

Irina And Maria Volokh



Here I am with my sister, Maria, in our school outfits. Maria is wearing a Komsomol pin.

My sister was born in 1933. She finished Pedagogical College and later worked as a laboratory assistant in Leningrad. Our brother, Boris, was born in 1946. He was a chief operator at Leningrad television. He died in 1993. I was born in 1939. We were all born in Leningrad.

My mother, Roza, was born in 1911 in Dnipropetrovsk, Ukraine. She completed four years in a Russian school. She met my father, Chaim Volokh, in a Jewish drama society. My father sang, and my mother danced and was a very good performer on a mandolin. Father was so handsome, my mother had lots of competitors.

My father was the eldest of seven children. He could speak and write Hebrew, spoke Yiddish and Russian. My mother, who was born in Dnipropetrovsk, Ukraine, completed four years in a Russian school.

In 1930 my father was a Party member, and was sent to Leningrad to study in a workers' faculty. Mother rushed after him and was going to enter a musical college. She was robbed of her Komsomol card en route and had to live incognito in Leningrad. She and Father then lived as husband and wife, and in 1932 their marriage was registered in a state office. Although my father was a communist, they did not forget Jewish traditions. Secretly they observed every Jewish holiday.

Father had served his term in the army and, in 1941, he was drafted again and was at the front near Stalingrad. Mother, my sister and I were in Leningrad when the blockade was declared. We had no food. When Mother realized we would not survive the blockade, she went to the Smolninsky district Party Committee, and asked that our family be evacuated. We planned to go to Stalingrad to join Father. But the situation near Stalingrad had become critical with the Germans approaching, so we headed for the Altai region, Siberia. After Stalingrad, my father's regiment was sent to the Crimea, and we followed him there.

Before and after the war, my father was chairman of an industrial association.

In 1951, a friend of his was arrested, Father was interrogated and dismissed from his job. We were regularly visited by shoemakers who had worked under my father. They helped out financially, but it was with their help that Father took to wine. It was really a great misfortune for our family.

I was a member of the Komsomol, because all the roads were blocked outside of it. They were blocked anyway, but more so without the Komsomol. In school, I had been among the five best mathematicians in my class, but I was not admitted to a higher institution. I got an excellent mark in the first exam, written mathematics. But in the oral exam, my mark was 'satisfactory.' Then I heard the following words behind my back: 'Pluck this one. We've got enough of them already' - and then I understood what I was. Because I wasn't admitted to the Institute of Water Transport, my teacher helped me enter the Radiotechnical College in 1956, the so-called 'protection department.'

I graduated from college qualified as a draftsman and designer. The college directed me to work in a scientific research institute of the military industry. I found myself in a secret department.

I got married in 1963. I met my future husband in 1960 at a ball dedicated to the 8th of March holiday. He was thin, frail, but a Jew! My husband, Boris Yankelevich Khokhlov, was born in 1937. His father lived in Ukraine in the village of Khokhlovka - hence their family name.

Our daughter, Elena, knew that she was a Jew from childhood. She encountered everyday anti-Semitism in school. In 1988, she graduated from the Leningrad Institute of Construction Engineering. During perestroika, many Jews were thinking of leaving the country. Elena married a Jewish boy, Mark Korenblit, and they left for Israel in 1990.

Due to my 'secret' job, I couldn't join them. When my bosses learned about my daughter's departure, I was treated badly, but I wouldn't quit the job. If I did, I wouldn't be able to get another. I only had only three years left to retirement. As a 'blockade child,' I had the right to retire when I was 53. In the end, they even had to promote me as a valuable executive. Having worked for 25 years at that enterprise, I retired in 1993.

I was very happy when I heard of the fall of the Berlin Wall. My family and I realized that the Jewish wall also collapsed - the wall separating the Soviet Union and Israel. This opened the way for us to get to know our 'promised land.' Our circle of acquaintances became broader and included a lot of people who had been there. Lecturers began to disclose more truthful information about Israel. While the USSR had turned this country into a foul place in 80 years, Israel managed to transform deserts into flourishing gardens in 50. We have recovered our spirits. We attend performances dedicated to Jewish holidays. We go to the synagogue. We enjoy Jewish music. With its sounds, my heart melts and my soul rejoices.