

Maria Rolnikayte

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St. Petersburg

Russia

Interviewer: Olga Vladimirova

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Maria Grigoryevna Rolnikayte lives together with her husband in a cozy two-room apartment in one of the new districts of Saint Petersburg.

*Before the interview, she strongly recommended to read the book *This Is the Truth* written by her. One of its parts is called *I Have to Tell You This*. In point of fact it is a diary Maria Grigoryevna kept being in Vilnius ghetto and later in 2 fascist concentration camps. The book was published all over the world in many languages. It gives all people an opportunity to get to know terrible truth of those days.*

From the very beginning of our meeting we are astonished at Maria's strength of mind and courage. You can judge about it from her appearances, from every word and opinion of her. She is a person of affability, humor, and great interest to outward things.

Maria often appealed to the facts recorded in her book: she did not want to tell terrible details of her life again, because (according to her) each of those memoirs left its mark on her.

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My family background

Unfortunately I know nothing about my great-grandfathers and great-grandmothers. I know only that they all came from Lithuania. Daddy used to say that his grandfather was a water carter, but possibly it was a joke. Most of my relatives lived in the small shtetl Plunge near Klaypeda.

[Klaypeda is the third large city in Lithuania, it is situated near the Baltic sea on both sides of the River Dane]. I remember that my paternal grandmother's name was Hana Rolnikene.

My paternal grandfather's name was Itsik Abel Rolnik. In Polish rolnik means a farmer, but as far as I know there were no farmers among our family members. He was an old religious Jew wearing beard and observing traditions. He was an owner of a small shop. My grandmother Hana was very vigorous and witty. She gave birth to 10 children and brought all of them up. Unfortunately not all of her children survived: some of them died before the war. At the beginning their shop was very small: buttons, ribbons, etc. (dry goods). Later they added fabrics and finished articles.

Grandmother told me that under the counter she had a wooden bucket (where women used to wash linen). In that bucket she kept her baby, she rocked that makeshift cradle with her foot and sold goods at the same time. The only break she had was a short time in small pantry to breast-feed her baby. That was the way she brought up her children!

My grandfather was religious: he attended synagogue. By nature he was very silent and sedate, and my grandmother (on the contrary) was very witty. Here is an example. She had got a brother who lived in the neighboring city. He used to send her letters, but wrote a miserable scratch. Therefore my grandmother sent him the following message: come to our place and read your letter!

In 1938 the shop passed into the hands of my uncle Berl (my father's brother). Grandmother did not rely on his ability to be engaged in commerce; therefore she poked fun at him: 'After my death, make a small hole in my coffin, so that I will be able to watch you doing without me.' In 1940 the shop was nationalized and my grandmother could not stand it. That shop was her brainchild and they dared to take it away from her. Authorities took away everything, so when my uncle left the shop for ever, he was carrying in his hands a worn through teapot (they used it to water the floor while sweeping). He said 'This is the only thing we possess now.' Grandmother died on January 3, 1941. And nationalization campaign was finished by autumn of 1940 (when Lithuania became a Soviet Republic [1](#)). She died in her sleep from cerebral haemorrhage. At that time she was 64 years old. Her heart was so strong that relatives had time to send for Daddy and other sons. They arrived and had time to pay the last tribute to her. Daddy made a speech during the funeral, though it was not customary. He spoke about her merits, about what relatives were grateful to her for.

Grandmother and grandfather sent my father to cheder, when he became 12 years old. It was situated in the neighboring small town. But Daddy quickly got disappointed in it and came home afoot. Later he finished a secondary school and went to Riga to study in gymnasia. Parents were able to buy him a black suit and a tie and that was all. He went to Riga having no money. Therefore Daddy worked as a porter and as a loader. When his trousers became full of holes, he made patches from his tie. He managed to finish that gymnasia in Riga (for some reason it appeared to be a Russian gymnasia). Daddy decided to become a lawyer and study at a university in Germany. He sent 12 applications to 12 universities and received 12 refusals. Nevertheless he left for Berlin and managed to press for an audience with one of rectors.

It is funny that a postage stamp played the decisive role in the way he became a student. Daddy came to that rector, said that he was from Lithuania and wanted to enter the University. The rector asked 'Are you from Lithuania? Recently we had differences with my colleague regarding Lithuania and Latvia. Is it the same state?' Daddy answered that it was not true, that he had a letter from his parents with a stamp of Lithuania. After that the rector allowed Daddy to become an external student. Later he passed through examinations and became an internal student. He studied in Berlin and Leipzig. He graduated from the faculty of law and later from the College of German Language and Literature which prepared teachers of German language and literature for foreigners. I asked him 'Daddy, what for?' And he answered 'It was very interesting for me.' But the knowledge of German language appeared to be very useful, because later we got a nanny from Germany and she spoke German with us. It is useful for me now, too (many years later). Some time ago it seemed to me that I forgot everything. But when they published my book in Germany, I went there and spoke poor German, but managed to answer questions. By the way I read my manuscript

in Yiddish (according to their request).

Mom was a housewife. She had four children and trembled over us like every Jewish mother. Her name was Tayber Koganayte.

I can't recall my Mom's father, but I remember her mother. Unfortunately I can't recollect her name. She was very religious. She lived in Telshe, but when she visited us, she used to be sitting and praying all the time. She also was very displeased if we broke rules during Shabbath. My mother's father died before I was born, his surname was Kogan.

Growing up

I was born in 1927 in Klaypeda.

In my childhood I liked to sing and wanted to become a singer. I sang so much that even had got problems with my throat. I also wrote verses. At the age of 9 I decided to write a novel and bought a thick writing-book. I called my novel Destiny and wrote the name on the book cover. I started with funeral ceremony of a countess: carriages, black curtains, etc. But I gave it up quickly. Anyway I wanted to write all the time. At school we used to have albums where we wrote rhymes to each other. I remember my verses (it is still a pleasure for me): when you become an old woman and an old man is beside you, put on your glasses and read these words. In Lithuanian it was rhymed and sounded well. I also kept a diary since my childhood.

We had a housemaid, though Mom did not work. Sunday was the housemaid's day off; therefore we (together with my elder sister Miriam, who was 3 years older than me) had to clean our rooms ourselves. Being rather little, we had to wash, iron and sew white collars and cuffs to our school uniform. We also were obliged to clean our footwear. If we got up late, our housemaid helped us, but later she terrorized us 'I'll give a report to your Daddy!'

Daddy kept an order everywhere. Mom's chief concern was to feed us. And Daddy used to say 'We have got bread, butter, tomatoes, and salt.' He also told us that we (girls) had to get prepared for future life, to learn to cook from Mom. Daddy worked alone, therefore his financial situation was not very good: he had got 4 children, his family also had a housemaid. I had a younger brother Ruvel (he was born in 1934) and a younger sister Raya (she was born in 1936). When somebody asked Daddy why he had so many children, he always answered he was waiting for a son.

I visited a Jewish kindergarten and later a Jewish junior high school. In 1940 it was closed and I became a pupil of a Lithuanian grammar school. But at home we spoke only Yiddish. I still can write in Yiddish. In ghetto and in fascist concentration camps I kept my diary in Yiddish. Till now I always indicate in different forms that my mother tongue is Yiddish, though I astonish people around me. During the general census [that all-Union national census was carried out in 1989] they asked me about my mother tongue and I said it was Jewish. The employee was surprised and noticed that my husband and I spoke Russian. I explained that we spoke Russian because he was not able to speak Yiddish. The employee was surprised that I knew 3 languages: Yiddish, Lithuanian and Russian. I am not sure that he wrote it down, because filling the questionnaire he used a pencil, and nobody knows what was written there later.

We studied at Lithuanian grammar school together with my sister. At that time people observed traditions and respected religious neighbors. There were manifestations of anti-Semitism (some

people blamed Jews for nailing Christ to the cross), but state anti-Semitism did not exist. For instance every Saturday in our grammar school we had the right not to fulfill written tasks, teachers did not ask us. We knew that during the main Jewish holidays we were allowed not to go to school.

At that time at schools pupils were taught religion (before the communists came to power). In our classroom a crucifix hang above the blackboard. In the morning our teacher used to come into the classroom, turn his face to the crucifix and pray. All pupils prayed, too (except us). And after the last lesson the teacher also ordered pupils to pray. A pupil on duty had to say grace. For me it was always funny to listen to Te Deum, if the pupil on duty managed to have got bad marks that day.

They taught us basics of Jewish religion, too (each Friday). All pupils from the 1st till the 8th form had to study it. One day I clashed with the teacher of religion, because he got to know that my father was not religious at all. Moreover during Sabbath he saw my Daddy going home in a cab. So it caused a scandal and the teacher refused to give me a good mark. According to rules, in that case I was not allowed to be moved up into the next form. By the way I was an excellent pupil (only Art lessons were difficult for me). A Roman Catholic priest was our form-master, therefore I went to him. He ordered me to learn by heart several sacred songs. I sang them and he gave me an excellent mark. The conflict was settled.

When a schoolgirl, I made friends with a daughter of Burgomaster. I remember our teacher of French language. She was a real lady, she visited Paris every year. We (girls) watched her dresses very attentively. You remember that Daddy prepared us for studying in Paris and taught us French at home. I was an advanced learner in compare with our school program. Therefore when our French teacher was too lazy to teach us, she said 'Rolnikayte, read and translate.' Lithuanian language also came easy to me (other languages, too). In general I studied without special difficulties. I know a Jewish saying: she could do homework standing on one foot. You know, I was able to stand on one foot and write. Once Daddy came home and saw me lying on the sofa (my feet on the wall) and learning history.

In Russian there are 2 different words: a Jew and a Zhid. And in Lithuanian, as well as in Polish, they have only Zhid. Recently, my former classmate's husband said '...and a person of your Nationality'. I corrected him: Zhid. I understood that he wanted to show himself an internationalist. He was afraid to hurt my feelings, but I corrected him. I never concealed my Nationality.

However at school I identified myself as a Jewess. For instance, in Lithuanian language accentuation is very important. If a person makes wrong accent in a word (especially in numerals), it means that he speaks poor Lithuanian. Our teacher dictated, and we had to catch the words by ear, and the accent was very important! And I managed: I wrote by ear. I was the only pupil in our class who used to get excellent marks. And our teacher said about me 'Lithuanian is not her mother tongue, but she writes better than all of you.' So you see that sometimes we realized that we were different. But nobody told it to our face.

Daddy trusted us. In Plunge there was only one car with a driver, and a lot of cab drivers. Our grammar school was situated far from our house (almost in suburb), near the cemetery. It was frightful to come back home in the evening, and Daddy gave us money to hire a cab. He only asked us to come back together. My sister was already grown-up, and they (young ladies) were going and discussing something, while I had to follow them silently.

I had a program in my mind: to go to Paris together with my sister and enter a University there. My sister was 3 years older than me. I had to work hard at school, but sometimes I stayed on a skating rink too long or spent too much time with my friend. In that case Daddy used to say 'When you come to Sorbonne, they will ask you questions. What will you answer? I guess you will tell them only what your Tsyпка knows.' For some reason he called my friend Tsyпка! But he never punished me or moralized. When we were going to be late home from different parties, we never told lies. And Daddy never ordered us to come back at a certain time, he only waited for us. I guess he did not sleep and waited till the door opened.

Of course when Soviets came to power, we had to forget about Sorbonne. By the way my grandmother was already going to give money for our studies, and my uncle who lived in France was ready to find a cheap boarding house in Paris for my sister and me. But our plans failed. Under Communists our life changed completely.

Regarding Jewish traditions, it was my grandfather who observed them especially strictly. Therefore we celebrated Pesach and I always asked those 4 questions. After that I used to get 1 kg of nuts. Together with my grandmother we lighted Sabbath candles. And though Mom was not very religious (as well as Daddy), she observed kashrut: separated meat and dairy food. And when my grandfather visited us, he used to drink tea only with jam, because glasses were considered to be not for dairy and not for meat. Together with my grandmother we went to synagogue, and I saw that men and women were separated there. Grandmother prayed. When on Rosh Hashanah blowing of the shofar opened the sky to let people's requests go straight there, everybody cried, and my sister and I did not understand the reason. During Yom Kippur Jews prayed in memory of dead people and grandmother did not allow me and my sister to be present in the synagogue. By the way, in ghetto there was no synagogue, only an apartment for praying. And rabbi forbade praying in memory of Jews taken by fascists to Ponary [2](#). He considered it to be a sin, because some of them could be alive! Sometimes it happened that after execution by shooting some Jews remained alive, got out from under corpses and came back in ghetto. At first fascists fired without aiming and people fell down only wounded. But later they gave an order to cover ditches with burnt lime, so that no one was able to get out.

My father's brother Berl worked in that shop we already spoke about. My aunt (his younger sister) got married in Riga and was killed there in ghetto. Her husband was shot among the first Jewish men. She had got 2 children (one of them was a baby), therefore she could not work. They died there from starvation. Much later 2 women from Riga ghetto told us about her.

Another father's brother was Mikhey. He finished his grammar school and left for Paris knowing nothing about French language. His first letters were very sad and melancholic. But a year later he entered Sorbonne. He was very talented. Later he became a well-known lawyer and all his colleagues were surprised that he was not French: by that time he spoke excellent French. In 1938 he managed to arrive to the wedding ceremony of his sister. He crossed Germany to reach Riga, and we all worried about him, because Hitler was already in power.

My uncle Berl (the shop owner) was exiled to Siberia [3](#) together with his family. They managed to get back only in 1956 or 1957. Later my uncle, my aunt and their daughter died. Their son lives in Israel now.

Plunge was a very nice small town! There was a large park of prince Oghinsky (relative of that composer Oghinsky, an author of the famous polonaise). The park was open for everyone. In the park there was a skating rink, where we used to skate. There were a lot of trees in the town.

When Hitler came to power, they broadcasted his speech. As radio receiver was only in our house, neighbors came to us to listen it. And the nanny of my little brother (a local Lithuanian girl) did not understand Hitler and used bad words, because Hitler disturbed the child who wanted to sleep.

Daddy was very sorry that we lived in a small town Plunge, a country town. He wanted us to get good education of European level. But in 1940 according to Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact [4](#) Vilnius became Lithuanian, and we moved there. And it saved our lives, because later during occupation (during the war time) 1,800 Jews of Plunge were gathered in the synagogue, taken out of town to a cemetery for atheists and executed by shooting. Fascists suggested Jews to deny Judaism to save their lives.

Some young people did, but nevertheless all of them were shot. In Plunge there is a monument on the place of execution. Certainly it were relatives of those Jews who gathered money for it, and Soviet authorities of Plunge permitted it. Inscription on the monument was written in Yiddish, Lithuanian and Russian languages.

Before the war our family was rather large. But my grandfather, the grandmother's sister, her husband with two daughters, and my father's cousin perished in Plunge. My uncle (my mother's brother) was killed in a small town Telshe. [Telshe is a town in Lithuania, situated 200 km far from Vilnius.] When Jews of Telshe were carried to the place of execution, he managed to escape. But fascists caught him and shot individually, so to say. They forced him to dig a grave for himself. Later some Lithuanians (witnesses) told us that he had gone mad: he understood that he was digging a grave for himself and went crazy (but it is impossible to be proved). And my aunt (his wife and 2 daughters) were killed in Shaulay ghetto. [Shaulay is a town in Lithuania.]

Daddy counted 49 members of our family lost during the war: his and mother's cousins, sisters, children ...

In our family only Daddy (he was at the front line), my elder sister Miriam and I survived. Miriam was in the Vilnius ghetto [5](#), but she managed to survive.

In September 1943 hitlerites retreated and the Red Army approached Smolensk. At that time Miriam managed to escape from the ghetto. She hoped to find some kind people to hide her or make false documents for her. She even hoped to help us (her family) out of the ghetto. At that time the situation in the ghetto was rather calm, but soon hitlerites appeared there. They read out the order of Gestapo chief about evacuation of Jews from the Vilnius ghetto. Jews had to be moved to 2 camps for work: one in Estonia, another one in Lithuania. Evacuation went off very quickly: everything was finished in 4 hours. Therefore I knew nothing about Miriam until 1945.

During the war

On June 22, 1941 the war [6](#) burst out. The same day Vilnius was bombed. The Soviet army started its running fight. Hitlerites were just about to occupy the city. My parents knew that fascists hated the Jews. Besides they had another reason for anxiety: my father had cooperated with the Soviet authorities. Parents decided to leave for some place far inland, where invaders would not reach us.

Father went to buy tickets, and we (Mom and 4 children) remained at home waiting for him. We waited very long, watching people with their belongings, Soviet tanks, motor vehicles walking and driving by our windows. At last we decided to move to the railway station to find Dad. At the station we got to know that there would be no more trains: it was a terrible misfortune. People informed each other about the last train which had been destroyed recently by bombing immediately after its departure. We did not find Dad and decided to walk out of the city hoping to catch a car. But it appeared to be a hard task to walk being languid with the heat (children of 5 and 7 years old did not manage). So we walked some time, and then went back. There we found out that in our absence Daddy came home and left again to search a car. Fascist armies entered the city that very night. Daddy did not return.

One of the first orders of the new authority was the order they posted up on the restaurants and cafe doors: 'No Jews allowed'. I went to our school to receive the school-leaving certificate of my elder sister Mira, and other documents. The school was dirty and ruined. A boy from the 9th grade approached me and said 'Get out! Stop stinking at our school!' But at that moment Yonaytis, our teacher called me. He shook hands with me, asked me what I came for, went to the school office together with me, and helped me to find the school-leaving certificate and our birth-certificates. That person did much for us later (when we were in the ghetto). He gave us food and money, risking his life.

Soon hitlerites put into use their own money and ordered to check in all radio receivers. Later they ordered every Jew to wear a special sign: a yellow square and a circle with letter J inside it. Together with Mom we made those signs out of an old yellow coverlet. Jews were obliged to bring to the commandant's office money, gold goods and other jewelry. But there came more frightening news: armed patrols arrested men in the city streets and put them into prison. At first people thought that from prison men were carried away to Ponary (to a labor camp), but soon we found out that there was no camp there, in Ponary people were executed by shooting.

On July 21, a month after Germans came to Vilnius I reached the age of 14. I put on a blue silk dress (no sign on it!) and seemed to be so beautiful! Beginning of the war was the end of my childhood. Only my diary connected me with my previous life. I kept my diary being a schoolgirl (it was in fashion!) and I went on doing it during the war. In the ghetto there was shortage of paper, but we used to occupy old apartments and it was possible to find some old writing-books. One day I was presented an accounting book, and I was happy to find blank pages in it! At present I am surprised that at that time nobody laughed at me when I tried to be a chronicler. On the contrary, my relatives used to ask me 'Masha, have you written about it?' We all slept together on the floor near the window. I hold my notes on the window-sill. Mom often said 'Learn it by heart! Your notes will repeat your fate.'

The next order of fascists forbade Jews to use sidewalks (they were allowed to move only along roadways) and all kinds of transport, including cabs.

On September 6, 1941 fascists enclosed several narrow streets in the city center and moved all inhabitants away. Jews were forced to move to their houses. That was the way Vilnius ghetto appeared. Our family also moved there. We lived penned up together with other families: 18 persons in a small room. There was not enough place to sleep. A girl slept on the table, another one slept under the table. There was a girl who had to sleep in the bath. Mom started working at a

sewing workshop. We were given ration cards and received only 125 grammes of bread and some black peas per day. It was forbidden to bring food into the ghetto. If somebody did, it could cost him his head.

In the ghetto fascists often carried out special actions: i.e. taking people for executions. In autumn of 1941 those actions were the most mass ones: 3-5 thousand people were executed during every action. And later when only the necessary number of handicraftsmen remained in the ghetto, they started terrifying people by unexpected searches. Soldiers rushed into any apartment and arranged a search. They did their best to find clothes without the yellow star, bread baked differently (in the ghetto they made special bread that looked like clay). If they found it, they immediately took all inhabitants of the apartment away. Certainly nobody ever saw them again.

Some news from the front line seldom reached us. With great pleasure we got to know that Germans ran away from Moscow and already left Kalinin [a city near Moscow, now Tver]. The German army suffered heavy losses and its soldiers suffered from frost very much. Therefore hitlerites decided to dress warmly at our expense: they ordered us to bring to the commandant's office all fur coats, fur collars and fur cuffs. And again death penalty was promised for those who refused.

The ghetto was some sort of a small state. In the ghetto there were different offices responsible for distribution of ration cards and rooms (or rather corners in the rooms). There was a special department taking care of orphans (several boarding schools were organized). There were schools and even a grammar school for children, but it was half empty: not because there were no children, but because they all had to work. There were a prison, a hospital, a drugstore with a poor set of medicines. In the ghetto there was even an underground organization which fought against fascism. One day 3 activists of that organization I. Kaplan, A. Khvoynik and A. Big got to know about liquidation of the ghetto and decided to leave for the forest through a drain-pipe. But unfortunately they lost their way underground and got out in the city center. Soldiers seized them and hang. When my book was ready for the first publication, the editor said 'People you named were not listed as partisans, eliminate this episode.' - 'But they were the organization members' I insisted. But nothing could move him 'Tomorrow they will come to ask for a special pension!' - 'Do not worry, they will not come: fascists hang them' I calmed him. But at that time I could not think about the future book and even about my possible survival.

Persecutions of fascists knew no limit. One day they took all old men away from the ghetto. They said they wanted to bring them to a recreation house to feed and treat. Relatives became suspicious and refused to let them go. But old people were taken away by force. They were really fed well and photographed during the first 2 days. And then they all were executed by shooting.

In the spring I found a job. For the most part we worked outside the ghetto. At first I worked on the fields of an old rich person. I had to carry hundred buckets of water a day to water plants. Later I started working at a knitting workshop, where women added fingers to gloves by knitting. Later I went to a furniture factory to polish skis.

That was they way we lived in the ghetto: dying from starvation and cold, and waiting for death. It seems strange, but in the ghetto there was a chorus. I was its member. We sang in Hebrew and in Yiddish. The head of the chorus also created a symphonic orchestra. Very few musicians survived: they were considered to be the least useful and fascists killed them first of all. But nevertheless the

orchestra appeared and together with chorus prepared the Beethoven's Ninth symphony for performance.

With great pleasure we got to know that hitlerites went into mourning for 3 days: they grieved about their armies defeated near Stalingrad. Later we knew from rumors that Kharkov [now Kharkiv, Ukraine], Rostov-on-Don and many other cities had been liberated. But all those cities were situated so far from Vilnius!

People got to know that in the neighboring shtetls hitlerites shot about 3 thousand local Jews. A lot of partisan groups appeared in the neighboring woods, therefore hitlerites were afraid that local Jews would certainly contact them. So they decided to execute a part of the Jews, and to move the rest of them to the Vilnius or Kaunas ghetto. But later they changed their mind and killed all of them! Only a few men managed to escape; they penetrated into our ghetto and told us how those Jews were shot in the wood near the large holes dug beforehand.

At that time my sister Mira managed to escape from the ghetto. Some kind people promised to hide her. Soon all inhabitants of the ghetto lost their jobs. The ghetto became completely isolated from the world. But nevertheless from rumors we got to know that at the Vilnius railway station there appeared an inscription JUDENFREI (it meant that the city was free from Jews). But in fact we were still alive! We understood that the countdown had begun.

One September evening all inhabitants of the ghetto were informed that they would be evacuated to two working camps: in Estonia and in Lithuania. Evacuation would last only 1 day. They permitted to take a small number of clothes with us.

My brother Ruvel learned to read in the ghetto. He was very proud of it, and used to say that Daddy would be pleased. Ruvel was afflicted that we were going to take only clothes (no books). 'What shall I read there?' he asked. Mom answered 'You will read when we get our liberty.'

At last we got ready to leave. There were lots of people in the streets. The crowd was gloomy. Together with other people we reached the ghetto gates and went out. After a while we reached a ravine and were ordered to stop. There the large crowd of people spent a night in the rain. Next day hitlerites ordered people to get out from the ravine. They let people out through the gate one by one, and Mom ordered me to go first. A soldier seized me and pushed aside. Mom and two children remained behind the gate. I tried to get back to my family and suddenly I heard that Mom begged the soldier not to let me back in. She said that I was young and could work well. Then she shouted to me 'Live, my child! At least you alone!' And she lifted children a little so that I could see them. And I saw them. For the last time in my life!

1,700 people including me were moved to the railway station and took aboard the train. We arrived in a concentration camp near Shaulay.

My camp life began, however it could hardly be called a life. Newcomers were given clothes. I got a silk ball-dress. It was decorated with an artificial red flower and had very low neckline. Long time passed until I managed to get a needle and alter the dress a little. I worked at the building site: I had to peck stones off and push heavy tubs full of stones. We suffered from terrible starvation, persecution and beating; we felt pain of death. In the camp there was an inscription 'You do not live to work, you work to live'. Hitlerites arranged the so called selections, i.e. sorting of people for

subsequent execution. Till now I do not understand why I remained alive: they were going to kill everyone younger than 18 and older than 30. I was 17, but probably there was some mistake in the card index. In the meantime Soviet armies were already near Riga: we heard explosions and bombardments and saw airplanes flying in the sky. We hoped to be liberated soon, but instead Germans forced us to move to Germany (to Stutthof). They transported us by a military steamship (it was loaded with some equipment) - in the cold.

Stutthof concentration camp was one of the oldest: it was built by Polish railwaymen as early as in 1938-1939. The camp reminded a market of slaves, because owners of farms used to come there. We had to strip to the skin and walk by employers showing our muscles. We were covered with abscesses because of terrible starvation. I said in German 'Ich bin stark (I am still strong)' and showed my muscles though there was nothing to be shown. A nearly blind old farmer looked at me and took me to his farm. There I worked about 4 months. I slept in the pigsty together with pigs. The owner locked us at night, we had no days off. But at the same time I was lucky to get there: it was possible to eat some potatoes from the pigs' ration without the owner's knowledge. He gave us a loaf of bread for a week and used to warn 'If you work badly, I'll send you not back to the camp, but directly to a crematorium.'

In November after harvesting we got back to the camp. We did not leave camp for work because of typhus epidemic. We got to know that there was fire in the gas chamber, therefore hitlerites poisoned the so-called soup (it was something like warm water, and it was a fortune to find a small slice of rotten cabbage in it) they fed us with. They did not give us enough water, therefore we ate dirty snow. So I got ill with typhus, too. But after a while I got better (by a miracle!). My neighbors told me that when I was lying on the floor unconscious, I sang loudly and abused Germans left and right. I felt ashamed: 'My Daddy is a lawyer, nobody in our family used bad language...'

Suddenly when all of us lost hope to survive, Germans ordered to evacuate those who could walk to another camp. I was not able to walk, but I knew that those who did not endure torture would be killed. And I crawled out. And I walked. It was the road of death. My companions in misfortune supported me; they said that it was a pity to leave such a young girl. On our way we managed to perceive snow-covered bunkers full of potatoes or beet. Neither kicks nor shots could stop us. We fell down, raked snow aside by benumbed hands, broke off the ground and snatched beet away. When we left, several prisoners remained on the snow killed. We spent nights in sheds en route. My feet swelled up. I was afraid to take off my boots... Later we understood that Germans took us away from the advancing Red Army.

One night we were put into a huge shed or a stable. In the deep of night we heard that someone was hammering on the door 'Hey, women, get out, Red Army is here!' At first nobody believed, we thought it was a provocation: Germans wanted to force us run out and kill by shooting in the back. Nobody of 700 women moved. The voice continued 'If you are so silly, go on sitting here!' And he disappeared. It seemed to us unbelievable! That soldier told tank crews about us. They used a tank to break the door, and women ran away from the shed. I could not walk, could not get myself up. I was lying on the floor and waiting to be trampled underfoot. At last Red Army men came into the shed. They lifted me and carried me to the village in their arms. I embraced them and started crying (for the first time!). Tears were rolling down my cheeks. One of those soldiers said 'Do not cry, sister, we will stand up for you!' And I had only one idea: I survived! It happened on March 10, 1945.

When I returned to Vilnius from the concentration camp (in 1945), I saw the city in ruins. I had no problems with my neighbors. At my work (I was an editor at the Vilnius Municipal Arts Department) my chief Banaytis was a very decent person and he paid attention to my emotional experience regarding my nationality. He said 'Don't worry, here we pay no attention to nationalities.' I didn't come across any manifestations of anti-Semitism. Among my colleagues there was a chief accountant - a Jew, a chief manager - also a Jew. My next job I got at the State Vilnius Philharmonic Society: there were many Jews, Poles, Lithuanians. Their hatred against Russians forced them to be nice to local Jews.

After the war

When I returned to Vilnius after all ordeals of the war time, I met Daddy in the street by chance. He already knew that Miriam remained alive. After the war she became a student of the Faculty of Law at the Vilnius University.

Now she lives in Klaypeda. Her husband tragically died: he drowned when she was 39 years old. She has got 2 sons and 5 granddaughters. And she still works (notwithstanding her age). Together with her children my sister visits our town Plunge every year on July 18 (the day of execution of Jews in Plunge).

Unfortunately after the end of the war Daddy lost hope that his wife and children Raya and Ruvel remained alive. All that hastened his death. I guess he was unhappy. Half a year before his death he left his work, because a doctor said 'If you go on working you will fall down dead!'

After the end of the war we spent a lot of time in Palanga together with Daddy. He often recollected the past. Once he reminded that when we were children, he got ill, but nevertheless (having running temperature) went to his office to work, because he wanted to show us the necessity of struggle, the necessity of work. I said that at that time we understood nothing. Daddy also often explained to us that it was very important for a person to become educated. Again, at that time I could not understand him. When Hitler came to power, I thought it was only important to have a rifle in your hands.

Daddy considered a hospital and a prison to be places where people can live. He was full of humor. I also started with comic stories. When my first book was published in Moscow, Misha Raytiz, a winner of Lenin premium wrote a foreword to my book. [Lenin premium in the USSR was one of the highest forms of encouragement of citizens for their achievements in the field of science, technique and arts. Lenin premium was awarded annually since 1925.]

My second book was published in 1967. I also made translation of Sayanov's play. He was a writer, a winner of Stalin premium. [Stalin premium in the USSR was one of the highest forms of encouragement of citizens for their achievements in the field of science, technique and arts. Stalin premium was awarded annually since 1939.] At that time all books of writers who were awarded Stalin premium, had to be translated into languages of the USSR republics. While translating, I suffered much, because my Russian was poor (I never learnt it). Sometimes I could not find author's words in the dictionary. But nevertheless I managed to translate it and presented the play at the entrance exams at the Literary College. I became its student.

Regarding the first manifestations of state anti-Semitism, I can mention murder of Solomon Mikhoels [7](#).

I also remember that at that time a murdered girl was found. It was so terrible for me that I decided not to use municipal transport but to walk everywhere I needed, because I was afraid to be beaten black and blue by passengers: they said that the girl was killed by Jews who took her blood to make matzot. It was really terrible.

I wrote an article for Literaturnaya newspaper. [Literaturnaya newspaper was a weekly literary and political edition in the USSR.] I named that article Whither Goest Thou? There I wrote that one fine day during the war Soviet soldiers liberated prisoners of a concentration camp and carried me out of it in their arms. They said 'Don't cry, sister, we will never let you be offended.' So after a time I became a companion-in-arms of enemies of people, murderers and cosmopolitans. My last sentence was the following 'Why are you silent now? You promised never let me be offended, but keep silence now.' Of course, by that time those soldiers were rather elderly, but in fact their children and grandchildren could be among skinheads.

On January 27 a radio reporter called me and invited to participate in broadcast program (I was recommended by Radio Liberty [8](#) reporters, where I gave a talk several times). I came there: it appeared to be rather strange broadcasting station situated in a one-room apartment. The reporter explained that for the most part they worked for seamen, therefore they broadcasted at night (from 1 till 2 o'clock a.m.). It was the day of liberation (but that reporter seemed to me to know nothing about the Holocaust), the day of raising the blockade of Leningrad. The reporter said 'How shall I introduce you to our listeners?'

'I am a prose writer and a former prisoner of the ghetto and two concentration camps.' (I didn't like to tell everybody that I am a member of the Union of Soviet Writers, because I consider Chekhov [9](#) and Dostoevsky [10](#) to be writers, not me). [Union of Soviet Writers was the organization of professional writers of the USSR.] He answered 'What?' And I understood that he knew nothing about the ghetto. He invited me to the microphone and asked to tell about myself. I started from German occupation and when I mentioned the ghetto he said 'Will you please explain to our listeners what the ghetto was.'

I explained, but realized that I was explaining it not only to the audience, but to the reporter, too. Then he asked me 'And what were you dressed in?' - 'Don't you know that we wore prison clothes, the stripes.' - 'Did they give prisoners underwear?' - 'It was difficult to call that sacking underwear.'

And he understood that it was better to ask me no more questions. I finished my monologue and started coughing, therefore the reporter suggested me a cup of tea. We moved to the kitchen. He said that I looked youthful, though I had suffered so much. Then he asked me the following 'Tell me about sanitary conditions in the camp.' - 'What are you talking about, I wonder? As for me, four days I was unconscious and then crawled out of the barrack to wash my face with dirty snow beside it.' - 'Did you receive any medical assistance, for instance aspirin?'

At that moment I was absolutely drooped with that aspirin! I said 'Why are you talking about aspirin, if a gas chamber and a crematorium functioned round the clock. People were brought there to die!!!'

So I left that broadcasting station and it seemed to me that I had swallowed a toad. That reporter was about 30 years old, he was a journalist, but he asked me if they gave prisoners aspirin in a concentration camp! Do you know who helped me in that situation?! It was a German journalist from Austria, he called me 2 or 3 days later. He lived in Graz (our executioner Franz Mourer was from Graz, too). That journalist told me that he knew about Mourer, that he was an executioner in the Vilnius ghetto. By the way in the Austrian edition of my book there is an epilogue which contains the following words 'This book requires an epilogue from an Austrian, because the majority of the mentioned executioners were Austrians.' That journalist was present at the legal proceedings against Mourer. He said that the audience sympathized with Mourer, because most of them were from SS-Verfügungstruppe.

That German journalist spoke excellent Russian. He told me that death notice of Mourer (about 10 years ago) was rather respectful. The journalist wanted to unmask Mourer (at least posthumously). Therefore he was searching for an eye-witness. In the Internet he found information about my book and decided to visit me. I gave him a photo of Mourer and two orders of him regarding prohibitions for Jews.

In the USSR I had to take care of my books myself. I used to go to the main bookshop of Leningrad and ASK them to take my books for sale. At first they allowed me to bring 5 books. Later I called them and asked their permission to bring another 10. And the goods manager told me apologizing that the new director ordered to take only 5 books from authors. She added that if the books were not sold during 2 months, they would be returned to the author.

On the Victory day [11](#) I was invited to speak at a meeting of two generations. The hall was divided into two parts: the former citizens of the besieged Leningrad [12](#) and the former prisoners on the one side and schoolchildren on the other one. The presenter asked me to prepare autographed copies of my books for the schoolchildren. They were sorry to have bought only 5 books (there were no more books in the bookshop!). Then I addressed the audience with my story (and you know that each recollection is painful)... They asked me many questions, including the following one 'What's your attitude towards young generation?' And I answered 'I rest my hopes upon them.' The whole room applauded.

In Petersburg there is an Association of the Former Minor Prisoners of Concentration Camps. Its members started to receive amends from Germany. Last year (in the beginning of August) 10 former prisoners from Moscow and 10 ones from Petersburg were invited to visit Germany. But you see, it was only me who spoke to people everywhere in Germany. Among the members of our group there were different people: one of them knew nothing, another one was too little to recollect anything. And I was an experienced speaker: under the Soviet regime they used to invite me to different factories, and I spoke to people readily (I knew that I had to). I also was a member of a Circle for Propagation of the Soviet Literature. The word propagation frightens people, but actually the circle arranged meetings of writers and their readers.

Someone said for a joke that in the Union of Soviet Writers there were hundreds of Jews, but only one Jewess.

In France (in 2003) I received a special prize In Memory of Holocaust, signed by Rothschild. He had to deliver a speech, but unfortunately that day hooligans set fire to a synagogue somewhere in the suburb. Therefore we did not meet (unfortunately!) and Rothschild sent me the text of his speech

translated into Russian. There he wrote that that premium had been awarded since 1998 once a year, and for the first time in its history it was awarded to a person from the country which was on its way to democratic society.

Among the well known political events I can mention Hungarian events [13](#) and Stalin's death. To tell the truth, I had no time to be engaged in politics: I always studied hard at school, at my college, etc.

When my book was published, authorities were very proud that they proved to have no anti-Semitism. You see, at that time I wanted my book to be published very much (on the one hand), and understood that I acted as a fig leaf for authorities to cover their anti-Semitism (on the other hand). They published a review and circulated it. They received a lot of requests for the book from different countries and started selling its magazine variant (Zvezda magazine) for dollars. Of course I got nothing: till 1973 in the Soviet Union there was no copyright.

It's interesting to mention that I have four different surnames as an author of those books. According to my passport I am Rolnikayte, in Israel (in Hebrew) and in Warsaw (in Yiddish) they called me Rolnik. In Paris they knew my uncle (there is a memorial plaque built into the wall of the house where he lived), therefore I was called there Rolnikas (to show our relationship). You know Maria Rolnikas in Lithuanian means just the same as Maria Ivanov - a woman's variant of the first name plus a man's variant of the surname. And in Czechoslovakia they transformed my surname into Rolnikassova. Hence I have 4 surnames as a real criminal! Erenburg [14](#) was the first person, who asked me about my first name when I visited him: he thought I was Miriam. And it was my sister whose name was Miriam. When I asked Daddy about my first name, he explained that when Mom was pregnant, she dreamed to give birth to a boy. At that time my father's grandfather died and my father's father asked him to call the newborn boy Moshele. Therefore when a girl was born, they called her (me) Masha (Maria). All was very simple and very complicated at the same time!

After the end of the war I immediately started my studies. My friends (girls) used to say 'Why are you spending your time at this evening school? Let's go to dance! We must drive boys crazy! We are eager to get married!' I answered 'No, I won't stay illiterate because of Hitler's occupation - not for the world! I will become educated.'

Therefore I got married rather late: at the age of 32. My husband lived in Leningrad, therefore after marriage we moved there. My husband's name was Semen Savelyevich Tsukernik. His father's name was Saul, but Savely according to his documents. It happened in 1959 (45 years ago). At first we lived in a communal apartment [15](#) in Mayakovskaya Street. There were 8 rooms (6 owners). When in France they asked me about my apartment, I was honest: 6 families lived together in our apartment. The interpreter stopped and asked me if she had to translate my words. And I said yes, I was not going to set the Frenchmen wrong, though I understood that at that meeting some third eyes could be present. And at the last meeting in France the audience rose when I came in. I was confused. I was so much confused, that walked along the aisle all of a shake. People were very kind to me. At the end of the meeting a person approached and started touching my face. He appeared to be a visually impaired friend of my uncle, he said 'Your chin is strong-willed, like that of Mikhey.' That day I was given a big bunch of roses as a present.

I told them that the next morning I was leaving for Leningrad. I explained to them that in Leningrad there was Piskarevskoye memorial cemetery. [Piskarevskoye memorial cemetery was a burial

place for the Leningrad citizens during blockade of Leningrad.] I told people in France that I was going to carry their flowers there. So I did it. I smelled the snow and roses: it was fantastic! It happened in 1967.

At present I am a member of the Society for War Veterans, Former Citizens of the Besieged Leningrad and Ghetto Prisoners and also a member of the Association of the Former Minor Prisoners of Concentration Camps. There we celebrate Jewish holidays. Besides that I use to celebrate anniversaries of our liberation from fascist concentration camp. When the date (March 10) is near, it comes to my mind again and again. I recollect our long walk to the camp, and the soldier pushing me down into the ditch, and a very strong wind. I remember that I wanted to fall asleep and be sleeping like a log till the end of those terrible days. You know, to tell the truth, all my terrible memoirs will stay with me for ever

Glossary:

1 Annexation of Vilnius to Lithuania

During the interwar period the previously Russian-held multi-ethnic city of Wilno (Vilnius) was a part of Poland and the capital of Lithuania was Kaunas. According to a secret clause in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (Soviet-German agreement on the division of Eastern Europe, August 1939) the Soviet Army occupied both Eastern Poland (September 1939) and the three Baltic states (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, June 1940). While most of the occupied Eastern Polish territories were divided up between Soviet Ukraine and Belarus, Vilnius was attached to Lithuania and was to be its capital. The loss of the independent Lithuanian statehood, therefore, was accompanied with the return of Vilnius, regarded as an integral part of the country by most Lithuanians.

2 Ponary

Forest near Vilnius that became the killing field for the majority of Jews from Vilnius. The victims were shot to death by the SS and the German police assisted by Lithuanian collaborators. In September-October 1941 alone over 12,000 Jews from Vilnius and the vicinity were killed there. In total 70,000 to 100,000 people, the majority of them Jews were killed in Ponary.

3 Gulag

The Soviet system of forced labor camps in the remote regions of Siberia and the Far North, which was first established in 1919. However, it was not until the early 1930s that there was a significant number of inmates in the camps. By 1934 the Gulag, or the Main Directorate for Corrective Labor Camps, then under the Cheka's successor organization the NKVD, had several million inmates. The prisoners included murderers, thieves, and other common criminals, along with political and religious dissenters. The Gulag camps made significant contributions to the Soviet economy during the rule of Stalin. Conditions in the camps were extremely harsh. After Stalin died in 1953, the population of the camps was reduced significantly, and conditions for the inmates improved somewhat.

4 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact

Non-aggression pact between Germany and the Soviet Union, which became known under the name of Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Engaged in a border war with Japan in the Far East and fearing the German advance in the west, the Soviet government began secret negotiations for a non-aggression pact with Germany in 1939. In August 1939 it suddenly announced the conclusion of a Soviet-German agreement of friendship and non-aggression. The Pact contained a secret clause providing for the partition of Poland and for Soviet and German spheres of influence in Eastern Europe.

5 Vilnius Ghetto

95 percent of the estimated 265,000 Lithuanian Jews (254,000 people) were murdered during the Nazi occupation; no other communities were so comprehensively destroyed during WWII. Vilnius was occupied by the Germans on 26th June 1941 and two ghettos were built in the city afterwards, separated by Niemiecka Street, which lay outside both of them. On 6th September all Jews were taken to the ghettos, at first randomly to either Ghetto 1 or Ghetto 2. During September they were continuously slaughtered by Einsatzkommando units. Later craftsmen were moved to Ghetto 1 with their families and all others to Ghetto 2. During the 'Yom Kippur Action' on 1st October 3,000 Jews were killed. In three additional actions in October the entire Ghetto 2 was liquidated and later another 9,000 of the survivors were killed. In late 1941 the official population of the ghetto was 12,000 people and it rose to 20,000 by 1943 as a result of further transports. In August 1943 over 7,000 people were sent to various labor camps in Lithuania and Estonia. The Vilnius ghetto was liquidated under the supervision of Bruno Kittel on 23rd and 24th September 1943. On Rossa Square a selection took place: those able to work were sent to labor camps in Latvia and Estonia and the rest to different death camps in Poland. By 25th September 1943 only 2,000 Jews officially remained in Vilnius in small labor camps and more than 1,000 were hiding outside and were gradually hunted down. Those permitted to live continued to work at the Kailis and HKP factories until 2nd June 1944 when 1,800 of them were shot and less than 200 remained in hiding until the Red Army liberated Vilnius on 13th July 1944.

6 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.

7 Mikhoels, Solomon (1890-1948) (born Vovsi)

Great Soviet actor, producer and pedagogue. He worked in the Moscow State Jewish Theater (and was its art director from 1929). He directed philosophical, vivid and monumental works. Mikhoels was murdered by order of the State Security Ministry

8 Radio Liberty

Radio Liberty, which started broadcasting in 1953, has served as a surrogate 'home service' to the lands of the former Soviet Union, providing news and information that was otherwise unavailable to most Soviet and post-Soviet citizens. During that time, the station weathered strong opposition from the Soviet Union and its allies, including constant jamming, public criticism, diplomatic protests, and even physical attacks on Radio Liberty buildings and personnel. In 1976, Radio Liberty was merged with Radio Free Europe (RFE) to form a single organization, RFE/RL, Inc.

9 Chekhov, Anton Pavlovich (1860-1904)

Russian short-story writer and dramatist. Chekhov's hundreds of stories concern human folly, the tragedy of triviality, and the oppression of banality. His characters are drawn with compassion and humor in a clear, simple style noted for its realistic detail. His focus on internal drama was an innovation that had enormous influence on both Russian and foreign literature. His success as a dramatist was assured when the Moscow Art Theater took his works and staged great productions of his masterpieces, such as *Uncle Vanya* or *The Three Sisters*. and also had some religious instruction.

10 Dostoevsky, Fyodor (1821-1881)

Russian novelist, journalist and short-story writer whose psychological penetration into the human soul had a profound influence on the 20th century novel. His novels anticipated many of the ideas of Nietzsche and Freud. Dostoevsky's novels contain many autobiographical elements, but ultimately they deal with moral and philosophical issues. He presented interacting characters with contrasting views or ideas about freedom of choice, socialism, atheisms, good and evil, happiness and so forth.

11 Victory Day in Russia (9th May)

National holiday to commemorate the defeat of Nazi Germany and the end of World War II and honor the Soviets who died in the war.

12 Blockade of Leningrad

On September 8, 1941 the Germans fully encircled Leningrad and its siege began. It lasted until January 27, 1944. The blockade meant incredible hardships and privations for the population of the town. Hundreds of thousands died from hunger, cold and diseases during the almost 900 days of the blockade

13 1956

It designates the Revolution, which started on 23rd October 1956 against Soviet rule and the communists in Hungary. It was started by student and worker demonstrations in Budapest started in which Stalin's gigantic statue was destroyed. Moderate communist leader Imre Nagy was appointed as prime minister and he promised reform and democratization. The Soviet Union withdrew its troops which had been stationing in Hungary since the end of World War II, but they returned after Nagy's announcement that Hungary would pull out of the Warsaw Pact to pursue a policy of neutrality. The Soviet army put an end to the rising on 4th November and mass repression

and arrests started. About 200,000 Hungarians fled from the country. Nagy, and a number of his supporters were executed. Until 1989, the fall of the communist regime, the Revolution of 1956 was officially considered a counter-revolution.

14 Erenburg, Ilya Grigorievich (1891-1967)

Famous Russian Jewish novelist, poet and journalist who spent his early years in France. His first important novel, *The Extraordinary Adventures of Julio Jurento* (1922) is a satire on modern European civilization. His other novels include *The Thaw* (1955), a forthright piece about Stalin's régime which gave its name to the period of relaxation of censorship after Stalin's death.

15 Communal apartment

The Soviet power wanted to improve housing conditions by requisitioning 'excess' living space of wealthy families after the Revolution of 1917. Apartments were shared by several families with each family occupying one room and sharing the kitchen, toilet and bathroom with other tenants. Because of the chronic shortage of dwelling space in towns communal or shared apartments continued to exist for decades. Despite state programs for the construction of more houses and the liquidation of communal apartments, which began in the 1960s, shared apartments still exist today.