

Raissa Yasvoina

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Kiev

Ukraine

Interviewer: Zhanna Litinskaya

I was born in Kiev on 5 December 1934.

My maiden name is Napuh. My father's name was Samuil Napuh. My mother Maria Lvovich had her 2nd husband's name. My father was her 3rd husband. My mother's maiden name is Minkovskaya.

My mother Maria is Kiev born and bred. She was born in Kiev in 1894. She was the 4th child in the family. Iosif Minkovskiy, her father, my grandfather, born in 1855, was a merchant. They lived a very good life. They had a house of their own in Podol. Their entire family lived in this house and everybody had a room of his own.

The family got together in the dining room each evening after my grandfather closed his store, which was located on the ground floor of the building. He owned five or six stores in Kiev and sold fabric, footwear, clothing and haberdashery. There was beautiful furniture, a piano, a lot of china and crystal in the house. My grandfather had an equipage of his own (only well-to-do families could afford an equipage - a coach and horses). My grandmother was at home and managed the housekeeping and bringing up her children (she had housemaids to do the work and the cooking). I don't know her name - my mother never mentioned it. My mother told me that my grandfather's family was very religious. My grandfather went to the synagogue every day putting on his tales and tfillin. He had a seat of honor in the synagogue. He gave a lot of money to the synagogue to support poor Jews.

Every Friday before Sabbath my grandmother lit candles and the family celebrated Saturday. My grandmother didn't do anything on this day. She only tried the food that the cook was making and fed the babies and of course, grandfather prayed before each meal. The family celebrated all religious Jewish holidays. As a child I already knew about Pesach, Purim, Hanukkah, etc. from what my mother told me. My mother told me that during these holidays they had lots of delicacies and sweets on the table besides traditional and mandatory dishes. My grandfather didn't quite like it because he was a very religious man and he thought that holidays were to raise the children into real Jews, not for pleasure. But my grandmother was not so religious and she always tried to convince my grandfather to make a real holiday for the children and make food that the children liked besides what was supposed to be on the table during these days. For example, at Pesach my grandmother made sweet rolls (but made according to Pesach standards) for the children besides matzah.

There were 7 children in the family, including my mother. My mother's older brother Isaak Minkovskiy was born in 1884. Isaak finished school and then my grandfather made him the manager of one of his stores. After my grandfather died Isaak got his jewelry shop. Isaak was a very successful businessman. His wife's name was Rosa and they didn't have any children. After the revolution and the Civil War Isaak decided to leave the country. The power in Kiev changed

continuously and there were pogroms. Isaak understood that sooner or later he would have to part with his riches and he sold his shops and left for Canada in 1919. The family had no contact with him. Only in 1953, after Stalin's death, my mother received a letter from him with a return address. But since people were afraid of arrests and repression my mother tore up the letter. She didn't read it to the end and didn't save her brother's address. She only kept the picture of her brother with his wife Rosa and their daughter Shyfra. I have no information about my uncle Isaak's family but I realize that neither my uncle nor his wife Rosa are among the living.

Isaak went to Canada with my mother's sisters Rosa and Shyfra. They were older than my mother but younger than Isaak. I have no information about them. I only know that Isaak gave his daughter the name of Shyfra after his sister and the same name of his wife and his sister – Rosa – is merely a coincidence.

My mother's sister Vera was born in 1891. Her Jewish name was Dvoira. After my grandmother died, Vera went to the family of some relatives that gave her a good education. She finished school, spoke and wrote in Russian well and knew French a little. Vera never worked. She married Moishe Golfeld. He owned an inn and was quite a rich man. They didn't have any children. After the revolution Moishe was a cabman. He earned enough for a living. When the Patriotic war began in 1941 Moishe was called up to the army and was killed in the first months of the war. Aunt Vera was in the evacuation to Tashkent and later she returned to Kiev. She died in 1975. My grandmother had two other daughters after my mother. One of them died when she was 2 and another girl died at birth. My mother had few memories of her childhood., because her childhood ended very early when her mother died after giving birth to the 7th baby. This happened around 1905.

After my grandmother died the two younger girls were taken to their relatives' families. My grandfather Iosif sent the children to the relatives after my grandmother died. It was difficult for him to handle the children. He never remarried but he wasn't interested in his children. He died shortly after my grandmother's death – approximately in 1908. Vera went to a rich Jewish family but my mother wasn't so lucky– she came into the family of Luba and Natan. I know neither their family name nor in what kind of relation they were with our family. I only remember my mother telling me that they were kind people and were nice to her. My grandfather probably gave them some money. My mother, when speaking about him, used a Ukrainian saying: "After the mother died the father went blind" (meaning that fathers do not take responsibility after something happens to the mother). Luba and Natan were not rich and my mother actually got no education. She studied at the primary Jewish school (4 years). My mother spoke Russian with an accent and at home she always spoke Yiddish.

I know very little about this period of my mother's life. My mother and Aunt Vera told me about the horrible pogroms in Kiev in 1910. The two girls left Kiev and got to Chernobyl. Some Ukrainian acquaintances of Luba lived there and my mother and Aunt Vera waited there until the situation in Kiev calmed down.

After my grandfather died my mother inherited his shop and went to work at 16. It was a garment store. She also altered clothes, if necessary. She got married when she was 17. I don't know her first husband's first or last names, only that he was Jewish. When my mother was 18 in 1912 she gave birth to a girl. The cradles were tied to the ceiling then and the girl fell out of her cradle and died. She was only a few months old. When World War I began my mother's husband was called

up to the army. He fell ill with spotted fever there and died in 1914.

In 1915 my mother married a much older man. His name was Mikhail and his last name – Lvovich. They lived very well and loved each other dearly, but they didn't have any children. This was Mikhail's second marriage, his first wife died. Mikhail owned a bakery, located in their apartment. They lived in the basement in Yaroslavskaya Street in Podol. They had a big room and a kitchen. There was a big stove where Mikhail baked bread and rolls and bagels. They sold their products right from the window of their room. Besides, wholesale dealers came and bought huge trays filled with baked goods. Mikhail Lvovich was a religious Jew. He observed all traditions and rituals. At Pesach he had a permit to bake matzah and sell it. They did not bake bread during Pesach, of course.

After the revolution the authorities expropriated my mother's shop. But the bread trade was very profitable and supported them very well. Mikhail adored my mother; he was buying her gold jewelry and jewelry with precious stones and was hiding them in her wardrobe. When my mother found them and asked where they were from he answered that if they were in her wardrobe it meant that they belonged to her.

In 1933 there was famine in Ukraine. Although they had a bakery it was a difficult time for them. The farmers didn't have any grain so there wasn't anything to make the bread from. My mother had to take some of her jewelry to the Torgsin [the store where one could buy food products for hard currency and gold].

In 1933 my mother's husband Mikhail came down with spotted fever and died. My mother's housemaid, a plain Russian woman, informed the NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs) that my mother had plenty of gold. My mother did have quite a lot of golden jewelry. They took my mother to 15, Korolenko Street in Kiev where NKVD was located. Investigation officers threatened my mother and demanded that she give them her gold. They locked her in the basement with many rats. My mother yelled and cried, and in the morning when the officers came she promised to give them all gold that she had to get out of that basement. She went home and gave them everything. She only left her wedding ring. Therefore, after her second husband's death she became instantly impoverished.

My mother was a very beautiful and sociable woman. Her future husband was one her father's acquaintances. He proposed to her after my mother became a widow.

My father Samuil Lazarevich Napuh was 10 years younger than my mother. He was born in Ekaterinoslav (Dnepropetrovsk) in 1904. I have no information about his parents, and I know only their names. My grandfather's name was Yakov Napuh, and my grandmother's name was Freida. I knew little of my father. He perished during the Great Patriotic War and there was nobody else to tell me about his parents. I only know that they were very rich, like my mother's parents. My mother always said that my father hated Soviet power, which had deprived him of everything he had and made him as poor as everybody else. But this was the main slogan of the Soviet power and my father had to keep his conviction a secret. My father had had a wife and two sons before he married my mother. I don't know why he left his family, but at the time when he made a proposal to my mother he was a free man. When I grew up I asked my mother several times to help me find my stepbrothers. I needed someone to be close to so much. But my mother told me she didn't

know how to find them. Perhaps she just didn't want to know. My parents didn't have a wedding party, just a civil registration ceremony. After their wedding my father moved in my mother's apartment in Yaroslavskaya street. I was born there.

My father was an intelligent man, but I don't know what kind of education he had. He worked as a confectioner at the confectionery factory. He often brought me chocolate, cookies and sweets from the factory. We always had butter, milk and cocoa at home. My mother didn't work any longer outside the house. She had me already. And then my younger brother Mishenka was born in 1937. My mother gave him the name of her deceased husband Mikhail. My father had no objections as he respected her memories. My mother sewed a little at home. Her clients visited her, but my mother kept her business a secret even from her friends. She was afraid of financial officers. At Pesach my mother and my father baked matzah in the oven at home. She had been taught by Mikhail Lvovich. People brought their flour to our flat, and my parents made matzah for them, charging them a little for the service. By the way, my mother baked matszah after we returned from evacuation in 1945 and continued her little business. She was doing this until 1955 when the authorities forbade making matzah for sale.

I have dim memories of my father. I remember him pulling my sled in the snow with me on it. He bought me a 3-wheel bicycle – how happy I was! My kindergarten was not far from where we lived. I was dressed up as a snowflake at the New Years party and I danced in my snow-white tutu. I was happy. My parents and Mishenka (my brother) came to take me home. These were the happiest moments in my life. But our happiness did not last long.

On 22 June 1941 the Great Patriotic War began. I don't exactly remember this day, but I remember the bombing. The fascist planes were flying low over our houses – this was so frightful. My father was called up to the army practically on the first day of the war. My mother and I saw him off to the recruitment office. Uncle Moishe, Vera's husband, was there, too. They both were sent to the military units that were to defend Kiev. My father was killed during Kiev defensive operations on 12 September 1941. We heard about it after we returned from the evacuation.

We went to evacuation in July. My father insisted that we go. He must have known already that the Germans were exterminating Jews on the occupied areas. My father and Uncle Moishe put us on the train. My mother, my brother Misha and my mother's sister Vera and I were all together on this trip.

I remember a terrible bombing on our way. The train stopped suddenly. The bombers attacked. And Misenka and I were so scared that we ran to the fields and got lost. It took my mother a while to find us. I remember seeing dead people for the first time – they were killed during the bombing. They looked weird, with their bodies lying artificially like dolls. We arrived in Lugansk first in the Eastern Ukraine. We lived there for a month or two. We rented an apartment in a private house. All of a sudden Aunt Vera decided to go back to Kiev and made us go to the railway station. They told us at the railway station that we couldn't go to Kiev because the Germans were near Kiev and that trains didn't go in that direction. We got on the train and went further east in evacuation. I remember very little about our trip. I remember feeling hungry all the time. My mother got off at the stops to exchange clothes for food for Mishenka and me. I was older than Misha and I didn't show that I was hungry, but Mishenka cried all the time. We arrived in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan. My mother rented a room from the Uzbeks and went to work in the rice factory. Aunt

Vera stayed home. She arranged a small vegetable garden near our house. There was very little food and there was this constant feeling of being hungry. I remember getting into the neighbor's garden to pick some plums. Their dog attacked me and I've been afraid of dogs ever since. My little brother Mishenka died from hunger in 1942. I remember my mother crying and saying words of the Jewish prayers for the deceased. I didn't understand them. Our life was very hard.

We didn't receive letters from my father and Uncle Moishe and my mother understood that they were probably not alive. She didn't say this to me; she tried to cheer me up. In the evenings she made plans for our happy life in the future, when the war was over and we would be back at home. The Uzbek family that gave us shelter was nice to us but they couldn't be much support because they were starving, too. Later my mother learned to make some kind of toffees from flour and sugar. She went out to sell them. But unauthorized trade or commerce was not allowed in the country. The people that violated this order were called speculators (or profiteers). Once my mother was detained and taken to the militia (police) department. Later she sold fish that our Uzbek landlord was catching. Basically, my mother took each and every effort to support me. She was constantly worried about how she was going to tell her husband about Mishenka and that she had lost him.

We returned to Kiev in 1945 when the war was over. I remember my mother crying after she received the notification about my father's death. I didn't cry or grieve. I was probably too young and didn't quite understand what living without the father was going to be like.

We lived in our apartment in Yaroslavskaya Street. It wasn't occupied but there was a lot of garbage, dirt and rat excrement in it. We stayed with our friends (we were in the evacuation together) until our apartment was put in order. Later my mother bought some old furniture: a wardrobe, beds, a table and then we moved into our apartment.

My mother had to earn a living. Her acquaintances went to the villages to buy chicken, eggs and other products. They sold these at the market in Kiev. My mother accompanied them, helping them to carry these products to sell and they paid her for her services. I also received an allowance for my deceased father. This was all we had for a living.

In 1945 I started school. I was 9 years old and they took me to the 2nd grade. I had to study a lot to catch up with the class. There were Jewish, Ukrainian and Russian children there. I didn't feel any difference in the attitude of schoolchildren or teachers. Vice versa. Many of them sympathized with me because I was an orphan. There were many such children. Many children lost their father to the war and many families lost their relatives that stayed in Kiev during the occupation. Lisa, my mother's distant relative, and her family perished. They didn't want to go to the evacuation. They believed that the Germans wouldn't do any harm to the Jews. We would have suffered the same fate if my father hadn't made us to evacuate.

I was no different from the other children while I was at school. I was a pioneer and I studied well. But my mother was constantly telling me that Soviets expropriated all our family's property. She said if it hadn't been for the revolution we would have been very rich and wouldn't have to drag out this miserable existence. As a result, I didn't enter the Komsomol when I turned 14.

My mother and I were leading a very modest if not entirely poor existence. However, my mother always found a way to celebrate Saturday with a festive dinner. There were always candles and dinner on Saturday. My mother followed the kashruth – she had kosher kitchenware. We never had pork in the house. My mother prayed every day, went to the synagogue, celebrated the main holidays (Pesah, Purim, etc.) at home. We fasted at Yom Kippur. This was all kept a big secret from friends, acquaintances and neighbors. We were afraid that somebody would report on us to the authorities. I never went to the synagogue with my mother. Religion wasn't popular with the young people at that time. Atheist propaganda was very strong and influential. Only old and elderly people and those that were not afraid of persecution of the authorities went to the synagogue. Therefore, only very few people attended synagogue services. If somebody at school had found out that I went to a religious institution I would have had a problem. The synagogue was located at a remote neighborhood in the basement of a building.

I finished 8 years of school (lower secondary education) in 1953, just when Stalin died. I remember people crying. My mother said that he and all communists were to blame for all our troubles and he didn't deserve to be mourned for. After studying 8 years at school I went to work. I continued my studies in the evening school or school for working young people as they called it. Simultaneously I finished a shorthand and typewriting course.

I got a job of a typist at the Town Council. I remember buying a pair of patent leather shoes when I received my first salary. This was my dream, as before I always wore somebody else's hand-me-down shoes. But I worked there less than a year. They called me to the Human Resource Department and fired without an explanation. There was a single reason – that I was a Jew. After that I couldn't find a permanent job for a long while. I worked at the house maintenance department and helped my mother with sewing. Then finally I found a job at the Institute of Folklore, USSR Academy of Sciences. Maxim Rylskiy, a Ukrainian writer, was Director of this Institute. He was a very intelligent person and treated the Jews as brothers of the Ukrainian people. He didn't put any restrictions on hiring Jews and I got a job at this Institute. I was a typist at first and then was promoted to the position of Chief of the Typing Office. I worked there until I retired. We lived in our apartment in the basement until 1965 (the toilet and water were in the yard). Maxim Rylskiy helped me to receive an apartment. My mother died in 1972.

In 1958 I met Semyon Sholomovich Yasvoin. He was born in Kiev in October 1934 in a Jewish family of ordinary workers. My husband's family wasn't religious. As far as I know they didn't observe any traditions. My husband didn't even know the biggest Jewish holidays or how they were to be celebrated. His mother worked at a plant and his father had died before he was born. Semyon was in evacuation in Chimkent. He studied seven years at school and went to work as a laborer at a plant. Later he learned the trade of a butcher and got a job at the central market. He was earning more than at the plant. However, people often abused him, calling him "zhyd" (kike) and at the same time accusing Jews that they always fixed things for themselves in the best possible way for themselves but never for anyone else. Once Semyon lost his temper and threw himself onto the crowd of people holding his butcher's knife. He didn't injure anybody, of course. People called the police, but they hushed up the case.

In 1958 Semyon and I got married. We had a civil wedding ceremony. We didn't have a big wedding party, just a festive dinner with close relatives. My mother was very sorry that we couldn't

arrange a real Jewish wedding. At this time even attending the synagogue was to be kept a secret. But frankly speaking, at that time I was not so religious as shortly after the war. I was responsible for typing the books and articles of writers, poets and literature critics. They were all atheists and this had its influence on me.

In 1959 our son was born. I called him Sasha to keep the first letter from my father's name Samuil. Sasha finished secondary school and went to learn the profession of a cook. He grew up a typical Soviet boy, paying no special attention to his nationality. He faced anti-Semitism when he was in the army. He was in service in Moscow. The others called him "zhyd" all the time. He kept patient for some time, but then he lost his temper and fought back. He was beaten and was sent to hospital. The commanding officer of this military unit asked me to come to Moscow. I went and learned what happened. I talked with his offenders in such a manner that they stopped offending my son. I just threatened them – I don't know how. My instinct as a mother helped me, I suppose. The commanding officer didn't want the conflict to go further on and helped my son to terminate his service term in the army. My son returned home and worked in various companies for some time. Now he owns a store, selling spare parts for vehicles. My son is married for the second time. He has a son Maxim from his 1st marriage, born in 1983. Maxim works together with Sasha. My son doesn't have children in his second marriage.

We often argued about emigration in our family. My son and I always dreamt about moving to Israel. But my husband Semyon had always been dead against it. My husband always liked Soviet power. He came from a poor family and he thought that the Soviets gave him and his family a lot. That is why my son and I remain here today. We couldn't convince my husband to go, and who would have had the heart to leave him alone? Unfortunately, I've never been in Israel. I would love to visit this country, go to the historical Jewish and Christian places.

Sadly, my husband Semyon Yasvoin died in 1996. I would have a very hard time if it were not for my belief. When I was still working, religion attracted me. I wanted to read the Bible. In those years it wasn't easy to get one. When I felt an urge to read the Bible I got it very simply – a passer-by just offered me to buy it. I started reading Bible and I couldn't tear myself from it. I didn't go to work for a week. I told them I was ill. Then I began to look for the religion that I would feel comfortable with – I wanted to remain Jewish on one hand and believe in Christ on the other. I found such religion – Judo-messianic. I know that the official Judaism is against my religion. I even met with Jacob Bleich, the rabbi of Ukraine. He listened to me and understood that I was a convinced believer and he neither argued with me nor tried to make me change my mind.

My son and his wife don't understand my religion and this causes almost constant friction and conflict. But I think that my belief helps me in my life and helps me to be kind to the people. I identify myself as a Jew and I love my people. I think that Christ is the son of the Jewish people and it helps me to believe in him. I attend the Jewish Culture Community, the Hesed Jewish charity center and Jewish concerts. I read Jewish newspapers, but I believe that Christ is the Messiah. It doesn't do any harm, does it?

[She needed a belief to find peace and consolation and reason in life. Her Jewish experiences played its part in it. She learned that a person could hold to religion when looking for some spiritual support and that religion could teach a person to love other people and to be more understanding and tolerant in everyday life]