

# Sarra Nikiforenko

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Lvov

Ukraine

Interviewer: Ella Orlikova

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*Sarra is a friendly woman with shrewd eyes. She has worldly wisdom and unquenchable interest in life. Sarra and her younger daughter, Tamara, live in a clean and tidy 2-room apartment. The interior of the apartment, bookshelves, curtains on the windows, well kept furniture bought in 1970s, shows that tenants with mean income live here. Sarra can hardly move in the apartment even with a stick. She always wears a flannel gown at home. She enjoyed telling the story of her life, but she withdrew into herself every moment we touched upon the subject of her older daughter Ludmila. She didn't want to talk about her daughter's family, and neither did Tamara. Later I found out that the tragedy of this family with Tamara's second son Yuri that doesn't communicate with his mother or grandmother, repeated itself. Sarra just mentioned him and didn't go into any details. These problems brought some awkwardness into our conversation.*

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## My family background

My father's family came from Smela town. This town is located in Cherkassy region. It's a small picturesque Ukrainian town in 200 km from Kiev. The town is located on the bank of the Tiasmin River. I don't know the origin of our family name – Zelyonyie, but most Jews in our town had Russian or Ukrainian sounding names. There was Ukrainian, Russian and Jewish population in the town. Poorer people lived in the outskirts and Jews resided in Jewish neighborhoods.

There was a grammar school for boys of all nationalities. The pupils at this school were children from wealthier families and it was a prestigious place to study. There was a municipal hospital and pharmacies in the town. Water was fetched from wells in the streets – one well for few blocks. The central part of the town was nice and cozy. At the time that I remember wealthy and educated people lived in the central part of the town.

Our family lived in a Jewish neighborhood closer to the center of the town. I don't know what my grandfather Zalma Zelyony did for a living. He died in 1900 when he was about 80 years old. I remember his big house with several rooms. There were ground clay floors. There were wooden floors only in the wealthiest homes in the center of the town. I also remember a special stove for

baking matzah and big tables for rolling dough for matzah. My grandmother also lived in this house. Unfortunately, I don't remember her name. She was in her 90s when I saw her in 1915. We visited her on Jewish holidays: Pesach, Rosh Hashanah, Chanukkah and Purim. She was so old that she kept forgetting things and was confused even about her grandchildren and children. She spoke Yiddish to them and laughed at her own forgetfulness. Grandmother died in 1920 when I was 6. I didn't quite understand what happened and why father was sitting on the floor for a whole day and why his clothing was slightly cut. Only when I grew older I found out that this was the way to mourn for close relatives. Even later, after grandmother died, other women came to the house to bake matzah before Pesach. I don't know who lived in this house after she died.

My father had few brothers and sisters, but I only remember uncle Isaac (he was a bit younger than my father and was born in 1864). He lived not far from where we lived and owned a pharmacy. Most of pharmacists in the town of Smela were Jewish. An old Jewish man was my uncle's assistant. I enjoyed watching the pharmacist weighing powders on a small scale and wrapping them in small pieces of paper. To see this I had to stand on tiptoes. There were little bottles with recipes tied to their necks on the shelves. I remember how we ran there to buy tablets relieving coughing and lump sugar, if my memory doesn't fail me. Uncle Isaac had a daughter whose name was Basia. She married my older brother that was her cousin. Such marriages were customary in Jewish families. Uncle Isaac was religious. He went to synagogue and prayed at home. A Jewish woman came on Friday to make a meal for celebration of Sabbath. She was specifically invited to cook for Sabbath. Isaac's wife didn't live long and he was a widower for many years. Uncle Isaac died in 1928. This was the period of NEP [1](#) and he owned his pharmacy until the end of his days. After uncle Isaac died in 1928 the pharmacy was nationalized [nationalization] [2](#) and became a state property.

My grandfather Zalman gave his children a decent education: both Jewish religious and secular. They had fluent Russian and could read and write very well.

My father, Shaya Zelyony was born in 1861. He prayed in his room every evening with his face to the East. He was not to be disturbed at this moment. He went to synagogue every morning, on Saturday and Jewish holidays and undeviatingly observed all Jewish traditions and celebrated holidays. My father got a profession of cabinetmaker when he was very young. He was a very skilled master and became popular. They say he was a jeweler of a cabinetmaker. He made expensive carved and incrustured furniture. He took orders from important people that had seen foreign furniture, but complimented my father's furniture. He did all work at home. My father got married at 19. He was a desirable fiancé that could read in Yiddish and Hebrew, knew Torah by heart and had a profession. My father worked a lot and was a taciturn person. He told me little about his childhood.

My mother Enta Platkova was born in Kamenka town near Smela [30 km] in 1865. Kamenka is a picturesque town on the bank of the Tiasmin River where the river forms a curve and flows through rocks making dams. The majority of the population was Jewish. Ukrainians lived in surrounding villages. They were farmers for the most part. Jews were storeowners, craftsmen and balagulas [coachmen]. There was a synagogue and cheder in Kamenka. There was no Jewish hospital there and I don't know whether there was a Jewish community there. There was a big estate in Kamenka that occupied a big territory in the town and spread to a big park on the bank of the Tiasmin River. The owner of the estate was a Russian nobleman. My mother told me that the landlord's family

were nice people. They didn't oppress Jews and allowed them to trespass their estate. If they hadn't been allowed to cross the estate they would have had to walk quite a distance to detour the area. They also used services of joiners, shoemakers and tailors provided by Jews and paid well for work. Only when their relative that was a musician was on a visit they didn't allow Jews to even approach their estate. People said he was a terrible anti-Semite. Long afterward I read in the memoirs about Tchaikovsky [3](#) by his contemporaries that the great composer Tchaikovsky, visited Kamenka .

My mother's father Shymon Platkov came from petty bourgeoisie: this was the name for craftsmen, retail traders and house owners. My grandfather was born in 1830s. He owned a store where he sold food products and other inexpensive commodities: dishes, tableware, buckets, bowls, etc. My grandfather died in 1905 long before I was born and all I know about him was what my mother told me. He was a decent, God fearing man. He went to synagogue on Saturday and on all Jewish holidays and prayed at home in the morning and in the evening. He raised his children religious. My grandmother Hana Platkova died in 1875 and there were hardly any memories about her left. My grandparents had three children: my mother and two sons. Their older son Idl, born in 1860, also owned a store in Kamenka the same kind as his father. He sometimes visited us in Smela. He was old then. I didn't know anyone of his family, I must have seen them when I was young, but I can't remember. He died in 1932.

There was younger Isroel, born in 1870. He left for Palestine in 1900s. Once he visited us. I was small, but I remember a man of substance and he was introduced to me as 'Here is your uncle from Israel'. We, children, were happy about his visit. He brought us sweets and cookies. This was the last time we saw him. We had no more information about him.

My grandfather on my mother's side Shymon Platkov was a well-respected man in Kamenka. He observed all Jewish traditions. Since my mother's mother died so untimely my mother was responsible for housekeeping. She learned to keep the house from other Jewish women: our neighbors and relatives. Her older brother that studied at cheder taught her to read and write in Yiddish whenever he felt like teaching her.

When my mother turned 16 and it was necessary to find a match for her my grandfather made the rounds of surrounding towns looking for a suitable match. My future father, a young man from a well-to-do family, having a profession, happened to be the most appropriate suitor. My grandfather came to an agreement with my father's parents and returned home to make all wedding arrangements. It was also quite customary for Jewish families that young people never saw each other before wedding. It was also traditional to lay tables for poor Jews before the ritual of the wedding and before the bridegroom arrived. The bride was sitting on a 'dizhka' [Ukrainian for a bowl for kneading paste] that was turned over. She sat on fluffy pillows. When the bridegroom arrived the bride was covered with a white veil. Four boys were holding posts with a chuppah stretched on them. The rabbi took them around the chuppah, said a prayer and gave them some wine and then the veil was taken off the bride and the husband and wife saw one another for the first time then. They liked each other and made a beautiful couple for the rest of their life. My mother and father settled down in Smela. They rented a room from a Jewish family until my father bought a house.

My parents named their oldest son Anisim. He was born in the Jewish month of Nissan in 1883. He studied at cheder like all other boys in Smela but he was fond of technical things since childhood. There was a sugar factory in Smela and a technical school for boys at it. Anisim finished this school and became a mechanic. He went to work in Donbass. In early 1920s he moved to Dnepropetrovsk, an industrial town with better job opportunities, where he got married. My brothers and sisters had Jewish spouses and observed Jewish traditions and customs, but they weren't orthodox Jews. They gave a tribute to traditions celebrating holidays and eating no pork. They spoke Yiddish at home.

I remember my brothers and sisters very young. They went to Baku [the capital of Azerbaidjan] in 1930-1932. I saw each of them two or three times afterward. We mainly communicated through letters.

In 1925 my older sister Basia went to visit him since we hadn't seen him since the revolution of 1917 [4](#) and Civil War [5](#) She came back with a cut on her clothes. My mother asked her 'What's the matter?'. When a close relatives dies it's a custom that a rabbi makes a cut on clothing. Anisim died of relapsing fever during my sister's visit.

Solomon, the second son, was born in 1885. He studied at cheder and was as fond of equipment as his brother. At the beginning of 20th century industry was accelerating in the south of Ukraine [that belonged to Russia at that time]. There were many vacancies and the origin didn't matter for employment – industrious work was important. Solomon went to work at an iron ore mine. A number of iron ore mines were linked to form a long and strange town named Krivoy Rog. Solomon was smart and was appointed a foreman. He told his parents to join him there thinking that life would improve in this new location. Once he was called to the office and while he was away from the mine there was a landslide resulting in fatality of the whole crew. My brother never descended to a mine again. He returned to Smela. This happened in 1912. In Smela he married his cousin Basia, uncle Isaac's daughter. They had a daughter. Her name was Rachel. In 1929 Solomon and his family moved to Baku. There were no other means of communications, but correspondence at that time. They wrote occasionally and we knew that Solomon became a joiner at a kerchief factory and lived in an apartment that he rented from an Azerbaidjan family. He worked at a kerchief factory. He died of a heart attack at the age of 90. His wife also died a long while ago. Their girls (there was another daughter born in Baku – I don't remember her name) moved to Israel a long time ago and there was no contact with them.

My older sister Basia, born in 1888, was educated at home. My sisters had Jewish teachers. I remember that they were old men wearing yarmulkas and poorly dressed. Our mother always gave them a meal and some food to go. I don't know whether they received money for their work. They had 2-3 classes per week where they taught them to write and read in Russian and Yiddish, basics of mathematics, literature and Jewish traditions. Basia married Grisha, a Jewish young man living in our street. I remember their wedding and my other sisters' weddings with a rabbi. The wedding took place in a blooming orchard in spring. The chuppah was a beautiful shawl tied to blooming cherry tree branches. Grisha was a nice and hardworking Jewish man, he worked at the mill in Smela. They had a good life - they loved each other - together and had two boys: Syoma and Zyunia. They moved to Baku in 1930 following Solomon's family. They died there in late 1960s. Their children became engineers. They live in Ber Sheve in Israel now. We rarely hear from them, they live their own life.

My other sister Bronia, born in 1892, was married to Shymon that was a bookbinder. They had a son. His name was Grisha. I don't remember whether they had other children. They moved to Baku during famine in 1932[famine] [6](#). I can't remember when they passed away.

Sister Sonia, born in 1895, was a great housewife. She and her husband Grigory, a Jew, lived near us in Smela. Their daughter Sarra, my grandmother's favorite, was a beautiful girl. Sonia helped mother about the house and Grigory learned profession with my father. He was a good specialist, but not as good as my father. They moved to Baku with my parents in 1931. Sonia died in 1973. I have no information about her daughter Sarra

Sister Polia, born in 1905, had the same teachers and had learned the same languages at home before the revolution, but afterward she attended a secondary school for several years. Polia married Boris, a Jewish man, cinema operator and a very nice man. All Jewish young people knew each other and got married based on their affections and preferences. Their daughter Rachel was born in 1928. In 1932 they moved to Baku following other relatives. Boris perished at the front during the Great Patriotic War [7](#). My sister was a widow, - she didn't remarry, but she had support of the family in Baku. She died in 1981. I don't remember my sister husbands' last name. I am 93 and I am surprised I remember anything at all.

My youngest and favorite brother Berele (he was called Boris at home) was born in 1907. He studied at a Soviet Jewish school. There were national schools opened in town during the Soviet period: Ukrainian and Jewish schools. There was the same curriculum at those schools where children studied geography, mathematic, history and other basic subjects and the only difference was the language of teaching: Ukrainian in Ukrainian schools and Yiddish - in the Jewish school. All teachers were Jews in the Jewish school. All schools were Soviet-orientated. We were taught to love the Soviet power and be atheists. Then he finished Food Industry College. He worked at sugar factories. Shortly before the Great Patriotic War he moved to our parents in Baku. He married a nice Jewish girl (I've never seen her since they lived in Baku, and can't remember her name). They had a son - Vitalik. Boris perished at the front during the Great Patriotic War. His son died of some disease during the war.

## Growing up

I was the fifth daughter in the family. I was born in 1909 in Krivoy Rog where my parents moved following Solomon. My father was hoping to have a lot more clients in a growing town. But it was a dirty and dusty town. They were not happy about living in a rented apartment and were completely discouraged by an accident in the mine. In 1912 we returned to Smela: to the familiar life and environment.

We had a big house that my father had built in Smela. There were four bedrooms: Polia and I shared one bedroom, and a big dining room. We had beautiful furniture that my father made: a huge table with heavy carved legs, chairs with high straight backs and a big black ornamented wardrobe. There was also a strikingly beautiful cupboard, the most beautiful cupboard I had ever seen. There was beautiful carving on it.

My father had a shop in the house with an entrance from the backyard. There was also a kitchen with a big Russian stove [8](#) where my mother cooked for our big family. She made kosher food

following all rules of Jewish traditions. She made chicken and Gefilte fish. She made boiled eggs stuffed with chicken fat. There was special cooking on Friday. I remember preparations for Sabbath. My mother baked bread and my older sister kneaded dough, made Gefilte fish and helped mother. When I grew older I also helped my mother. My mother did all cooking for Saturday and put it in the oven to keep the food warm until Saturday. We didn't do anything on Saturday and we didn't have help in the house as was customary in other families. My mother and sisters did everything by themselves.

We celebrated Pesach, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and other holidays. The family fasted at Yom Kippur – only younger children were allowed to have a bite of something in the kitchen. My mother spent a whole day in the synagogue. I ran to see her there; she lifted me to see the men praying downstairs. There was a big and beautiful synagogue near our house. My mother had an honorable seat at the synagogue that my father paid for. My father went to synagogue on holidays and every morning. I also remember him praying at home standing by the wall and swinging.

We sang many Jewish songs. I had a wonderful voice and my father enjoyed singing with me. There were special songs for each holiday. Here is a song for Sukkot:

[sings in Yiddish, it sounds like she doesn't remember the words]

'Sukkot holiday is when Jews make a hut from planks that they cover with dry sticks (sunflower) and there is a Jewish man sitting inside and singing. Then he says that it is such a decrepit hut that it can be blown down by wind, but since he is a Jew he will keep sitting there and singing'.

By the way, we didn't have a special sukkah made in the yard. We used a special fore room with lifting roof where we had meals on this holiday. There was also a special table where we had meals only on this holiday.

There was another song that we sang:

[sings in Yiddish]

'It rains, but then it stops raining, but there is water flowing from roofs; I've made a boat and let it sail. All of a sudden the wind carried it away. My little boat, where did you fly? To warm countries where birds sing and flowers bloom. Little boat, take me with you, please! Please take me with you!'

Those were joyful holidays when many people came to the house: all children and their friends. They sang and danced. It was a lot of joy to have a big family at that time. All children were treated with love. We celebrated all nights through Pesach singing songs and drinking wine. At midnight my mother opened the door and every newcomer got some wine. This was a custom.

My father composed a song at Purim. He came from the synagogue, greeted my mother with the holiday and sang:

'Agit jontov faj man dir mider megile ih vur dijunsef agite pecire. Non shtende droufon bin der flash. Ejn gibt far bar na Gymentash'



‘You shall not get off like this: put a bottle of vodka on the table and give me hamentashen for a snack’.

We spoke only Yiddish in the family, although my father spoke fluent Russian. There were many books at home in a bookcase: they were both religious books in Yiddish and Hebrew since my parents prayed at home. My father said a prayer before each meal and also in the morning and in the evening. My father wasn’t fanatically religious. He wanted his children to study successfully, get good professions and work decently. He didn’t like chatterboxes involved in a propaganda instead of working. He always told us, children, to stay away from such people.

Our family was well respected by the Jewish, Russian and Ukrainian population. When my father walked in the town men took off their hats to greet him and when my mother came to the market people addressed her as ‘Madam Zelyonaya’ and sold products on trust to her.

My father was recruited to the tsarist army twice: once it happened during the WWI and another time in Lvov – only I don’t remember in what year.

My mother was very proud of her children: we were big and healthy and so were our friends. When a bunch of us was going out she always asked us to stay at a distance from one another so that nobody put an evil eye on us. There were beautiful Jewish weddings in our town in summer when everything was in blossom. We had a big garden where a big silk shawl was spread over blooming branches to make a chuppah. Of course, the rabbi came to a wedding: he respected our family a lot. He said a prayer and a bride and bridegroom went around the chuppah: all Jewish customs were observed. My sisters got married in this way and we all sang songs at their weddings.

When the revolution took place in 1917 I was 8 years old and I don’t remember much of this period. My mother didn’t allow me to go far from home. Sometimes gangs [9](#) came to town. People said they were Petlura bands [10](#). People were afraid of them. I remember mother made my older sisters stay in bed. She wrapped their heads in shawls and told them to stay quiet. When somebody approached our house she yelled ‘Typhoid, typhoid!’ The bandits got scared and left or grounds. Several times we hid in our cellar. The situation was very scaring and when the soviet power was established our family perceived it as liberation and beginning of a quiet life. However, my father didn’t put much trust in Bolsheviks since he referred them to big talkers rather than doers.

There was order established in the town. A number of new institutions were opened where Jews were getting managerial positions there. There was a popular song ‘Who was a nobody will become a man of substance’. Many people were happy. My father didn’t get much for his work Our living standards became considerably lower. Nobody needed good furniture. He mainly fixed old furniture in schools, cultural centers and canteens.

There was a Jewish school named after Sholem Aleichem [11](#) opened in Smela. There were all subjects taught in Yiddish and there were Russian and Ukrainian classes in it. We read Sholem Aleichem’s stories about a hard life of Jewish children within restricted residential areas – the Pale of Settlement [12](#) We felt happy that nothing like that would ever happen in our country again. There were portraits of Lenin in each classroom. We were told that only thanks to him we got everything that we had. When in January 1924 it was announced that he died we cried a lot. We

couldn't imagine life without him. I remember it was freezing on that day and when I was running home tears from my eyes were turning into ice. I don't think my mother or father cared about Lenin's death. I studied well at school. I was praised for my successes. I didn't become a pioneer at school since I was older than the age of 14 until when children could become pioneers. I didn't join the Komsomol, either [13](#). I didn't participate in any activities, besides, my origin was far from proletariat: I was an entrepreneur's daughter. I wasn't 'politically educated' or active and I didn't care about Komsomol. I was very fond of singing. My friends and I used to go to the bank of Tismin River where we sang Russian and Ukrainian songs, but mostly Yiddish, of course. My voice has lost its strength, but I remember songs:

[sings in Yiddish]

'Girl Hannushka went to the woods and unbraided her hair. All of a sudden she met a young man that asked her 'Hannushka, what are you doing in the forest? What are you looking for, did you lose something?' She says 'I'm looking for daisy flowers'. He said 'Well, you are on the way there while I have already found the most beautiful and interesting flower with lovely hair and beautiful eyes. May I stroke your hair and hold your hand?' 'No, you can't. My mother wouldn't allow it. My mother is old and ill and I won't do things that she forbids'. He was hurt and left and she goes on looking for a daisy, tra-la-la'.

Many boys fell in love with me when they heard me singing. Young people used to get together in the evening: there was quite a bunch of us. We played lotto – it was a popular game then, [the players got 3 cards each with numbers in them written in rows. The game master took wooden casks with numbers out of a bag and a player having this or that number took a cask and put it on a card. The winner was the one that was the first to fill up his card] went to the park – there was a big park in Smela. In summer we went boating on the Tiasmin River. We liked going to the cinema at weekends: there were silent movies, but we liked comedies, especially the ones with Charlie Chaplin. I had Jewish friends. We spoke Yiddish, but we had fluent Russian as well. The synagogue in Smela was closed by atheists of various nationalities in 1929. My father was very unhappy about it. All churches were also closed during this period of struggle against religion [14](#). There was entertainment center at the sugar factory where young people came to dance in the evening. I don't remember other programs.

After finishing school in 1926 I entered the College of Food Industry in our town. Most of the students were Jewish. Jewish young people were eager to get a good education. I was to become a lab assistant for sugar industry. I was a painstaking student.

Once during a party where I sang Ukrainian and Jewish songs a young man approached me. He was Vitaliy Nikiforenko. He was a student of the Institute of Food Industry in Kiev. He was on vacation in his hometown visiting his parents. He asked my permission to take me home. He was looking at me with admiring eyes. I had never had a non-Jewish friend before and I was concerned a little bit. I avoided him at the beginning. I didn't want to date with him. He came to see my sister Sonia and said 'If you don't tell Sarra to come to see me I will go to the river and drown myself'. Sonia got scared, ran to me and said 'Here came your sweetheart'. Boris, my brother, said 'Give him a stick and let him beat this kind of ideas out of his head'. I had to go see him and say 'Don't be stupid'. To make the long story short we were destined to be together. I have no regrets about it.



Vitaliy, born in 1908, came from Smela: we were neighbors. I knew his parents and they knew me. They didn't mind my being a Jew. Vitaliy came from a very nice family. His father was a teacher at College – I don't remember at which, and his mother was a teacher, but she didn't work. They had a son and a daughter. My parents were a little concerned since I was the first one in our family to have a non-Jewish spouse. They knew Vitaliy's family. They bought fish from Vitaliy's grandfather, but still they were a non-Jewish family. My father said to Vitaliy 'You need to know that if you hurt Sarra just once you will lose her'.

We saw each other for a year. I finished College and Vitaliy graduated from the Institute in 1930. He wrote me nice letters. Upon graduation Vitaliy got a job at the sugar factory in Smela. We had our wedding registered at registration office. We had a wedding party in my parents' garden, but it was a Soviet wedding without a chuppah or any other Jewish rituals. There were Ukrainian and Jewish relatives and guests at the wedding. They shouted 'Gorko!' [Russian for 'bitter' – a Russian tradition] to us. Jewish young people that left their families stopped observing traditions. We believed in new socialist life and thought that Jewish traditions belonged to the past. We thought we were more advanced than older people and had to look into the future.

I worked at the laboratory at the sugar factory and my husband was an engineer at the same factory. We worked there a few months since Vitaliy got a job offer in Kremenchug in the same year of 1930 [an industrial town on the bank of the Dnepr River in Poltava region, 240 km from Kiev]. There was a military laboratory responsible for monitoring strategic stocks of grain and later it was involved in the development of food stock storage conditions. My husband and I went to work in Kremenchug.

In 1931, soon after we left, my parents moved to Baku where my brother Solomon resided. He always said this was a nice and hospitable town and there was always a lot of food. There were no problems with getting a place to live or a job in Baku. There was a big Jewish community and a synagogue in the town. Gradually all of my relatives moved to Baku. There is a big area at the Jewish cemetery in Baku where my relatives were buried. Baku is the capital of Azerbaijan in Zakavkaziye. It stands on the Caspian Sea, and is the center of oil industry that enriched this town at the beginning of 20th century. The town is located in 2700 km from Kiev.

We got a room in Kremenchug. We cooked on the primus stove [15](#) and there was a wood stoked stove for heating. I went to work and didn't spend much time doing the housework. Vitaliy was manager of the laboratory and I was a lab assistant at the same laboratory. My husband held an important position related to restricted information and he just had to join the Communist Party. Besides, since this was a military laboratory he was given a rank.

We were expecting a child in 1932. This was a hard period in Ukraine. Although we received food packages as a military family I was still concerned and went to Baku to be with my mother when the baby was due. This was my first visit to a big southern town. My parents had neighbors of all nationalities: Azerbaijan, Armenian, Russian and Jewish. They were friendly with each other and felt comfortable speaking their own languages. When my father went to synagogue all non-Jewish neighbors greeted him with Jewish holidays. My mother treated them to some Jewish food and they treated us to their traditional food. In 1932 my older daughter Ludmila was born. In his letters Vitaliy talked me out of returning to Ukraine. This was the period of forced famine in Ukraine while there was plenty of food in Baku: lots of vegetables and fruit. My husband was involved in a very

important mission: filling strategic stocks of grain. Vitaliy was a very responsible employee. In 1933 he wrote me that he got an invitation to the military Academy in Kharkov. This was a good offer and he moved to Kharkov. He became head of the laboratory involved in scientific research of strategic food storage conditions. Vitaliy was also invited to teach politics and some technical subjects at the Military Academy. Kharkov was the capital of Ukraine before 1934. It was a big industrial center.

He received a nice two-room apartment in the apartment building for military officials and lecturers of the military Academy. I arrived from Baku with our little daughter. I liked the apartment and our neighbors. It was a new house with a bathroom, toilet and electricity. In 1938 we got gas in the house. Wives of commanders of the Red army treated me nicely. My husband provided well for us and I didn't have to go to work. My husband worked a lot preparing for lectures and writing a textbook in chemistry. I was involved in public activities. Wives of military officials didn't work, but attended sport and amateur art clubs. I took part in sport competitions. I took the first place in shooting. I also took part in concerts singing Ukrainian and Russian songs. Once I was invited to study in Odessa Conservatory, a teacher heard me singing, but Vitaliy was against it. He didn't want to part with me.

In 1937 our second daughter Tamara was born. There was more things to do, but we took it easy. The prewar period can be determined with one word – 'enthusiasm'. We sang, laughed and believed in the wonderful future. We had little free time, but when we had some we went to the cinema. We got together with friends, had tea and sang Soviet songs from the movies we saw. My husband was very fond of his work. Thank God none of our relatives suffered from repression in 1930s [16](#). We were aware of the ongoing arrests and exiling people, but we believed that things were going right and the Soviet power was just. We had Jewish friends and neighbors and they didn't face any mistreats. My father often wrote me from Baku. He wrote about my brothers, sisters and their children. They got used to the town, only they were aging and were in their late 80s. My father wrote in Russian very well. In 1940 my father died and my mother went to live with my sister Sonia.

## **During the war**

Military officers realized that the war was inevitable, but even then, the day of 22 June 1941 when the war began came as a big surprise. Vitaliy was recruited to the front right away and I kept listening to the radio that kept announcing that the Soviet troops were leaving towns to Germans. The front was approaching Kharkov. All big shots and officials in our house sent their families away. There were only few of us left: wives whose husbands were at the front and their children. I wrote my husband that all other officials evacuated their families and there were enough of us left to make cutlets for Hitler. I was aware of the brutality of Germans since mass media published this information [editor's note: it is known that no Soviet mass media published anything about extermination of Jews by Nazi, but this is what Sarra said]. In few days a general called me to his office: he even sent a car to take me there. I thought that something was wrong with my husband. When I came to his office he asked 'Where is your husband?' I said 'At the front'. 'Do you correspond with him?' I said 'Yes, I do'. 'Why is he there?' 'What do you mean – why? He's struggling'. – 'Then why do you make him feel bad?' What happened was that they intercepted my letter. I said 'Then why did all other families leave? Look, there are only few of us left'. 'A bus will

pick you up tonight. Go get ready'. In the evening a bus arrived and took us – 5 families that were left – to the station where we got on a freight train for transportation of horses and taken to Saratov region, one of the biggest regions in Povolzhiye, on the Volga. [The eastern part of Saratov region is located in Zavolzhiye steppe areas with continental climate in about 2000 km from Kiev] Pirpilovo village in 40 kms from railway.

We were accommodated in local houses. I met a woman on the train. She had two girls and we decided to keep together. Our landlady had three children. We called her by her patronymic – Stepanovna. She let us stay in her biggest room. She treated us as if we were her family. Zhenia, the woman I met, and I worked at the collective farm. I was strong and took to any work to earn sufficient food for my children. I had never done any farm work before, but at this collective farm I did mowing and stacking working with scythe and pitchfork and singing. I sang beautiful songs like 'Katyusha', a song about a 'blue kerchief', 'four steps to death'. They were very popular at that time. These were Russian songs, but they were close to my patriotic spirit. Once I fell from haystack and got injured by a pitchfork. Other women dressed the wound with some rags and I got back to work. I still have a scar. I also worked with grass cutter. I was the only Jew in the village and people respected me. God helped me: I had work to do and my children had sufficient food. Zhenia and I went to cut sunflower stems in winter. There was waist-high snow in the steppe. We cut stems to stoke them in the oven. Winters were severe. I had a pair of my husband's boots and his trousers that rescued me from frost. We earned coupons for grain or flour and cereals. In towns people received bread coupons for work. As an officer's wife I had a certificate for money allowances that I could receive at a registry office, but the nearest one was located in 40 km and there was no transportation there. I received the total amount after the war.

Ludmila went to school in the village. Although she was a spoiled town girl in Kharkov, there, in the village she was like all other village children, wearing her winter coat and wrapped in a big shawl. I gave all my clothes to villagers: I would have done anything to make them like us. Tamara was small. She and other children waited for us to come home from work sitting on the stove in winter or playing in the yard in summer. The children were used to being on their own.

The most important events for me were letters from my husband and relatives from Baku. Vitaliy was a major in logistics services – he was responsible for soldiers' meals. Although he was not at the frontline he was shell-shocked twice and rescued from a pile that fell on him. He had an injury of his back, but he remained in service. My relatives told me about the events of their life. My mother died in Baku in 1944. Baku was not under German occupation during the Great Patriotic War. My younger brother Boris, his son and my sister Polia's husband Boris perished at the front. Polia couldn't bear that he died .

## **After the war**

In 1945 Vitaliy got a job assignment to Prikarpatiye regiment. He was a colonel. In Lvov he received a big apartment in the house for high-rank officers. His messenger arrived to pick us up in Saratov region. We didn't even have clothes to put on. I made a pinafore dress from a rucksack for me and wore it over my husband's shirt. We didn't have any luggage with us and traveled light. I was very excited about seeing my husband: we hadn't seen each other for four years. Vitaliy didn't change: he was handsome and kind and loved me much. He would have done anything for me. He was very jealous; God forbid if somebody dared to talk with me. He continued his service in

logistics units. He was responsible for keeping food stocks in the army.

I liked Lvov a lot – a very nice European town with narrow streets, nice buildings that were not destroyed during the war. The local population was a bit suspicious about those that came to live there from the Soviet country. We settled down in a 3-room apartment with high ceilings. There was Polish furniture that remained from former tenants that left for Poland. My husband got a good salary and big food packages and we had plenty of everything we needed. I was a housewife raising my daughters. I got along well with our neighbors. My husband was never ashamed of having a Jewish wife. It never even occurred to me to change my Jewish name of Sarra to a different one. I celebrated only the biggest Jewish holidays, even though my husband or children never joined me, but I didn't insist on that. I didn't go to synagogue, but I fasted on Judgment Day and Vitaliy and the girls knew that I was not to be disturbed on that day. We had matzah at Pesach and my husband went to buy the best wine kosher at Pesach. On his way home he showed it to neighbors 'It's my wife's holiday today'. I made traditional Jewish food that my mother taught me to cook: Gefilte fish, chicken broth and stuffed chicken necks. My husband didn't eat pork and neither did the daughters.

In 1948-50s newspapers began to publish horrible articles about rootless cosmopolites [17](#). It was clear that those articles were against Jews. Similar abuse happened in 1951-52. This period was called the 'doctors' plot' [18](#). I was afraid that something terrible was about to happen. I showed newspaper articles to my husband when he came home from work, but he believed it was all stupid and indecent and just said to me 'Take it easy'. He tried to comfort me saying that this could not last long. He avoided any discussions. He didn't want to upset me: he was a very sympathetic and kind man. Like all of us he believed that Stalin didn't know anything about what was happening and when he found out he would straighten it up. We believed in the wisdom of Stalin. On 5 March 1953 when we heard the announcement that the leader had died we grieved a lot. Children and adults were crying. We didn't think we were going to survive when he was not there any longer.

I was a housewife and dedicated my life to my family. I didn't join the Party. I wasn't interested in it.

Vitaliy got the rank of colonel, but his illnesses aggravated: he had injured his back and had to wear a special corset, but the disease was progressing regardless. He was offered to be promoted to a higher rank, but I said to him 'God damn this general's rank. You are ill and this will be too much for you'. In 1954 he was demobilized. I had to look after him helping him to dress and undress. His back didn't move and he couldn't turn his head. He was such a beautiful man - and an invalid. Vitaliy had to get busy, though, and he worked as freelance member of the public control committee at the town council. He also took part in other activities. He had a vehicle to take him to work and when he couldn't go there even in a car he managed work by the phone staying at home. In 1955 we celebrated our silver wedding - 25 years together. There were many guests: high officials. I made traditional Jewish food, as usual: Gefilte fish and other traditional dishes. My husband was very proud of me. He was never ashamed of my Jewish name. I was a member of parents' committee at the school where my girls studied: they were never ashamed of having a Jewish mother. Since they were not ashamed it never occurred to any one to hurt them.

My husband was a very ill man and in all those years the family adjusted to his schedule of life. He had to go to hospitals and recreation centers and I always accompanied him. Due to his illness we

never traveled or went to theaters. We only communicated with our neighbors and my husband's former colleagues. We celebrated Soviet holidays at home. My husband's condition didn't allow us to have guests. At leisure time my husband and I read Soviet magazines. My husband had a big pension of a retired military. We could afford good food, clothes and had enough to pay our monthly bills for the apartment.

Vitaliy loved our girls and spent a lot of time with them. He wanted them to have Jewish husbands. I said 'What's the difference? You are not a Jew' but he laughed 'well, I am an exception'. My daughters never kept it a secret that their mother is a Jew and were not ashamed of it. However, when it was time for them to get their passports I insisted that they had their nationality written down as 'Ukrainian'. It was important at that time to avoid any difficulties with getting a higher education or a job. Ludmila, my older daughter, married Misha Lishytz, a Jewish man. They were co-students at the Polytechnic Institute in Lvov. They lived with us at the beginning and their son Sasha was born in this apartment: my husband and I raised him. They received an apartment and had a daughter – Lena, but Sasha continued living with us. Ludmila and her husband worked as engineer at a scientific research institute in Lvov. Tamara married her teacher Edward Finkler, a Jewish man. He was nine years older than she. He was a very talented man. He had two sons: Vadim and Yuri. Tamara worked as an editor and then corrector at a scientific publishing house in Lvov University. She helped me a lot looking after my husband, but his condition was getting worse. He was confined to bed for several years. My Vitaliy died in 1983. He was buried with all military honors: there were soldiers and an orchestra at his funeral. We were inseparable for 52 years (except for the war period). I stayed with him even in hospitals. He was an invalid of grade 1 and I accompanied him to recreation centers to look after him.

The situation in our family changed after my husband died. My grandson Sasha that lived with us demanded that I gave the ownership for the apartment to him. We had to exchange our big apartment in the center for two smaller ones. We live in a small two-room apartment now. But this didn't bring peace into our family. My daughters had a conflict associated with inheritance. Ludmila, my older daughter, and her family moved to Israel without my permission. I don't even know where they live. They don't call or write me. It's hard to talk about it. This is such a tragedy – no, I won't talk about it.

When perestroika began in 1980s my children had hopes for a better life. I told them that perestroika wouldn't change the situation. My husband received a pension and we raised our children, but nowadays pensions are too small to make ends meet. I am happy Tamara has a good job. She is a good corrector. Hesed provides assistance. They are so good and caring. They came to greet me on 93rd birthday: I am so grateful, they give us what has a high value – care. I cooked food for guests from Hesed that came to greet me. They said that it was so delicious that one had to be a professional cook to make such delicious food. This was in summer and I made vegetables: tomatoes, peppers, etc. I can hardly move in the apartment, but I can cook all right.

In 1998 Tamara's husband died of stroke. She and I live together. Her son Vitaliy is a nice boy. He has a Russian wife. They are very much in love. Tamara and I had no objections to their marriage. Vitaliy works, but they have a hard life since employers do not always have money to pay their employees.



I've always remembered Jewish holidays. I celebrate them, only we do not follow all rules. We make traditional food and fast at Yom Kippur. I wish I had traveled to Israel and other countries, but now that I am 93 I feel happy when I can get to the kitchen or balcony.

I have plenty of time to recall my life. I recall my parents and my childhood more and more. I loved my husband. We had a long and good life. This was the problem of our generation that we grew up as atheists and forgot traditions and language of our ancestors and that we didn't raise our children with this knowledge. It is not just a Jewish problem, it's a problem of almost all nations in the USSR. My husband's ancestors were Christian, but he never went to a church. However, we had a lot of good in our life. We had our belief and ideals. I have no regrets.

#### GLOSSARY:

1. The so-called New Economic Policy of the Soviet authorities was launched by Lenin in 1921. It meant that private business was allowed on a small scale in order to save the country ruined by the October Revolution and the Civil War. They allowed priority development of private capital and entrepreneurship. The NEP was gradually abandoned in the 1920s with the introduction of the planned economy.
2. Nationalization: confiscation of private businesses or property after the revolution of 1917 in Russia.
3. Tchaikovsky, Peter Ilyich , 1840-93, Russian composer. He is a towering figure in Russian music and one of the most popular composers in history. The most successful of his compositions are his orchestral works, notably his last three symphonies; the fantasies *Romeo and Juliet* (1869, rev. 1870 and 1879) and *Francesca da Rimini* (1876); *Marche slave* (1876); the *Manfred Symphony* (1886); the ballets *Swan Lake* (1877), *The Sleeping Beauty* (1890), and *The Nutcracker* (1892; also arranged as a suite for orchestra); and the *Piano Concerto in B Flat Minor* (1875) and the *Violin Concerto in D* (1881). Of his operas, notable are *Vakula, the Smith* (1876); *Eugene Onegin* (1879) and *The Queen of Spades* (1890), both from stories by Pushkin; and *The Maid of Orleans* (1881).
4. In early October 1917, Lenin convinced the Bolshevik Party to form an immediate insurrection against the Provisional Government. The Bolshevik leaders felt it was of the utmost importance to act quickly while they had the momentum to do so. The armed workers known as Red Guards and the other revolutionary groups moved on the night of Nov. 6-7 under the orders of the Soviet's Military Revolutionary Committee. These forces seized post and telegraph offices, electric works, railroad stations, and the state bank. Once the shot rang out from the Battleship Aurora, the thousands of people in the Red Guard stormed the Winter Palace. The Provisional Government had officially fallen to the Bolshevik regime. Once the word came to the rest of the people that the Winter Palace had been taken, people from all over rose and filled it. V. I. Lenin, the leader of the Bolsheviks, announced his attempt to construct the socialist order in Russia. This new government made up of Soviets, and led by the Bolsheviks. By early November, there was little doubt that the proletariats backed the Bolshevik motto: 'All power to the soviets!'
5. Civil War (1918-1920): The Civil War between the Reds (the Bolsheviks) and the Whites (the anti-Bolsheviks), which broke out in early 1918, ravaged Russia until 1920. The Whites represented all shades of anti-communist groups – Russian army units from World War I, led by anti-Bolshevik officers, by anti-Bolshevik volunteers and some Mensheviks and Social



Revolutionaries. Several of their leaders favored setting up a military dictatorship, but few were outspoken tsarists. Atrocities were committed throughout the Civil War by both sides. The Civil War ended with Bolshevik military victory, thanks to the lack of cooperation among the various White commanders and to the reorganization of the Red forces after Trotsky became commissar for war. It was won, however, only at the price of immense sacrifice; by 1920 Russia was ruined and devastated. In 1920 industrial production was reduced to 14% and agriculture to 50% as compared to 1913.

6. In 1920 a deliberate famine was introduced in the Ukraine causing the death of millions of people. It was arranged in order to suppress those protesting peasants who did not want to join the collective farms. There was another dreadful deliberate famine in 1930-1934 in the Ukraine. The authorities took away the last food products from the peasants. People were dying in the streets, whole villages became deserted. The authorities arranged this specifically to suppress the rebellious peasants who did not want to accept Soviet power and join collective farms.
7. 22 June 1941 – memorable day for all Soviet people. It was the first day of the great Patriotic War when the Germans crossed the border of their country bringing the war to its terrain. 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 the German army had seized the Ukrainian Republic, besieged Leningrad, the Soviet Union's second largest city, and threatened Moscow itself. The Great Patriotic War, as the Soviet Union and then Russia have called that phase of World War II, thus began inauspiciously for the Soviet Union.
8. A 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. There was usually a bench made that made a comfortable bed for children and adults in winter time.
9. During the Civil War in 1918-1920 there were all kinds of gangs in the Ukraine. Their members came from all the classes of former Russia, but most of them were peasants. Their leaders used political slogans to dress their criminal acts. These gangs were anti-Soviet and anti-Semitic. They killed Jews and burnt their houses, they robbed their houses, raped women and killed children.
10. Petliura, Simon (1879-1926): Ukrainian politician, member of the Ukrainian Social Democratic Working Party, one of the leaders of Centralnaya Rada (Central Council), the national government of Ukraine (1917-1918). Military units under his command killed Jews during the Civil War in Ukraine. In the Soviet-Polish war he was on the side of Poland; in 1920 he emigrated. He was killed in Paris by the Jewish nationalist Schwarzbard in revenge for the pogroms against Jews in Ukraine.
11. Sholem Aleichem, real name was Shalom Nohumovich Rabinovich (1859-1916): Jewish writer. He lived in Russia and moved to the US in 1914. He wrote about the life of Jews in Russia in Yiddish, Hebrew and Russian.
12. Certain provinces in the Russian Empire were designated for permanent Jewish residence and the Jewish population (apart from certain privileged families) was only allowed to live in these areas.
13. 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.

14. The 1930s was a time of anti-religion struggle in the USSR. In those years it was not safe to go to synagogue or to church. Places of worship, statues of saints, etc. were removed; rabbis, Orthodox and Roman Catholic priests disappeared behind KGB walls.
15. Primus stove -a small portable stove with a container for about 1 liter of kerosene that was pumped into burners.
16. Great Terror (1934-1938): During the Great Terror, or Great Purges, which included the notorious show trials of Stalin's former Bolshevik opponents in 1936-1938 and reached its peak in 1937 and 1938, millions of innocent Soviet citizens were sent off to labor camps or killed in prison. The major targets of the Great Terror were communists. Over half of the people who were arrested were members of the party at the time of their arrest. The armed forces, the Communist Party, and the government in general were purged of all allegedly dissident persons; the victims were generally sentenced to death or to long terms of hard labor. Much of the purge was carried out in secret, and only a few cases were tried in public 'show trials'. By the time the terror subsided in 1939, Stalin had managed to bring both the party and the public to a state of complete submission to his rule. Soviet society was so atomized and the people so fearful of reprisals that mass arrests were no longer necessary. Stalin ruled as absolute dictator of the Soviet Union until his death in March 1953.
17. Campaign against 'cosmopolitans': The campaign against 'cosmopolitans', i.e. Jews, was initiated in articles in the central organs of the Communist Party in 1949. The campaign was directed primarily at the Jewish intelligentsia and it was the first public attack on Soviet Jews as Jews. 'Cosmopolitans' writers were accused of hating the Russian people, of supporting Zionism, etc. Many Yiddish writers as well as the leaders of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee were arrested in November 1948 on charges that they maintained ties with Zionism and with American 'imperialism'. They were executed secretly in 1952. The antisemitic Doctors' Plot was launched in January 1953. A wave of anti-Semitism spread through the USSR. Jews were removed from their positions, and rumors of an imminent mass deportation of Jews to the eastern part of the USSR began to spread. Stalin's death in March 1953 put an end to the campaign against 'cosmopolitans'.
18. Doctors' Plot: The Doctors' Plot was an alleged conspiracy of a group of Moscow doctors to murder leading government and party officials. In January 1953, the Soviet press reported that nine doctors, six of whom were Jewish, had been arrested and confessed their guilt. As Stalin died in March 1953, the trial never took place. The official paper of the party, the Pravda, later announced that the charges against the doctors were false and their confessions obtained by torture. This case was one of the worst anti-Semitic incidents during Stalin's reign. In his secret speech at the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956 Khrushchev stated that Stalin wanted to use the Plot to purge the top Soviet leadership.