

Ruth Strazh



This is me. I am 16. This photo was taken in Tallinn one week before deportation of our family to exile in Siberia, June 1941. In August 1940 Estonia was annexed to the Soviet Union and became a Soviet Republic. Thus, our troubles emerged soon. First, our store was nationalized. Shortly after we were forced to move out. Soviet authorities decided to make a military recruitment office in our house. None of these NKVD people cared about where a woman with two daughters was supposed to go. Even before we moved out they came to our home and took away all money and jewelry. Mama hoped that those people would leave us alone having taken away everything from us. We were to learn to live in this new situation. Mama went to work at a scarf shop. She took out threads to make fringes on scarves and fixed the edges. She often took work home and I helped her in the

evening. Next day she brought scarves back to work. Our gymnasium was closed. Instead, they opened a general education Yiddish school. I had no problems with that since Yiddish was my mother tongue. There were arrests, but they were not so numerous. For the most part, they arrested politicians or those who spoke openly against the Soviet regime. On 14th June 1941 early in the morning our landlady dropped by. She said that her maid had been to the store where they told her that the Falstein family, whom we knew well, were arrested by the NKVD early in the morning. Nobody knew why they were arrested. Soon our doorbell rang. There were three individuals at the door: one wearing a marine uniform, another one was a civilian and a militiaman. They were armed. They asked for Mama and I said she was at work. They asked me the address, but I didn't know it. Then one of them said my sister and I were to go with them and they would keep looking for Mama. I said we were not going with them when Mama was not there. Then one went to look for Mama, and the two others stayed with us. They told us to pack our things. The militiaman seemed to be a nice guy, and he told me in Estonian that we were to be sent to Siberia and I had to take warm clothes with me. I started throwing warm clothes and underwear from the wardrobe into suitcases. At that time my mama came home. When we came to the station, we were taken to a freight train. It consisted of cattle freight carriages. We boarded the train. I don't remember all places that we passed. At some point we boarded a ferry. Finally we got off at the village of Molotovsk, Kirov region. All those from Estonia were accommodated in a local school. Next day we were registered as exiled citizens and were assigned to new locations. We were sent to the kolkhoz in Slobodskoye. My sister was 12 and I was 16. Shortly after we arrived, my sister and I went to the local school. I went to the 10th grade, but actually I had already learned what they were teaching at my school in Tallinn. Anyway, I had to quit school to go to work at the shop. My mother, my sister and I worked at home. We knitted jackets from cotton packthread. We had to do this work. The shop gave us bread coupons, for 500 g bread per day, while the rate for non-working people was only 200 g bread.