

Irene Shein



This is me in exile, Tomsk oblast, Bakhchar district, settlement Vavilovka, in 1947. The day of 14th June 1941 is remembered by all Estonians as the night of deportation of Estonian citizens. They came to us early in the morning. NKVD officers informed us that our family was to be deported. We were blamed of being rich, 'socially dangerous elements.' We were given half an hour to pack our things. We were allowed to take only one suitcase and a blanket. Mother was at a loss and even forgot to take money with her. Father was taken away at once and we were not allowed to see him again. Mother and I were told to get in the car with some people and we were taken to the train station. There were cattle trains. There were guards by the cars. We were squeezed in the car. There were double-tiered bunks along the walls of the car. There was no wash basin and toilet. There were only women with children and elderly people. Men were to take other cars, headed for the Gulag. It was a settlement in Taiga. Vavilovka had existed for only ten years. It was mostly populated with Russians, exiled from the USSR during that time. After 1941 a few Estonian families came there as well. Mother and I were the only Jews in the settlement. First, we were helped by one exiled Estonian lady. She gave me a chunk of bread a couple of times. Then Mother and I gradually managed to settle. We followed the example of others exiled – we planted vegetables on a small plot of land. When I grew older I went to people to dig their kitchen gardens. I was fed for work and given a bucket of potatoes and a bowl of sauerkraut. Local people planted flax and spun threads from that. Mother and I learned how to knit jackets from those flaxen threads and took orders. We were paid for that. But still, we lived from hand to mouth. Mother didn't throw away potato peelings. We ate them. In the summer she collected 'orach,' a type of grass. We boiled it, made gruel out of it and added it to one potato. Then we used the cooker and made fritters from that 'orach.' All of us thought that we would be released from exile after the war was over, but

nothing changed for us when the victory came on 9th May 1945. I remained in exile until 1948.