Mykhaylo Krasnyanskyy

The Jewish Family Under Attack

"Lo, the people shall dwell alone,
and shall not be reckoned among the nations."
Numbers 23:9 (KJV)

Abstract

In his article, the author recounts the story of his Jewish family in the Soviet Union. Out of the eight members in his family, six were fatally harmed by antisemites in some form or another. At the same time, there is not a single grave of these six related persons to the author that he could visit and bring flowers to.

Happenstance is a fundamental property of the material world. It is the reason we cannot foresee all the trials fate has in store for us. But, we must be prepared for anything. As the Torah teaches us, it is not the sinners God tests, but the righteous. Human fate may well be divinely preordained, yet what is to befall each of us is not drafted as a straight line but rather a matrix that allows for plenty of variations. What we choose is entirely up to us. Indeed, we always get what we want, consciously or not, having chosen one of the paths laid out in front of us by God.

Naturally, what I am about to tell you is the truth, even though truth is often brutal. It is also worth remembering that a boa constrictor's truth may be very different from the rabbit's, especially if the rabbit stands his ground rather than rolls over and submits.

I was born in October 1942 in Makhachkala, in the North Caucasus region of Dagestan. My family (Fig. 1) had fled there from Stalino – now known as Donetsk, Ukraine, where they had lived and worked before the Second World War. At the time of our escape, Stalino had already been occupied by the Nazis, and the terrible stories of their treatment of Jews had spread quickly. My parents, or rather just my mother, since my father was already defending the Caucasus front, named me Moishe. However, the Makhachkala ZAGS (vital statistics office) did not recognise the name Moishe, so they recorded my name as Mikhail in their records (much later, in independent Ukraine, I became Mykhaylo). Our family originally came from Odessa. My grandfather, Moses Krasnyansky, was from Ananiev, which is now in the Odesa Region but was in those days part of the Kherson Governorate.

Before the Bolshevik revolution (1917), Ananiev was one of the most affluent and significant towns in the Russian south. This

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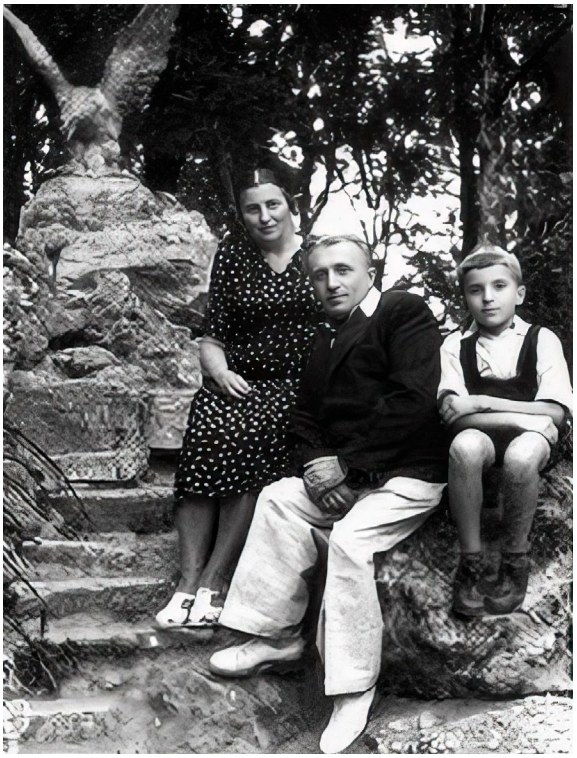

Fig. 1. My mother, father, and me (seated on the far right). I was eight years old in this photograph. Kislovodsk, Soviet Union, 1950. (Personal collection).

was largely due to its location in the Pale of Settlement, where Jews were permitted to live in accordance with the decree of Catherine the Great[1]. Interestingly, Odessa proper was not part of the Pale of Settlement, and only highly educated Jews, such as physicians, 1st Guild Merchants, and skilled craftsmen (mostly jewelers and tailors) were allowed to reside there. My grandfather (as my father told me) was one of Ananiev's most respected citizens. He was a 2nd Guild Merchant who owned several stores and warehouses, a photography studio, and a large horse-drawn transportation company. Additionally, he served as the head of the local Jewish school's board of trustees.

My grandfather Moses was an Ashkenazi Jew. The Russian Empire settled Jews on its western borders, resulting in the formation of a distinctive people in places such as Vitebsk (the birthplace of the artist Marc Chagall), Berdichev, and Odessa. These people, known as the Ashkenazi, spoke, wrote, and sang songs in Yiddish. Many people still love to sing their songs, such as "Hava Nagila", "Tumbalalaika", and "Bagels" (Boublichky). However, after the atrocities committed by Hitler and Stalin, as well as the antisemitic pogroms perpetrated throughout history, very few such Jews remain in these lands today.

1 Miller Y.A. (2021) Catherine the Great and the Jews: 5 Facts. – AISH, https://aish.com/catherine-the-great-and-the-jews-5-facts/.

My grandfather and his wife Sofia–my grandmother–were murdered by Symon Petliura's atamans in 1919, during a horrific Jewish pogrom.[2] Where did the atamans abandon the bodies of my grandfather and grandmother? Where are their graves? I was never able to find out. Can anyone answer me a simple question: Why did the hardworking, enterprising Jews pose such a terrible threat to the independent Ukraine Petliura dreamed of?

Petliura's potential victims also had a protector – the famous Bessarabian "Robin Hood", a powerfully built man named Grigory Kotovskiy, who later became a high-level Red Army commander. When he was sentenced to death for armed robbery in 1916, a few days before the execution, a certain Madame Shcherbakova, a general's wife who was madly in love with the handsome brigand, virtually stormed her way into the office of General Brusilov, who was then the Governor General of the Novorossiya Krai (province), and begged him on her knees to spare Kotovskiy's life. As early as late 1917, Kotovskiy resurfaced in the Odessa Region, now as a Red commander.

A fan of soulful conversations around the dinner table, Kotovskiy was a welcome guest in many affluent homes in Ananiev, including my grandfather Moses's inn. For some time, Kotovskiy was also a patron of Odessa's infamous criminal kingpin Monya Vinnitskiy, better known as Mishka Japonchik, with whom he had once been in prison. By that time, Japonchik had a sprawling criminal empire in Odessa, which included all the city's flea markets, brothels, and gambling dens. When the Red Army entered Odessa in January 1919 and initiated a merciless campaign to destroy the criminal underworld, Japonchik showed up at the Third Red Army's staff, and with Kotovskiy's support, he created an infantry regiment named after Lenin. Interestingly, the first battle of the "Japonchik-Lenin regiment" was with Petliura's troops. The Bolshevik revolution was quite a melting pot.

However, the gangsters didn't enjoy war as much as they did robbing civilians, and they refused to return to the front lines. What they failed to understand was that they were already part of the Bolshevik system. Iona Yakir, the army commander, immediately ordered the arrest of all "those ragamuffins" and their leader. During an attempt to apprehend them, in which Kotovskiy's soldiers also took part, Japonchik fought back and was shot dead. The "grateful" Soviets did not forget Kotovskiy, whose love of freedom and ambition became an inconvenience for the "builders of communism" after the civil war. On a dark August night in 1925, the forty-year-old Kotovskiy, who had by then become a deputy corps commander in the Red Army, was killed on the outskirts of Odessa by his old acquaintance Zayder, who happened to be an agent of the secret police, the GPU.

2 Hunczak, Taras (1985). Symon Petliura and the Jews: A Reappraisal. *Ukrainian Jewish studies,* Lviv-NY-Toronto.

It should be noted that from 1917 on, the majority of the Jewish intelligentsia supported the Bolsheviks.[3] This is not surprising, considering that the Tsar's regime, the White Guard, and many Ukrainian nationalists were all vehemently antisemitic, with some even responsible for murders of Jews. In contrast, the Bolsheviks, before Stalin's speech in 1946, were not antisemitic. Misled by the new flags and grand promises of equality and brotherhood, Jewish intellectuals saw an opportunity to escape the persecution motivated by the "Jewish question" and embraced the idea of a communist future. Unfortunately, this dream was never realised, especially for Russian Jews. Those who marched with red flags in October 1917 were unaware of this harsh reality; as the poet A. Kushner once wrote, "you don't get to choose your time, you just live in it and die". (Source: https://www.askbooka.ru/stihi/aleksandr-kushner/vremena-ne-vybirayut.html)

And here's yet another interesting fact: as a young man, my grandfather Moses had a friend, Zyama, the son of another Ananiev merchant, the Austrian Jew Gersh Rosenblum. Zyama, who was a few years older than my grandfather, was considered to be very smart and talented. He was fluent in several languages but did not have any interest in his father's business. A few years before World War I, twenty-five-year-old Zyama disappeared and never returned. Years later, Zyama (Zigmund) Rosenblum would gain fame as the "Ace of Spies", Sydney Reilly.

But the truly amazing thing is that the misfortunes of my large, extended family in Odessa were eventually avenged. During a pogrom against Jews in Balta, not far from Ananiev, Petliura's troops killed an entire family of local Jewish residents – the Schwartzbards – who were distant relatives of my grandfather Moses. There were fifteen of them, including five children, and only Shlomo Schwartzbard survived. He had been living in France since 1910 and served in the French Foreign Legion during World War I, from 1914 to 1917. Like many educated Russian Jews, he disliked the Tsar's regime because of its antisemitism and refused to settle in the Pale. He fought bravely in the Foreign Legion and received the order Croix du combatant for his bravery.

A Jewish poet and journalist, he returned to Odessa in 1918 as an interpreter for a French military mission. In 1918–1919, he was drafted into the Red Army and served in Kotovskiy's brigade, which is why he was far from Balta during that fateful pogrom. Disillusioned with the Bolsheviks, he again fled to Paris in December 1919. In 1924, Symon Petliura, who had escaped the Bolsheviks, also settled in Paris, to his own (future) detriment. When Shlomo Schwartzbard learned about this from the newspapers, he tracked Petliura down, accosted him on a city street, and, being an experienced soldier, emptied his revolver into the nation-

3 "50,000 Jews Killed in Petlura Pogroms, Paris Court Hears." Jewish Telegraphic Agency, 22 July 1926. Retrieved 30 May 2017, https://www.jta.org/archive/50000-jews-killed-in-petlurapogroms-paris-court-hears.

alist leader and then waited for the police ("*les agen France*") to arrive. This incident occurred in May 1926.

Shlomo Schwartzbard was arrested and put on trial. Some French newspapers asserted that it was a political murder, reporting that Shlomo Schwartzbard was an OGPU agent. However, an experienced attorney hired by a group of well-known French intellectuals (including writers Romain Rolland and Henri Barbusse, painter Marc Chagall, and physicist Paul Langevin) managed to prove that the murder was driven purely by revenge. The young man simply killed the man who murdered his family. At the trial in Paris, Schwartzbard accused Petliura and his atamans of killing 50,000 Jews.[4] The jury sympathised with the defendant and acquitted Schwartzbard. According to my father, after those horrendous pogroms, there were old Jewish women clad in black walking down the streets in Ananiev and Balta, tin mug in hand, soliciting donations "for vengeance".

My aunt Rakhil, who had somehow survived the inferno of the Petliura pogroms, could not leave Odessa in 1941 and was executed by the Nazis in a Jewish ghetto not far from the city. Since the Autumn of 1941, Romanian fascists led by Marshal Ion Antonescu together with Sonderkommando 11b, a unit of German Einsatzgruppe D, committed atrocities in Odessa. Until 27 October of 1941, Jews were executed right in Odessa. Beginning on 27 October, thousands of Jews were marched from Odessa to a special ghetto camp. This ghetto was located in the Ukrainian village of Bogdanovka, about 160 kilometers from Odessa now Mykolaiv Oblast. The Nazis forced a total of up to 30,000 Jews to walk 160 kilometers. As far as I have been able to determine, my Aunt Rachel was among this group of Jews. Did she die along the way? Or was she killed in the ghetto? Where is her grave? I will never know ... Of the approximately 200,000 Jews of Odessa (as of 1939), more than 100,000 Jews managed to evacuate before November 1941, but about 70,000 were exterminated during the Nazi occupation.

My mother's name was Elka-Simkha, or Elena Semyonovna in its Sovietised version, and she was also from Odessa. Her maiden name was even Odesskaya. Her father, my other grandfather Simkha (Semyon) Odessky, led a group of interpreters and translators who supported Odessa's merchant port. He was fluent in five different languages. God failed to save him from the executioners of KGB, but he saved my mother and me. My grandfather was arrested in 1929 before the bloody years of Yezhov and Beria as part of the campaign against alleged saboteurs among the intelligentsia and died under suspicious circumstances at the age of forty-seven while being held in the NKVD pre-trial detention facility. His grave does not exist. In those years of "early Stalinism", when the OGPU was headed by V. Menzhinsky, families of those arrested

4 Madievsky, Samson. (2000) "Jews and the Russian Revolution: Was There a Choice?", *Lechaim,* 11 (103), https://www.lechaim.ru/ARHIV/103/madievskiy.htm.

My children and me, Los Angeles 2024.

were not as badly persecuted as in later years. Had my grandfather survived until 1937, he would have inevitably been "exposed" as a "spy" for each of the five countries whose languages he spoke; my mother would have been arrested as the daughter of an "enemy of the people"; and I would have been born somewhere, in one of in Stalin's prison camps in northern Siberia.

My grandmother Rosa passed away during the evacuation eastward during the Second World War. My mother explained to me that Hitler's army occupied Stalino and established an administration there in November 1941. Initially, my mother and grandmother remained in the city, but when the Nazis began making mass arrests and executing Jews, they decided to leave. The Nazis did not bother using ammunition for the executions; instead, they would throw Jews who were still alive down vertical shafts that were over one hundred meters deep. The 4-4-bis Kalinovka mine alone became a mass grave for over 75,000 people, including Jews and Soviet civilians and military personnel active in the surrounding areas. Survivors recounted how the Nazis forced entire families, including children and the elderly, into the mine. Today, there is a memorial at the site of the mine in Donetsk to honor the memory of those who died there.

This brutality is the reason why, in November 1941, my mother and grandma Rosa fled Donetsk. They managed to get their hands on a cart and an old mare that barely moved. Braving snow and cold, they reached the neighbouring Rostov region and somehow managed to get on a jam-packed train. The train had been bombed before, and all the windows were broken. It was so cold in the car-

riage that water froze. Grandma Rosa died on the way, and her body was taken outside at a nearby station. I still do not know where she is buried. Somehow, my mother survived that ride through the frozen hell and, after two weeks on the road, reached the small town of Makhachkala in the northern Caucasus. The town was already bursting at the seams with tens of thousands of other refugees from other occupied areas.[5] There was no housing available, so my mother had to live on the enclosed veranda of a house. It was almost as cold there as it was outside; hygiene was abysmal, and there was no place to cook. With little food available, many people simply starved. It was on that veranda that my mother gave birth to me in October 1942. (In December 1941, my father, who was building military fortifications near Makhachkala, took a day off and joined my mother where she was staying; apparently, that was the day I was conceived.) My mother and I stayed there for almost a year, suffering from hunger and cold. Only in the fall of 1943 did she manage to move to a bunk in a small room that she shared with other Jewish families with children. Since my mother was always hungry, she had very little breast milk to feed me, and there was no other milk available. She would pick up bread crumbs from the tables, add a teaspoon of sunflower oil, wrap it in a clean rag, and stick it in my perennially screaming mouth to suck on. Love and sorrow reigned supreme in that little room of ours – the two indispensable components of Jewish life. Only in 1945 did my mother and I return to our ruined apartment in recently liberated Stalino. The furniture and huge library we had left behind were all gone. There were no doors or windows left.

My father started his post-war career as the head of the construction department at the Stalino State Executive Committee. He also served as a deputy of the Donetsk Regional Council for many years. Over time, he consolidated various construction design organisations in the area under the State Urban Planning Institute (Giprograd), where he served as director for the last twenty years of his professional life. The problem was that Mr Degtyariov, the powerful First Secretary of the Donetsk Regional Committee of the Communist Party, hated my father. During the final years of my father's career (1965 to 1967), this influential local figure would frequently contact the authorities in Kyiv, asking when they would finally "get rid of that kike". In mid-1967, the Donetsk Regional Communist Party Committee decided to terminate my father's employment. All of the things my father accomplished throughout his whole life crumbled in an instant. Just a few months into 1968, tragedy struck our family. On the afternoon of 16 February 1968, my father's breathing suddenly became labored (an autopsy later confirmed that he suffered a

5 Kornilov G.E. (2015) "Evacuation of the population during the great patriotic war", *Ural Historical Journal,* 4 (49), https://lost-childhood.com/articles/kornilov-jevakuacija-na-ural.pdf.

major heart attack), and from that moment on, events unfolded rapidly. My mother called for an ambulance, which arrived within ten minutes. Medical professionals in white coats connected the oxygen, an intravenous injection of strophanthin, and administered an adrenaline shot to his heart ... and then it was all over. My father was sixty years old when he passed away, leaving my mother and me with a small one-bedroom apartment. We had no car, no country house, and no substantial savings. A man of integrity, like many before him in our family, he lived and died with honor.

I spent my early childhood in that thoroughly destroyed city. I still vividly remember the misery and ruins. Our days were spent playing soccer, one courtyard against another. No one had money for a real ball, so we made one out of one of my mother's old stockings filled with rags. The losing team would often try to punch the winners in the face for revenge. Occasionally, my mom would give me a 10-kopeck coin so I could go see a movie. Those were truly happy days. There were usually older bullies in front of the movie theater entrance who would try to take money from the younger kids by force. But I had a well-thought-out "military strategy": I would hide the coin in my mouth, sprint from a distance as fast as I could, and ram into the line of extortionists, trying to break through into the theater lobby. If they caught me, I would swallow the coin. If the coin wasn't for me, then it certainly wasn't for them!

After graduating from high school, I was accepted into the Department of Chemistry at Donetsk Polytechnic Institute. Soon after, I became the captain of the KVN team, a popular amateur stand-up comedy competition in the Soviet Union. In 1972, we reached the all-Union KVN competition, a show broadcast on Central Television. During the competition, we may have pushed the boundaries a bit too far. The things we said were considered offensive by our city and regional Communist Party leaders. For example, during a question-and-answer session, we were asked, "What is the joy of Soviet labor?" Our response was, "It is what a Soviet poet feels while watching Soviet workers build a dam." Another question we answered humorously was, "What did you do in the evenings when you didn't have a TV yet?" Our response was, "We would gather as a family and watch the spinning of our home ventilator, much like watching Soviet TV." Additionally, we joked, "Due to the building of socialism in the Sahara Desert, they are now facing shortages of sand." "Disappointed aliens left the Soviet Union territory after a futile search for intelligent life there."

After our controversial performance in Moscow, the university president and the university's Communist Party secretary summoned us to the Donetsk Regional Committee of the Communist Party for questioning. Madam Radchenko, one of the Party leaders, was especially upset and insisted that I, referred to derogatorily with a fake Jewish accent, be removed from teaching at Donetsk Polytechnic Institute. Consequently, I, a twenty-eight-

year-old Candidate of Chemical Science (PhD), was dismissed by the University's Communist Party committee, and our KVN team was disbanded.

I am truly shocked by the unwavering and consistent hatred shown toward our Jewish family by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Both my father and I were forced out of our workplaces by decisions made by Communist Party bodies. Despite this, I must express gratitude to the Soviet Union and its Communist Party. It is largely because of their valiant antisemitic efforts that Soviet Jews learned to survive and thrive in extremely adverse conditions, whereas many other nations would have succumbed long ago.

Out of the eight members of our Jewish family (two grandmothers, two grandfathers, father, mother, aunt, and myself), six were victims of some form of fatal harm by antisemites. The only survivors were my mother (who passed away in 2000 at the age of ninety-one) and me – still alive, unconsumed and undigested. At different times, our family faced persecution from Petliura's militias, Stalinist and Nazi executioners, and the communist regime. Despite these challenges, three generations of our family continued to work hard and achieve success. Some were builders, others were involved in science, teaching, or economics. We have always strived to "sow the reasonable, the good, the eternal", with our traditionally Jewish qualities of intelligence, hard work, perseverance, and faith guiding us.

Now at 83 years old, I still feel young, if one measures age by the number of ideals lost rather than years lived. Looking back on my life, I see myself as a small yet integral part of this planet, spinning under the sun, moving through time and space, pushing its eight billion inhabitants toward the future, each seeking their own happiness.

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Today, my native Donetsk and the eastern part of Ukraine are again facing occupation (together with the graves of my parents – whom I buried in Donetsk), similar to 1941, but this time by Russian forces. The role of brutal dictator is now being played by Putin. Ukraine is fighting for its freedom, as well as that of Europe.

Mykhaylo Krasnyanskyy PhD, worked as a professor at Donetsk National Technical University (Ukraine) in the Department of Ecology. His research interests include industrial, ecological, and public safety. He is the author of over 120 scientific articles in Ukrainian, Russian, and English, as well as five textbooks for universities in Ukrainian and Russian. He has published collections of short stories (in Russian and Ukrainian) in Ukraine, Russia, Germany, and Israel. Since 2007, he has been residing in the USA with his family and collaborating with various international scientific and social journals.
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