BAR MITZVAH

(translated by Natalia Melnikova)

Dedicated to the Israeli Interior Minister

(Bar Mitzvah - thirteenth anniversary, a day when a Jewish boy reaches maturity. The celebration of a boy's Bar Mitzvah is a confirmation of his "Jewishness"; it is strictly required by Israeli Interior Ministry, which strives against the entry of people with "uncertain blood" to Israel. Quite interestingly, Hitler considered a person with more than one eighth of Jewish blood (either on the father's or the mother's side) to be a Jew. For a long time, the state of Israel strongly obstructs the immigration of people who are Jews only by father or by mother's father. That is why there are hundreds of thousands of people who, "according to Hitler," are subject to extermination, while, "according to Israel," are not subject to rescue.

Oh, God! How paltry is the mankind you've created!)

My elder brother Isaac keeps repeating, “Whatever happens is for the best.” When we were boys, I hated this expression and was always rather afraid of this ‘best’. But now Isaac is stuck in Zaporozhye with his Russian wife, Russian grandchildren, and a perfectly Russian heart attack. And as for me, for five months now I have failed to obtain any legal documents in Israel, as they do not even see me as a Jew. So I cautiously started to use this stupid expression and to try it for myself. It immediately became clear to me that Isaac’s heart attack was ‘for the best’; at least in Zaporozhye he will be able to hold out with it until his retirement. And it is ‘for the best’ that the shrapnel in my noggin hurt a bit, for if it had not started to hurt I would have dragged my feet to work at the construction site, and the story in which I prove to myself that I am a Jew would have never seen the light of day. At the construction site, I present my ID - according to it I'm fifty nine; and, after all, in fact, the Interior Ministry’s Officer who has refused to issue my Israeli passport for half a year now is right. His office-drudge instinct tells him that there’s something wrong with my papers. But probably he just thinks that I am not a Jew; therefore, next month I will face two rabbinate courts on the ascertainment of my Jewish heritage.

I have already submitted copies of eighteen documents to the Interior Ministry; I brought them my son's original birth certificate and a copy of my nephew's birth certificate, he lives in Haifa. But when the officer asked me whether I had had my bar mitzvah, I could not give him a clear answer. And I failed to submit my mother’s death certificate. I tried explaining to the Israeli officials that the police chief officer was Ossetin, and Yurka Plisetsky’s father was the lawyer, and I can not reach them now. Nothing happened. They just called a cop and threw me out of their office at Queens Shlomtsion Street. Moreover, when my case was transferred to another office, it appeared that all my data were mixed up, and the officials had given me my father’s first name, and he got the name of the late grandfather, and, even more, they married me off to my mother-in-law. That is when, once and for all, I realized that “all is for the best,” and there is no way I could speed up these mysterious procedures that take place at the Israeli ministries.

That is why I should try to puzzle out the story in which my name is Zinoviy Efremovich, while before the war I was called Mon’ka. Now I myself can issue my mother’s death certificate and, the most important, answer the question – whether, without a bar mitzvah, I am Jewish enough to finally get the Israeli passport or, at least, a residence permit. But for this I need to return in my mind to the town where we lived before the war, and try not to think about today.

I am looking at the few surviving family photographs; I gave the originals to the Israeli Interior Ministry, and now - with the copies - I am going to reconstruct an idyllic picture of the Jewish every-day life before the war.

This one is of Zaporozhye. Shoddy place. And here is my class; I am standing in front of Isaac. This is our mother with her younger sisters; and here is the faded baby picture of my father, who doesn't look like Isaac or me.

I remember Zaporozhye from the day when I went to school. Zaporozhye was a small town with two or three hundred thousands residents, a bit smaller than Jerusalem nowadays. My father was an ordinary carter – like those who built the Egyptian pyramids. According to the "Plan for the Electrification of Russia," they launched construction of the first hydroelectric power station in Zaporozhye; and he was very lucky to get a cart driver's job there. The fact that my father was a carter was reflected in KGB archives and is stated in the document that the "comrades" politely sent me just before I left to Israel. We lived in a mud hut #118, near the aluminum factory construction site. My father was even called "an individual economic carter" – he "individually" owned a horse and a cow. The horse and the cow were kept in the house. In the field, where the "Zaporozhstal" plant was later built, Isaac and I used to tend the cow.

Next to Voznesenovka village, there was a new town with the appalling name "Sotsgorodok" ("Socialist town"). First, they built Dneproges, then – "Sotsgorodok" that existed at the expense of Voznesenovka. We used to fight with Voznesenovka, for only "individual peasants" lived there, and we – the "industrial settlers" – gradually had been cutting off their lands. No matter how much our father was making, it was the cow that fed us all the same. Our mother used to go to the working barracks, shouting out, "Milk! Who needs milk?" Every day the cow gave up to forty liters of milk; my brother and I used to bring her cracked watermelons from the farmers' market.

Then Isaac went to school. They did not let me go because I was only six; but Isaac and I always were together, and I did not want to be parted from him. I was small and fearless, and for three months I had been sitting in the class as if I had a full right to do so. The teacher knew I wasn't listed, but when she was kicking me out through the door, I was getting back in through the window. In three months I became the best student, and they decided that it was already too late to expel me. Isaac did well in his studies, but I did better. There were four Jews in the class. I remember Ania Krasnick who was shot before we were; there was also a guy, that, thirty years later, I

fixed up with a mechanic's job in the Zaporozhstal. Now I would hardly recognize him, but he surely would remember me.

I am trying to speak only about what was good in that happy time before my bar mitzvah, but Ania Krasnick and that lop-eared boy, the future mechanic, are on our class picture; and I ask the Israeli Interior Ministry to excuse me for the excessive details.

Father was arrested in 1937. When they were taking him away, he stroked my head – like this – from the forehead. Then they took out Uncle Haim. He was a Jewish drunkard and, like my father, drove a cart. Then they searched the house.

We were left alone. Plus the horse. Later we sold the horse and the cart though we could have, probably, eaten the horse. When I was fourteen and had already joined the partisan squad, I received my second medal for putting chopped copper wire in the Romanian cart horses' food. The horses started to die one after another. The Romanians took them outside the village and shot them out there. We used to go there by sleighs and chop off pieces of frozen horse-flesh for the squad's meal. But this was after my bar mitzvah and therefore has nothing to do with the story.

Life before the war was always poor. At home we ground corncobs, which for some reason lacked kernels, and mom made pancakes out of them. During the winter of 1939 mother was keeping a big pumpkin under the bed, but Isaac decided to roll it around, the pumpkin got broken, and we had to eat it. The pumpkin was supposed to be kept until the spring…

Mother was tailoring and then went to another job as well. She was selling ice-cream – one wafer on the top, one wafer on the bottom – near the aluminum factory. We used to pass her on our way from school, and she hurried us along to milk the cows. There were two of them then. We slaughtered the speckled one only when the Germans were about to occupy Zaporozhye. We planned on leaving for the Urals, but missed the moment. Only people with money managed to escape. Uncle Yasha wanted to take us with him; when the war began he served across Dnepr, on the island named Khortitsa, our jet fighters took from there.

Uncle Yasha – with his head bandaged – arrived the beginning of August, brought us some food, promised to take us away, and then disappeared.

The battle for Khortitsa was quite long. The thirtieth outpost was desperately fighting for the island so the aviation factory could move out. Bombardments began in September; they were conducted methodically, twice a day. Some shells hit our

school. One day I came home, and my classmate Vovka came in and said that the barge with canned food had sunk near Khorititsa, so we swam there. The soldiers did not stop us. We were getting onto the barge, placing cans under our shirts and bringing them home. The cans had no labels on them and were covered in oil. The Germans were also swimming to the barge – from the opposite side of the river; they were unarmed and just wearing underwear. I swam there three times. On the last time, the Germans opened fire and Vovka was wounded. Isaac and I carried him to the 3rd Hospital, on Proletarskaya Street. Men from the Red Army took the last of our cans away – they were probably starving.

But no one helped us to carry Vovka.

The Germans entered Zaporozhye at the very end of September. The town surrendered without a shot. The mood of our army was quite defeatist: they thought that the war was lost anyway, and the Germans most likely would not go beyond Dnepr. I too believed that it was impossible to overcome the German power. At first, the Germans were even welcomed; their chief kissed bread and salt offered to him at the entrance to the town. But later they began to draft teenagers for labor in Germany and the enthusiasm died away. At that time our house sheltered the two sisters of my mother and father's younger brother. Now he lives in Haifa, I called him recently. Uncle Yasha was killed in 1944; I know it because, almost until the end of the war, his wife was receiving his pay. My father was the oldest in his family, then – uncle Haim, who was also arrested and executed, uncle Isaac died in Zaporozhye, uncle Sema - who is now in Haifa – was the chauffeur of the Commander-in-chief of the Black Sea Navy, and the last one was uncle Petia, who, having anticipated the war, moved his family to Omsk. For some time uncle Yasha's apartment remained closed; then mother sent me and Isaac to take their sewing machine, and we also disassembled uncle Yasha's motorcycle that was in the hallway, and, to spite the Germans, threw all the parts into a well. The neighbors were Russian, they saw us, but did not tell anybody, only asked us to be more cautious.

As a matter of fact, we were only allowed to walk the streets with a chest- or arm-band, but I was a pigeon-breeder, everybody in town knew me, so I feared nothing and walked anywhere I wanted. Starting in July, the whole town was covered with "ditches." Near one of these horrible ditches I witnessed the first execution. The Germans lined people up along the edge of a trench and shot them. There were many ditches in the place where the factory stadium is now. These days they hold the factory championship there – one shop against another and no professional games allowed. At that time I went to see the shooting, because my mother told me to; she was trying to

find some of her aunts, and I could move around town freely. After the war the bodies were dug out and reburied in a mass-grave. Winter was already there, snow was on the ground. The police chief officer was Ossetin, and Yurka Plisetsky's father was the town council's lawyer.

Bigger executions started in the spring. In the beginning of March they shot nine thousand. Isaac, his friend Zorik, and I wanted to leave Zaporozhye in winter, but mother did not let us. Zorik was executed in the beginning of February. Old Jews used to come to Turgenev Street, to the synagogue, and talk about the nine kilograms of gold that should be collected to save local Jews from execution. But they failed to collect anything. One could hear the Germans shooting down the old people, children, and women at "Stalin's" state farm. The weather was getting warmer. In the spring the Lithuanian punishment squad came to the town. First they quartered in Dnepropetrovsk, and then moved to Zaporoshye. We were told that they arrived to guard Hitler. He paid a visit to Zaporozhye after our aviation factory had started assembling German aircrafts, we knew about it from a newsreel. Everybody expected Jews to be relocated elsewhere. Ten Jewish families lived on our street as well. There were rumors about the organization of a ghetto, and everybody had high hopes for Romanians. There were fewer executions in the places where they quartered; they even had some Jews among generals. Italians also treated the Jews quite well. At last the order was issued and according to it, on March 28 we would be moved to Gulyai-Polye, to the ghetto. It was the place where Nestor Makhno was born.

That was the first day of Passover, and – it began. The town turned black with police uniforms, trucks with policemen were arriving one after another; these were mostly Lithuanians. The day before we were supposed to report to the police station, a woman hung a child in our yard, and then hung herself. Her husband was a military officer from the Western Ukraine, and the woman was a refugee, but she had failed to escape further east. All day long our neighbors had been came and begged us to find a hiding place but where could we hide?! In the morning the whole street was blocked up. The German Ministry of Internal Affairs was working at full-tilt. Jews were dragged out from their yards and marched along the street. As they left, they were crying. We were marched through the town towards the southern outskirts. The direction was obvious – they led us to the place where nine thousand had been shot already. We looked into the tank ditches that were dug outside the town and saw the piles of corpses. Using sticks and lashes, the policemen forced us to bury them. I should apologize to the Israeli Interior Minister for the naturalistic details that might upset him; we, old folks, have a tendency to go into details. But everything I am

writing here is just the answer to the question why I have not had my bar mitzvah. At that moment, by the way, I did not think that my bar mitzvah would ever take place.

The policemen drew us away from the edge and forced those of us with better clothes to undress. Aunt Mania had a nice fur-coat, and a policeman took it away. The policemen were walking around and looking at us. Mother was crying. My little brother Lucik, whom she was holding in her arms, was crying, too. Lucik was only one and a half years old and just started to babble, in a very funny way – he used to look out of the window and say, "Gelmans go." The policeman grabbed Lucik's leg, tossed him up in the air, and shot.

By the way, I've remembered this when a policeman was kicking me out of the Interior Ministry Office; but I just cannot stand the police in general.

We were taken to the edge of the ditch again. I remember Isaac and I were tightly holding each others' hands. He was a year and a half older than me. I say "was," for it was had been the last time when Isaac was really older. In a few hours we would become coevals. A year later when I turned thirteen, the partisan squad would pick me up, and I would suddenly become ten years older than Isaac. At fourteen, I would be wanted for the lynching of the policeman's family, and since that moment we would never be the same age.

While we were sleeping, the woman had gone to the police station and told her husband that she had caught two little Jews. Isaac had made a bad choice – this was the local policeman's house. They threw us out, using rifle butts, and locked us up in a threshing barn, without food or water. "It's OK like this, you both will be dead by morning!" said the senior policeman.

I sat down on a straw litter, for I was not able to stand. "We survived there, now they'll shoot us here!" said Isaac gloomily. "There, at least, we would have been lying next to mother." "Stop whining," I told him. "We'll rake away the litter and flee from here!" But raking away the litter turned out to be unnecessary. Few hours later we were awaken by firing, then the door flew open and somebody lit the candle. "He's gone! But here are two little fellows; they should be ours if he locked them up. Scram, this place will soon be chock-full of police." "Which direction is Rostov?" I asked quickly. "There!" answered our savior. And we ran "there."

The next night and day, then another night and another day, we hid at a stream. It was very cold, but we were too frightened to go anywhere. At night, we used to cuddle up against each other, covering ourselves with dry weeds. I was kind of

sluggish; not quite myself. For three days everything was laying upon Isaac's shoulders. In the morning he killed a bird and brought it on a stick. We made a fire. "Mon'ka, step aside and look to see if the smoke is visible!" ordered Isaac. Then he built us a shelter. Usually I was more active and nimble than him, but at that time I was incapable of doing anything. "We do not have mother anymore," said Isaac at night. "We survived, but I have no idea what is ahead of us."

On our way to Rostov, we kept regretting that we had left the stream: there was plenty of fish in the tiny lakes, and we ate our fill. But in the woods we met an old man, who told us that Rostov kept being passed around, and it was four hundred fifty kilometers away; that meant we had to leave the shelter and go.

We walked mostly by night. The roads were very crowded then. In about three days we got very lucky – we met a kind, older man, who was also heading to Rostov. He was Georgian. We used to call him "katso." Later, after the war, when we decided to check the chronology, it became clear that the beginning of our travel coincided with the beginning of the Passover and the Easter. Seven days of Passover, then seven days of Russian Easter – there was plenty of food at cemeteries! Just like true traders, we had sacks that were filled with the food that people had left at the graveyards – hard-boiled eggs, potatoes, even vodka. By the way, we met Katso at the cemetery – he was peeling a painted Easter egg, sitting on a rock. We felt much safer near him – Katso immediately realized that we were Jews and told us not to be afraid of him.

We went through deserted German settlements with huge haystacks, which turned out to be very comfortable to sleep in; Ukrainian stacks were much smaller. The closer we were to the front line, the fewer traders we saw. Of course, their papers were being checked, but nobody was seeking out Jews, and we were not afraid to sleep. In May we came across a rich Greek village and were hired by a Greek woman to dig up her vegetable garden. The Georgian made his home at the other end of the village. The local police did not pay attention to us and to the captives. The Greek lady – she gave us soup and helped try to get rid of our lice. We picked up lice while living in coaching yards. Then she passed us to Russian Avdotia Popova, where we also dug up the garden, a whole hundred acres. I recollect one peculiar moment: Isaac told me to wake up and go to work; otherwise Avdotia wouldn't give us food. But I was exhausted and I swore, saying, "Get out, you Jewish mug!" Now Isaac says that it never happened, but I remember precisely, it did.

We have been living in the Greek village for the whole month, and cherries had already started to ripen. Once Isaac, somewhat thoughtfully, told me, "We have lived

two extra months after our shooting." We could have stayed in the Greek village, many captives did so. But Katso told us that it was not safe for both of us, and we ought to cross the frontline. One evening he found us at Avdotia Popova's and said that we would leave in a day. "German troops have started out," – he said. "And we should follow the front." The first woman, the Greek one, prepared a lot of dried crusts and a big chunk of lard for us, and Avdotia Popova also gave each of us a sack with food. People looked over their fences and watched us leaving – we spent a month and a half in the village and used to watch over the village's melon garden. We still were learning not to roll our r's, but it was not easy. It is only in Israel that you can find somebody who does not hear your accent. But for Germans it was all the same, they did not notice us. Let alone loud Italians; there were many Italian units quartering in nearby miner's settlements. It has been the fifth month of our wandering. Isaac has changed a lot; I stopped calling him "a girl." He refused to steal, saying that he would rather beg than steal, because people are also starving. As for me, I was different. One night, in the end of July, as we were making our beds in hay, Katso told us that the time has come to have some meat. I immediately agreed. Katso explained that he had spotted a pig in the barn, but the window was too small, I was the only one who could fit. "Take my bag and fill it with a road dust," he said. "As you approach the pig, quickly pull the bag onto his head!"

The pig managed to squeak, but its owners did not wake up. Katso pulled out the pig, then – me. With our prey we went as far as possible to some less populous village. The Georgian was cooking the pig for six hours. He stewed it. First he dug a pit, and then cut the carcass, having left the skin. Then he stuffed the carcass with dried crusts, covered it with clay, and carefully put in the pit. And over the pit Katso set up a fire. Isaac and I were waiting like two hungry wolf-cubs.

I dream to bake something by this recipe here, in Jerusalem, but can not choose whom to bake. I will wait till Isaac arrives, by this time we both will be having certificates confirming that we are Jews now; and we will bake a kosher lamb on the slopes of Jerusalem.

We were eating off the pig for three days, and then moved on to Rostov. On our way there we got stuck one more time – Isaac got sick and we had to spend twelve days near a state farm's field, plucking out frozen beets from the soil with bare fingers. We had to wait till the beet thawed out, then we could eat it. The front was close, and endless German troops were passing by; cannon blasts were heard all day long.

My bar mitzvah was only three months away. Rostov – four days. I must force myself to walk this way both in my mind and on paper, but I cannot bring myself to do it. In four days I will have to separate with my elder brother for years, but each time I, again and again, would hope that, from the depths of my memory, an artillery tractor with not-too-tall sides would appear!

We reached Rostov in about four days – we both were very exhausted. We slept in stacks, begged for food, and passers were quite generous. I got used to sleeping in the open air; I still miss it nowadays. At last Isaac and I were at our end – we reached Rostov's suburbs. Rostov was a real combat zone: trenches, horses, tanks, motorcycles. Nobody asked for our documents – the Germans let everyone in the city. When we arrived downtown, the terrible bombardment began; the missiles were coming from "that," the Soviet side. The Georgian was eager to get back to troops; I remember him looking like my son Sashka now – a bit bald, heavy figure, thick black beard.

No one in Rostov lived in their apartments – people were hiding from bombs in the trenches. In every yard there was a trench with a water barrel in it. As the bombardment began, we rushed into the first crack in the ground we could find, and suddenly I got a feeling that the "ours" are close, that we are safe. As always, I fell asleep immediately, with no worries. Within two hundred kilometers from the frontline nobody cared whether you are a Jew or not; one better not mention it in SOHNUT. The day was breaking when we heard loud Russian speaking. A Russian tank drove into the yard, roaring. Isaac burst up laughing and said "It is over, we are alive! We are free! You can sleep now."

I do not know how much time had passed - an hour or two, but I woke up again when some woman said loudly, "Ours are retreating!" The three of us – the Georgian, Isaac, and I – ran out off the trench to the street. A truck with our soldiers was driving by us. The Georgian rushed after it, grabbed the side and the soldiers pulled him in. Then they gave a hand to Isaac, and in a moment he was inside. It was my turn. I was much shorter than Isaac; I caught up with the truck, jumped up, and managed to catch the side with one hand, but then my other had slipped! Isaac grabbed my hand… and here, at this moment, I want to end my story.

For they will go away now, into their life, and I will fall down onto the ground and will be left with mine. The Georgian will not let Isaac jump out of the truck, and I will be waiting for them for two weeks; but our troops will not get back to Rostov. And there will be a chasm and death between me and Isaac. Then I will go wandering

and, along with other captives, I will be easily captured by the soldiers in German uniform, and stay in a cellar, waiting for the interrogation and execution. Soldiers in German uniforms will turn out to be partisans of Suprunov's squad, and I will fight for their side for two years and witness the death of their entire squad.

In a second, Isaac will let my hand go, and I will stay in the life, where I will have to live with my dead cousin’s documents: serve at the Navy, graduate from the Polytechnic Institute, work as a janitor in a Hasidic Yeshiva. But for the time being, Isaac is still holding my hand, I am still myself, I am still – Mon’ka Lerner, and my bar mitzvah is coming in two months! And I am still hanging on the side of an army truck!

Time, stop! My brother is going away with this truck. I do not want to let his hand go.