

Boris Nayshtut

*Ukraine*

I was born in Krasnye Okny, a village in Ukraine's Odessa region, on September 15, 1935. Soon after, my father and mother moved us to Odessa. Before the war there were five people in our family: my father, Moisey Davidovich Nayshtut; my mother, Klara Viktorovna Nayshtut; my older brother, Viktor; my younger brother, Aleksander, and me. My father had 11 brothers and sisters, though only he and one brother survived the war. It was nearly the same on my mother's side: out of her 10 brothers and sisters, only two survived.

According to my father, attempts were made in approximately 1937 to stop anti-Semitism in Ukraine, and anti-Semites were even prosecuted. But before the war began, anti-Semitism had started to grow again.

The Germans bombed Odessa right after the war started, and a bomb hit my family's house at night. My younger brother Aleks and I were sleeping in a bed opposite the entranceway. The blast wave apparently tore out the door, and by some miracle the door fell onto our bed frame, blocking the ceiling above us. The house was one story, and that door held up the entire ceiling. Even today I remember when I woke up I couldn't move and began crying. I obviously lost consciousness, because when I woke up my brother and I were on the bed and our father was next to us, crying. My mother had been killed near the bed when the bomb hit the house. We were rescued and taken to a dormitory, then provided another apartment several days later.

Then another horrible event occurred: my sixteen-year-old brother, Viktor, was mobilized to defend installations at the approaches to Odessa and was killed in a bombing. We had just buried my mother. With two children (I was five and Aleks was three), my father was unable to evacuate on time.

Following my real mother's death, my father entered into a civil marriage with the woman I called "mother," as she saved my life many times. Her name was Fira Vladimirovna. Her son was killed at the same time as my older brother while defending Odessa. We were still living in Odessa when German and Romanian forces entered the city. The persecution of Jews began almost immediately.

A wave of anti-Semitism swept over Odessa. According to my parents (I write "parents" because I called Fira Vladimirovna my mother), the fascists claimed that the "Soviets" were comprised of Jews and communists. They chased the Jews away from the better neighborhoods and robbed their apartments. All across the city, the police searched homes for Jews, aided by Russians and Ukrainians. We left our apartment for Odessa's outskirts to stay with one of my father's friends, but someone told the authorities and we were taken to jail by the police with a group of Jews. At that time, jails were used as gathering points for Jews in Odessa.

Back then there were not enough workers in the villages, so in February 1942 a large group of Jews was taken to the village of Karlovka, in the Domanevsky region near Odessa. I was in this group, along with my father, mother, and little brother. My parents took up various essential jobs there, but after some time passed all of the children were taken from their parents to a farm that was far away.

At the farm, my brother and I could see that many of the children had been put into cubicles. As I remember, these were actually pigpens. Children at the farm were doomed to starve slowly, though apparently no one wanted to kill them. They simply let them quietly die. My mother made it to the farm several months later, and bribed the secret police to take my brother and me out. The guard decided she could take just one of us, and for some reason she chose me over my brother. I still remember how my mother and I crawled on the ground under the barbed wire, and how, after returning to where my parents lived, I asked if they had any *makukha* (the part left from sunflowers after the oil has been beaten from them), which I thought was the best food in the world.

My four-year-old brother Aleks didn't survive. We found out later that he starved to death on the farm. In six months our family of five was

down to just two: my father and me.

My parents took part in farming and building roads. I helped to gather what remained of beets, potatoes, and so on, which we were allowed to take from the fields. Nobody brought us food. Villagers baked their own bread and traded it for clothing, and vice versa. When there was no work, my parents went to villagers and took jobs for pieces of bread, heads of cabbage, or an ear of corn. We ate whatever we could, even spoiled and rotten food.

During the occupation, my parents and I were put against the wall to be executed three times, though I will only talk about the last time, which I will always remember. It occurred at the beginning of April 1944.

My father and other men were taken to Akhmechetka to dig trenches for the retreating Germans, so my mother and I were left behind. At that time, the fascists were retreating towards Romania. A German vehicle arrived at the barracks where we lived, and once they realized we were all Jewish they roused us out and stood against a wall. I stood next to my mother, who knew why we were standing there. At the right time, my mother told me to run to a nearby haystack to save myself. I was so frightened that I could do nothing. Everyone was forced out of the barracks as the Germans prepared for the execution. At that very moment, a second vehicle approached, and an officer told the soldiers that Soviet forces were coming and would be there any minute. The Germans quickly jumped into their vehicle, and in the meantime all the people continued to stand against the wall. The Germans only cared for their own lives. So many Jewish lives were spared in a matter of moments.

My father returned from digging trenches several days later, and we prepared to return to Odessa. On April 12, 1944, they gave the three of us documents at Karlovka stating we'd been in the ghetto since February 1, 1942. I have the documents to this day.

When we arrived in Odessa, we found out that a former policeman had taken our apartment. Realizing his situation, he moved out without saying a word. Later, he was called upon to account for occupying our apartment during the war, and after some time he was brought to justice for taking it.

Right after the war, according to my parents, anti-Semitism began

to expand. By then, in Odessa, you could hear: “Jews, go away to Tashkent,” though according to military statistics Jewish people came in third within the USSR among those receiving the “Hero of the Soviet Union” award.<sup>1</sup>

There was a famine in 1946 in southern Ukraine, so my parents decided to move to Lvov. My mother worked in a produce store, and my father was in the printing business.

I graduated from high school in Lvov in 1954, and tried to get into the Lvov Polytechnic Institute to study mechanical engineering. But in those years, anti-Semitism was at such a high level in Lvov that you had to do extremely well when taking the entrance examinations. Even though my entrance tests were not bad, I wasn't accepted to the institute. That same year I was drafted into the Soviet Army, where I served until June 1957. That September I began working in a telegraph parts factory, where I worked for many years. I began as a locksmith, and after 16 years became a technology engineer. I enrolled again at the institute, first through correspondence courses, and then transferred to night school, which I finished in 1972.

After the USSR broke up, our lifestyle worsened significantly. Many people were out of work. I retired in 1995. In August 1993, my brother Vladimir Nayshtut (born during the war, on April 2, 1945) immigrated with his family to Tucson, Arizona. A few years later he invited my wife and me.

My wife and I arrived in Tucson on December 7, 1997. I thank G-d for this country, and that I'm able to live in this wonderful place. I've seen what freedom means to a person and to an entire country. I must confess that the first time I went to synagogue was when I came to Tucson. In Lvov, Ukraine, there were no synagogues. In Tucson, the presence of so many nearby churches made a huge impression on me. There's a Catholic church close to our house and a Lutheran church just 100 meters away. There's a synagogue located close by. As far as anti-Semitism goes, I can say that I don't feel any in my daily life here.

---

<sup>1</sup> The highest Soviet military award, akin to America's Medal of Honor.