

# Esfir Dener

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Kishinev

Moldova

Interviewer: Natalia Fomina

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*Esfir Borisovna is a short lady with a girl's figure and small aristocratic hands. She has a young slightly hoarse voice. One can tell that she has great inner strength and vital optimism. Her one-bedroom apartment, a little neglected, has seen better times: there is a light-colored parquet floor, and convenient built-in closet cabinets in the hallway. There is a couch, a low table and two armchairs in her room. There is a small pastel carpet square on one wall and a portrait of American writer Ernest Hemingway and a few landscapes on the other. There is a bookcase in the corner where a few shelves contain volumes of poetry. Esfir Borisovna has poor sight. During our conversation she slightly bent forward to meet my glance. She elegantly served tea and some modest treats on the low table. In the course of our conversation Esfir asked me to turn off the tape recorder a few times. She recited poems in these moments, with deep feeling, artistically and with a well-balanced voice. When talking she threw in phrases in Yiddish, German and Romanian.*

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## My family background

My maternal grandmother Esfir Gutman, nee Moldaver, lived in the town of Yedintsy in the north of Bessarabia <sup>1</sup>. My grandmother died before I was born and I was named after her. I knew my grandfather Haim Gutman. When I was small I sometimes spent a couple of weeks in summer with him. I'm not sure what my grandfather did for a living. Most likely, he dealt in some kind of trade. I remember that there was a vegetable garden and a garden near my grandfather's house and he kept a cow. Probably one of his children was living with my grandfather at the time. I don't remember when he died. I think it must have happened in the early 1930s.

My grandfather and grandmother had five children. I vaguely remember my mother's sisters Ita and Dora. They didn't have any education and were housewives. From what my mother told me I know that her brother Henrich finished the Medical Faculty of Prague University and worked as a doctor, but not in Yedintsy. The second brother, Zicia, was a pharmacist. I went back to Moldova in 1965 and made inquiries about my relatives. They all perished during the war [World War II].

My grandmother Esfir's brother Iosif Moldaver from Falesti raised my mother and I believed him to be my grandfather. Grandfather Iosif and his wife Sarah lost their only son. He contracted scarlet fever at school during an epidemic in 1895 and died. Sarah could have no more children and thus my grandfather Iosif adopted his sister Esfir's younger daughter Pesia, my future mother, who was

three years old then. Actually, he took her into their house for about three weeks hoping that the little girl would mitigate their pain from the loss of their son, and then she stayed on with them in Falesti. They adored her and cared a lot for her. They didn't even send her to school and she had classes with visiting teachers at home. When it was time for her to go to grammar school, my mother continued her studies at home and passed all exams at Odessa Russian grammar school as an external student. She sang beautifully, played the piano and was great at embroidery. My mother got married at the age of 18.

All I know about my paternal grandmother and grandfather is that my grandfather's name was Shymon Dener and my grandmother's name was Sarah. I think they died before the Russian Revolution of 1917 <sup>2</sup> since my sister Sarah, born in 1918, was named after my paternal grandmother. They came from Kishinev. My father's older brother Yakov Dener lived in the Deners' family mansion in Kishinev sharing it with some other relatives. There were 13 tenants in the mansion. My uncle Yakov had four children: his daughters Etia, Maria and Viktoria and his son Semyon. Uncle Yakov was much older than my father since his younger daughter Viktoria was about 20 years older than me. My father also had two sisters, who moved to Argentina in the early 20th century, and the third sister lived in Koenigsberg in Germany, presently Kaliningrad. I know nothing about their fates.

My father was born in Kishinev in 1884. I never asked him about his education, but it's evident that he finished a grammar school. He spoke fluent Russian, Romanian and German. He also had some professional education since he worked at the affiliate of the Bessarabian Bank in Falesti. He was a manager or chief accountant there. He married my mother, when she was 18. I have no doubts that they had their wedding ceremony under a chuppah because my step-grandfather was very religious. After the wedding they settled down in Grandfather Iosif's house in Falesti. My grandfather built an annex with four rooms, a kitchen and back rooms to his house. It was actually an adjoining house. Besides, he gave his adoptive daughter a nice dowry: clothing, bed sheets, crockery, etc. I know that my father's sisters from Argentina and the one from Koenigsberg came to the wedding and brought the newly-weds nice wedding gifts: furniture and a grand piano.

## Growing up

My parents' first son, my brother Yuzef, who was called Yuzik at home, was born in 1913; five years later my sister Sarah followed. I was born in December 1925 in Falesti where I lived for almost 16 years. Falesti is a small town about 28 kilometers from Beltsy. I think there were about 2-3,000 residents at the time. There were a few streets in the town and all houses were one-storied buildings. The main street was paved with cobble-stones. There were two synagogues on the main street. The one, where my grandfather and parents went, was located across the street from our home in the very center of town, and the other one was farther from the center. There were Jewish-owned stores on the main street: Pergament owned a shoe store and Berezin owned a haberdashery store; there were two big food stores, one owned by Isaac Barak where he worked with his wife and a clerk, and the other one owned by Dorfman. The most popular dressmaker Rozhanskiy lived and owned a store on the main street. My mother and sister Sarah had Rozhanskiy make their clothes and when I grew older he also began to make clothes for me. The shops were closed on Saturdays.

Jews mainly lived in the center. There were a few Moldovan families who had their houses in close vicinity to the church, near the school for boys, but the majority of them lived in the suburbs. The suburbs of Falesti reminded you of these picturesque Moldovan villages buried in verdure. There was a market on Thursdays and Sundays where Moldovan farmers sold their vegetables, food products and poultry. There was a tavern on the main street where they could enjoy a lunch and a drink after their products were sold. There was a railway station three kilometers from town. People usually got there by horse-drawn phaetons; there was no other transportation in Falesti at the time. When I was small we came to this station several times to take a train to Yedintsy to visit my mother's relatives.

Our house was in the very center of town between a tavern and a pharmacy. It was a big white mansion with a tin roof. There were flower gardens on both sides of the house. We also had a wooden terrace. There were four rooms in our part of the house. There was a grand piano and two living room sets in our living room. One set was ebony wood with green plush upholstery and the other set was mahogany wood with pink rep upholstery. My father's sisters from Argentina gave them to my parents for their wedding. Each consisted of a low oval table, two armchairs and two settees. There was a record player with a big tube on a marble table and a big mirror in a bronze frame on the wall. There was also a violin on the wall. My brother was a violinist. The grand piano occupied one third of the living room and there wasn't much space left. Our dining room was big – 36 square meters. When we had guests or celebrations on Jewish holidays we unfolded the table, which could seat 24 people. Another table was brought in, if we had more guests. There was a nice bedroom set and two big wardrobes in my parents' bedroom.

We had a small children's room with two beds for Sarah and me, and a couch for Yuzef. There was also a wardrobe and a chest of drawers in our room. When my brother turned 18, he moved into the dining room. My brother was 12 years older than me. He left home to study at a grammar school in Beltsy and then he studied in the conservatory in Bucharest. Then Sarah went to the Jewish grammar school in Beltsy and they only spent their vacations or holidays at home, so I had the children's room at my disposal.

My mother took care of the house and had a housemaid to help her around. Our housemaids were girls or women from nearby villages. My mother did the minor laundry herself and had a woman coming in to wash the bed sheets every three months. My mother did the cooking herself since she strictly followed the kashrut. She bought dairy products and poultry at the market and also shopped at stores. Of course, she bought live chickens and had them slaughtered by a shochet. We never mixed dairy and meat products and had special crockery for dairy and meat products. My mother made menus for each day, so that we had dairy products – for example, soup with milk or pancakes with cottage cheese – one day and meat dishes on the next: meat with prunes and chicken soup with farfelakh. My mother went to the synagogue on all Jewish holidays.

My father was of average height, very dignified, with an upturned moustache, and a pince-nez with a golden rim. He worked at the affiliate of the Bessarabian Bank on the main street not far from our house. He also managed two big grain storage facilities at the railway station. This grain was purchased in the surrounding villages and shipped in freight railcars from the station. My father probably inherited those storage facilities from my grandfather Iosif, who no longer did any business at the time. I remember that other people called my father 'the banker' for his management of the Jewish community mutual aid fund. My father was a well-respected man in

town.

My father was a member of the Jewish Arbitrary Court [bet din] where Jews brought forward their problems and disputes. They addressed my father and each party sent its representative. I already knew that when my father ushered new people to the living room and looked at me strictly, it meant that I had to go to my room. In the 1990s I read in an article by a Jewish historian from Kishinev that my father had been engaged in politics in the early 1930s. He was one of the founders and later the leaders of the Romanian Jewish Party. In 1933 this Party had its own list for participation in the parliamentary elections. My father was the third on this list and lacked only a few votes to become a deputy of the Romanian Parliament. My father was a man of the world, but he went to the synagogue on Jewish holidays.

My grandfather Iosif Moldaver was the dearest person to me. He was very smart. In my long life I've never met another person of such wisdom, that's right – wisdom. Since I was the youngest in the family, and seemed to be slightly ignored – at least many things were forbidden for me whereas my older brother and sister were allowed everything – I brought my 'world-weariness' to my grandfather Iosif. He put me on his knees and had long discussions with me in Yiddish as if I was an adult. My grandfather was tall and broad-shouldered and had a big white beard. He always wore a long black kitel, a white shirt, a narrow black tie and a yarmulka. He prayed every day with his tallit and tefillin on. He went to the synagogue every day. As for my grandmother Sarah, I can hardly remember her: she was very nice and quiet and always wore dark clothes.

I remember one incident. There were two Romanian elementary schools in Falesti: one for boys and one for girls. There I began to study Romanian. In our family my parents spoke Yiddish and Russian, but I only knew Yiddish in my childhood. When I was in the 1st grade, we had a small morning party dedicated to the start of the academic year where school children danced, sang and recited poems wearing Moldovan folk costumes. I was to recite a fable by Anton Pann [Romanian poet and ethnographer, singer and author of music textbooks] in Romanian.

My mother made me a gorgeous costume; it was the best one at school. The moment I entered the school building my teacher grabbed me and Annushka, a local rich man's daughter, and literally dragged us into an empty classroom where she ordered us, 'Get undressed!', ripping off my belt, blouse, skirt and my decorative vest. She gave it to Annushka to put on and took her on-stage where she was to sing. I was standing there in my undershirt and didn't understand what was going on. When Annushka came back, my teacher haphazardly helped me to put my clothes back on since it was time for me to go on-stage. The moment I stepped on-stage my ribbons went loose and I knew I was looking ridiculous. I was so confused that I forgot my words, burst into tears and ran off stage. When I came home my mother already knew what had happened. Somebody must have told her. She was furious, but in our family there was a rule to say no bad things about other people, so when I complained to her all she said was, 'It's all right, it'll be better next time'. I felt even more hurt and went to my grandfather to get some sympathy.

My grandfather put me on his knees and said, 'Don't be angry with the teacher. She wanted Annushka to look good and your costume looked better than hers. Let me teach you a thing about life, but you must give me your word that your mother, father, grandmother or your best friend will never know what we are talking about now'. I firmly gave him my word and my grandfather said, 'From now on you'll be aware of everything happening at school, you will know everything your

teacher tells you to learn. Do you know the 'Tatal Nostru'? [Our Father in Romanian, he is referring to the Lord's Prayer]. I said, 'Who doesn't? Our classes at school start with 'Our Father' every morning'. He asked, 'What if I woke you up in the middle of the night and said Fira [affectionate for Esfir], recite Our Father – would you?' 'Of course', I replied. And he said, 'Then, if you had known this fable as well as Our Father, you would have recited it so brilliantly regardless of problems with your ribbons that nobody would have ever noticed your ribbons. You must know everything for '10'. We had a 10-point system at school. And he concluded, 'At the end of this academic year I will come to your school and we shall see who will have the laurel wreath on his head'. The first school girls were awarded laurel wreaths.

Of course, at the end of the year I had a laurel wreath on my head. At that time the 'Dimineata copiilor' [Children's Morning in Romanian] magazine was published. Between 1st June and 1st September there were supplements of four sheets in this magazine containing photographs of the children of all elementary schools in Romania who had received awards, with their first and last names, the name of the school and the town indicated in captions. Of course, my name was in this magazine each year. When I received my award for the first time, my grandfather talked to me seriously again, 'You've received your award. Now listen to me. Do you remember the fire across the street from where we live? The people lost their home. Someone had his purse stolen and somebody was robbed in the street. Everything can happen in life, but what you insert here – and he pointed at my head – will stay with you for the rest of your life. Nobody will ever take it away from you, under no circumstances'. However, love makes people a little funny. When I finished the 2nd grade, they wrote 'Ielena Dener' under my photograph instead of Esfir and my grandfather was so upset, just like a child. 'How could they?' he hissed, and demanded that my father wrote an angry letter to the editor's office requesting refutation, but my father just said, 'It's all right. When Fira receives her award next year, I will write to them in advance so that they don't make this mistake again'.

My grandfather educated me unobtrusively and gradually. I remember, when my mother and father gave me Chanukkah money [Chanukkah gelt] at Chanukkah, my favorite holiday, I went to share this joy with my grandfather. My grandfather judged by my looks that I had some capital, put me on his knees and asked me what I was going to buy for the money that my parents had given me. I told him that I was going to buy candy and sweets in the confectionery store across the street from our house. My grandfather asked me, 'Do you know that there are children who have no grandmother or grandfather or even mother or father? I said I did and he continued, 'Who are these children? Orphans. Your grandmother and I will also give you some money. What are you going to buy for it?' And I stared at him again, not getting his point, and said, 'Chocolate this and that... And he said, 'Tell me, will you enjoy eating it knowing that there are children who have nothing at all?' At that I replied, 'No, grandfather, don't give me money, give it to these children. But he replied, 'No, you are my granddaughter and I must give it to you, but here is a box and you can put some money into it for these orphans so that they can buy some sweets. Then you will eat your candy, chocolates and cakes with a clear conscience'. And after that I remembered for the rest of Chanukah, when my parents were lighting another candle, that orphans also had their sweets. I still have an old chanukkiyah that somebody gave me recently. It reminds me of my happy childhood and my beloved grandfather. I light the candles every Chanukah now.

We celebrated all Jewish holidays and Sabbath at home. Every Friday my mother lit two candles in silver candle stands. When I was in the first grade, somebody told me that Sabbath candles don't burn your fingers, if you move one of them over a candle to and fro. Well, what do you think – could I help experimenting? So I came home, waited till my mother lit the candles and went to the kitchen to move my finger over the candle. My grandfather caught me at this standing in the doorway watching me perplexed. I ran to him and said, 'Grandfather, it's my fault, punish me! I know I mustn't do it, I didn't know you were looking! Punish me'. You know, I'm an old woman now, but I do remember what my grandfather said: 'Don't be afraid if I see, fear that He sees.'

On Sabbath my grandfather and grandmother usually visited us. They also celebrated all Jewish holidays with us. Before Pesach my mother and our housemaids did a general clean up of the house. They cleaned the carpets, changed the bed sheets and polished the furniture. My grandfather watched that all rules were being followed. I remember that he took us, kids, to the bank of the river where we turned our pockets inside out to shake off all crumbs. My grandfather explained to us that we were shaking off all sins. My mother took special holiday crockery from the cupboard and put away our everyday crockery. I remember this fancy crockery – dishes with pink edgings. In the evening we sat down at the festively set table. I remember candles burning and silver ware shining. We were dressed up and ceremonious. I cannot remember all the details, but I still remember the feeling I had at seder on Pesach. This was my family, my house and we were all Jews. My father conducted the seder. Yuzef asked him the four questions – fir kashes [in Yiddish]. I remember how we put away a piece of matzah [afikoman] and the one who found it received a gift. We stayed at the table till late and since I was used to going to bed at nine o'clock sharp I remember the last hours of seder as if in sleep. We ate matzah for a whole week. My mother made matzah, matzah puddings and matzah latkes. I liked chicken soup with matzah.

I remember Simchat Torah: I was small, wore a red velvet dress with a white collar and went to the synagogue with my mother. I had a little flag on a stick with an apple on it. The apple was hollow inside and there was a little candle inside. I walked proudly with my nose up. In the synagogue we kissed the Torah. Then there was Sukkot and we made a sukkah in the yard. There were prefabricated planks for the sukkah that were kept in the house afterward. We had meals in the tent for a whole week.

Purim was the merriest holiday. When my brother and sister, who also studied at the conservatory, arrived there were more festivities. Young people got together at our home, my sister played the piano and my brother played the violin. We sang and had lots of fun. They liked it when I sang to them. Now I know that I looked funny – a little girl singing love and tango songs in Romanian. However, I didn't study music like my older brother and sister did. My father supported them while they were studying but wasn't really happy about my sister and brother being in the conservatory. He wanted them to get legal education. Music was for the heart at that time; a musician couldn't support a family and my father used to tell Yuzef, 'Are you Paganini or Mozart, what's this all about?' My father didn't allow me to sit at the piano. He said, 'If I see you there, I will cut the piano into pieces. As soon as you put a doctor's or an attorney's diploma on the table, our own musicians will teach you music'.

We had three bookcases in the dining room – we were all fond of reading. My sister never went to sleep before reading 20-30 pages. Then she said, 'Goodnight', turned off the light and went to sleep. If it was a historical or adventure novel, she left it on the sideboard, but when she put a book



under her pillow, I knew that it was a love story. A forbidden fruit is always sweet and I secretly looked up the author and the title of the book, and when my sister left for Bucharest, I looked for these books in Romanian. If we didn't have them at home, I went to the private library and asked for the book pretending it was for my mother. So, when I was 12-13, I read 'The Pit' by Kuprin [3](#) and 'Resurrection' by Tolstoy [4](#) in the Romanian translation. There was a wonderful book titled 'Cocaine' by an Italian author that saved my life, I would say. Perhaps, it was a dime novel, but the author depicted the sufferings of cocaine addicts – addicts who had no money to buy drugs – so vividly, that it instilled fear and disgust of drugs in me for the rest of my life. I read all books in Romanian. In 1937 the Russian language was forbidden in Romania due to the termination of diplomatic relations between Russia [Soviet Union] and Romania. I grew fond of poetry and one of my favorite Romanian authors was Mihai Eminescu [5](#).

After Hitler came to power fascist movements expanded in Europe. There were Cuzists [6](#) in Romania. There were noted court proceedings against the Anti-Fascist Committee in 1936 in Kishinev. The head of this committee was Petru Constantinescu-Ias. He was a Romanian communist and the others were Jewish men – there were about seven of them. This was a resonant case and there were attorneys from France and England. My uncle Yakov's daughter, Etia Dener, was on trial. She was sentenced by the Romanian Military Tribunal. She was kept in the main political prison, Doftan, in Bucharest for several years. She had no family. Her fiancé turned her down with the words, 'I need a wife and a mother for my children rather than a political activist. I want a family'. Etia's brother Semyon was also a member of this committee, but he managed to escape to France with his fiancée Sonia. Semyon was a chemical engineer. He worked at a military plant. When the Germans occupied France, they arrested him and he perished. His wife Sonia and their little son survived. After the war the French Communist Party funded his son's education. Uncle Yakov's daughter Maria got married and moved to Palestine in 1935. I don't know anything about her life. Uncle Yakov stayed with his daughter Viktoria. She finished the Medical Faculty of Prague University and married Israel Grinberg. Viktoria worked as a cardiologist.

In 1937 I was in the 2nd grade of grammar school. There was only a four-year grammar school for boys and girls in Falesti. I had a friend whose name was Colman Akerman. He studied in the 3rd grade. Colman lived with his mother and sister Lusia. Their father had already died. Colman wanted to study with me and tried hard to fail at two exams and then he missed the following three exams. He had to stay in the 3rd grade for another year. When I asked him why he wanted to stay in the same grade for another year, he replied, 'How else could I visit you at home? But now we are classmates'. He came to see me every day and always tried to surprise me. Once he brought a camera that his uncle from Iasi had given to him. He photographed me in the street and then he showed me where to look through and which button to press and I took a picture of him. When he brought the pictures, I put one picture in my notebook, carried it in my school uniform pocket and showed it to the other girls, saying, 'I took this one myself!'

My father was very strict and demanded that I behaved impeccably. I remember once our zoology teacher said that after having lunch at home we would go out of town to catch insects for the school insectariums. I was very thin and ate very little and my mother decided to take advantage of my being in a hurry to stuff me up. My classmates were waiting for me near the house. Colman whistled putting two fingers into his mouth. I ran to the window and shouted, 'I'm coming!' That instant my father appeared in the dining room and asked, 'Is this for you?' I replied, 'Yes, I'm

leaving'. He slapped me, the only time in my life, on my face and said, 'Remember, a girl shall not be called from Boris Dener's house by whistles!' My mother snorted at him, 'What's happened to you? It's not her fault.' But he remained strict: 'I don't know whose fault it is. You must remember that she will get married and people remember bad things rather than good ones'. I remember my mother saying, 'She isn't even 13 yet and you are talking about marriage.' 'Time flies', he answered. However, assault wasn't really a common thing in our family, and later my father felt guilty for a long time and I took advantage of this as best I could.

Colman was 14 and I was 13, when his 18-year-old cousin came to see him from Iasi. They came to visit me. He was sitting on the sofa in the dining room looking at us haughtily, regarding us as provincial small fry. Then he suggested that we played 'American bets'. We had no idea what it was about and he explained, 'If I ask you a question and you know the answer, you can ask me for anything I have and you can have it. But if you don't know the answer, you will do anything I tell you'. Then he turned to me: 'Of course, the girl will go first'. I took it easy: what could he ask of me, if I didn't know the answer – to recite a poem or sing a song, maybe. He asked me a question about a boxer, whom I had not the slightest idea about. Then he said, 'Well, here is what we will get', and he bent over and kissed me on the cheek. I was taken aback and jumped up. The worst thing was that Colman, my cavalier, burst into tears. That way I learned what a man's guile was about. Colman said, 'I will tell your mother'. His cousin laughed and said with disdain, 'What a kindergarten!' and left. I told Colman to leave: 'Go away and never come back to me'. I was probably crying all day long.

When Sarah came home, she invited her friends and they discussed their admirers and movies about love. It was popular to collect pictures of actors and actresses: Greta Garbo, Morris Chevalier, Marlene Dietrich... I listened to them chatting, dreaming about my first kiss. It was to happen in the evening, in a garden, with nightingales, and the moon. He would tell me of his eternal love and beg me for a kiss. And then I would allow him to kiss me on my cheek – and this would be my first kiss. But then, all of a sudden, a boy whom I didn't know happened to kiss me. Besides everything else, I lost it all: the bench, the moon, the nightingales and the cavalier speaking of his love to me. But above all, I was to blame for it, you know.

About nine years later I met Colman's mother in Chernovtsy. She told me that Colman had perished near Smolensk in 1942. She said, 'They say you have a picture of Colman?' I showed her the picture and she wanted a copy. I gave her the photograph and said that her son's breathing and fingertips were on it and that he had taken this photograph himself. She started crying, 'I'm so sorry that you didn't become my daughter-in-law'.

In 1939 my beloved Grandfather Iosif died. According to the Jewish tradition they wrapped his body in a takhrikhim burying his face in it and put it on the floor in his house. Then his body was taken to the synagogue and from there to the Jewish cemetery where my grandmother Sarah, who had passed away a short time before, was buried. I don't remember whether the relatives had their clothes ripped on the edges, but I remember clearly that we sat shivah for seven days.

## During the War

A year later, on 28th June 1940, the Soviet rule began in Bessarabia. My brother Yuzef and my sister Sarah happened to have stayed abroad in Romania and we didn't know anything about them. In August the new authorities took away our house and we lost our home. They considered the



house too large for a family of three. We rented a room and a kitchen from two Moldovan sisters in their house in the suburbs of Falesti. I went to the 8th grade of a Russian school. I didn't know any Russian and had to study a lot, so my parents let me the room that was brighter and stayed in the kitchen. When my classmates began to join the Komsomol [7](#), I also applied to join, but there I got to know that I was a 'socially hostile element' and that my father was a 'bourgeois'. When I told my mother about it, she wanted to go to school to talk about it, but my father stopped her. He understood everything about the Soviet power already.

In 1941, on the night of 13th to 14th June, two officers wearing NKVD [8](#) uniforms and two witnesses came to our home. They woke us up, searched our lodging and told us, 'You have 20 minutes to get ready and leave the place!' We were taken to the railway station. There was a train there and most of the wealthier families of Falesti, most of them Jews, but there were also Moldovans. It happened so that the train was at the dead-end spur for 24 hours. Pyotr, a Moldovan boy, who became orphaned and whom my father had helped to learn accountancy, came to see us. In the morning, when it became known that we were to be deported, Pyotr's grandmother cooked a chicken and sent her grandson to take it to us. My father gave Pyotr the key and sent him to pack some belongings. Pyotr took a tablecloth and packed whatever fell into his hands. When we arrived at our point of destination, the women joked, 'We won't die of the heat in Siberia: Madam Dener has got two fans'. Pyotr had packed two ostrich feather fans and my mother's ball gown embroidered with beads. My mother sold them to the Pushkin Theater from Leningrad, which was in evacuation in Tomsk.

Before we arrived in Tiraspol, they made lists of all men, heads of families, and on the night of 15th June they read out the list and the men were getting off the train. We never saw my father again. As we got to know later, all men were taken to a camp in Ivdel district, Sverdlovsk region. Our train went on and on our way we heard that Germany had attacked the USSR on 22nd June and that the war [Great Patriotic War] [9](#) had begun. We arrived in the town of Mogochin, Molchanov district, Tomsk region in Siberia. There they declared that we were sentenced to 25 years in exile. Mogochin was in the Siberian taiga, on the bank of the Ob River, which was over one kilometer wide in that location. The only way to Novosibirsk or Tomsk was along this river. We were accommodated in the houses of other exiled people from Ukraine and Russia deported in the 1930s during the time of the collectivization [10](#). They had big families and we could only share a room with the owners of the dwellings. My mother and I moved from one house to the next, till we got lucky. Here is what happened: According to comrade Stalin's order, if a member of an exiled person's family perished at the front, his family was released from exile. Our landlady Katia came to exile in her teens. Her young husband perished at the front and Katia and her baby son were released. Though she had lost her husband, she was happy to be released and left her apartment to us: there was a little room with a Russian stove [11](#) and a shed in the yard. My mother gave her a golden ring for it.

At first we worked in the kolkhoz [12](#) in Mogochin, but later we were sent to work at the saw-mill. Women carried loads of bricks for the construction of a shop and girls worked as loaders loading planks onto a barge. We were lined up by our height: one girl had to put a cushion on the left shoulder, another girl on the right shoulder, and they piled four-meter planks to the height of a stretched up hand onto us and we carried them up the ladder onto the barge. Every two hours our supervisor announced, 'Smoke break!' and we could sit down for ten minutes and then we got back

to work. We worked 12 hours a day. It was such hard, but probably equally necessary work, that we received 800 grams bread per day, which was the ration of an adult worker. Bread was the only food we got. We exchanged clothes for potatoes. Bread and potatoes was our main food. We were usually allowed to go home for lunch. Once, going back to work from lunch, I heard the Evening Serenade by Schubert on the radio at the check-in point, and I stood still there. I loved classical music, and my sister Sarah had often sung the Evening Serenade. The lunch break was almost over. The janitor, a tall fat woman, ran outside and dragged me to the work site. 'Listen here', she warned me. 21 minutes late for work at that time meant one year in prison.

I was 16 and was supposed to study in the 9th grade, but we weren't allowed to go to school: we didn't come there to go to school is what they thought. Our boys and girls there, Fenia Zilberman, Raya Berezina and Misha Bugaev, appointed me their delegate to the commandant because although I spoke poor Russian, I was the smartest. We came to the commandant and I decided to use his weapon: 'What have we done wrong that they don't allow us to follow the covenant of Illich [Lenin]: Study, study and study? They don't allow us to go to school.' He didn't know what to say and took us to the director of the saw-mill. He left us in the reception room from where we could hear their discussion. The director was yelling, 'These bourgeois children aren't here to study. There is a war and they are here to forge victory'. The commandant replied: 'Does your daughter go to school? Does your chief engineer's son go to school? And those bourgeois children must forge victory for them, Komsomol members? They will go to school today!' He came out of the director's office saying, 'Go to school now, but you must only have excellent marks – I will follow up!' His surname was Mukhamadiarov – he was a Tatar man. Of course, somebody reported on him and soon he left for somewhere else, we didn't know where.

We didn't have passports, but a piece of paper with name, first name and patronymic, year of birth and nationality on it. Every ten days our mothers went to the commandant's office to sign for us that we were there, since we were under age. In November 1941 my mother and I were called to the office. They told us that my father had died on 1st November 1941. I was standing by my mother and said in Yiddish, 'a dank dem got' [Yiddish for Thank God]. The officer pricked up his ears: 'What did she say?' My mother turned to stone; she just shook her head. 'No, what did she say? What did she say?', the officer insisted. He thought it might have been something about 'the father of the people' [Stalin]. 'Nothing, it was Thank God that she said', my mother replied. But isn't she his own daughter?' the officer was wondering. My mother said, 'Yes, she is'. He turned to me saying, 'Why did you say this? And I replied, 'Because he is no longer suffering'. He gave me a mean look and said, 'You viper!'

After finishing school I made a copy of my certificate and sent it to the Medical Colleges in Tomsk and Novosibirsk – my father wanted me to become a doctor. I got invitation letters from both colleges. I went to the commandant, he tore those letters into tiny pieces, threw them into a garbage bin and said, 'No studies! In three days you will go to the timber cutting site!' I ran away on one of these three days. That September happened to be warm in Siberia, which was a rare thing. I had to sail down the Ob to Novosibirsk. It was impossible to take a boat sailing to the south – they were thoroughly inspected. I took a boat sailing north and at the next stop I changed onto a boat sailing to the south. My mother blessed me and gave me a golden pendant for the road. There was a Swiss clock inside. My mother wanted me to sell it to buy warm clothes in Novosibirsk. However, it was my poor luck. There was a search on the boat and a young NKVD officer took

custody of me. He saw that I had no luggage and that my only document was my school certificate. He knew who I was. 'Two hours from now I will take you to the commandant', he said. I looked at the clock: how many hours of life did I have left. I decided to jump into the river – the commandant would leave me to rot. The officer saw the clock and liked it. I took it off and put the chain and the pendant into his hand. He let me go. I got off in Novosibirsk wearing a light dress, summer shoes, having no money, but most importantly, having no passport.

At the railway station I read an announcement about a course for medical nurses for the front. I went there. I said that I was in evacuation. A woman, a major of medical service, offered me to stay overnight in her apartment. It was her daughter's birthday. There were boiled potatoes, cabbage and pork fat, and spirits on the table. I was starved and ate the food, when all of a sudden I felt sick. The mistress of the house didn't understand what was wrong and I explained that we, Jews, didn't eat pork fat. She said, 'But you, Jews, are so fanatic'. I stayed a few days with them and they were good to me. At that time the Novosibirsk Industrial College announced additional admission and they admitted me without even asking for my passport. They accommodated me in the hostel.

A few days later I bumped into a man and a woman talking in Yiddish in a shop. I ran to them and asked, 'Are you Jews?' The man was the producer of the Minsk Jewish Theater, which was evacuated to Novosibirsk. I told them about myself. This man, his name was Boris, helped me. His daughter Elvira was three years younger than me. He made a copy of her birth certificate and an artist of the theater, also a Jew, forged this certificate putting in my name and information. Then they made a copy of this copy at a notary office. At that time people often lost their documents in evacuation and notary offices made copies for them. I submitted this false copy of a copy to the militia office to obtain a passport. They told me to come back two hours later and I went to a nearby movie theater. There was a popular Soviet movie showing: 'V shest chasov vechera posle voyni' [At six o'clock in the evening after the war]. I was sitting there with my eyes closed crying: in two hours they would either take me to prison or give me a passport. When I came back to the militia office, they gave me a passport. Do you understand what this man put at risk: he could have been sentenced to ten or more years, and he had a wife and two children! Through Boris I set up correspondence with my mother. In 1946 I received her last letter. Later Boris got to know that she had died.

## **. Post-war**

In college I made friends with Dina Varshavskaya, also a Jewish girl. She evacuated from Belarus with her mother and twin brothers. Germans bombed their train on the way. Dina's mother and brothers perished. We lived in the hostel, had no clothes or shoes. Local girls lived at home and had at least some clothes. Then I heard that this hostel had vacancies for a cleaning girl and a linen keeper. Dina and I went to talk to the director of the hostel and were employed. We received a small wage and food cards. We sold some of the food that we got at the market to buy some clothes. Students could have meals at the canteen and we also did some work there cleaning the tables and had a bowl of soup or boiled cereals for doing so. During the war the best jobs were where there was food. We were young and Dina said every now and then, 'Look, we never go out' and I comforted her, 'Dina, we are young. Our cavaliers will wait for us'. I didn't know how short youth was.

I was a last-year student, when I was called into the corridor. 'Dener, your brother has come', they announced. I left the classroom and understood everything immediately - a military was waiting for me. He just said, 'Let's go'. We went to an apartment. There was a man sitting at the desk. They began to threaten me with arrest, but then tempered justice with mercy and offered me to work for them secretly. Every Friday I was to submit reports on the talks and moods in my college. Under the threat of arrest I signed what they gave me to sign and went to Boris from there. 'What do I do now?' Boris knew about the Soviet regime and NKVD rules. He calmed me down. He said I had to pretend that I industriously fulfilled the task of the organs. He asked, 'There must be boys and girls in your college, who don't only kiss, but also have intimate relations?' I remembered that Lena and Lyosha were under 18 years of age, but were living together - it wasn't allowed to get married before turning 18. 'This will work, it's 'immoral' for the Soviet authorities and you will write about it.' Boris knew that this would do those folks no harm. 'You will take this report to them on Friday and request a two-month leave to write a diploma. As soon as you receive your diploma, you must leave Novosibirsk before the morning of the following day'. They gave me a leave and after obtaining my diploma I disappeared.

At the beginning I found shelter at Raya Berezina's place. She was my friend from Falesti and was exiled with her parents. She studied at Novosibirsk Medical College. How did she manage to do that? Her uncle Motl Berezin got to know that his brother and his family had been sent into exile. Motl had money. He went to the Ural and paid ransom for his brother. His guards pretended that he had escaped. Somehow, probably also for money, Motl managed to rescue Raya, her mother and brother. He bought Raya a passport for 3,000 rubles in Novosibirsk and Raya could go to study at Medical College. I stayed with Raya for two weeks while she was passing her summer exams. Then we went to Chernovtsy where her parents had already rented an apartment. I lived with them for some time and they were kind to me.

Raya's father and her brother Aizik were working, Raya continued her studies at Chernovtsy Medical College and I was looking for a job. Raya introduced me to her friend Shura Liberman from Kharkov. He went to the front after finishing the 10th grade and after the war he entered Medical College. Three weeks later Shura wrote me a letter saying that he loved me and wanted to marry me, but I decided for myself that I wasn't going to ruin his life. He was a very nice person, he had been at the front and suffered so much. And I was an exile escapee and could be arrested any moment. I had a meeting in Chernovtsy once that I hate to recall, but since it had an impact on my future life, I need to tell you about it. One of my father's Jewish acquaintances from Falesti, who had often come to our house, bumped into me in Chernovtsy and offered me an apartment and provisions to visit me every now and then. I was hurt deep down in my heart. He also explained to me that I was a burden for the Berezins family and that they might have problems because of me.

I left the Berezins and went to work as a rate setter at the reconstruction of the knitwear factory, ruined by German bombing. My boss Rostislav Ippolitovich Menchinskiy, a Polish man, was a wonderful person. He helped me to get a little room with a wood stoked stove in the hostel. There were 90 Hungarian and 200 German prisoners-of-war working at the reconstruction of the factory. They worked on one job site, but in different crews. They didn't communicate with each other. In the morning the foreman issued a task and I put down personal scopes of work. By the end of the day the foreman and I checked the laborers' day's work and calculated how much they had earned. For this amount we gave them bread. I hated the Germans, but my good manners didn't allow me

not to greet them in the morning; my father would have turned in his grave. So, I came onto the site saying, 'Good day today', just stating that it was a good day. I spoke Russian to the superintendent, but he replied in German knowing that I knew German. Once he asked me, 'Fraulein Fira, do you think there is a God?' and I replied, 'When I got to know what you were doing to the Jews in Europe, I said there is no God. But when you, fascists, receive bread from my Jewish hands, as much as I write you should have, I say: there is a God!'

I had different, warmer relations with the Hungarians. Their superintendent was a very intelligent man, a former editor of one of the main newspapers in Bucharest. My superintendent used to tell my boss Menchinskiy that 'Fira flirts with all the Hungarians'. One of them, a young boy of about 18 years of age, whose name was Gyula, was my interpreter. He spoke a little Russian. They called me Esztike, affectionate for Esther. I learned to say good morning in Hungarian: jo reggelt, and good day: jo napot. In the morning I greeted them in Hungarian and there was always a smile or a kind word for each of them. There were women selling milk at the entrance gate. Often Hungarians asked me to buy them milk and gave me money and pots. I enjoyed doing it and did it demonstratively so that the Germans could see it, of course! In 1947 the prisoners were released and about eight Hungarians wearing their uniforms without shoulder straps came to my office to bid me farewell. I was pleased.

However, there was always fear throughout this time. I woke up at night in horror, afraid they would come for me! Once I met with Sarah Fooks, someone whom I knew from Falesti. She said, 'They arrested Fenia Zilberman last night and Misha Bugaev the night before. You must change your surname'. I married Lyonia Korol, a Jew, who liked me. I married in order to change my name. He was a janitor at the factory. I obtained a passport with a different surname. Lyonia was a simple, uneducated guy, but I decided that if he happened to be a good man, I would try to help him with his studies. However, I didn't love him and asked him to give me two weeks to get used to him. He didn't listen to me and damaged our relations. I got pregnant. On 2nd April 1948 I gave birth to a seven-month premature boy and a stillborn girl – they were twins. I named the boy Boris after my father. He only lived for three months.

Then I went to work at the shipyard in Nikolaev where I was an apprentice to an electric welder. I had no idea that this shipyard was a military site and that there was an NKVD department there. They finally dug out who I was and that I was on the all-Union search list. Nine months later they came to the hostel with a search crew. They took away my mother's last letter. I snatched it from the NKVD officer's hands and said, 'This is my mother's last letter. She has died, and nobody but me is allowed to have this letter', but they took it away from me, anyway.

I was arrested and kept in the cell with criminals in Nikolaev prison. The investigation officer insisted that I wrote that I acknowledged myself guilty in my own handwriting. I said, 'No'. He didn't let me sleep for three days. The warden was watching that I didn't close my eyes in my cell. The senior prisoner in my cell wasn't exactly my friend, but the investigation officer, whom they called 'musor' [Russian for trash] was their enemy. And the enemy of my enemy simply had to be my friend. This senior prisoner sat on my plank bed and told three other women to sit before us, with their faces to the door where there was a big eyelet. She said, 'Quiet! Put your head on my shoulder. Close your eyes, go to sleep'. She let me fall asleep that way a few times a day. I was 25 years old. I was young. When the officer realized that this 'no sleep' idea didn't work, he sent me to a punishment cell for 15 days. I was staying in the damp cell for 15 days in winter. When they



dragged me out of there I could only whisper. The officer thought I was cheating on him and took me to the prison hospital.

The otolaryngologist examined me and said, 'She won't talk for a long time. She has laryngitis, pharyngitis and tonsillitis'. I didn't know yet that I also sustained heart deficiency in this cell. I was waiting for the trial to tell this scoundrel of an officer everything I thought about him, but there was no trial. A warden took me to a room where there were four military men, one had a white robe on. Later I was told that they were prosecutor, chief of prison, military doctor and somebody else. They read my sentence that they had received from Moscow: 'For the unauthorized escape from her settlement location Dener Esfir Borisovna is sentenced to three years of imprisonment in work camps and further return to the location of settlement for an indefinite term'. This happened in February 1951.

They took me to another cell where prisoners whose sentence had been passed were kept. Then I was taken to five prisons on the way to my point of destination: Kharkov, Gorky, Kirov and Solikamsk and Nyrob. The most terrible prison was in Gorky. We arrived at a huge gate with steeples on them. The doors were sliding to the sides like curtains in the theater. I remembered the Dante's Inferno: 'Abandon every hope, you who enter'. I think it was there that I met Martha, a young woman from Germany, who sang arias from 'Silva' [operetta by Imre Kalman, a prominent Hungarian composer] in the cell in German. She told me her bloodcurdling story: In 1945, after the war, she, a German girl, married a young Soviet officer. A week after their wedding Stalin issued a ban on marriages with foreigners. Her husband's friends advised her husband to disappear for some time and Martha's relatives gave him shelter. When the NKVD came for him, he wasn't at home and they arrested his wife. So she happened to come to the Soviet prison. She didn't know what happened to her husband. I never got to know how her story ended. From Solikamsk prison in Perm region I was taken to the transition prison in Nyrob settlement. There was a barrack for women with about 30 inmates and about 20-30 vacant plank beds. There was a big camp for men behind the fence.

I was taken to the camp on bathroom day. Each of us was given a tin wash pan and a bar of soap. There was a woman sitting beside me on the bench. I washed myself and stood up to rinse myself with water, when I saw two big hungry eyes looking at me from the wall. I covered myself with the pan. My companion who had been there six years said calmly, 'Why are you scared? 'There is someone there...' I stuttered. 'So, what', she said, 'some men are gazing...' 'How awful!' I exclaimed. 'It doesn't hurt', she said and continued, 'Two years ago we bathed together. There was nothing about it. We, girls, were starving! And we had to go to work. Women managed somehow, but men were skin and bones. They were dying every day. Now they give us more bread and some cooked food. So look at them, male dogs! And let them look. You won't get any worse from it'. I understood then that men die faster from hunger than women do.

But this wasn't the end of the day yet. In the evening, when it got dark, a warden came in and asked, 'Who is Dener?' I already knew that when they were calling your name you were to give them your full name, article of sentence, term, its beginning and end. The warden took me out of the barrack, through a gate to a room with four men in camp robes. I wondered what this was all about. They had familiar faces – they were Jews! They had been there for years and were now working by their professions. One of them was a foreman at the brick factory, another one was an accountant and one was a rate setter. This rate setter had spotted the Jewish name 'Dener' in the



list. They didn't understand what this Article 78 and sentence of three years meant. This was too short a sentence for political prisoners who were usually sentenced under Article 58. Three years was a sentence for pickpockets and minor thieves. They wanted to meet with me to see whether they could help me. They listened to my story, including that after my sentence was over I was supposed to settle down in Siberia for an indefinite term, they exchanged glances and decided to help me. There were two women's camps: one was for pregnant women or women who had small children. The children were kept in the children's home until they reached the age of two. Their mothers worked in the laundry, in the bathroom, in the shop and cleaned the barracks. Other female prisoners worked at the wood throw. They wanted me to stay in this camp where there was additional milk supply for pregnant women and the children's home, and pioneers working at the wood throw also received a glass of milk and a bowl of milk soup each twice a week.

So they agreed that they would help me to stay at Shunia camp, when the warden ran in and urged them, 'Hide her, I cannot take her back now – the senior officer and senior warden are inspecting the barracks!' There was a big box with some papers and files in the room. They took out the papers, turned this box with the lock to the wall and told me to get in there. I was thin, so I fit in there, pressing my knees to my chin. They closed the lid, put a chip between the lid and the box for me to be able to breathe. One of these four men sat on the edge of the box smoking. Those two officers came in saying, 'Why are you smoking, it's impossible to breathe in here! Chief, let's go outside.' And they left. The warden came back and said that he could only escort me back to the barrack in the morning. I sat in this box for a whole night. Those people were putting their position in the camp at risk – later I called it 'Hesed in the camp'.

I don't know how they managed it, but I really stayed in Shunia camp. I was kept in the barrack for criminals. This was terrible! They smoked makhorka tobacco and cursed terribly; they were just swearing all the time. They made lesbian love behind a sheet curtain and smoked hashish delivered from Central Asia. What was I to do?! Fortunately, there was a cultural/political unit where I could borrow books to read. There were shelves with books on them. I turned to the other side and, thought, 'My God!' – Guess what I found there: Mihai Eminescu, among books by other writers. This was a sign of God – and it meant that I wasn't going to stay there in the camp and in exile forever! I took this book into my shaking hands, put it on my plank bed, closed my eyes, saw the graves of my mother and father and swore an oath that I would never drink, smoke drugs, make lesbian love, and that I would never lose my humanity. Never! Because I had no father, no mother, and if I fell there would be no one to give me a hand.

I read in the evenings: there was a table with a lamp on it in the center of the barrack. Once a woman from the barrack with political prisoners came into our barrack. She saw me reading, called me outside and asked me who I was and what my sentence was. I told her my story. She was Tamara Logvinenko, a writer from Ukraine. She advised me, 'Make an appointment with the chief of the camp, tell him that your fellow prisoners smoke a lot and that you cannot work properly and that you have problems with your lungs. Ask him to move you into our barrack'. I did as she told me. When I came to the chief's office he had my file on his desk. The chief of the camp – his surname was Ofitserov – listened to me and said, 'What can we do for you? You know, those political prisoners have long sentence – 10 to 25 years'. After some serious thought, he said, 'There, you have my permission to visit this political barrack before the retreat. At ten sharp you must be on your plank bed'. There were decent people among the camp personnel.

So I met those political prisoners. Some had worked for Germans, but most of them were decent women. I was lucky to meet Nathalia Ilinichna Sats. [Soviet producer, playwright, pedagog, a Jewess. She made a significant contribution to the development of Soviet theater for children. She was arrested in 1937, in prison and in exile for 16 years and rehabilitated in 1953. In 1964 she organized the Children's Music/Opera Theater in Moscow. She also staged opera performances abroad.] We spent a few months together. She asked me whether I could sing. Hearing my answer was 'no' she asked me to recite something: 'You have a talent. I will work with you'. She taught me about stresses and pauses and about the vocal organ. After those classes she told me that I could perform on any stage. 'Why would I need to do this?' Her answer was: 'To make them loyal you will recite poems or tell them stories in the evening. Of course, you won't recite from Anna Karenina or War and Peace'. My fellow inmates called me 'friersha' – small fish – plus, I was a Jew. There was no anti-Semitism, but staying together in confined space provokes to entertain oneself or tease somebody. My nationality was as vulnerable as somebody's big weight, for example. So I recited poems or told them stories in the evening. The senior inmate, Zoya, ordered, 'Silence! Keep so quiet that we can even hear a fly buzzing by!' They teased me a little, but they listened to me.

Once my fellow inmate Masha, a Moldovan woman, sentenced for murder under Article 156, asked me to write her request for parole. Her story was terrifying and it would take a long time to tell it. Anyway, she and I began to talk. Her five-month-old son Vovka [Vladimir] was born in the camp. 'Masha, show me your Vovka', I begged her. She took me to the children's home. I took this Vovka with his huge gypsy eyes into my arms and remembered my deceased baby son. I pressed him to my bosom and he wet me all over. Masha took my robe to wash and I was sitting under the blanket. Zoya, the senior inmate said, 'Everybody has his follies. You need a baby. Look, you read to us... Let us do something good for you. There are young wardens here – you chose somebody and I will make the necessary arrangements'. It took me a while to explain to her that I could do it this way, of course, but that a baby wasn't a toy and that a child needed a father. The only thing it proved to her was that I wasn't of this world.

I was in the camp for a year or a year and a half, when something happened that made me know that those criminals didn't think badly of me. Saturday was our bathroom day. Afterwards we were lying on our plank beds. I was on the upper tier bed by the window. Sunday was a day off and we could sleep until 8am while on the other days we got up at 6am. After the bathroom day, in the evening, we were served tea. The inmate on duty was carrying hot tea in a bucket pouring it into the inmates' mugs from her mug. When she came to me, the door opened and somebody called her. 'Just wait there, I'll pour some tea for this zhydovka [abusive word for a Jewess] and come there afterwards.' I acted on impulse, you know, evil communications corrupt good manners. I lost control and splashed hot tea into her face. She cursed at me. Then one inmate jumped off her plank bed, then another, the third, the fourth... I thought, 'What are they up to?' They turned to her: 'Why do you violate the constitution? She is a Jew and you call her zhydovka, Galka is Ukrainian and you call her hohlushka [abusive word for Ukrainians], Kira is a Chuvash and you call her chuchmechka [abusive word for Chuvash people]. You'll get it from us...' She was glad that they didn't kill her and ran away. They turned to me: 'How long will you continue to be a 'friersha'? If you had burned her with this tea you would have been taken to a punishment cell.... Couldn't you just curse her?' I gave them a half hour speech explaining to them why I couldn't curse.

Two days later the chief of the camp ordered me to come see him in his office. 'They told me you read in your barrack. I replied: 'Is it not allowed to do so?' 'It's all right, particularly since you read the classics. They say you dislike cursing. This means, you help with the education of other inmates. I think you should recite poems on Soviet holidays. You will make a list of what you are going to recite and show it to the censor, he needs to check it'. So I began to recite poems at performances.

We worked at the wood cutting site. We got up at 6 o'clock in the morning. We had some cereal for breakfast and then left the camp. We had black wadded pants, quilted jackets and pea-jackets. We formed a line and every morning the convoy chief informed us, 'A step to the right, a step to the left is a try to escape. I will shoot without a warning'. There were wardens with machine guns and dogs on leashes. So we marched at gun-point to work in the woods. We worked hard from morning till night. We sawed wood with manual saws with wooden handles. At first we made a notch on the wood with a heavy ax and then we put a saw into this notch. We sawed into about a quarter of a trunk and then pushed the tree with picaroons into the direction where it had to fall. And this was us, women, doing this! Then we chopped off branches and boughs and then tractors hauled these trunks away. We had soup and kasha [pulp] delivered from the camp at lunch. We ate from aluminum bowls. Also, we didn't have spoons and ate from the bowls with our hands.

I never started sawing another trunk before the end of a working day. The convoy never waited for us and we never knew whether we would come to the same job site on the following day. And a tree with an undercut could fall at any moment. I never took this risk. I remember standing by a big fire at the end of a working day, we called this fire 'Tashkent' in the camp. I was drying my gauntlet gloves, when I heard the typical grinding sound of a falling tree. Where do I run? Right, left or back?.. I managed to slightly get on my feet, gain a grip with my fists and stretch as much as I could. The tree fell on my back and its crown covered me. There was much ado, the convoy rushed to me pushing away the tree. I was bleeding and there were scratches on my face, but I was lucky that it was the crown of the tree falling on me and that I was wearing thick winter clothes. The warden wiped the blood off my face with snow and said, 'Wench, you were born under a lucky star'. There was a twig sticking out under my left eye. You can still see the scar from the hole of it when I smile.

On 5th March 1953 Stalin died. I don't know whether his death and Purim happened on the same day. But anyway, in my childhood Purim was in March. And this was the happiest Purim in my life! When I got hold of a Soviet newspaper with a photograph of Stalin in the casket I kept it for a long time like a relic. I remember that Hitler committed suicide on 30th April and in the same way I remember that Stalin died on 5th March. They are both the same kind of evildoers for me. Looking at him in the casket I felt pleased that he had died. I met with so many wonderful people in the camp - there were masses of political prisoners sentenced for no reason. They were sentenced for 25 years of hard work, for which they weren't paid. Stalin plotted a system of credits, where one year was reckoned as three or seven years, and prisoners were happy that they worked off their 25 years in five or seven years, but they died before they were to be released. They either died from hard labor that was too much for them or they left the camps as cripples.

In 1954 my term came to an end and I was released from the camp, but I still had my 'indefinite exile' left. I couldn't leave Nyrob and I stayed there to work in the office. I was accommodated in a little room with a stove. At that time I met Igor Golubin, a prisoner from Kharkov. He was sentenced

for what they call 'commerce' nowadays: he bought or sold something and was sentenced for five years for profiteering. When he was released he came to me and confessed his love. He said he wanted to stay with me, though he could leave for wherever he wanted to. I asked him whether he had a family. Never in my life could I have been with a person who had a wife and children. My mother wrote in her last letter: 'Never build your happiness upon somebody else's unhappiness'. This sentence was sacred for me. I asked him to have his mother write to me and confirm that he was single. She arrived at Nyrob and told me herself that she was happy for her son and that he wanted to marry a decent woman. We lived in civil marriage for three years, but Igor was drinking and I didn't dare to have a baby. Igor died from cirrhosis in Kharkov.

In 1956, at the Twentieth Party Congress [13](#) Khrushchev [14](#) denounced Stalin and this had a direct impact on me – in 1956 I was released from exile. I was happy that they released me and I obtained a legal passport! My God! That's still the most precious thing I have in my life. It was summer. I had a piece of a red polka-dot staple fabric. I designed a dress and took the fabric to a dressmaker to make a dress for me. I was walking in the street wearing this dress, when I saw the chief of the camp. He said, 'You look like a strawberry. Look, let's go to the cinema. No guns or dogs! Don't be unforgiving. Whatever there was there was.' I said, 'Remember this, man. I shall never have anything to do with somebody who convoyed me at gun-point'. And I went on. I must say people treated me very well in the Ural. There was no anti-Semitism. I was a labor and salary engineer in repair shops in Nyrob and then I moved to Zlatoust in Cheliabinsk region.

I didn't know anything about my brother and sister who had stayed in Romania, but I had relatives in Kishinev. I sent a letter to the address inquiry office in Kishinev and indicated their prewar address: 7, Fontannaya Street. I was hoping that somebody might have returned from the war. They sent me a note saying that my cousins Etia Yakovlevna Dener and Viktoria Yakovlevna Dener lived on 29, Armianskaya Street, Apt. 26, in Kishinev. I wrote to them and they replied. They wrote that Uncle Yakov had died in evacuation, that my brother Yuzef had perished in the ghetto in Transnistria [15](#) in 1942, and that my sister Sarah had survived and was working in the house of a composer in Bucharest. We began to correspond. In 1964, after her husband died, Sarah moved to Israel. They had no children. They offered her a job in a music school in a kibbutz, but she refused, 'I lived my life in Bucharest and I can't live in a village'. She went to work in a restaurant where she washed dishes. Since Sarah knew six languages – French, German, English, Romanian, Russian, Yiddish and Latin –she went to work as a telephone operator on long distance calls within some time. Then she took a six-month training in Munich. All in all, she retired from her work as deputy chief of department in the Ministry of Communication of Israel. She lives in Ramat-Aviv.

My cousin Viktoria was asking me how long I was going to live in the Ural and wanted me to come back to Moldova. I finally decided to try, and moved to Kishinev in 1964. I stayed with Viktoria. Etia Dener had passed away before then. I went to work in the construction department in Krikovo near Kishinev and lived in a hostel. Six months later our department moved to Kishinev. In 1968 I received a one-bedroom apartment in Ryshkanovka, the greenest district in town. I received a good salary and bought furniture on installments: a living room set, a couch, armchairs and a TV set. This was my home hearth and I enjoyed arranging it. I was 44, I was strong and was thinking of adopting a boy. I went to the children's home. There was a four-year-old boy there. His name was Andryushka and I was told that his parents had died in an accident. I went to see him four or five times. I brought him toys and sweets and went for walks with him. I had to collect a number of

documents for adoption, including recommendations from work and a health certificate. I had wonderful recommendations, but in my health certificate they wrote: heart deficiency, surgery required. And they turned me down. Of course, Andryushka forgot me long ago, but I cannot forget this incident. I could have a son now.

My boss Gennadiy Alexeevich Shevtsov knew that I had no children and swamped me with public activities. I was responsible for the training of young specialists who came to work at the department after college. He introduced me to them, 'You can ask our chief engineer all work-related questions and address other questions to your tutor'. They came to me with all their problems: regarding a hostel, an award, holidays in summer time, or an apartment, when they were getting married. I called them 'my boys' and loved them in a 'motherly' kind of way and they returned my love.

I was considering moving to Israel in the 1970s, when many people were going there, but my doctors told me that the climate wasn't for me. Many of my friends and colleagues left then. I don't remember the names. I remember numerous meetings condemning those people and putting them to shame. I sympathized with them, but I kept silent at such meetings. I already knew that sometimes it was better to keep silent.

In 1978 the doctors said I urgently needed a heart surgery and that there could be no delay. I wrote to my sister in Israel. I wanted her to visit me before the surgery. I sent her an invitation and collected all necessary documents, but the Soviet authorities didn't give her permission to visit here. My cousin Viktoria Dener was a cardiologist in the Republican Polyclinic. She helped me to have the surgery done by assistant professor Vasiliev. She had to pull some strings for me because in the USSR one couldn't choose a surgeon. When I was in hospital, somebody at work got to know that I needed blood for blood transfusions. Once the chief of department at Paskaryuk came into my ward and said, 'Esfir Borisovna, a bus from your workplace brought 18 young men to give you their blood.' 'Where are they, my boys?' I asked. 'Don't worry, we've sent them to the blood transfusion office.' he replied. I started crying, of course, sobbing, 'What have you done. They didn't bring me candy or kefir, they brought me their blood, but you didn't even let me see them'. The doctor didn't want me to worry and joked, 'You know, despite your hot temper 18 young guys are too much for you right now. Let them visit you one by one'. This simple joke put a smile on my face. And he continued, 'Another tear and you will have an intravenous injection. You mustn't worry!' And later, the boys did come to see me.

After the surgery my doctors recommended me to have an apartment not higher than on the second floor and the construction department gave me another apartment in the same district. Every year I obtained a free stay at the cardiologic centers in Moldova, Palanga [Lithuania] and Kislovodsk [16](#). I loved traveling and the Crimea was my favorite place. I usually went there in the middle of September, the 'velvet' season, when it was warm, but not hot. A plane ticket from Kishinev to Simferopol cost 17 rubles. I took a trolley bus to Yalta. This was the longest trolley bus trail in the USSR [about 160 km]. In Yalta I rented a room, swam in the sea and went for walks in seashore parks. I also went on tours along the seashore: to the former czarist palace in Livadia, to Count Vorontsov Palace [17](#) in Alupka, to Gursuf, which Pushkin [18](#) had once visited. I remember a beautiful open air museum near Yalta - 'The Meadow of fairy tales...' And of course, I read in my free time. I had a small collection of Russian and foreign classical books. I like Somerset Maugham.



In 1988, when the relations between the USSR and Israel got warmer during the rule of Gorbachev [19](#), my sister Sarah obtained a three-month visa. I was expecting her to arrive on 5th May, but she arrived on 4th May and I didn't meet her at the station. She took a taxi. When I opened the door and saw her I exclaimed, 'Mama!' We hadn't seen each other for 48 years and I remembered her as a 22-year-old girl and when I opened the door, I saw my mother, the way she looked when I saw her for the last time in exile in Siberia. Sarah looked so much like my mother.

There was so much joy and so many tears on that day. Sarah brought me many gifts from my acquaintances from Falesti who had moved to Israel. She stayed in the apartment next-door because my neighbor went to Moscow for three months. We spent all our time together. She celebrated her 70th birthday here. I invited all of my acquaintances and arranged a party for her. Then we visited friends and there were feasts and parties. Sarah didn't understand this; she would say, 'This is the wrong way to live. We live differently. We go to a restaurant, have dinner and listen to music or dance, but to cook so much! We don't cook so much.' She didn't like the shop assistants here. They weren't so friendly at that time. When we went to buy gifts for my acquaintances, Sarah was very nervous; and she was shocked by the fact that she wasn't allowed to go to Leningrad and Moscow. The authorities explained that she only had a visa for Kishinev. 'How can one live here!' she was indignant.

In the 1990s, after the break down of the USSR Sarah sent me two parcels with soap, shampoo and detergents. During her visit she had seen stocks of these in my neighbor's bathroom and must have come to the conclusion that we were having problems getting these goods. Perestroika [20](#) had its impact on pensioners and we began to have financial problems. I spent my pension to pay my rent, but I always pay my bills for the apartment, power and telephone in a timely manner, so that they, God Forbid, don't take away my apartment. I've had this fear in my blood since they forced us to leave our home, when the Soviet power here started.

However, I understand that perestroika made the rebirth of the Jewish life in Kishinev possible. They opened a Jewish library, the Jewish Enlightening University [Community lecture course], and the Jewish Charity Center Hesed Yehuda started its work. I attend lectures on the subject of Jewish life in the Enlightening University twice a week. They tell us how to celebrate Jewish holidays and hold lectures on Jewish history and literature: [Isaac] Bashevis Singer [21](#), for example. I also go to the warm house where I celebrate Jewish holidays with older people like myself and talk. But I'm not used to going to the synagogue. I went to the restaurant in Hesed every day before I had a micro stroke in the eye, but now they deliver meals to my home.

Four years ago [2000] I had a cataract surgery. To be blind would be terrible for me. I was alone in Kishinev. My cousin sister died in 1984, her son Yakov and his family moved to Augsburg in Germany. I borrowed money - it was a lot of money for me - on the security of my apartment through an acquaintance of mine. I wrote a request to the Assistance Fund of Hesed. The former director of Hesed said, 'Make arrangements to leave them your apartment'. Four years have passed, but I cannot think calmly about it. I wasn't asking money for a coat, a dress or a visit to my sister. Loneliness and helplessness are the hardest things. There's nothing more important than human relations and health. My former colleagues often call me and send me their regards on New Year's, 8th March [Women's Day] and Builders' Day [one of the professional holidays in the former USSR]. Recently I got a call at midnight: 'Esfir Borisovna?' the voice asked. I replied, 'Speaking, Tarakanov'. I recognized his voice. This was Valera Tarakanov, one of my 'boys'. 'How come you



call so 'early'? I asked. He said, 'You know, I've recently come back from Israel where I was visiting my friends. Do you remember how you stood up for me, when I needed a room in a hostel?' ... We talked until one o'clock in the morning.

## Glossary

### **1 Bessarabia**

Historical area between the Prut and Dnestr rivers, in the southern part of Odessa region. Bessarabia was part of Russia until the Revolution of 1917. In 1918 it declared itself an independent republic, and later it united with Romania. The Treaty of Paris (1920) recognized the union but the Soviet Union never accepted this. In 1940 Romania was forced to cede Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina to the USSR. The two provinces had almost 4 million inhabitants, mostly Romanians. Although Romania reoccupied part of the territory during World War II the Romanian peace treaty of 1947 confirmed their belonging to the Soviet Union. Today it is part of Moldavia.

### **2 Russian Revolution of 1917**

Revolution in which the tsarist regime was overthrown in the Russian Empire and, under Lenin, was replaced by the Bolshevik rule. The two phases of the Revolution were: February Revolution, which came about due to food and fuel shortages during World War I, and during which the tsar abdicated and a provisional government took over. The second phase took place in the form of a coup led by Lenin in October/November (October Revolution) and saw the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks.

### **3 Kuprin, Aleksandr Ivanovich (1870-1938)**

Russian writer. In 1919, during the Russian Civil War, he emigrated to Paris. In 1937 he returned to Russia. Kuprin is best known for the short novel *The Duel* (1905), a story of army life in a provincial garrison, and *Captain Ribnikov* (1906), a spy story.

### **4 Tolstoy, Lev Nikolayevich (1828-1910)**

Russian novelist and moral philosopher, who holds an important place in his country's cultural history as an ethical philosopher and religious reformer. Tolstoy, alongside Dostoyevsky, made the realistic novel a literary genre, ranking in importance with classical Greek tragedy and Elizabethan drama. He is best known for his novels, including *War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina* and *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, but also wrote short stories and essays and plays. Tolstoy took part in the Crimean War and his stories based on the defense of Sevastopol, known as *Sevastopol Sketches*, made him famous and opened St. Petersburg's literary circles to him. His main interest lay in working out his religious and philosophical ideas. He condemned capitalism and private property and was a fearless critic, which finally resulted in his excommunication from the Russian Orthodox Church in 1901. His views regarding the evil of private property gradually estranged him from his wife, Yasnaya Polyana, and children, except for his daughter Alexandra, and he finally left them in 1910. He died on his way to a monastery at the railway junction of Astapovo.

### **5 Eminescu, Mihai (1850-1889)**

considered the foremost Romanian poet of his century. His poems, lyrical, passionate, and revolutionary, were published in periodicals and had a profound influence on Romanian letters. He worked in a traveling company of actors, and also acquired a broad university education. His poetry reflected the influence of the French romantics. Eminescu suffered from periodic attacks of insanity and died shortly after his final attack.

## **6 Cuzist**

Member of the Romanian fascist organization named after Alexandru C. Cuza, one of the most fervent fascist leaders in Romania, who was known for his ruthless chauvinism and anti-Semitism. In 1919 Cuza founded the LANC, which became the National Christian Party in 1935 with an anti-Semitic program.

## **7 Komsomol**

Communist youth political organization created in 1918. The task of the Komsomol was to spread of the ideas of communism and involve the worker and peasant youth in building the Soviet Union. The Komsomol also aimed at giving a communist upbringing by involving the worker youth in the political struggle, supplemented by theoretical education. The Komsomol was more popular than the Communist Party because with its aim of education people could accept uninitiated young proletarians, whereas party members had to have at least a minimal political qualification.

## **8 NKVD**

People's Committee of Internal Affairs; it took over from the GPU, the state security agency, in 1934.

## **9 Great Patriotic War**

On 22nd June 1941 at 5 o'clock in the morning Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union without declaring war. This was the beginning of the so-called Great Patriotic War. The German blitzkrieg, known as Operation Barbarossa, nearly succeeded in breaking the Soviet Union in the months that followed. Caught unprepared, the Soviet forces lost whole armies and vast quantities of equipment to the German onslaught in the first weeks of the war. By November 1941 the German army had seized the Ukrainian Republic, besieged Leningrad, the Soviet Union's second largest city, and threatened Moscow itself. The war ended for the Soviet Union on 9th May 1945.

## **10 Collectivization in the USSR**

In the late 1920s - early 1930s private farms were liquidated and collective farms established by force on a mass scale in the USSR. Many peasants were arrested during this process. As a result of the collectivization, the number of farmers and the amount of agricultural production was greatly reduced and famine struck in the Ukraine, the Northern Caucasus, the Volga and other regions in 1932-33.

## **11 Russian stove**

Big stone stove stoked with wood. They were usually built in a corner of the kitchen and served to

heat the house and cook food. It had a bench that made a comfortable bed for children and adults in wintertime.

## **12 Kolkhoz**

In the Soviet Union the policy of gradual and voluntary collectivization of agriculture was adopted in 1927 to encourage food production while freeing labor and capital for industrial development. In 1929, with only 4% of farms in kolkhozes, Stalin ordered the confiscation of peasants' land, tools, and animals; the kolkhoz replaced the family farm.

## **13 Twentieth Party Congress**

At the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956 Khrushchev publicly debunked the cult of Stalin and lifted the veil of secrecy from what had happened in the USSR during Stalin's leadership.

## **14 Khrushchev, Nikita (1894-1971)**

Soviet communist leader. After Stalin's death in 1953, he became first secretary of the Central Committee, in effect the head of the Communist Party of the USSR. In 1956, during the 20th Party Congress, Khrushchev took an unprecedented step and denounced Stalin and his methods. He was deposed as premier and party head in October 1964. In 1966 he was dropped from the Party's Central Committee.

## **15 Transnistria**

Area situated between the Bug and Dniester rivers and the Black Sea. The term is derived from the Romanian name for the Dniester (Nistru) and was coined after the occupation of the area by German and Romanian troops in World War II. After its occupation Transnistria became a place for deported Romanian Jews. Systematic deportations began in September 1941. In the course of the next two months, all surviving Jews of Bessarabia and Bukovina and a small part of the Jewish population of Old Romania were dispatched across the Dniester. This first wave of deportations reached almost 120,000 by mid-November 1941 when it was halted by Ion Antonescu, the Romanian dictator, upon intervention of the Council of Romanian Jewish Communities. Deportations resumed at the beginning of the summer of 1942, affecting close to 5,000 Jews. A third series of deportations from Old Romania took place in July 1942, affecting Jews who had evaded forced labor decrees, as well as their families, communist sympathizers and Bessarabian Jews who had been in Old Romania and Transylvania during the Soviet occupation. The most feared Transnistrian camps were Vapniarka, Ribnita, Berezovka, Tulcin and Iampol. Most of the Jews deported to camps in Transnistria died between 1941-1943 because of horrible living conditions, diseases and lack of food.

## **16 Kislovodsk**

Town in Stavropol region, Balneal resort. Located at the foothills of the Caucasus at the height of 720-1060 meters.

**17** Vorontsov, Mikhail Semyonovich (1782-1856): Russian statesman and count, governor-general

of Novorussia and Odessa from 1823-1844. His contribution to the development of Odessa is truly immense. Vorontsov was an energetic and dynamic administrator, happy only when he had some challenge to meet, and Novorussia provided enough of those. His wife, Elizaveta Vorontsova, is known for having had an affair with the famous poet Alexandr Pushkin, when the latter was exiled to Odessa due to his suspected anti-state activities. Pushkin dedicated a number of poems to Countess Vorontsova. In 1844 Vorontsov, by then 62 years old, was appointed governor-general of the Caucasus and commander-in-chief of the Russian forces there, in addition to his duties in Novorussia. He spent the next 10 years either in military action in the Caucasus or in developing economic projects in both regions.

### **18 Pushkin, Alexandr (1799-1837)**

Russian poet and prose writer, among the foremost figures in Russian literature. Pushkin established the modern poetic language of Russia, using Russian history for the basis of many of his works. His masterpiece is Eugene Onegin, a novel in verse about mutually rejected love. The work also contains witty and perceptive descriptions of Russian society of the period. Pushkin died in a duel.

### **19 Gorbachev, Mikhail (1931- )**

Soviet political leader. Gorbachev joined the Communist Party in 1952 and gradually moved up in the party hierarchy. In 1970 he was elected to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, where he remained until 1990. In 1980 he joined the politburo, and in 1985 he was appointed general secretary of the party. In 1986 he embarked on a comprehensive program of political, economic, and social liberalization under the slogans of glasnost (openness) and perestroika (restructuring). The government released political prisoners, allowed increased emigration, attacked corruption, and encouraged the critical reexamination of Soviet history. The Congress of People's Deputies, founded in 1989, voted to end the Communist Party's control over the government and elected Gorbachev executive president. Gorbachev dissolved the Communist Party and granted the Baltic states independence. Following the establishment of the Commonwealth of Independent States in 1991, he resigned as president. Since 1992, Gorbachev has headed international organizations.

### **20 Perestroika (Russian for restructuring)**

Soviet economic and social policy of the late 1980s, associated with the name of Soviet politician Mikhail Gorbachev. The term designated the attempts to transform the stagnant, inefficient command economy of the Soviet Union into a decentralized, market-oriented economy. Industrial managers and local government and party officials were granted greater autonomy, and open elections were introduced in an attempt to democratize the Communist Party organization. By 1991, perestroika was declining and was soon eclipsed by the dissolution of the USSR.

### **21 Singer, Isaac Bashevis (1904-1991)**

Yiddish novelist, short-story writer and journalist. Born in Poland, Singer received a traditional rabbinical education but opted for the life of a writer instead. He emigrated to the US in 1935, where he wrote for the New York-based The Jewish Daily Forward. Many of his novellas, such as Satan in Goray (1935) and The Slave (1962), are set in the Poland of the past. One of his best-

known works, *The Family Moskat* (1950), he deals with the decline of Jewish values in Warsaw before World War II. Singer was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1978.