: "Get out on your own!" I had no choice but to somehow swim to shore. I improved each time, and soon I knew how to swim.

Legend had it that Utian Lake had to claim at least one bather each year. And that's what happened: every year, one person would drown. But life was stronger than death, and people continued to take dips in the lake, to swim, and to enjoy its cool water for at least half of summer vacation.

Both lakes were surrounded by thick green woods and encircled by walking trails. Many couples in Utian got their start when each found his or her "better half" on a walk around the lake or on a romantic excursion on a boat rented from the Lithuanian fellow who owned the marina. As children, we would swim primarily in Utian Lake, as it was smaller than Raesha Lake, which we visited infrequently.

Utian Lake, 2011.

The Utian of my youth was home to some 4,000 Jews and 2,000 non-Jews, mostly Lithuanians. The non-Jews lived on the road that led to the lake, and they would throw rocks and curse at us as we passed. It was a road that we always tried to walk down as quickly as possible.

Sometimes, we would throw rocks back at them and run toward the lake until we reached moist, uneven ground, which meant that we were already near the water. The fertile black soil that surrounded the lake was used by the women of Utian to pot plants and grow flowers.

The path that ran beside the lake was also the route of the final journey of the deceased from the Jewish community, because it led to Utian's two cemeteries. The path that ran along the shore of Raesha Lake led to the forest in which the Nazis and their collaborators buried the Jews and Jewish life of Utian in massive pits. Like orphans, the two lakes, one large and one small, bore witness to what once was and what ceased to exist. The lakes will remain forever, but Jewish life in Utian will never return.

The old Jewish cemetery.

In Search of a Profession

Ever since I was very young I had a passion for the theater. As a child, I always did "theater" for young children, and I dreamed of being an actor. However, back then I regarded it solely as a hobby. I liked to pretend that I was a photographer, and I would build a "camera" out of cardboard boxes, cover myself with black fabric, and pretend to photograph other children. Perhaps this is why my father sent me to study photography with a professional photographer, where I took a lot of photographs and developed them myself. But one day my father visited me in the photographer's darkroom where I was learning how to develop pictures, and he realized that the profession required spending a significant amount of time in the dark. He thought this was not healthy for me, and he called off my training.

Our family. Utian, 1937.

Then my father decided that I would be a carpenter, and he sent me for training for which he was required to pay. I studied the profession for a year, until one day my father decided that the work was too hard for me, and that was that. After my carpentry training, my father paid a tailor he had met to allow me to come work with him

as an apprentice. During this entire period of professional training, I remained active in the youth movement of the Communist party (Komsomol). While I was training with the tailor, May 1st (the holiday of the workers) rolled around, and I of course did not go to work. When the tailor asked me where I had been and I told him that I had not come to work because it was May 1st, the tailor asked me to bring my father in to talk to him. When I told my father, he got annoyed and sent me to train with a different tailor named Aba Flatt, who was a much better tailor than my previous mentor. I trained/worked with Aba Flatt for four years, during which I acquired a real profession that served me my entire life.

Parting with my Father

When my father died from a heart attack in 1938 just a few months before my 17th birthday, it left a major absence in my life. My father was a wise and astute man with a unique sense of humor, and I have many memories of him. Here, I have chosen to share two stories out of many.

My father was a shoemaker, but he also tried his luck as a matchmaker. I remember someone once asking him: "Reb (which is how people would address an older respected man at the time) Avrom, how do you know if two people from different families and different cities are suited for one another?" My father responded as follows: "Listen, I'm like a *shoichet*. I only need to slaughter the chicken. They'll pluck each other's feathers on their own."

The last photo of my father, with my sister Rosa (on the right).

Once, during a funeral, as a wagon carried the deceased on a stretcher to the cemetery via a path paved with stones, the wagon bounced up and down incessantly and the deceased bounced with it. Suddenly, I heard my father mumble quietly "he'd be better off walking

than riding like that," and someone next to him began to chuckle. Even today, the memory of that story puts a smile on my face.

When my father died, I left our home in Utian and moved in with my sisters in Kovna. Kovna was located approximately 100 kilometers from Vilna and was the second largest city in Lithuania. At the time, it was the provisional capital of Lithuania.

My relationship with my stepmother Libsheh and my half-brother Ephraim had ceased long before, and I never saw them again. I later learned what happened to them during the war. When the Germans invaded Lithuania in June 1941, Libsheh wanted to save her children. To this end, she took them to a church to see a priest who had helped many Jews, and she asked him to convert her and her children to Christianity in order to save them from being killed by the Germans. The priest agreed, but the effort was in vain, as the Germans ultimately killed the entire family, as well as the priest.

The War

When I arrived in Kovna I already had a profession. I was a tailor, and I found work relatively quickly at the Danga factory. My sisters Fruma and Rosa and their families lived together in Kovna in a wooden apartment house in a place called "the Green Mountain." Each family had its own apartment, which were separated by a hallway.

During the day I worked as a tailor, and in the evenings I organized and ran activities for Komsomol. We "fought" the capitalist regime in Lithuania (the Russians called it a "fascist regime"), and as part of our activity we would post anti-government placards on walls and hang red flags on electric poles. Of course, the activity was illegal and dangerous. I spent two years working in this manner. In the meantime, the Soviet Union annexed Lithuania, and one year later Germany launched its war against the Soviet Union and invaded Lithuania. I was nineteen-and-a-half years old, though only seventeen-and-a-half according to my official identity papers.

At this juncture, it is important to add a few explanatory notes. Between 1920 and 1939, Vilna was under Polish occupation and Kovna was the capital city of Lithuania. Kovna's Jewish community numbered between 35,000 and 40,000, accounting for approximately one-quarter of the local population. The city was home to dozens of Jewish institutions, including some 20 Jewish schools, yeshivas, and institutions of Jewish learning, including the well-known Slabodka Yeshiva; Yiddish and Hebrew schools; a Jewish hospital; Zionist organizations; dozens of Yiddish and Hebrew Jewish newspapers; and numerous publishers.

As already noted, the Soviet Union occupied and annexed Lithuania in June 1940. On June 24, 1941, two days after the onset of the Nazi German invasion of the Soviet Union, Germany conquered the city of Kovna. The Lithuanian nationalists greeted the Germans warmly and viewed them as liberating them from the yoke of Soviet occupation. Local armed militias (referred to as "wearers of the white ribbon") began to round up Jews and murder them on the grounds that the Jews had ostensibly ushered Soviet communism into their country.

The evening before the invasion I attended a party at a local Jewish club. I returned home at 3:30 am and the German bombings

began half an hour later. Lithuania had a common border with Poland, which was already occupied by the Germans, so the fighting was very close. I remember hearing heavy cannon fire. At first I thought it was a military exercise of the Red Army, but I later saw houses on fire and discerned German fighter planes dropping bombs on the city. I woke up all the residents of the building, and we turned on the radio and heard Hitler delivering a speech, screaming and blaming the Jews and the Russians for the war. The Soviets, he maintained, had violated the agreement that Germany had signed with them. As we listened to the radio, it became clear that it was, in fact, war.

Fruma already had a three year old daughter named Basia, and my sister Chaya-Rayzel had two sons: Benjamin and Kuba (Jacob). Fruma and Rosa decided with their families to board the refugee train to Russia. I was committed to the Komsomol, and I went to get organized with the others. With this, our paths parted. I ran to the factory where I worked, but no one was there. I found my friends at the Communist party's headquarters in town, where more than a hundred movement activists had assembled. With them, I fled the Germans into Russia by foot. We initially thought that we would only need to walk a short distance before the Russians defeated the Germans and that we would then be able to return. That, however, was not the case; the Red Army, with all its tanks and ammunition, fled even more quickly than we did, from the border deep into Soviet territory. I still remember the panic and fear that gripped them during their hasty retreat.

I took nothing with me except the clothes on my back, which were light summer clothes. The journey was difficult and took almost two weeks. During the trek, the Germans were always dropping bombs from planes, and under these conditions we traveled some 600 kilometers by foot. By the end of the journey, only about ten people from the original group of 100 remained, and I was one of them.

On the way, we encountered the retreating Red Army. It was a miracle that we survived. The soldiers stopped us and suspected that we were German spies because we spoke Yiddish, which sounds similar to German. We did not know Russian, because in Lithuania we had spoken only Lithuanian and Yiddish. Fortunately, one of our activists managed to use his broken Russian to explain to the soldiers

that we were Jews and members of Komsomol. We carried no documents, because we feared being captured by the Germans. The Russian commander decided to believe us but nonetheless ordered us to return to where we had come, even though he knew that the Germans would kill us. We initially began to retrace our footsteps, but after a few kilometers we made a u turn and again set a course eastward, as far away from the Nazis as possible.

We made it to a train station and boarded a freight train that was meant to transport cattle, and we continued onward. We eventually reached a district of the Republic of Chuvashia and arrived in its capital city: Cheboksary. From there, we were taken to a kolkhoz (a collective agricultural farm), where I stayed for approximately half a year, until the winter. Around January-February 1942, with the help of the Red Cross, I located Fruma and Rosa, who were residing in the city of Sarapul in the Udmurt Republic, some 550 kilometers from where I was located. I decided to make the trip to Sarapul.

On the way to see Fruma and Rosa I passed through the city of Izhevsk where my aunt and uncle, Kalman and Hanna Goldfein, lived, along with Kalman's sister Riva, and I decided to stay with them. Riva had connections, and she helped me find work in a weapons plant. However, I worked only one day before receiving an order to leave Izhevsk because I had not been issued a refugee certificate. I continued on to Sarapul where I acquired the long-awaited refugee certification.

I reached Sarapul aboard a ship on the Volga River. There, I met my sister and I quickly began working. I was not called up by the army because I was too young (the Red Army only enlisted recruits who were at least 19-years-old).

In 1943, some friends and I contacted the draft office and together enlisted in the Red Army in order to fight the Nazis. Refugees from Lithuania were then being enlisted in the 16th Lithuanian Division, which the Soviets had establish in December 1941.

We spent three months training to shoot and fight, and then we were sent to the front. We arrived in Belarus to fight in the village of Alexeyevka, where German forces had entrenched themselves. We reached the village at night. It was a harsh winter – 16 degrees below zero (Celsius). We were sent to sleep in wooden houses near the

entrance to town, and we were supposed to attack the Germans' position the next morning at dawn.

When I opened the door of the first house, I discovered that it was full of soldiers sleeping everywhere and cold air rushed inside. The occupants screamed and cursed, imploring me to shut the door. I set out in search of another house. However, when I found one and opened the front door, I immediately encountered the same situation: the house was crammed full of soldiers who cursed at me and told me to go away and to shut the door behind me. In the rest of the houses I checked I found the same situation, and when I reached the last one I resolved that I would not go outside again. On the table beside an oil lamp sat a bucket of water with a ladle beside it. I placed the ladle in the bucket, put the bucket on my lap, hugged it with all my might, and eventually fell asleep.

At dawn, we manned our positions up the hill. The village was above us, and it contained a church in which the Germans had dug in. They were armed with machine guns, rifles, hand-grenades, and mortars, and our assignment was to charge and conquer the hill, the church, and the entire village.

Before we charged the church, our cannons and our planes bombed the German positions to soften the resistance. Only after that did we begin our charge, to cries of "For the homeland! For Stalin!" We encountered heavy fire from the Germans who were holed up in the church and we suffered significant casualties. We did not succeed in conquering the village, and we waited for nightfall to make our retreat. As we retreated, the Germans continued shooting at us and shelling us with mortars. Suddenly, out of the darkness I heard a familiar voice: "Oy, Hirshkeh! Help me!" "Who is that," I asked. "Berl?!" "Yes, help me!" It was my friend Berl Frakt, who was wounded. He had been shot six times and he could not move. I carried him while crawling until we reached a deep hole in the ground in which we could hide. On the way, he caught a seventh bullet, as a souvenir. Later, the medics came and evacuated him to the rear. Berl survived, and so did I. We saw each other again after the war, first in Vilna and then at the Yiddish Theater in Moscow, which I will talk more about below.

In the days that followed we remained at the firing positions we had built for ourselves using small shovels, which were official military

equipment of soldiers of the Red Army. We were always engaging in firefights with the Germans, who had an advantage over us in their positions and their weaponry. We were also attacked by an enemy plane, which caused us additional casualties. In the midst of all of this I was also wounded by a bullet that struck my left leg, but I ignored the injury, which was relatively minor. The bullet passed through the calf muscle and exited from the other side. I did not make a big deal of it. However, the night after I was injured, as we sat in our firing positions in the freezing cold, I was suddenly unable to feel my leg. In addition to the injury, my legs had completely frozen. Only then did I agree to be evacuated to the field hospital in the city of Vitebsk for initial treatment. From there, I was evacuated to a military hospital in the city of Samara, deep inside Russia.

After three months in the hospital, I was released with an order sending me back to my home unit in the Lithuanian Division. To reach my unit, I needed to travel by train via the Soviet capital of Moscow.

When I arrived in Moscow, I remembered that my cousin Haim Eisen was in the city. Haim's two brothers had been killed in the war. Due to his high status in the party, Haim was exempt from the draft. Before the war, he had been the secretary of the Communist Party in Lithuania, and he had been arrested on a number of occasions and spent some time in jail. He sometimes hid at my house or in a secret location which only I knew about. He was now in Moscow, along with the entire Lithuanian Communist party elite, and was living in Red Square. I decided to pay him a visit to say hello. We met, and after updating each other a bit, Haim sent me to a rehabilitation center for injured soldiers for 24 days to regain my strength. When I returned from the rehabilitation center, Haim told me that he had a proposal for me which he asked me to think over. He suggested that I attend a parachuting course so that they could drop me into the Germans' rear in occupied Lithuania. I would also need to take a special two-week course in which they would teach me Morse code for the purpose of sending radio transmissions. I told him that I would think it over and get back to him with an answer. His suggestion sounded surreal to me, and without pondering it too much I made my way directly to the nearest enlistment center and asked to be sent back to my original unit in the Lithuanian Division to continue fighting the Nazi enemy. This

returned me to the front and provided me with another opportunity to get injured, this time in my left hand.

When I was in Moscow, I witnessed a shocking event that was ingrained in my memory. Before we were sent to the front, along with many other soldiers, we spent a few nights at the enlistment center in Moscow. One morning, we were ordered to go outside to the yard and to line up in inspection formation. We were told to stand at attention, and two armed soldiers walked out of the building with a man whose hands were bound. They stood him up in the center of the yard and read out a ruling of a drumhead court martial, which charged the bound man with deserting the army on three occasions. The court had sentenced him to death, and we were assured that any other soldier who deserted would be subject to the same fate.

The ranking officer ordered them to free the hands of the convicted man and to make him kneel. One of the two soldiers who had led him out took out a pistol and ordered him to bend over. He pressed the pistol against the man's head and fired two bullets. As someone who had been to the front and taken part in battles, I had already seen death and men killed in battle. But this was the first time in my life I had seen death inflicted in such a cruel manner. After witnessing this incident I was unable to sleep for months. Its memory remains with me today.

From the enlistment center we left for the train station, and we travelled to the city of Gorky. There, I was again interrogated about my civilian occupation and asked if I had already served in the army. They suggested that I serve as a tailor in the army, but I refused and told them that I preferred to go back to fighting the Nazis. I returned to the same platoon in which I had served before my injury. This time, I was made a machine gunner. I would subsequently go on to kill a substantial number of Germans with my machine gun, for which I was awarded a medal of honor.

Sometime later I was injured again. It happened in Belarus, when we received an order to conquer a village known as Palkino, which had been occupied by enemy forces. Prior to the attack, which, as usual, was supposed to take place at dusk, we prepared firing positions for our machine guns. Each machine gun was operated by two soldiers: the second machine gunner, who was responsible for the supply of

ammunition; and the first machine gunner, who did the shooting and killed as many Germans as possible. For our gun, I was the first machine gunner.

When the fighting began, the Germans started to shell us with mortars. Suddenly, I heard a powerful explosion and watched as my second machine gunner fell dead on the ground. I then noticed that my left hand had been completely torn apart and now amounted to three fingers hanging off a piece of flesh. The marks of the injury remain with me today. At first I felt no pain, and the medic I called for immobilized my hand with a wooden splint. From there I was evacuated to a field hospital where I underwent an initial operation. I refused to have my fingers amputated, and the doctors put a cast on my hand. Strangely enough, my decision to refuse amputation stemmed from my fear that, if I allowed it to happen, I would never again be able to play the mandolin or the violin. From the front, I was sent on a train of injured soldiers to a hospital on the Russian home front.

The train stopped in one town after another, letting off wounded soldiers at each station. When I heard that the next station was Izhevsk, where my Aunt Hanna and Uncle Kalman lived, I asked to be let off there. My recovery was slow, and I remained in the hospital for almost five months, during which my family came to visit me often. When I recovered from my injuries, I wanted to return to the front. I reported to the enlistment center, but the army refused to accept me due to the severity of my injury. They told me that if they needed me, they knew where to find me.

My sister Fruma moved to Izhevsk with her daughter Basia, and I moved in with them. We all lived together (Fruma, Basia, Aunt Hanna and Uncle Kalman, their daughter Tzila, and I).

During the war in Izhevsk.
Standing, from right to left: Fruma, me, Tzila, and Aunt Riva.
Seated: Aunt Hannah, Basia (Fruma's daughter), and Uncle Kalman.

Beside our house stood another small house, and because our house was not big enough and did not have room for everyone, I slept in the other house. We lived in Izhevsk until the war ended. During that time, I worked as a tailor in a garment manufacturing factory.

Approximately a month after the end of the war we all returned to Lithuania and settled down in the capital city of Vilna (Vilnius).

Fulfilling my Dream

The year was 1945, and we were living in Vilna. I never stopped loving the theater. After a month or two I began making the trip to Moscow to try to get accepted to study acting at the Yiddish theater school of the Moscow State Yiddish Theater (GOSET), which was directed by the legendary Solomon (Shloyme) Mikhoels. Before I even finished my studies, I started getting cast in minor roles in the theater's plays.

Shakespeare's "The Twelfth Night"

Playing a role in a production of the Yiddish Theater in Moscow.

During my studies I made new friends, and we became a tight-knit group in heart and in soul. Our group included Reuven Levine from Kishinev and his girlfriend (and subsequently wife) Anushka (Hannah), Lionka (his last name escapes me), and Emka Friedsohn. We lived off the small scholarships we received from the theater. During my studies I also made a living making men's suits (I was the only breadwinner in the group), which also helped us pay the bills.

Emka Friedsohn was a war veteran, like me. And like me, he wore a long military jacket (known as a *shinel*). Our appearance mortified

the anti-Semites in Moscow, who maintained that the Jews had not fought the Nazis. On one occasion, when we were still wearing our army coats (we had no other coat to wear), we walked into a barber shop to get a haircut, and we sat down to wait our turn. Suddenly, we were accosted by a stranger standing in line behind us: “Hey! You! You're a Jew, right? I see you’re wearing a shinel. You probably bought it at the flea market. Jews didn’t fight. They all fled to Tashkent. Take off that shinel!” Before I could even answer him, Emka grabbed him by the throat and shoved him up against the wall. He then explained to him, in a loud voice so that others could hear: “Listen, you! When *you* were still climbing in the trees, *we* already knew how to read and write.” I am not certain that the man understood what my friend was getting at, but he fled the barbershop while he still had the chance.

Me and my closest friends: Anushka, Lionka, and Reuven.

As promised, I now return to Berl Frakt, whose life I saved in the war. During one of our vacations from theater school, when I was in Vilna visiting my family, I ran into Berl. We talked, and I convinced him to join the Yiddish theater school in Moscow. He was accepted into Reuven Levine's year in the program, which was two years behind me. One day, we were walking together on Gorky Street, which was a wide, busy thoroughfare, and Berl, who had been disabled in the war and had a wooden leg, stumbled off the sidewalk into the road. Suddenly, I saw a bus quickly approaching us, so I grabbed him and together we rolled onto the sidewalk. That is how I ended up saving his life a second time.

In Moscow I also met my future bride, Zina. From time to time, Zina and her younger brother Tolik would accompany their mother to the theater. One day, during a play in which I had not been cast, I peeked out from behind the curtain to get an impression of the audience seated in the theater. In one of the last rows in the theater, I saw a pair of dark, sparkling eyes. I made my way down into the theater from backstage, and I sat down behind the proprietor of those dark eyes. In my broken Russian (we spoke Yiddish at home, and I only started to learn Russian when I arrived in Moscow), I asked her if she would be willing to translate the play for me, from Yiddish into Russian. I remember, how during the play, I asked her the difference between "*simcheh*" (a joyous celebration) and "c*haseneh*" (a wedding). She looked at me and said: "There are many *simches* but only one c*haseneh*." Before the intermission was over, I managed to bribe her younger brother with a bar of chocolate. In return, he gave me their address and their telephone number.

Zina's grandmother was a wise woman. She was supportive of our relationship from the outset. One day, Zina told her grandmother that I was going to accompany a good friend to the train station on his way to Kishinev, where he lived with his wife. Her grandmother asked her if she knew the friend, and Zina said she did not. "You should go meet your boyfriend's friends," she told Zina, and Zina came to the train station with me. On the way home, we sat together on a bench in the park. It was then that we shared our first kiss.

Zina was only 17 when we began to spend time together. Five months later when she turned 18 we were married by civil ceremony at a marriage registration office. It was May 24, 1949.

The theater's acting school had a four-year program, and I was close to finishing it. I dreamed of continuing to work in the Yiddish Theater, but the future had other things in store.

These were hard times for Jews in Moscow, especially the intellectuals. Shlomo Mikhoels, the founder and director of the Theater, was murdered by NKVD operatives in a hit and run "accident" in the city of Minsk. Despite the state funeral at which he was eulogized by Stalin himself, the authorities announced a few months later that Mikhoels had been an American spy. The Yiddish Theater was shut down, and actors were arrested and sent to Siberia. The acting school's fourth year students, myself included, were permitted to take exams for the degree in Russian theater in the Russian language, which, as already noted, I did not know well. In spite of the difficulties involved, I managed to complete the exams and earn a diploma. Unlike some of my fellow students, however, I could not be accepted into the Russian theater due to the fact that Russian was not my native language. However, *I also did not want to join the Russian theater*, as I viewed myself as a Yiddish actor.

With Emka Friedsohn. Vilnius, 1958.

Returning to Vilna

At the time, at the end of 1949, Zina and I were already married, but we had nowhere to live and therefore continued living in the Trifonovka student dormitory. As I was no longer a student, I was not entitled to continue living there. Nonetheless, the dormitory's kind cleaning woman agreed to host us in her small one-bedroom apartment. We stayed with her for a week, until the dormitory manager announced that whomever he caught hiding Jewish students would be dismissed and jailed. We left, in order to avoid getting the good-hearted cleaning woman into trouble, and we needed to decide what to do next.

Zina returned to the one-bedroom apartment in which her family was living, and I went to stay with my family in Vilna, where I looked for work and a place for us to live. Within a week, I found a job in my former secure profession as a tailor, and I also found a vacant small one-bedroom apartment. Ten days later, I received an advance on my wages and immediately sent Zina the money to buy a train ticket to Vilna. After that, we were together again.

In our small apartment in Vilna, on May 3, 1950, Elyusha (Eli), our first child, was born. Zina wanted us to name him David, but Zina's mother decided on the name Eli, after Zina's father who was killed in the war on the Belarussian front in 1944. We lived frugally, as I was the only wage earner. We ate potatoes three times a day, but we were in love and we were happy.

One day we received an eviction order, which, it turns out, was meant for somebody else. We looked for a new place and found a family that was willing to rent us one room in their large apartment.

The apartment belonged to a well-known cinema producer and director who at some point moved to Germany, leaving us in a large and spacious apartment, of course only on a temporary basis. We remained in the apartment for three years, until an official representative of the municipality came to tell us that we had to vacate the apartment, which had been earmarked for an influential senior

party member who had just returned from studying in Moscow. The designated new tenant was a good man who liked to drink. After speaking with him a bit and downing a bottle of cognac together, he promised to help us find another apartment. And that he did.

The new apartment was situated in the old city of Vilna, where the city's large ghetto had been located during World War II. The apartment, which was in a building that had served as a Jewish hospital for many years, consisted of one large room that we divided into two rooms using a wooden divider. It also had a kitchen, a cooling cellar, and a bathroom. We lived there for 15 years, and in 1969 the state provided us with a new apartment in a new building. Two years later, we would leave the Soviet Union to immigrate to Israel. Zina gave birth to two more children in our apartment in the old city: Basia, who died of polio at the age of 11 months, and Boris (Dov), who was born in 1956.

The year 1956 was also a turning point in my acting career. It was then that a group of culture-loving friends and I decided to establish a Yiddish folklore group, which would include a theater, a choir, and a dance troupe. Later, we also established a mandolin orchestra. All of the group's activity was conducted on a completely volunteer basis. We received no wages, even though we poured most of our energy into

maintaining the troupe. We worked during the day, and we rehearsed at night. The theater and the dance troupe created facts on the ground. Despite being harassed by the authorities, we were joined by many young Jews. As not all of them knew Yiddish, we also offered Yiddish classes for the younger members, and I was one of the teachers. We taught Yiddish through songs and stories.

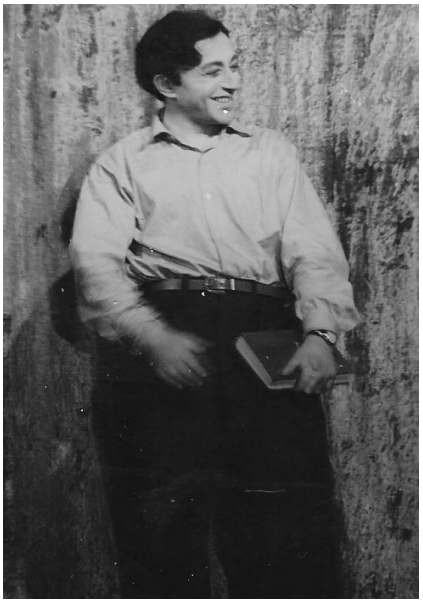
"The Big Win (200,000)"

The first director of our theater was Yitzhak Dogim, who prior to the war had been an actor in a professional theater. In our theater, he functioned both as a director and an actor. Dogim directed Shalom Aleichem's play "The Big Win", which ended up being a great success. It was also the play that made me the theater's leading actor. My wife Zina was also cast in the play, and she too became an actress. Over the years Zina and I played dozens of roles, including a number of leading roles. We were sometimes also partners on stage.

One year later, Yitzhak Dogim managed to leave the Soviet Union and to immigrate to Israel. Our next director was named Epstein. He directed two short plays by Sholem Aleichem ("Agents" and "People")

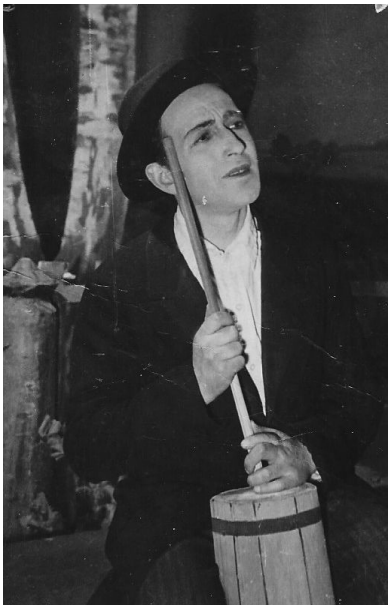
and another play titled “Green Fields,” in which I played a young yeshiva student in search of a bride. This was one of my favorite roles.

We continued looking for a high quality director, and we ultimately settled on Leonid Luria, who was a student of Shlomo Mikhoels and one of Mikhoels' assistants at the Yiddish Theater in Moscow. Luria was one of the first directors of the Russian state theater in Vilna, where he was greatly admired, and we managed to convince him to work with our amateur theater. Though he did not do it for free, it nonetheless meant taking a professional risk. The crowning glory of the period during which Luria worked with us was the play “Freilechs,” which we both knew from our time with the theater in Moscow. It was a celebration on stage – it had singing and dancing, and above all else, it dealt with the continuity of the Jewish People after the Holocaust and with the will to live and to be happy.



“There is a Woman in the World”

“Freilechs”



“Green Fields”

Over the years, we performed in dozens of plays in cities throughout the Soviet Union. Our success made us a "public" Jewish theater, which was the highest status that could be assigned to an amateur theater in the Soviet Union. This classification should have opened doors to us everywhere, but this was precluded by the traditional anti-Semitism of the authorities and the funders of culture

in the Soviet Union. For example, we never performed in the capital city of Moscow or in Kiev.

In the 1960s, when I was already well known as an actor among the Jews of Vilna, I was cast in a role in "Žingsniai naktį" (*Footsteps at Night*) the first film of Lithuanian director Raimondas Vabalas, in which I played a Jewish prisoner at the Ninth Fort in Kovno during the Holocaust.

A scene from "Footsteps at Night."

Two years later, I landed a role in Vabalas's second film "March, March, tra-ta-ta!" a biting anti-war satire in which I played a Jewish businessman who owned a fashion salon. At the end of the 1960s, I was also cast in the Tajikafilm production of "The Legend of Pawiak Prison." In this film, I played a Jewish prisoner engaged in an ideological debate with his cellmate, a Catholic priest.

"The Legend of Pawiak Prison"

At the same time, I continued to earn a living as a tailor and to advance in my profession. After beginning as a tailor I became a cutter and a modeler, which added to my wages. But most importantly, I made a name for myself as a maker of women's coats who was known far beyond the borders of Lithuania. I also worked at home sewing women's coats by order for private customers. Such private work was prohibited by law, but I needed to make ends meet and I was therefore willing to take the risk.

Our theater and our folklore troupe paved the way for other Jewish theaters and troupes in other cities in the Soviet Union: the Riga Choir, the theaters in Kishinev and Tallinn, and the theater and the dance troupe in Kovno. The theater in Kishinev was established by good friends from my acting school days in Moscow: Reuven Levine and his wife Hanna. We had become close during our studies and we remained friends for the rest of our lives. Together we spun dreams of immigrating to Israel, but we were separated by fate. I immigrated to Israel in December 1971, and Reuven and his family remained in Kishinev. The couple worked for state television in the city – Reuven as a director and Hanna with the puppet theater. In their free time,

they led the city's Yiddish theater. After they too requested to immigrate to Israel, tragedy struck. A few months after we left, Reuven was murdered in an intentional truck collision in the center of Kishinev. In this case too, the authorities insisted that it had been a run-of-the-mill traffic accident. However, their strange behavior toward the family was indicative of what had really occurred. The family was asked to refrain from asking unnecessary questions and was informed that if they requested to immigrate to Israel, they would immediately be granted an exit visa. The family moved to Israel, where Reuven was recognized by the state as a "Prisoner of Zion."

My wife Zina and I with Hannah Levine, Reuven Levine's widow.

Immigrating to Israel

After a long struggle, we managed to acquire exit visas, and we immigrated to Israel (made Aliyah) on December 19, 1971. It was the eighth night of Hanukkah, which we continue to celebrate as our day of immigration to this day. But our journey to Israel actually began much earlier, in 1964, when we began requesting to immigrate to Israel. Our request was denied by the Soviet immigration authorities each time we submitted it.

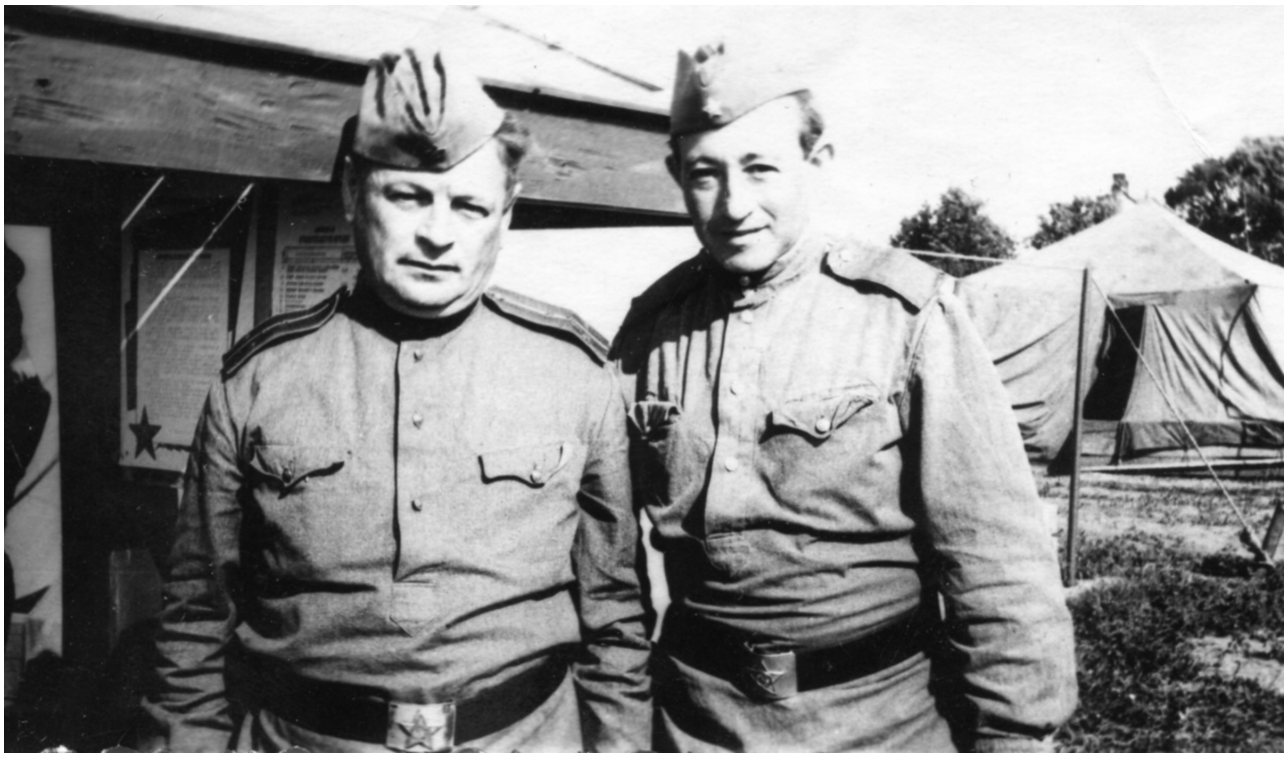
After Eli completed his service in the Soviet military in 1970, we again requested that the state immigration authorities allow us "to be unified with our family in Israel." These were the only grounds on which the Soviet authorities would allow us to leave. My brother Elchanan, who immigrated to pre-state Palestine in 1934, sent an official request for family reunification, which we submitted to the appropriate officials in the immigration ministry.

Our family during our last summer in Vilna before immigrating to Israel.

The two “Leningrad Trials” that took place in the Soviet Union at the end of the 1970s, with significant media coverage, dealt with a group of Jews who had not been permitted to immigrate to Israel and had tried to hijack a Russian passenger plane and land it in Sweden. The Jews who perpetrated the act received long prison sentences. The incident had reverberations around the world, leading the Soviets to attempt to prove to the West that Jews in the Soviet Union enjoyed equal rights.

A camera crew of the Soviet Ministry of Culture produced an anti-Israel film that incorporated clips from our troupe’s performances. They tried to show the entire world that there was Jewish culture in the Soviet Union and that it was supported by the state. This was a lie we could not bear. The last thing we wanted to do was to serve as a tool of Soviet anti-Zionist propaganda. In December 1970 we held a general meeting that culminated in a dramatic decision – to disband the entire package: the theater, the dance troupe, the choir, and the orchestra. Many tears were shed at that meeting, but we had no other choice. We disbanded and joined the struggle for the right to immigrate to Israel that was being waged by the Jews of the Soviet Union at the time.

Two years later, most of the members of the dance troupe and the theater immigrated to Israel in a number of different waves. My family and I were part of the second wave, which departed the Soviet Union at the end of 1971.



With a friend, during my final reserve duty. Summer 1970.

In Israel

When we arrived in Israel we went directly to the immigrant absorption center in Atlit. We remained there, studying in the center's immersive Hebrew study program (*ulpan*), until May 1972, when we moved to the city of Netanya into an apartment provided by the state (Amidar). While still in Atlit, and in addition to studying Hebrew, I found employment as a modeler in Tel Aviv, and I started working.

In Israel, we were able to keep in touch with the members of the troupe from Vilna. In 1973, we met and decided to resume our artistic activity in the format of a folklore troupe of new Soviet immigrants. We also chose a name for the troupe: "*Anachnu Kan*" in Hebrew, or "*Mir Zaynen Do*" in Yiddish – "*We Are Here*."

Earlier, I had tried to find work as a theater actor. However, I quickly came to realize that Israel had no theater that performed in Yiddish and that, as an actor, I had no future in Israel. I continued working at the factory in Tel Aviv, once again saved by my old profession.

We lived in Netanya, and I took public transportation to work. Initially Zina stayed home, but the following year she began working in Tel Aviv at the National Association of Immigrants from the Soviet Union, at first as a volunteer and later as a paid employee. Her wages were low, but at least she was no longer working for free.

I worked as a modeler in a factory where I was greatly valued, and, in 1973, our older son Eli married Polina. My younger son Dov continued his studies at the agricultural boarding school at Nahalal. He had begun studying there in 1971 at the age of 15, after we arrived in Israel mid-year and needed to find him a school.

The Yom Kippur War broke out on October 6, 1973. During the war, the factory shut down and I had to look for another job. Eli was in the army and Dov stayed at school. One month after the outbreak of war, Eli and Polina had their first child – a daughter named Yael, who was our first grandchild. Despite the war, *Anachnu Kan* continued preparing for its debut performance.

The event took place at the Culture Hall in Tel Aviv before an audience of more than 3,000 people. Seated in the front row was Golda Meir, who was Israel's prime minister at the time, and David Ben-Gurion, who made the trip all the way from Kibbutz Sdeh Boker

especially to see the show. It was a huge success, and it was a powerful statement – *Anachnu Kan*! We Are Here! Truth be told, Ben-Gurion was not particularly pleased by the event, as he opposed the usage of the Yiddish language in Israel. With Golda, on the other hand, we spoke the *mama loshen* (our mother tongue) – Yiddish.

Zina continued working in Tel Aviv for the Association of Immigrants from the Soviet Union and with Anachnu Kan (on a volunteer basis). A few years later she found employment at the Tadiran factory, where she learned a new profession: printed circuit board control. She continued working there until she retired.

In the meantime, I found a new job at the Raintex factory in Petach-Tikva, where I was hired as a modeler. I was happy at the factory, and the owners were happy with me. The factory was owned by the Kopidlowski Brothers. When they passed away, their children opened a new factory by the name of Kerentex, and they asked me to join them. I worked there until 1995, when Zina and I retired together and started working as volunteers at a Kupat Holim clinic, with our general practitioner, Dr. Erica Apht.

With Anachnu Kan, which included our sons Eli and Dov and Eli's wife Polina, we travelled abroad on a number of occasions to perform. We did shows in the United States, Canada, Mexico, England, Holland, and Belgium. Upon returning to Israel after our 1977 tour we decided to leave the troupe. Zina was already working at Tadiran, Eli had a job with Israel Discount Bank, and Dov was serving in the Israeli military. In 1978, Dov married Mati, whom he met during his military service.

With our first great-grandchild, Adiyah.

Life Goes On

In 1998, Zina was diagnosed with cancer, and from then on, until her death on December 19, 2004, we fought the horrific illness together. In the course of our life in Israel we enjoyed countless vacations together, both in Israel and abroad. Indeed, we managed to enjoy ourselves and to see a great deal, and for that I am grateful to my dear wife, who was the driving force behind it all. I still love her and miss her dearly.

A year and a half before Zina succumbed to her illness, a monumental tragedy befell the family: our granddaughter Inbal, Eli and Polina's youngest child, died suddenly at the age of 17. Zina found it difficult to bear the loss, and this accelerated her illness. They now lay together, side by side, at the cemetery on Kibbutz Maagan Michael.

Me, Inbal, and Zina.

After Zina died I continued living in the same apartment in Netanya where we had lived since 1972. It was the home in which we spent most of our life together. I felt unable to leave the apartment; every inch of it reminded me of my beloved Zina.

In March 2014, after stumbling and falling in my home in Netanya, it became clear to me that I could no longer live alone. My son

Eli had been pleading with me for some time to come live with them on Kibbutz Maagan Michael, and now I agreed.

For the first three months on the kibbutz I lived at Eli and Polina's house. I was then offered a number of different living options. I chose to move into a small ground-floor apartment in the center of the kibbutz. After my fall I began using a three-wheel walker, which restored my mobility and independence and allowed me to resume my morning walks.

My family moved almost the entire contents of our apartment in Netanya to my apartment on the kibbutz to make it as similar to my old home as possible. This made it easier for me to get acclimated to the kibbutz, and today I can say that I like my new home.

As far as I am concerned, the best thing about my new life on the kibbutz is the fact that I am living close to my family – that is, half of it. The other half, Dov's family, lives in Modi'in, and one of his daughters, my granddaughter, lives with her husband and their children on Kibbutz Yotvata. On Maagan Michael, I have my son Eli and his wife Polina, three grandchildren, and eight great-grandchildren, whom I see almost every day. This makes me very happy. On Friday evenings, we meet for Shabbat dinner at Eli and Polina's house, and everyone usually attends.

On the kibbutz, I attend holiday celebrations and cultural events, meet new people, and forge new relationships. I also receive assistance, and I have had wonderful caregivers.

What can I tell you? Life is good!

Epilogue

Parting with Aba.

Aba (Hebrew for "Dad") passed away on February 10, 2020 (Tu Bishvat). He lived to the age of 98 years, three months, and 10 days.

Two months earlier, he had moved to *Beit Carmel* – Maagan Michael's elder care facility, which is currently run by my daughter-in-law Mara. Emotionally, the move was not an easy one – not for my father, and not for us. This may have stemmed from his acceptance of the change in his physical condition and his loss of independence, which was so important to him. The months that preceded the move were difficult for us all. We watched as his everyday functioning became increasingly difficult and complex, and at times simply impossible. An ever-widening chasm emerged between his clear, lucid mind and his elderly body, which refused to listen to him. Together, we reached the conclusion that a move to the nursing home was unavoidable.

With Rania at Beit Carmel.

As reflected in the pieces of his life story recounted in these memoirs, Aba was adaptive by nature. Here too, he quickly got used to his new place of residence and became part of the landscape of *Beit Carmel*. We took care to set up his room and make the move easier for him. He quickly bonded with the staff and the other residents, and he also instituted a number of rules of his own, like going to sleep late, only after watching the end of a soccer or basketball game on television. His caregiver Rania continued to come care for him in his new home, which made things much easier for him. His first question each morning was typically: "When is Rania coming?" As his family, we all continued to visit him and to envelop him in attention and love.

Two days after I returned to Israel from a ski holiday, *Aba* decided that he would not be getting out of bed that morning. "I'm tired," he said. "Let me rest." When I tried to convince him to eat, he responded in Yiddish: "Eli, you talk too much…"

We quickly realized that he had already decided to part with this world, and we informed the immediate and extended family and close friends that we had begun the process of saying goodbye. On Friday, he started to receive visits from people who were dear to him and to whom he meant so much. The stream of visitors continued through Saturday and Sunday, and the atmosphere surrounding him was full of love, stories, smiles, songs, and tears. On Saturday, my brother Dov and I managed to sit him up for a few minutes. At that point, I sang with him, for the last time, Joseph Papiernikov's song "*Zol Zayn*." This became our song of parting.

> “Let it be, that I will build my castles in the air.
> And it seems that my God doesn’t exist.
> In my dreams I feel brighter and better.
> In my dreams the sky is a deeper blue.
>
> Let it be, that I do not reach my goal,
> And that my boat does not find the shore.
> I seek neither to achieve nor to arrive.
> For me, it is important just to walk down a sunny road.”

On Monday evening, we were sitting with him as he took his last breaths. He parted with the world to the sound of his favorite songs in Yiddish, which had been playing in a loop for the past three days and nights. *Aba* was buried beside my mother and my daughter. Now they are together.

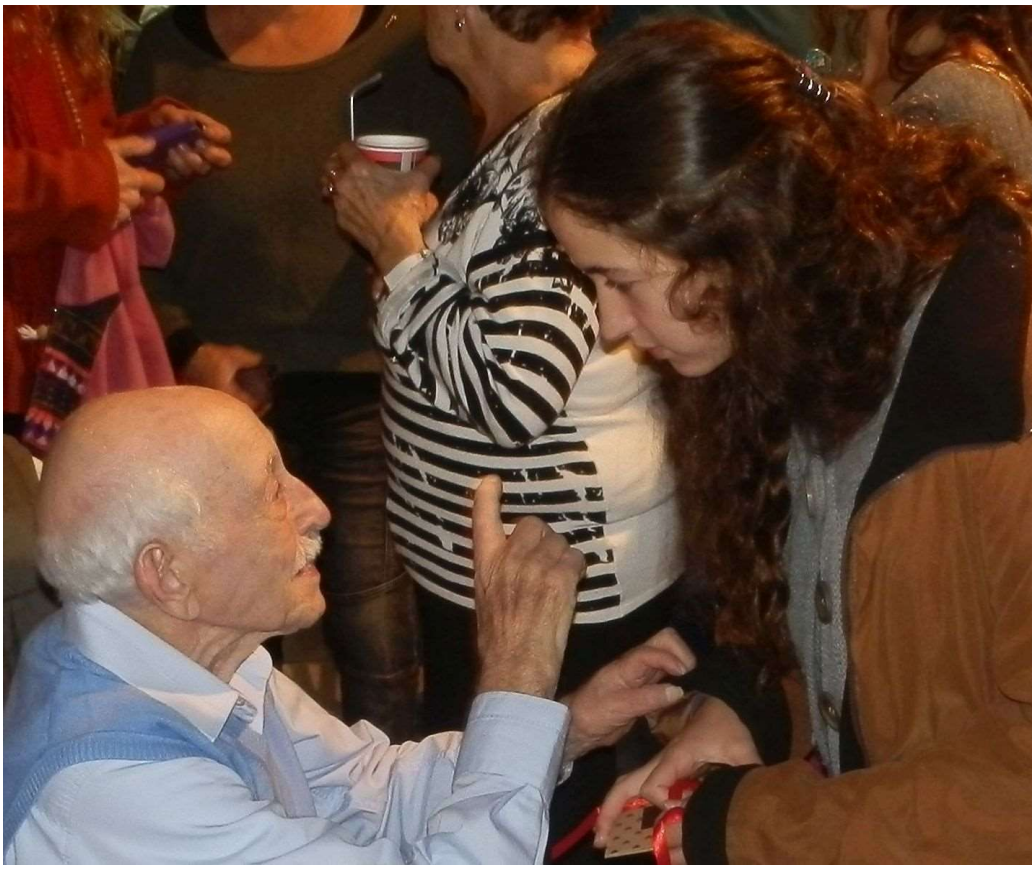
Over the past few years, I have made a large number of video clips and short films in which my father can be seen talking about his life, performing scenes from plays, singing songs, and spending time with the family. They can all be found on YouTube at:

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLTjVXJh_ohHO0RdKdVSAJcfneO4dXladu

Eli Sharfstein
August 2020

At the release of this book's Hebrew edition.

Polina and Liat with the author.



Moshe Hirsh and Liat.

Family Photos

Polina and Eli.

Yael, Geremy, Adiyah, Gilboa, Maagan, and Hallel.

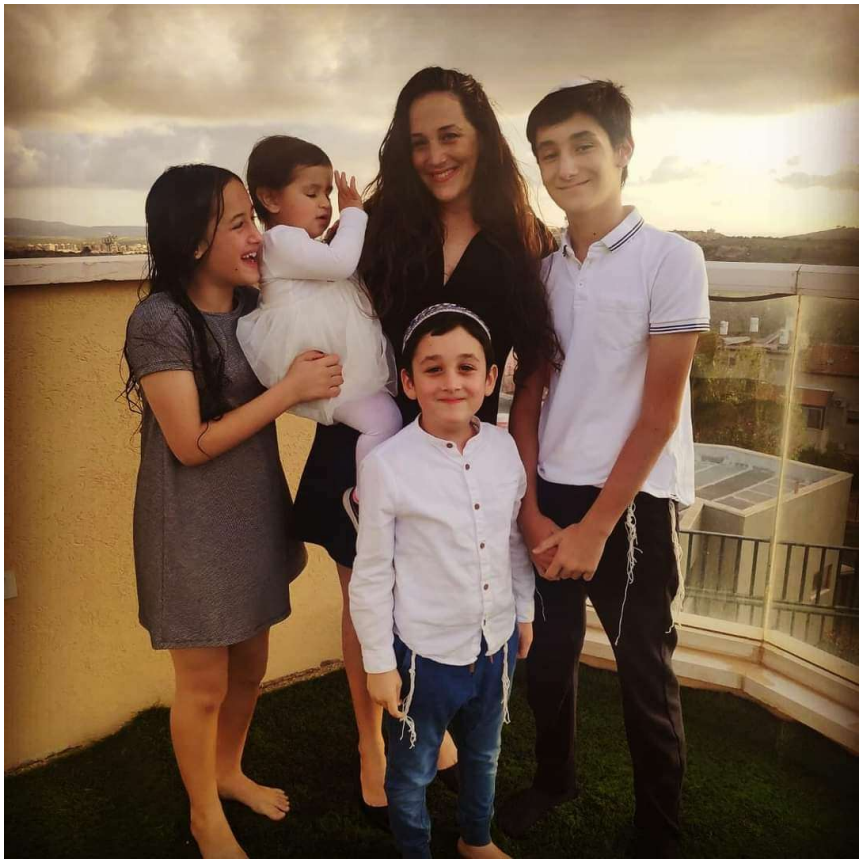
Aviad, Mara, Neomi, David, and Natan.

Amikhai, Jenia, Hila, and Adi.

.

Dov, Matti, Einav, Shani, Shimrit, and Amit.

Einav, Idan, Maayan, Omri, Noah, and Roey, with "Saba Grisha".



Shani, Itamar, Hodayah ,Michael and Hallel.

Shimrit-Batya, Yakir, Neomi, Evyatar, Netanel and Yael.

With Rochaleh and her twin girls – Rivki ans Shayna

Me and my sons Eli and Dov

With Eli and Polina

Purim in the Kibbutz.

Basia Goldberg, me, Batia Reindorf and Polina Sharfstein.

Haim Kuritzky, Sarah Kuritzky Weinstein and me.

"The Old Man and the sea".
Maagan Michael 2019.

With Sveta and Sasha Levine

On my 97-th Birthday

Family Tree

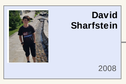

Adiyah Forman
2002


Gilboa Forman
2005


Maagan Forman
2008


Hallel Forman
2012

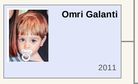

Neomi Sharfstein
2006


David Sharfstein
2008


Natan Sharfstein
2012

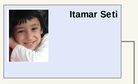

Adi Nahor Sharfstein
2011

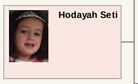

Ma'ayan Galanti
2009

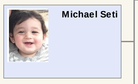

Omri Galanti
2011

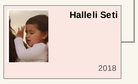

Noa Galanti
2012


Roi Galanti
2016


Itamar Seti


Hodayah Seti


Michael Seti

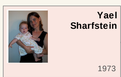

Halleli Seti
2018


Neomi Ben Shitrit
2013


Aviatar Ben Shitrit
2014


Natanel Ben Shitrit
2015


Yael Ben Shitrit
2018


Yael Sharfstein
1973

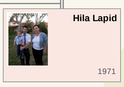

Geremy Forman
1969


Aviad Sharfstein
1978

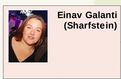

Mara Derendinger
1972


Evgeny (Jenia) Dudochkin
1985

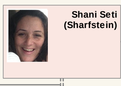

Amikhai Moshe Sharfstein
1983

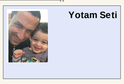

Hila Lapid
1971

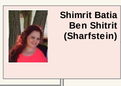

Inbal Sharfstein
1986 - 2003


Einav Galanti (Sharfstein)


Idan Galanti

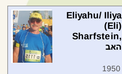

Shani Seti (Sharfstein)


Yotam Seti


Shimrit Batia Ben Shitrit (Sharfstein)


Yakir Ben Shitrit


Amit Sharfstein

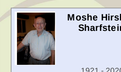

Eliyahu/ Iliya (Eli) Sharfstein, האב
1950


Polina Sharfstein (Neiden)
1949


Basia Sharfstein
1954 - 1955


Dov (Boris) Sharfstein
1956


Mati Sharfstein (Chobotaru)
1958

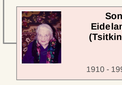

Moshe Hirsh Sharfstein
1921 - 2020

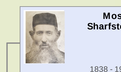

Zinaida Sharfstein (Eideland)
1931 - 2004


Avraham Sharfstein
1880 - 1938


Sheine-Basie Sharfstein (Weinerman)
1888 - 1926


Elik Eideland
1908 - 1944

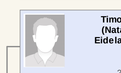

Sonia Eideland (Tsitkina)
1910 - 1992


Moshe Sharfstein
1838 - 1918


Sarah Naomi Sharfstein (Rutenberg)
1846 - 1919


Hirsh Vainerman
? - ?


Sarah-Chiena Vainerman
? - 1941

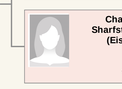

Timofei (Natan) Eideland
? - ?


Eideland
? - ?


Itzhak Tsitkin
? - ?


Faina Tsitkina (Lokshtanova)
1879 - 1962


Yossi Yankel Sharfstein
1812 - ?


Chayah Sharfstein (Eisen)
? - ?


Efraim Rutenberg
? - ?


Fruma Rutenberg
? - ?


Solomon
? - ?


לא ידוע
? - ?


לא ידוע
? - ?