**Between 2000 and 2002, I was working with Igor Kipnis on a biography of his father Alexander Kipnis. When Igor died in 2002, I set aside the project because he was my primary source of information on his father. I did, however, complete several chapters which I will add to Alexanderkipnis.org**

**Today, I am pleased to post Chapter One about Alexander’s early years in the Ukraine. Please note that Igor did review this chapter and approved it. – Barry Lenson, November 1, 2024**

**Chapter One: Zhitomir**

Alexander Kipnis, a witty and expansive raconteur when describing the events that occurred through most of his life, became reserved when discussing his early childhood in Zhitomir. Seven members of the Kipnis family resided there in a two-room hut made of clay: his mother, his father, a younger brother and three sisters. Their lives were scarred by poverty, illness and unrelenting hardship.

In light of his seeming reticence to dwell on those years, it might be tempting to conclude that Kipnis was ashamed of his humble beginnings, or that he wished to conceal them. Yet the reminiscences he left behind (both written and in recorded interviews), reveal that shame or subterfuge were simply not at work. In fact, when he was asked about his early childhood, Kipnis always responded openly and frankly. For obvious reasons, he seemed happy to quickly on to happier topics. He naturally preferred talking about the triumphant musical years of his life. Who wouldn’t?

What record is there of those early years? No family letters remain, if any were written. Igor Kipnis has observed that his conversations with his father seldom centered on early life in Zhitomir. More unfortunate still, we have no record of Alexander’s conversations with his wife Mildred about the events of his earliest years.

Yet a rich mosaic picture of those years emerges, pieced together from a variety of sources. First, there are recorded interviews. Second, we are lucky to have recollections of conversations that took place between Kipnis and his daughter-in-law, Igor’s wife Judy Kipnis. It seems that the elder Kipnis was completely at ease talking with Judy about those years. Perhaps her position as a newcomer to the family, or her warm eagerness to discuss everything that he had experienced, made her just the right beneficiary for some of the recollections he tended to withhold from others. To the immense benefit of this book, Judy was happy to share her recollections of those uniquely valuable conversations.

Zhitomir, Kipnis remembers accurately, was a large city with about 100,000 inhabitants at the time of his birth, not a small town. The water that flowed through the two rivers that converge in the city were pure enough at the time for washing clothes, cooking and even drinking. The Jewish ghetto, where his family lived, was located on the outskirts of town.

Yet Kipnis’s reminiscences, factual though they are, often seem permeated with a certain aura of sadness and frustration. There was little to eat. (“Tea and herring were delicacies,” Kipnis told one interviewer.(1.) His mother, Machlya, endured a harsh existence as a mother of many children, forced to live in extreme poverty.

Yet Kipnis often remarked that she was a woman who retained higher aspirations for herself and her family. First, a keen ambition for her children to enjoy a better life. Second, as Kipnis often recalled, she sang as she worked around the house, most notably Schubert’s “Ständchen” and “der Leiermann” and snippets from *Rigoletto*. When he later discovered the real identify of these songs, Kipnis was surprised to recognize in them tunes he had heard so often in his childhood. Where had Machlya heard them? We may never know.

Overall, Kipnis’s childhood reminiscences seem dominated by the image of his father Shuya, a frustrated and intimidating man who, during Kipnis’s formative years, was literally working himself to death.

In his later life, Kipnis explained the situation frankly to one interviewer. (If you recite these words aloud and listen closely, you will enjoy a first pungent taste of Kipnis’s elegant turn of phrase.)

“He went to village markets to sell heavy winter material for peasants’ coats. He was driving a little wagon with one horse, and the roads were full of water, and very often the little carriage fell into the water, and he had ‑ with his strong big shoulders ‑ had to lift out this. This was his profession. The cart didn’t belong to him, the horse didn’t belong to him either, the material which he had didn’t belong to him . . . they paid him a little percentage if he sold something. It was a very little thing. And when he made a little bit of money, he came home. Then we had a better meal, something better to eat, some flour for my mother to bake bread for supper.” (2)

Yet despite the hardship and abject poverty, Shuya retained an intense sense of pride. Shuya’s own father Moshe, after all, had made his living as a Torah copyist and sometime teacher/scholar. Shuya therefore viewed himself as a member of the “Jewish aristocracy” - a man of erudition and dignity, despite his poverty and harsh trade. Such dual identities, it might be noted, often crop up in histories compiled today by Jewish families concerning the Shtetl life of their grandparents and great-grandparents. Laborers and tradesmen are said to have also embodied the “higher” personae of scholars; women are often described as cultured and artistic. It seems natural that people should compensate for their dire circumstances by turning their eyes toward something better.

Among the stories Alexander told about his childhood, one that recurs most often concerns the day when one of his sisters bought a sewing machine and brought it into the house.

Here is one of Kipnis’s versions of that story:

“Father was a learned man and his opinion was that a working man or woman didn’t belong in his family. His own father really did not have a profession. He read the Torah, he was fluent in Hebrew. Very learned. Laborers were considered second-class and children were discouraged from learning a trade. My older sister managed to save a few kopecks to buy a sewing machine. When she brought it into the house, my father went into a rage. `In my family, nobody should work!’”(3)

When relating this same anecdote to another interviewer, Kipnis appended this comment:

“She was not allowed to do any work while my father was still alive.” (4)

Many anecdotes of Shtetl life record that it was actually quite common for Jewish women to practice dressmaking and other cottage industries to augment family earnings. Shuya’s harsh insistence that he should remain the sole breadwinner in the household therefore seems somewhat anomalous.

Part of the explanation for Shuya’s intense pride may lie in a theory of Judy Kipnis’s. (Note that here we encounter the name “Sasha” for the first time; it was Alexander’s nickname, used by his closest friends and family members for many years.)

“Sasha’s mother apparently had some kind of a good voice. And she would sing to him Schubert songs. She particularly liked to sing `Leiermann’ . . . His mother was said to have come from a much better family and married beneath her. [Perhaps] her family wouldn’t have anything to do with her. So they cut her off. . . . If that’s true, I don’t know.” (5)

Family historian Nachum Kipnis, for his part, has a similar opinion to share, based on the fact that Alexander’s mother’s colorful full name was unusual: Machlya Abramovna Typograf:

“The last name implies that someone in the family, perhaps her grandfather, owned a printing house. This is the second evidence, in my view, that Maclya’s family  
was comparatively well off, the first being her familiarity with operatic music.”

If these theories are true, they provide might further explain the underlying causes for Shuya’s stern admonition, “In my family, nobody should work!” Was he trying to demonstrate to his wife’s family that he was able to provide for his family? That their daughter had not married so badly, after all? We have no way of knowing, but the theory seems to hold water.

Tragically, when Alexander was twelve, Shuya died. Shuya was only forty years of age, but the rigors of his harsh labor had taken their toll. He contracted tuberculosis and died a horrible, painful death at home.

When speaking of his father’s death, Kipnis seemed to grow especially restrained when speaking to interviewers. In one recorded interview, he simply observed: (6)

“Father came home from one trip, got sick from the cold and lost his lungs.”

In interviews over the years, Kipnis described his father’s death in several ways, but always in one brief turn of phrase. He told some interviewers that his father had “coughed out his lungs.” He also said that, in recalling his father’s death, he could remember “all that blood.”

Shortly after Shuya’s death, Alexander was constrained to seek work. Not yet a teenager, he became apprentice to a Jewish carpenter. If furniture-making was to be his trade, it was at least one that suited his intelligence, sturdy constitution and strong hands. Surrounded by a cabinetmaker’s saws, planes and clamps, Kipnis could at last sense that his life was changing. And for the first time, he himself - someone other than Shuya - was a breadwinner for the family.

In one conversation, Kipnis recalled “I cried” when his mother took from him the few kopecks he earned and used them to buy bread for the family. (7)

It was only one additional frustration in the life of this resourceful young man. Certainly, it was not to be the last.

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Despite the harshness of Alexander’s childhood, music was still to be found - albeit at the periphery. As noted, Kipnis’s mother sang around she performed her household chores.

“When she was cooking or cleaning the house she was singing,” he told one interviewer. (8) In the same interview, Kipnis also recalled another early childhood memory of music:

“ . . . during the evening time, we heard from the distance sound. Music. People were singing Ukrainian, old, slow, sad songs. And my ears were open. I learned those songs and I sang them.”

As Jewish residents of the ghetto, Alexander and his family were not permitted to freely travel into the center of Zhitomir to see theatrical productions or listen to concerts. Judy Kipnis, apparently, was the only person with whom Alexander shared this early childhood memory.

To quote Judy’s recollection of the Kipnis told her:

“Apparently they had theatrical productions or band concerts in the center of Zhitomir, in the park. And he recalled sneaking out of the Shtetl ghetto to go and hear these concerts. At one point, police caught him and beat him and said, `Jew boy, get back to where you belong.’” (9)

Yet by the time Alexander had reached the age of twelve, he had made an interesting discovery about himself, perhaps when echoing the distant Ukrainian folk songs he heard on warm summer nights.

“I was twelve years old. I had a good soprano voice.” (10)

Soon, for the first time, the Kipnis voice served as a means to earn money. A cantor from the town of Novybug in Bessarabia (11) came to the area looking for boy sopranos to join his choir. Alexander sang for him, was immediately accepted, and left almost at once.

How did Machyla feel to see her strapping, yet inexperienced, 12-year-old son departing for an unfamiliar region to the south? We do not know, of course. We have on record only Kipnis’s own recollection that “He left a big golden coin to my mother so she shouldn’t cry when I left her.” (12)

Kipnis later recalled that he packed his bags and left to sing in a city that was “500 miles distant from Zhitomir.” A little map work reveals that that distance estimate represents only a slight exaggeration of fact. The distance from Zhitomir to Novybug is [BL to do some atlas work; the name Novybug appears to no longer be in use. The distance from Kiev to Belgrade is 468 miles - likely a journey only slightly longer than any Kipnis might have undertaken.]

For a boy who had never traveled far from home, the journey to a distant, new region must have seemed an astonishing adventure. Bessarabia, to be sure, was a region rich in Jewish culture and history. In 1920, the pre-holocaust years, about 267,000 Jews resided in the region.

Kipnis joined another boy soprano in taking the top melodic line in the cantor’s choir, which was a double male quartet. All the singers lived in the cantor’s home. They were well fed and, as Kipnis recalled years later to Perlis, “The cantor composed some beautiful solos for me.”

The years in Besarabia provided Kipnis’s first exposure to regular singing, public performance and to reading music. It was also the first time, remarkably, that Kipnis received regular instruction in anything except Hebrew; he had never attended any school regularly, except possibly Torah school, as a child. And for the first time in Bessarabia, Kipnis engaged in an activity which, in years to come, was to be of primary importance over the years as he gained his skills and grew toward his full artistic achievement: He identified someone who knew more than he did about a skill ne needed, and found a way to gain instruction from that person. It is a pattern that emerges at key times in the story of his life and ongoing evidence Kipnis’s persistent drive for self-betterment.

In this instance, Kipnis struck a deal with a bass in the temple choir. Young Alexander agreed to wash the older man’s muddy galoshes daily. (A not insignificant undertaking, since the streets were not paved.) In exchange, the bass gave Kipnis lessons in how to read music.

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At this time, Alexander learned his first classical song. Remarkably, it was one of the same handful he had heard his own mother sing so often.

“The first song was very peculiar,” Kipnis later told interviewer Bavard. “It was `Der Leiermann’ by Schubert, `The Organ Grinder.’ And I sang it almost everywhere, it fit so my mood. `The Organ Grinder’ is a very, very sad song, very beautiful. So this was my first song.” (14)

“Der Leiermann,” the final song of Schubert’s song cycle, *Die Winterreise,* surely was a melancholy first song to learn*.* The mournful organ grinder it describes stands as the last of many harrowing images encountered by the cycle’s wandering protagonist. The image of the organ grinder, in fact, is usually assumed to represent death itself. The sung melody is meted out in brief, cropped phases declaimed over a droning, organ-like motif in the piano. With minimalist strokes, Schubert paints his eerie image of a man half frozen, near death.

Although Kipnis almost certainly learned the song in a Russian translation, the lyrics, by Wilhelm Müller, frame a disquieting, despairing image:

Over there past the village an organ grinder stands,

And with numb fingers he plays as best he can,

Barefoot on the ice he staggers back and forth,

And his little plate stays always empty.

No one likes to listen, no one gives a glance,

And dogs snarl around the old man.

But he lets it all pass by him, as it will do,

He plays, and his organ is never quiet for him.

Miraculous old one, shall I go with you?

Will you accompany my songs with your grinding organ?

Did Kipnis fancy this song simply because it was suggested to him, or does its troubling imagery reflect something of the gloom that he felt, miles from home in a strange city? Does its hollowness mirror the emotions felt by Kipnis and his family in a country where they were, like the organ grinder, poor outcasts who had been tossed out into the cold, their plates empty? There is no way of knowing, but something in the somber mood of this song must have spoken to the young man so strongly that, as he noted, he “sang it almost everywhere.”

Yet surely, the years in Bessarabia were not all sad. In fact, they were the first when Alexander enjoyed a degree of security. The food in the cantor’s home was not luxurious (“Tea, bread, I suppose some vegetables”(15),) but meals did arrive with a predictability that must have been most welcome. And while details concerning life in the cantor’s home have not survived, it almost certainly presented an improvement over the pervasive poverty of life in Zhitomir.

Yet the improvements were short-lived. When Alexander was fourteen, his voice changed and he was on his way back home to Zhitomir. He had spent more than two years in Bessarabia - the first of his musical learning and growth. He later recalled:

“I learned how to read music there, and stayed for about two years ‑ two and a half years ‑ and then my soprano voice was gone. And a very young bass‑baritone came up. It was beautiful and tender, like an egg without the shell. I was advised not to sing at least for three years; otherwise, the egg without the shell would break. And so I came back home to Zhitomir. It was not very joyful. Everyone worried about himself, how to find something to eat. I tried to be quiet and not to sing. I found a job, and I worked as a carpenter ‑ a young carpenter, I had strong hands. And I started for myself to sing and . . . the shell of this raw egg started to grow, and my voice became strong and good, a good mechanic sound. And one day a man who was working with me, small in size, [with] a good tenor voice, told me, `There is a young group assembling three times a week and rehearsing. We are rehearsing Jewish plays.’ And I said, `What kind of plays?’ He said, `Do you know there was a Jewish composer, his name was Goldfaden?’” (15)

It was 1907. Kipnis was sixteen and his vocal “eggshell” was solidifying. He went to audition for the director of this traveling troupe, with a proposed repertoire centering on *Shulamis* and *Bar Kokhba,* two Jewish operettas by Avrohom Goldfaden, a composer whose light operas are still presented in the Yiddish theater.

Any impressions that this Jewish troupe presented elaborate productions is quickly dispelled by Kipnis’s recollections such as this:

“I sang, they took me as a member. They didn’t pay anything. There was a father, and two daughters and a sister‑in‑law. This was of the director of this company. We were sitting around a table. Everyone had a little book, and the father sang for us the melodies, and we imitated because we didn’t have any music, and we sang them. The prospect for the future was, as soon as spring comes . . . we will take a bus and we will travel to the country and we will give performances. We will perform these operettas, and we are going to have a grand time. And so it was.” (16)

**The Suit and the Pillow**

During the Easter/Passover season just before the troupe’s tour began, Alexander had an unusual chance to make some money - an opportunity, like all opportunities, that Kipnis was eager to seize.

“It was about Easter time; at that time in Russia it was still allowed to bake matzos. And they needed young help, so they hired me as a helper to roll the dough ‑ hard masses ‑ to stand there in front of the oven and help them to take them out. And through several weeks of work, they paid me. . . oh, about twelve hundred, which was about six dollars. This was a lot of money. I bought for myself a suit ‑ a navy blue suit, a very beautiful suit, measured according to the size, and this was my new suit. And then, when I was sitting in the bus going out to my first experience as an actor and singer, I had a blue suit. It was the only thing I had . . . [I wore it] everywhere, day and night. My mother also gave me, as a farewell gift, a pillow; so if I should sleep somewhere, I shall sleep softly.” (17)

A certain import lies hidden within those words, “farewell gift.” Because incredibly, at the age of sixteen, Alexander really was leaving home for the last time. And as we shall see, that suit and that pillow will hold special significance in his tale.

What was life like in this traveling troupe? What were performances like, sung in Yiddish, without benefit of instruments? In Kipnis’s words:

“We had first of all arrived in a small town where a Jewish community is. So we had to build benches and then make a gate around those benches, so that the people cannot go in. Then we had printed advertisements which we had to carry around in town and to hand them out: “Tonight at eight o’clock there is going to be a performance of Bar Kokhba” or something like that. And when about seven o’clock (there were two entrances) I and somebody else were standing at the door and taking of the tickets. And after the people were sitting on their benches we had a stage. We had to build a stage. . .then we went backstage and we put on our makeup. I didn’t know what makeup was then. Somebody told me, you put a little bit of black here, and a little red here, and put on a wig, and there is the character.” (18)

Actually, the troupe did pay something. For his performances, Kipnis had the choice of either of two pay plans: he could accept two rubles a month and let the operetta company supply his food and lodging; or accept twelve rubles and cover his expenses himself. Kipnis recalled, “I wanted to be independent, so I said, I am going to have the twelve rubles.”(19)

Kipnis rented a small room in or near Zhitomir, in a private home or boarding house. It was his first exercise in independent living. Yet his newfound independence was not to remain unchallenged for long.

Only five or six months after the troupe began its tours to entertain Jewish audiences in towns around the Ukraine, a curious edict came down from the Governor of the province that prohibited all Jewish theater. Drama companies could perform in Russian or German, the order proclaimed, but not in Yiddish. The director of Kipnis’s operetta troupe, apparently as resourceful as Kipnis himself, decreed that performances would continue. The performers would simply alter their Yiddish pronunciation, swapping the vowels “o” and “u” for “a,” thereby lending a Germanic sound to their Yiddish. The troupe director’s knowledge of German was apparently as flawed as his estimation of the intelligence of the censors; it took only a performance or two before the troupe was shut down.

“They realized it was a fake, it’s not German,” Kipnis recalled, “and this was the end.” (20)

**Der Wanderer**

His newfound independence threatened, Kipnis began to look for cheaper lodgings. But before he could settle on any, providence again intervened. The tenor from the operetta troupe appeared on Kipnis’s doorstep, about to leave to sing the high Jewish holidays in his own town of Rovno, not far away. He wanted Kipnis to come along too.

“So here I was, staying in a little room, and paying my own rent, and going into some of the cheaper places to eat. I was on my own. This young man ‑ our tenor . . . said to me, listen, it’s not very long before the high holidays are coming up. They are looking for good voices. I will go to my town (the name of town was Rovno, off in the Ukraine) and I will inquire if . . . they need a voice like you. In case they do, I will send for you.” (21)

Kipnis soon received a telegram from the tenor, asking Kipnis to arrive at the Rovno train station the next day at 2:00 P.M.

It was, again, an opportunity. Yet it presented for Kipnis a kind of Talmudic problem - or at the very least, one that seemed drawn from a story by O. Henry. Kipnis was nearly out of cash. He could either pay his outstanding rent or he could pay for his train ticket to Rovno. Ever resourceful, Kipnis arrived at a solution: “So, in order to pay for my room, I left my pillow. This was the payment, and I bought myself a ticket, and I came to Rovno.”(22)

When he arrived on the platform, his tenor friend was waiting for him. Without pause for a bite to eat or a drink, the two men went straightaway to audition for the cantor, an elderly man with a gray beard and yarmulke.

“And he said, sing for me. I had only one song. It was still the same song. Yes, the organ grinder . . . so I sang it. Later on this cantor admitted that his hair came up when I sang. I was in a very bad state, and I was sad and . . . my mood fitted exactly to this music and to the words. And he said, `All right, you stay here with me. There’s a room, you will live with us. And we are going to give you food and pay you a little.’ This was the second‑best synagogue in Rovno.” (23)

At the time, Rovno was a city with about 50,000 inhabitants. Kipnis stayed there, the cantor wrote solos for him. “And I found myself very happy for the first time. I had a roof, I had food, I didn’t have to worry. And I sang well, and the people liked me.” (24)

Before long, Kipnis’s reputation grew. The cantor from the bigger synagogue in Rovno contacted him and Kipnis took an engagement to sing there too, since his first synagogue hired singers only for high holiday services.

With two incomes of sorts, Kipnis rented a bigger room. He remained in Rovno for nearly two (CK) years, until 1910. He was now in his late teems. He was singing. He was making a living at it. His voice was very promising. His reputation was growing. Although Rovno was a backwater to be sure, he was beginning to lay the foundation for what was to come. And at this point in time, his blue suit continued to provide him with faithful service.

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It was during the Rovno years that Kipnis heard his first complete opera performance: Tchaikovsky’s *Queen of Spades,* performed by a touring company opera. (Record of which company it was, or where it came from, have apparently not survived.)

“So I bought myself the cheapest place on top of the gallery there . . . I was standing listening to this opera. I don’t remember very much of that. I remember there were some duets, some arias. Anyway, during the first act the lights went on, and I turned around, and I discovered my cantor, with his gray beard, with his hair, with his yarmulke and his glasses. He was also standing there and listening to that opera. When he saw me, he became pale and scared to death. He came over to me and he said, `Don’t tell anybody, don’t tell that you saw me!’ You know, orthodox Jews shouldn’t hear a woman singing. It is printed in the Old Testament. He said, `Don’t tell or I will lose my position as a cantor.’” (25)

Even though his first exposure to opera did not seem to impress Kipnis overly, the Rovno years did awaken in him a growing interest in gaining a *bona fide* musical education.

“I was dreaming about studying music. But in order to study music I would have to have a graduation certificate of at least two years in a gymnasium. [a Russian high school] I didn’t have it. In order to enter the Conservatory in Moscow or Leningrad, I didn’t have it, and I realized I couldn’t do it.” (26)

Again, Kipnis was able to negotiate a bartering arrangement with someone who could teach him skills he needed. In this case, he made an arrangement with a Russian student who was in his third or fourth year of university studies somewhere in Poland. (All we know of this man is that he wore a student uniform that, Kipnis later recalled, made him look like “a general.” (27))

Kipnis would offer singing lessons. In exchange, the student would tutor Kipnis in general studies, including Russian language and grammar, Latin, arithmetic, history and other basics Kipnis would need to matriculate in a Russian conservatory.

But that matriculation was not to happen, at least not as Kipnis envisioned it at the time. The general-like student soon returned to Poland to resume his studies. Next, the cantor at the second (“better”) synagogue announced his plans to relocate to Siedlce, a Polish city with a sizable Jewish population. He would become canter at an elegant synagogue with a sizable budget for paying its musical staff. The cantor asked Kipnis to accompany him there too.

As he was considering this offer, Kipnis learned an interesting fact. The Warsaw Conservatory, prestigious as it was, did not require applicants to present a diploma from a gymnasium. Only an application, and possibly an audition, would open the doors.

In Poland, Kipnis would have an income. Perhaps he could obtain the musical education that had come to preoccupy him as his cherished vision for the future.

Poland looked like opportunity. And where opportunity led, Kipnis was always quick to follow.

**Footnotes**

1. Interview with Michael Bavar, date TK [probably about 1994].

2. Vivian Perlis of the Yale University Spoken History Project.

3. Bavar

4. Perlis

5. Interview with Judy Kipnis, date 1999.

6. Bavar

7. Bavar

8. Perlis

9. Judy Kipnis

10. Perlis

11. A region in eastern Europe bounded by the Prut River on the west, the Dniester River on the north and east, the Black Sea on the southeast, and the Chilia arm of the Danube River delta on the south. Bessarabia passed successively, from the 15th to 20th century, to Moldavia, the Ottoman Empire, Russia, Romania and the Soviet Union. During World War II, Romania temporarily reclaimed the region. In 1944, the Soviet Union reasserted its authority and divided Bessarabia between Ukraine and Moldavia (present day Moldava). Source: Brittanica.com

12. Perlis

13. Data from the Simon Wiesenthal Center

14. Perlis

15. Perlis

16. Perlis

17. Perlis

18. Perlis

19. Bavard

20. Perlis

21) Perlis

22) Perlis

23) Perlis

24) Perlis

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27) Perlis