

# Amalia Blank

Amalia Blank

Tallinn

Estonia

Interviewer: Ella Levitskaya

Date of interview: September 2005



I think it was a godsend when I met Amalia. This amazing woman has remained young in her soul at the age of 95 after having had many losses in her hard life. She has such a strong spirit, such optimism and soundness of mind that it is hard to believe how old she really is. Amalia is of short height. She is still very feminine, wearing lipstick and a string of pearls around her neck. Her hair is nicely done. She has shiny grey hair and young looking, fair eyes. Amalia knows how to find joy in every moment of her difficult life. Even young people could envy her quick reaction and the vividness of her speech. There are a lot of things to remember. Her life would be interesting to write a novel about. Amalia fulfilled the main purpose of her life. She was born an actress, she knew, what she wanted to be, and achieved it. Her second purpose was to love and to be helpful to her beloved one. Amalia and her husband found each other when they were not young any more, when their lives had been shattered. Probably age does not mean anything in love. They were happy, but not for long. Boris got seriously ill and then Amalia fulfilled her calling. Her care and will kept her husband in this world for many more years. It was she who prolonged his life for ten years. Of course, the doctor helped too, but in reality only Amalia 'cured' him and gave him that extra stretch of life. When I asked her about the secret of her young soul she said, "Those who preserve interest in life, are young at any age."

[Growing up](#)

[Drama school](#)

[During the war](#)

[Post-war](#)

[Glossary](#)

## Growing up

I cannot say anything about my parents' families. I didn't know my grandparents. Even if my parents told me something about them, it is dead and buried. I don't even know where my parents, my father, Samuel Blank, and my mother, Sarah Blank, were born.

Our family lived in Poland, not far from the German border, in a town called Gzhezhov [about 500 km from Warsaw]. It was a small town at that time. I just have scraps of memories from that period of time. I remember there were military barracks not far from our house. The soldiers sang beautiful songs in the evening. We were indigent. Father was a barber and his earnings were barely enough to scrape through. Mother was a seamstress. We rented an apartment in a dilapidated house, like most houses in our street. We ate what we could find.

Our family was not particularly religious. I don't recall any holidays and any traditions and rites connected with them. Sometimes, my parents went to the synagogue, probably on Jewish holidays. The children were not told about that.

Father was to be drafted into the army with the outbreak of World War I. The most dreadful thing for him was not the feeling that he might be killed, but the feeling that he might kill someone. To avoid the army, Father started drinking some yucky potion that made his hands shake. He couldn't be mobilized with that ailment. Later, his hands didn't stop trembling. It wasn't as strong any longer, but didn't go away completely. Father adjusted somehow, and still worked as a barber.

Mother raised the children and worked as a seamstress. She was a very intelligent lady. She had fine taste. I was the eldest child, born in 1910. I was namely Amalia, but at home they called me tenderly Mali. My sister Fanny was born in 1911 and my brother Solomon in 1913.

Yiddish was spoken at home. It was not that Yiddish, which I had to study later on in Mikhoels's studio [1](#), the literary language. At home it was everyday, illiterate language, which differed much from the literary Jewish language. Of course, we knew Polish. We went to a Polish school as there was no Jewish school in Gzhezhov. I finished two grades of elementary school there.

In the 1900s and 1910s Jewish pogroms took place in Poland. Then the situation calmed down and then they started again in 1919. The guard in the house where we rented an apartment, Franek, was a real gangster, drunkard and hooligan, but he worshiped my mom, which was unexplainable. He was ready to kneel in front of her. Certainly, Franek was connected with the gangs, who were involved in pogroms. Once, Franek called my mom and said, 'Sarah, there will be a dry pogrom.' 'Dry' pogrom implied that the pogrom-makers wouldn't kill the Jews. They would destroy houses, plunder, beat people, but not murder them.

Father was very nervous and said that the doors should be barricaded for the pogrom-makers not to break into. Mother said that it should be the other way around: keep the door wide open. If the pogrom-makers saw that they would be shocked and Mother wanted to take advantage of that. So, that's what she did: she left the door wide open.

The next day there was a crowd of pogrom-makers in our street. I don't know how many people there were. Their leader was in the front. They came in our apartment. Mother welcomed them with a smile and told them to feel at home. It was a pity that there were not enough chairs for the 'honorable guests.' Let them sit the way they wanted. The pogrom-makers looked at each other perplexed, as they were taken aback by such a reception. Mother kept on being affable saying that they could take all they wanted: 'Would you need darned baby's stockings? Take them. Or patched dresses of my daughters? Go ahead!' The pogrom-makers kept silent, and none of them moved. Then Mother took a box with cigarettes. At that time there was a deficit, but Mother had gotten ready in advance. She started treating them to cigarettes and saying that unfortunately it was the only treat she had for the guests. They took them, the leader gave a sign and they vanished.

In two or three weeks, Franek came up to my mother again. He was very nervous and said that there would be a 'wet' pogrom for several days and we had to flee. We lived on the border of Poland with Germany and Mother decided that we should run away there. I don't know how she managed to arrange for Father to cross the border, but he was the first from the family to do so. Then she had us go, and finally she crossed the border herself.

I remember how she did that. In general, Mother was a legend. What an amazing woman! She took us three children to the border. She had studied everything. There was barbed wire – Polish soldiers on one side and German soldiers on the other side. Besides, there was a long ditch along the border line. Mother put simple clothes on, rolled up her sleeves, put an apron on. On her way she plucked field flowers by the ditch and gave each of us a bouquet. I don't know how Mother had managed to agree with the German lady, but she organized everything. She gave us the flowers and told us that the lady on the other side was our mother, who would come to get us.

When the lady showed up, we were supposed to follow her and not look back. She instructed us, we did what she told us and reached the border. Then Mother took out cigarettes and gave them to Polish and German frontier officers. She asked them to free her from these poor children – us. She said she'd found them in a ditch; they'd plucked flowers there. They might have come from Germany and got lost. Mother said she was a laundrywoman and had to do washing, so she wouldn't have time to deal with children, and she asked the frontier officers to let the children over the border into Germany as those kids were most likely from there.

At that moment a lady on the German side showed up. She came running towards us and cried out, 'Children, children I have been looking for you!'. We cried out, 'Mama!' and darted towards her. It happened exactly according to Mother's scenario. The frontier officers parted the barbed wire and let us through. That lady took us to Father. Soon Mother joined us.

That was another brilliant performance, concocted and performed by mother. She understood that it was dangerous to cross the border at nighttime, as they might start shooting. It ought to be done in broad daylight. It was risky for Mother to go to that part where we had crossed the border, as she would be recognized. So she found a place, where she could go through a ford across a streamlet, no deeper than knee length. Mother rolled up her feather bed and started crossing the border in the open.

Of course, she was nabbed and asked where she was heading. Mother only repeated that she wanted to go to her mother's grave. The frontier officers brought her to the chief frontier guard and told him what had happened for him to decide what to do with her. The guard started to ask Mother questions and no matter what he asked she responded with one and the same phrase: 'To my mother's grave.' The guard kept Mother for a certain time, and then let her go – what could you do with an insane person? Let that crazy woman go to her mother's grave with her feather bed, as it looks like she is demented indeed. Mother was permitted to cross the border. She found us in the village where Father and I were staying. Then we moved to Berlin, where we started a new life. I never returned to Poland.

Only my parents spoke German before, but I learned it very quickly. It seems to me that it is easier to study a foreign language for people who have an ear for music. In any case, my musical talent was helpful. Soon I was so fluent in German that I could go to a German school.

My performing talent was discovered in Berlin, though I was not aware of that. It all began with a hurdy-gurdy. Once an organ-grinder came to our street. We lived in the basement as we were very poor and couldn't afford to rent a good apartment. Having heard the music, I climbed out from the basement and started dancing to the music. Buxom German ladies were leaning against the window sills and saw me dancing. The organ-grinder had a wooden leg and I was sorry for him. When he finished playing, I walked around the yard, picked up the coins wrapped in paper, which

had been thrown from the windows by those German ladies and put them in the hurdy-gurdy.

Since that time I forgot about the time of the day, home and school whenever that organ-grinder showed up; I followed him as if under a spell. I came back home in the evening. Of course, Father strictly punished me, he even beat me with a strap. I wasn't afraid of pain, but of humiliation. Then Mother had a talk with me; she said that after school I was supposed to come home, eat and do my homework. I promised that I wouldn't go with that organ-grinder from yard to yard like a gypsy girl. Of course, I kept my promise as I was ready to do anything for my mother.

After a while my parents forgot about it all, as I behaved properly. I danced at home, as I couldn't help dancing. But I needed spectators. There was a tram stop right by our house and there were always people who were waiting for the tram. I started running to that stop and danced in front of those people.

Once a very elegant lady stepped out from that crowd and asked me to introduce her to my mother and to show her where we lived. She went down the basement with me. She introduced herself to my mother and said that she had her own ballet school. And that I had caught her attention. She said if the child danced in front of people in the street, it meant she was possessed, in the best sense of the word. She suggested to my mother that she'd teach me free of charge. She didn't want me to be a classical ballet dancer, but an improviser like Isadora Duncan. That lady told my mom that I would become a celebrity and make her school famous. [Duncan, Isadora (1877-1927): American dancer, regarded by many as the mother of Modern Dance.]

Mother listened to her and said that she was very grateful for her high assessment of my skills, but unfortunately she had to turn down the offer, that she had her reasons for doing so. The lady didn't insist, but left her business card. She left and I burst into tears. I took it as a tragedy! All the dreams I had been living with collapsed.

Mother tenderly touched my head and said when I would turn 14 or 15 years old she would tell me why she had turned down that lady's offer. She said not to worry, as where one mushroom grows, another one would grow in his place. So, we would wait for another mushroom and would not turn down that one.

So, I lived in a routine: went to school, did my homework. When I was at home by myself, I started dancing and improvised in front of the mirror. These were the moments of my happiness, the times when I felt alive.

When I turned 14, Mother lived up to her promise and explained why she had refused that lady to teach me ballet. She gave me a book by Magnus Grishfeld, where not only normal types of intercourse were described, but also heterosexual life – both male and female. When I read it, Mother said that among actors those things were very common, therefore she didn't want me to be surrounded by such people in my early teens. Mother said that my second 'mushroom' was theatrical talent. I understood that it would be very hard for me to become an actress. There was even a saying in Berlin that the way to the stage was through the bed and it was true at that time. I found it unacceptable for me.

In 1928 a Jewish theater came on tour to Berlin from Moscow. The director was Granovskiy, he founded that theater. Solomon Mikhoels was a leading actor in that theater. I attended all their

performances. There were very interesting performances. I was particularly delighted by the play 'The Sorceress,' written by Goldfaden [2](#). After that performance I played that role in my way. I combined the features of Goldfaden's witch and mine. I also worked on classical roles – the scene of Ophelia's insanity from Shakespeare's Hamlet. There were some more roles.

There was a famous actor named Granakh in Berlin. He was unsurpassed, brilliant. He was loved by all of Berlin after his wonderful part of Mephistopheles. My pal worked with him in one theater. Once I mentioned that I wanted to show my roles to someone who could say competently if I had it in me to become an actress. I couldn't judge whether I had the talent from God or not. She suggested that I should meet Granakh. If he found talent in me, he would be able to help. She warned me, saying that if a girl comes to his apartment, she walks out a woman. I said that I was ready to take a risk – and I was determined: I would come a girl and leave a girl!

Once after rehearsals my pal introduced me to Granakh. He looked at me appraisingly and joked that I was too clever for him, but still made an appointment for an audition in his apartment. He lived out of town. I went by metro and he picked me up at the station. I was aware that I had to explain everything on our way. I started telling him that I came of a very poor family and dreamed of becoming an actress, but had doubts whether I was really gifted and whether there was a sense behind my dreams. So, I wanted to find out those things from him. He started thinking and I saw a glimpse of kindness in his eyes. I calmed down.

When we came to his apartment, he suggested that we should get down to business. I decided to perform the scene of Ophelia's insanity and the role of the witch. When I said that I was going to perform Ophelia's insanity, he pursed his lips. He probably thought that I would look insane, pull my hair out, run around the apartment and scream. I stood still, however, didn't raise my voice. I didn't show him outward insanity, but a person in deep tribulation, on the verge of insanity.

There was a long pause, after I had finished the monologue. Then he looked at me differently and asked what else I could do. I performed a scene of the sorceress. Granakh was very effusive and hot-blooded. When I finished, he picked up the phone and said, 'Gustav, come here, I've discovered a new talent! She is the Ophelia and the Witch!'

Gustav Vandenheim was one of the most famous actors in Berlin. He was a very handsome man. All women were in love with him. He came at once and grabbed my breast. My reaction was spontaneous, I acted by reflex – I slapped him. Granakh laughed with the laughter of Mephistopheles and Vandenheim left. Granakh said that he would dress me up and open up the gate for me and do his best for me to be on stage. I was a 17-year-old and had no experience, but I intuitively picked the right course of behavior. I replied that there was no need in putting on or putting off clothes, but as for opening the gate, that would be good, at least a chink.

At that time there was a famous actress called Ilke Grunend. I didn't want to deal with male actors and asked him to give a recommendation letter to her. Granakh insisted on having lunch, but still I got the letter in the end. Granakh wrote a wonderful letter and besought Ilke Grunend to listen to me. As soon as I got the letter, I bowed to him politely and left. I left a girl as I had told my friend. I never saw Granakh again and I was afraid to bump into him in the street.

I went to Ilke Grunend right away. She read the letter and asked me to perform the scenes that I had shown Granakh. When I finished, she said that she would teach me free of charge and

schedule the first class. Unfortunately, I got ill. I had blood poisoning, and the doctors even wanted to amputate my leg. I was unwell for a long time, and when I got better I went to Ilke Grunend and the maid told me that she had gone abroad. Thus, I couldn't realize that chance. I kept on trying, but didn't succeed. I didn't even have a chance for an audition: they just saw a girl with a good body, whom they wanted to use, and I understood that it was not my fate to become an actress in Berlin.

In 1929 my mom died. She was still young. Her heart must have failed due to constant responsibility for the family, which was living in poverty and constant strain. It was really hard after Mother's death. I didn't get along with Father. I was very proud and wasn't willing to ask him for money. I was very needy. There was a swing of unemployment in Germany. The economy was depressed. What could I count on? I didn't have any professional skills. I hadn't become an actress. I was on odd jobs.

At that time many German citizens took a liking to the Soviet Union, I as well. Nobody knew the real state of things at that time. There was such an organization as the Council of Friends of the Soviet Union. I was a member of that organization. I was so emaciated that I ended up being unable to eat anything. Once, I was told that the Council of Friends of the Soviet Union sent jobless people to the Soviet Union to some resort. I was also included in that delegation. We were taken to Miskhor, Crimea, Soviet Union [today Ukraine]. I was so weak that the group leader who was supposed to take us to Miskhor held me in his arms during our trip. When we arrived, he carried me to the doctor.

There was a wonderful doctor there. He and his wife took care of me, as if I was their daughter. They taught me how to eat. I couldn't swallow. They gave me tiny portions, but the food was very nutritious. They made me eat those tiny portions. They watched me closely to catch me if I was about to swoon, didn't allow me to be in the sun. They let me recoup and regain my footing. We were taken to Moscow from Miskhor. We checked into a hotel. The leader of the German group, who was supposed to process our documents and take us to Germany, came to the hotel. There was a delay and we had to stay in the hotel. It was early October 1931.

I was afraid to go back to Germany, as I understood that I shouldn't do that. Fascism was in full swing. It was already brewing before my departure for the Soviet Union. It was hard to picture what the Fascists were doing. It was getting stronger: Hitler became more and more popular and it felt that the whole situation would end in great calamity. I knew that Hitler had declared Jews the enemies of the German people. I feared the thought of coming back. I decided to try and stay in the USSR.

I knew that there was a Comintern [3](#) organization in Moscow and I went to the German section, headed by Wilhelm Pieck [4](#). No less, no more. I got a pass. Went in. There was a secretary at the reception. I said that I wanted to talk to Wilhelm Pieck. She looked at me like at a mad lady and said that he was busy at a conference. I said that I would wait for him. In an hour the secretary told me brusquely that I disturbed her and there was no use waiting for Pieck, as he was very busy. I replied that I would wait as long as needed, and if I disturbed her, she could complain about me to Pieck. The secretary blew her top and said, 'That is what I will do!', and went to his office.

Pieck came out and asked me what the matter was. I said that I was from a German delegation and was to go back to Germany in a day or two, but I couldn't do that as I was a Jew. I also added that I



was a member of the organization of Friends of the Soviet Union. I said I would be detained in Berlin on the platform without even a chance to get home. What was the point of being treated and saved from death by hunger if was to face death now? I asked Wilhelm Pieck to let me stay in the USSR and warn our group leader about it.

Pieck was a kind man, and I understood that as soon as he walked into the reception room. He had a sharp voice, but his eyes were the kindest. Pieck listened to me and dictated his secretary a temporary permit for me to stay in the Soviet Union until the issue was clarified. He said I could stay in the hotel for another week and then they would think of something.

The delegation left for Germany and I stayed on my own, without money, without knowing the language. I had no idea what to do. Again I went to Wilhelm Pieck. I knew that there was a foreign department at Moscow University [5](#) in the journalist faculty. Of course, I couldn't go there at random. I didn't even have any documents, but the paper issued by Pieck. So I went to Wilhelm Pieck and asked him to assist me in studying, so that I would have a place in a hostel and a scholarship if I deserved one. I had to provide for myself somehow. Wilhelm Pieck laughed and replied that he wasn't worried about me, as I would achieve any stated goal. Thus, I left without a clue what to do next.

In Berlin I knew a writer called Berta Lask [1878-1967: poet, journalist, Communist activist]. She was friends with the outstanding Soviet activist, communist Klara Tsetkin and knew her son. Klara and her family lived in Moscow. When I was going to the Soviet Union, Berta gave me a small greeting letter for the Tsetkin family. At that time I took it there and completely forgot about those people. Now I decided that I would go to them.

I went to Klara Tsetkin's son and told him about my problems. I asked him how I could find a job. It turned out that his sister-in-law had two children and wanted to hire a governess who could speak German with her children. I was given the address and that lady hired me. I didn't live there for a long time. Their house-keeper was lice-ridden and I suffered from it as well. I didn't want to stay there and left. It took time for me to get rid of that nightmare.

## **Drama school**

I found a job in an aviation company which worked jointly with Germany and the director sought a secretary, who was fluent in German. I was offered the job, but I was still dreaming of becoming an actress. By that time I had lived in Moscow for two years. It was the year 1933. I knew that Mikhoels was living in Moscow and decided not to chuck away such a chance. Things looked very simple to me at that time: decided-done. I knew that Mikhoels was also a producer and artistic director of the Jewish theater. Granovskiy didn't come back to Moscow after his tour but stayed in Paris.

I found out Mikhoels's home number and called him. I didn't speak Russian, only German. The telephone was answered by a secretary and I asked her if I could speak to Mikhoels. We spoke German, as he was fluent in German. I told him that my matter was serious and asked for an appointment. He suggested that I should come to the theater, but I objected saying that he would be busy, disturbed by people and he wouldn't be able to pay attention to me. Mikhoels said that I should come to his place.

He lived in a poky apartment on Stankevich Street. As soon as I saw him, I greeted him and begged him to engage me in his theater. He looked at me astonished and I started telling him about my dream of becoming an actress when I lived in Berlin and that I didn't succeed in that back then. I also remembered and told him of the tour of the Jewish theater in Berlin.

Mikhoels didn't interrupt me and when I finished asked me how a table was made. I was perplexed and he asked the same question: how a table was made. How would I know that? I was not a joiner, I didn't know. Mikhoels told me in spite: So I didn't know how to make a table, but without learning anything I would know how to become an actress? He asked me not to come with that request to him ever again. What was I to do?!

Mikhoels then said in a softer tone that there was a drama school by the theater, where he was the principal. He said that I should try to enter it like anybody else. Exams would be held in September. My visit to Mikhoels was in April. I said that it was a long way to go until September and I just wanted to know whether I had a chance. Maybe I was really good for nothing. Mikhoels looked at me sympathetically and said that he would make an exception for me. He'd let me come to the drama school to take an exam. But it was a serious violation of rules, as the teachers would have to examine me instead of having classes with students. I was so impudent that I didn't react to that.

I went to the school when I was told to. The students were crowded in the halls: it was a sensation that an audition was arranged because of one person! I entered the room where the board was sitting. I was scared at that moment! Only there and then I realized what was happening to me. The door shut behind me and Mikhoels asked what I come with. I said I didn't know. 'Why have you come?' asked Mikhoels. I said that I had no idea how an actor's talent was discovered. Mikhoels said that they would have their ways to find out and suggested that I should read something. I read verses by Heine in German.

Then Mikhoels made a sign to a bald man at the grand piano and I heard a waltz being played. I had no clue what I was supposed to do. Well, I didn't think that he wanted me to dance the waltz. It was ridiculous. What did he imply? I brooded on for a second and then started improvising. I sat down on the chair and imagined that I was at the prom and on the eve I had a tiff with my beloved. He was not in the hall and I was sitting there and looking at dancing couples. Maybe he was somewhere? No. Then the door opened and I startled: is it he? No, I sat down and was despondent like a flower without sun. It was my first improvisation.

There were so many melodies that finally I said that I was exhausted. Mikhoels said that to be an actor is sweat, tears and hard work. He commanded from the very beginning. There were so many more melodies and I had to think over things again.

Finally he said that he was through, and asked if other board members would like to give me a task. The producer of the theater, as I found out later, Efraim Reuter, suggested that I should role play the phrase: 'for some people life is a blooming garden and for others a bog.' Oh my God what would I do with that newspaper's phrase? Dismay! I imagined myself at a party with a glass of champagne – a happy and rich girl, for whom life is a blooming garden. Then thousands of people, for whom life is a difficult path. I don't remember all I did, just the last option. I sat on the chair and imagined that there was a typing machine in front of me and the editor dictating me some phrase. I repeated that phrase without any intonation, pauses etc. there was a big pause and Mikhoels told me to wait in the hall while the board would be discussing my case.



I couldn't open the door as there were very many students propping against it on the other side. Finally I managed to walk out, and the students started applauding, exclaiming: Sarah Bernharth! I was really strained after the exam and was sure that they were teasing me. I burst into tears. The girls said that nobody wanted to hurt me and that I had done all right. Mikhoels came out of the room. He took my hand and started walking me slowly along the corridor. He chewed the cud, made long pauses, 'You see... Well... However,... You are admitted to the second course!'

The academic year began in September and I had to study in the second year with current freshmen. I couldn't believe my happiness. The principal came up to Mikhoels and said that all was OK, except that I didn't know Yiddish. I wouldn't be able to speak German in class. 'In two weeks,' said Mikhoels, 'that girl will speak, read and write Yiddish.' I understood what kind of obligation I had. I burned the midnight oil to live up to his expectation. I learned to read, write and speak Yiddish. This was the way I came to the great Mikhoels.

It was much spoken and written about. He was a great personality and a great actor. That was the way I saw him. Fate was very kind to me, to be his student. Later on, when I was more mature and was able to understand people, I realized that he was a very lonely man. I could really feel it. He was too great. Those kind of people are lonely, believe me. No matter how many friends and admirers they might have, the greater a man, the lonelier he is. Maybe that was the reason why the subject of loneliness was brilliantly depicted in his parts; it was felt all way through.

Most students of the drama school came from hick towns to study in Moscow. They didn't only worship Mikhoels, they even feared him. He was copied on stage, in every day life. It irritated him and he told the male students that all of them wanted to be little Mikhoelsiks and would be nobody as there was one Mikhoels already and they had to remain themselves. This is how individuality begins.

I remember once Mikhoels told us during class, and I don't know whether it was his own thought, or a quotation: 'Success is the point of altitude where you can see the fall. It means, my dear students, no matter how well you do, you should work to achieve success again. You should work hard, or you will see the point of the fall.'

Mikhoels never performed anything in class as other directors usually did. He thought we were supposed to think of an image and live it, and the director should take care of the direction. If he showed how to play this or that part, most people would copy him and Mikhoels didn't want that. He explained everything in such a way that no demonstration was needed.

He was a thinker for me, an actor-thinker. I would never abide by the thought that he is not alive. I look at his picture, at his face and it seems to me that he is alive. He lives in me and in all of us. An actor can be recognized by his roles. Let's take Tevye the Dairyman [6](#), for instance. His Tevye was on earth, but in his mind he was closer to heaven.

In the performance of the play 'The Travels of Benjamin the Third' [based on the novella by Mendele Moykher Sforim] [7](#) Mikhoels made a Quixote out of Benjamin. It was a Jewish Quixote. He had his Sancho, in this case Senderl, played by Mikhoels's partner, Zuskin [7](#), a magnificent, wonderful actor. They complemented each other. I would even say that Zuskin was the alter ego of Mikhoels on stage. Only two actors played the parts in that performance. It is impossible to retell!

The performance begins and both of them are poor men from a Jewish town in the pale of settlement <sup>8</sup>. They embark on a journey to seek better people and justice. They walk on and on and come back to their native little town. Their poetic dreams collapsed in rigid reality. There was such a musicality, rhythm, expression, poetic spirit. Amazing. I still remember it vividly, though 60 years have passed! The last words of Senderl: 'Benjamin, we are again in Tuneyadovkas.' That was the end. I could talk incessantly about that performance.

Many people in theory say that the part of the king is played by his retinue. But when Mikhoels played the part of a king without any retinue, hardly had he emerged from behind the curtain, when everybody knew that the king came in all his grandeur. It is unexplainable how he did it. He was a genius! Can we explain how geniuses do things? No gestures, no words, just his head emerges from the curtain and we see a grand, grand king.

He thought up things himself. He worked really hard on every role, pondered over every image. He really strained his thoughts. The scene in the forest. The king was abandoned, only Earl Kent stayed with him. How can the loneliness be shown. His king of Lyres in the forest was barking at the moon, like a dog, then howled like a wolf. There was such a tragedy in that howling of the wolf, such inescapable solitude. It was the cry of the soul out of desperate loneliness and strong feeling of being abandoned. All spectators sat still, taken aback by this genial transformation.

The last scene of the performance – the death of Lyre. Oh my God. When dead Cordelia is brought. How he picks her up! Then lays her down on the ground, lies down close to her, happy as he had his dear daughter back. There are no words. Only the freezing sound of 'M-m-m-m-m-m-m-m-m....', slowly dying, like the last voice.

The famous English actor Gordon Craig, who also had to play the part of Lyre, came to Moscow just to see Mikhoels playing. He was rapt in contemplation. In that role Mikhoels rejected the traditional appearance of Lyre. All actors have a beard when they play Lyre, they look alike. Mikhoels's Lyre was without a beard, the face was smooth, he hardly had any makeup. It was the inner part – grand, the strength of tragedy. His gestures, his musicality were absolutely amazing! His fingers were ugly, like short sausages. But if you saw him on the stage, his play! They were very expressive, and he could say more with his fingers than with his words. Gestures were the most important. They meant more than words.

Mikhoels also played in a play called 'Deaf.' How can you show deafness with words? He found a gesture for it: he put his hand to the ear and started twisting his hand as if pulling the sound from his ear, and his hand was going farther and farther as if he wanted to pull out the sound completely, to see it and to hear it! He depicted this with one gesture.

Mikhoels did not stage only tragedies. There was a play called 'Freylachs' in the Jewish theater. Freylach means mirth and freylach is a wedding dance. Mikhoels directed that performance and played in it. It was a bright show, the fireworks of buoyancy, the waterfall of unceasing sap. In that performance Mikhoels showed his great love to Jewish people. There could be many things told about Mikhoels's roles, but can we describe the genius in words ...?

Our classes with Mikhoels. He could be different. He liked hoaxes. Mikhoels had the best students – in his opinion – sit next to him. He was always in the center. The best female student, usually I, was on one side and the best male student was on the other side. There were all kinds of things at the

classes. Here Mikhoels came, sat at the table, looked around the classroom, took a cigarette. All boys darted to him with lit matches. He smoked. Pause. The hoax began. Meaningful pauses, general tension. Poor students didn't know how to react to that – when such precious time in class went by without any purpose. I got angry and nervous. In general, his classes were like poetry, the poetry of thought. The time was fleeting in his classes. It seemed like the class only took seconds.

I practically didn't know Russian and I was much despondent about that. I always felt, was aware that I was a foreigner, and didn't have the same rights Russians had. It put pressure on me. It was all strange to me at the very beginning. I had to start learning things all over. I was sociable. I lived in the hostel of the drama school. I could speak Yiddish there, as everybody spoke it. When I was out, I communicated with gestures. Unfortunately, I did not study Russian on purpose. I learned it reading signs and always boldly asked, 'What does that mean?' I disturbed everybody all the time. I started speaking, but my language was broken, had a harsh German accent. Finally, I spoke, mutating the language, but still I somehow knew it was broken.

I always corresponded with my kin, mostly with my sister. Father was dead and my brother didn't write often. Once my sister came to the Soviet Union from Germany for a few days. She stayed with me. After that visit, in her letter Fanny wrote to me that Father's brother had found them. It turned out that he lived in America. I didn't remember him. My sister wrote to me that he knew me from childhood and loved me. She met with Uncle and he decided to bequeath a large amount of money to me. My sister told me to come at once, without procrastinating and process all the documents as the uncle was very ill and was about to die.

At that time I was aware of the Soviet reality. Repressions started, though it was not the Great Terror [10](#) like in the late 1930s. There was the issue of 'enemies of the people' [11](#) at that time. Rich people were sent into exile, the Gulag [12](#). I understood if I got money from America it would be revealed in the NKVD [13](#) right away and it would be easy to predict what would happen next. In such cases the state took half of the amount officially and the second half would be taken unofficially after arrest. It would have been useless to write to Uncle telling him not to bequeath me money, as the censorship would have noticed that. I decided not to respond and stop correspondence. It was my fault that I stopped keeping in touch with my relatives.

I got married during my studies at drama school. I met my husband, Illia Koltynyuk, at school. He also studied there, but at the producer's department. Illia was my age. He was born in Odessa [14](#) in 1910. He came to Moscow, to Mikhoel's school, after he got secondary education. I didn't know any of his relatives. Both of us were lonely and found the warmth in each other that both of us sought. We registered our marriage with the state marriage registrar. It was not a wedding as such, just a registration. We were given a small room in the hostel, which became our first home. At that time I got my Soviet passport and became a citizen of the USSR.

I entered the 2nd course of the school right away, so I studied only for three years. In 1936 I was to graduate and get my diploma. I had two parts: Laurencia in 'The Sheep's Spring' and several parts from one-act plays of some modern actor. I played the part of the strumpet. What a combination Laurencia and a trollop.

A large board was to grade the graduation performance and right after their discussion we were supposed to get a mandatory job assignment [15](#). Finally I was called into the director's office. Mikhoels and the members of the board were sitting there. Somebody from the commission said

that my mandatory job assignment was at the Moscow Jewish theater. I turned it down. I said if I were younger, I would welcome it. I was 26. I would play the parts: 'the food is served' for a year or two, then I would have the parts with a couple of phrases and then I would get old until I have real roles.

I thanked the board for the estimation of my work and asked them to send me to any city, even to a provincial theater, where I would get main parts or any more important parts for that matter. Where I would have a chance, to try, to learn from my mistakes and become an actress. Mikhoels kept silent. What could he say in objection? I was right. I made my choice deliberately. There were 13 Jewish theaters in the Soviet Union and I was assigned to the Jewish theater in the capital of Azerbaijan, Baku. My husband asked for the same mandatory job assignment. Both of us left: a budding producer and a budding actress.

Our common debut was in the theater in Baku. I played the main part in this performance. The play was called 'losele.' I don't remember the playwright. It was a touching drama about the life of a poor boy from a poor Jewish town. I played the part of the boy, losele. After that performance, which was a success, my husband told me that I was gifted enough to work in the theater without his assistance, so that nobody would blame me of being treated preferentially since I was the producer's wife. So, he would not give me any parts. He wanted me to show my capabilities for other producers to see me and offer me to work with them. That's the way it was and I understood that he was right. That decision eliminated all kinds of intrigues regarding both of us.

We came to a strong team. If my husband was accepted right away, it was harder for me. There was a prima donna in the theater and she appeared to be against me right away. She saw a rival in me. I had a fair attitude to her, without showing my hurt feelings. I was a success in the role of the boy losele. Spectators gave me a very warm welcome.

Then the actress called a meeting where the embodiment of the boy created by me was discussed. They scolded me the best way they could, saying that it was no good. I kept silent. Finally, she could not help asking: Would I please explain to the people why I did this kind of personification that was good for nothing? Upon which I said that the audience was the most competent judge for me and I would listen only to their opinion. I would take only their criticism seriously. The audience really liked me. That actress would not calm down, was trying to nag on me, and hurt me. I ran out of patience and went to work in the Jewish theater in Dnepropetrovsk. My husband also went to work there as a producer.

My favorite part was the role of a girl in the play of the Jewish poet and playwright Perets Markish [16](#), 'Feast.' It was a tragedy, set in Ukraine in the 1910s, during pogroms [17](#). There is no need to retell the content of the play. I would only say that I played the part of the Jewish girl who was forced to dance before she was killed by pogrom-makers. The director of that play decided to invite a ballet master who would work with me on that dance. I objected saying that his guidance would be no good here and asked to be allowed to dance the part myself. I didn't even rehearse that dance, I improvised on the stage, when the tragic music started playing. I was a leading actress of the theater and played mostly tragic parts. I was happy that I didn't have to play comic roles. I felt happy that spectators would forget about their problems thanks to my work.

I lived in Dnepropetrovsk before 1939. It was a hard time for the people of the Soviet Union. It was the time of the Great Terror and everybody was worried for the lives of their loved ones. I probably

understood it even sharper than others. Others were raised by that regime and for them it was dear and impeccable, but I was an onlooker. Yes, I was scared. I understood that I might fit in the role of the spy, and thus be an 'enemy of the people.' I was born in Poland, came to the USSR from Germany and could be either a German or Polish spy, which was fraught with arrest.

Now I think that my life was protected by God. Every time when there were hardships He protected me. I was rescued in the 1930s. When I understood that I was in imminent danger, I arranged things in a way so that I would be in the theater less often and tour around more. I must have been paid less attention as I was traveling most of the time.

### During the war

In 1939 Hitler attacked Poland [18](#). I was horrified. In contrast to Soviet people, who had no idea what fascism was, I saw what it was and ran away from it. And again there was another danger. I calmed down, thinking that the war would not last long. Hitler's troops were defeated by Soviet troops, commissioned in Poland. After that the governments of both countries signed a non-aggression treaty [Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact] [19](#), and part of Poland was annexed to the Soviet Union. Lvov was also annexed. There was a wonderful Jewish theater there. It was decided to merge the Dnepropetrovsk and Lvov Jewish theater and our theater moved to Lvov. My husband and I happened to be in that splendid old city.

Probably not all local dwellers were happy to be Soviet citizens and had hostile views of the USSR. Our theater was like an isle and all waves passed by us. There was a very large audience at that theater and we did not lose it after the merger of the two theaters. There was a great audience in Lvov, people were demanding, but very grateful.

First I was perturbed by the jealousy of the leading actress there. There was a wonderful actress there, Ida Kamil'skaya. She was jealous of my success for some reason. She was a great actress and she could take pride in her own success instead of envying somebody else's. It was hard for me to understand what her motive was.

I never had a feeling like that as I was in constant quest. There was the end of the performance and the spectators were applauding me, standing up and crying out my name. It was great. It is hard for me to put in words those happy moments I felt. I was so glad to get such a feedback from the audience. Apart from joy there was another feeling. I bowed to them and had another thought in mind: what will I bring them tomorrow.

I cannot say I was always happy with my work. I soberly assessed myself. I did not spare myself. I went through Mikhoel's school and he taught me that a creative process was very complicated and I had to put my heart and soul into that. How could I stop if there was a new role waiting for me. How could I relax?

On Sunday, 22nd June 1941 I had to play in the evening's performance and in the morning we did not rush, just took a little rest. Suddenly I saw through the window that people were running. It was unclear. Then we heard Molotov's speech [20](#) on the radio and found out about the outbreak of war [21](#), Germany's attack of the Soviet Union.

Lvov was bombed. They said that people should go down the basement during bombings. There was no basement in our house, so my husband and I went to the next one. There were women with

children. Some of them were infants. They were swaying like in prayer and lamenting. They said that Hitler would not leave anybody alive and Ukrainians might kill all of us before Hitler arrived. There was an old Jew with a long gray beard in the center of the room. He raised his hands and prayed. But it was more demanding rather than praying. He demanded protection and help from God. It was scary.

There were no signs of evacuation in the city. All directors and managers ran away from Lvov in their cars and bikes, leaving the city absolutely helpless. Do as you like. My husband had heart trouble and he was not to be drafted into the army. How were we to be rescued? We survived the night and what was next?

We came back home and suddenly someone rang the doorbell. There was a young couple outside, whom we did not know. They had backpacks. The guy asked me why I was at home if the Germans were only 3 kilometers away from Lvov. I was at a loss. I asked them who they were. They said they had watched my performances. How did they get my address? It turned out that every night after the performance they were waiting for me to remove my makeup, get dressed and say good-bye to the actors. Every night they were waiting for me and saw me home incognito. They suggested that I should go with them.

We had to get to the train station as soon as possible to take any train and flee from here. There was a new business in the city: those who had at least a handcart took luggage to the station. We got to the train station and there were crowds of people, a wave of misery. There was such a sobbing of people, who did not manage to get on the train. I understood that it would not be easy for us to get there and cried.

Suddenly some rail station worker elbowed his way through the crowd and said to me, 'Do not cry, my daughter.' He told me at what platform a new train would leave from and told us to go there at once. Instead of going there I cried out loud, 'Guys, follow me, there will be a new train,' and that throng of people rushed there. I was knocked down. People were jumping over me. Some guy helped me get up and we also ran there.

As soon as we got in the car, there was a German plane flying low and started shooting at the cars, at people at the platform. Good thing that there was a soldier with a rifle who shot at the plane. The plane started burning and flew away. During the shooting we were under the car and laid still. We thought that we would be safe there. After the shooting we got in the car and the train departed.

We traveled for a little while and then our train stopped to let the train heading to the front go first. I looked out the window: absolutely young soldiers, children went to fight with Germans. I burst into tears. A young girl was sitting in front of me. She started powdering her nose and smiled at those guys. I cried as I knew that they would have to face death.

After a while a couple in civilian clothes came in and headed straight to me. They asked us for documents and demanded that we should open our suitcases. They took out all things and started knocking on the suitcases, looking for double bottoms. Finally I got over the shock and asked what the matter was. They apologized and the elder asked me to follow them. I went with them and they said that a young woman in front of me had said that I was mourning over Soviet soldiers. I said I cried as I was sorry for their young lives. The guy apologized and said that I could have my



reckoning with that lady. They left.

I went back in the car and told her to leave me alone. I told everybody what had happened. They wanted to throw her off the train, she could hardly save herself. From time to time a patrol came on the train. During checkup of the documents both of my rescuers were taken off the train. They had been in such a rush to come to my rescue and had left behind documents. I besought the patrol to let them be, as they had saved my life, asked them to give them a chance. Nothing helped. I do not know what happened to them, whether they survived or not. I still feel guilty. We reached Kiev, Darnitsa station, but because of what was happening at Babi Yar [22](#) our stop was not allowed and we went farther, to the Urals.

For a while my husband and I stayed in a small town in the Urals. I cannot recall its name. My husband worked as an electrician. Then I found out from the papers that the Moscow Jewish theater had been evacuated to Tashkent [today Uzbekistan]. I decided to go there. I did not want to ask Mikhoels for help. Somehow, we saved money for the tickets and left. We found out in what hotel Mikhoels lived. I called him and said that I was happy to hear my teacher's voice. He invited my husband and me to come over. He asked what he could do for us. I said I had not come to bother him with my problems, but to thank him that he and the theater were alive.

We stayed in Tashkent. I was offered a job in the drama school, where I studied. I taught there. In 1943 the theater returned to Moscow, and I stayed in Tashkent with my husband. My career as an actress ended there. I could not work in Russian theater, as I had a slight German accent; I was not accepted in any theater. I remained jobless and we decided to go to Kuybyshev [now Samara, about 1000 km southeast of Moscow].

I tried to go on stage again. I was an elocutionist in the philharmonic society, but it was not what I sought, though I was a success there. My husband found a job as a producer in children's theater. We marked Victory Day [23](#) in Kuybyshev. It was a happy day. All people were so close. Strangers greeted each other in the street, hugged each other. I could not believe that the following day would be the first day of living in peace.

Anti-Semitism was rather conspicuous during war. Soviet people must have hated Jews before, but they had to conceal their feelings. When the war was unleashed, they did not have to hide and hold back anything, so all those feelings poured out. During our life in Tashkent I came across the notions of anti-Semitism. I had to cope with that.

I remember the first time I felt it. It was a summer day. I was waiting for a train at the stop. A lady with gorgeous plaits done in the form of a high crown stood next to me. I had my eyes glued on her hair. When I was about to get on a train, I felt a blow on my temple. It was that woman and she cried out, 'Hey you, kike, you want to be the first to get on the train?' I pulled her hair and started tearing on it. She fell down and I started to kick her. I was in a rage. It was terrible. I could have killed her. Nobody interfered.

The militiaman came up to me, some people told him in Uzbek what had happened. The policeman did not detain me, he just told me to get on the train and leave. I was standing on the steps of the train, trembling. One old Uzbek got up from his seat, walked over to me and told me to take his seat.

The second incident also happened in the train. There were many people. Some youngsters started to be indignant about lack of room. Then they started crying out that it was so cramped because the train was full of Jews, who should have been killed. I had an ID card in my purse. For some reason the cover was of red color like ID cards of the militia, NKVD and party members. They called it 'red booklet.' I showed them the ID and cried out if they did not stop talking they would have to stay in prison for a long time. They left the train without waiting for a stop. I understood that anti-Semites were yellow-bellied. They make these comments because they don't expect rebuttal. As soon as they are confronted with a counterattack, they lose their bravery. I never kept silent, no matter whether I was offended or another Jew was.

## Post-war

I found out that the Lvov theater was closed down after the war. My husband and I had nowhere to go. We stayed in Kuybyshev, worked and lived somehow. Then in 1948 the campaign against cosmopolitans [24](#) started. I was aware that they were against Jews. It was not even concealed. The Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee [25](#), founded by Mikhoels, was divulged. There were incessant processes against Jewish cosmopolitans. There were more articles in the papers, TV and radio broadcasts, where outstanding scientists, men of art and literature were stigmatized. All of them were Jews. All Jewish theaters on the territory of the Soviet Union were closed down. Stalin closed them all. None out of the 13 were left. Of course, the greatest actors were sent to the camps or they were executed.

Those who spoke Yiddish, not Russian could be accused of Zionism which was equal to treason in the Soviet Union at that time. People were indicted, tried, sent to the Gulag. Some of them were even shot. It was terrible and everybody understood what was going on in his own way.

I took it as a tragedy for Jewish people as well as for the entire mankind. How could it have happened in a country that struggled against fascists? I understood that it was very dangerous for me, as I was Mikhoel's student who was also under disgrace, an actress of the Jewish theater. So I clearly was a cosmopolitan for them, who should be fought. My fate saved me here again. In spite of all, I was not shot, and they didn't even take measures against me. It was a miracle. I was the director of a folklore theater in the cultural society of metallurgists. I was not even fired at that time. It happened later.

The same year, in 1948, Mikhoels perished in Minsk. It was published in the paper that he was accidentally crashed by a truck. I understood that with Stalin there could not be such accidents. Mikhoels must have been much too outstanding and much too loved by people to be sent to a camp. So they decided to do away with him like that.

I could not help going to his funeral in Moscow. I have worshipped him all life long, he was a deity for me. He was a genius, gifted by God. The streets were overcrowded, even far from the theater, where the commemoration took place. There were so many people in the street, as if a leader was being buried. He was a leader, not the type of leader that was common in the USSR, but a peoples' leader, who aroused best feelings in our hearts.

I managed to reach the theater, went to the service entrance, which was leading to the makeup room. There were militiamen even there. They didn't let anyone in. I said that I was a former student of Mikhoels, an actress and I wanted to say good-bye to him. I was refused, and one cop

pushed me so hard in the chest that I could hardly stand on my feet. I decided that I should be there. There was some official delegation with flowers and two people were holding a large billboard. I came up to them and asked them to take me with them. I explained the situation to them. They let me hold on to the billboard and I entered the theater with them.

I stayed in Moscow after the funeral for a while. I met some of my fellow students. My pal, also an actress played a part in a movie and suggested that I should meet a producer, who had worked with her. I refused. I was poorly dressed, as if from a masquerade. I had a worn, colorless coat and a beret that I could not keep on my head – I had to lace it up – and felt boots. The only thing I had kept from the war was a nice gown. I thought that an actress could not show up in front of a director looking like a pauper. Finally, I agreed to go under the condition that she would not tell him that I was an actress. She gave me her word.

We went to the theater, to his office. My friends introduced me and we had a talk. After a while he said that he wanted me to play one part in his new movie. Then I said that I did not live in Moscow, but in Kuybyshev. He said he was sorry to hear that and would be able to help me with lodging here. I left for Kuybyshev.

In 1948 there was an event, which I consider to be important for all Jews. The state of Israel was founded [26](#). I should say that I reacted to it superficially, I just could not appreciate and feel the significance of that event. Later I understood how much it means for us to have a Jewish state. Even the fact of its existence gives us confidence.

In 1953 the Doctors' Plot [27](#) began. Doctors were called 'murderers in white robes' and another wave of anti-Semitism began. It was non-punishable and impudent. I was not quite acclimatized in Kuybyshev. Frankly speaking people were rude there. During the Doctors' Plot that rudeness was boundless. People were so anti-Semitic that school children cried out in the streets: 'beat kikes, and save Russia!'

Strange, but I wasn't scared at that time. I had a strange feeling that I had come here from another world by chance. I was jobless and broke. I didn't have any people that were close to me. I was divorced. At least I wanted to know that he was OK. He was still the producer of the children's theater. I was looking for a job. First all seemed OK, then they looked at my passport, the line 'nationality,' and politely said that they had to clarify certain things and would call me back. Of course they never did. They just turned me down politely. [Editor's note: In the USSR the ethnic identity was indicated in citizens' passports. The situation in the Soviet Union was such that Jews had problems with entering higher educational institutions, finding jobs, traveling to foreign countries, etc.]

Finally I went to some artel [28](#), where they had their own amateur group. The head of the artel took pity on me and made me lead an amateur art group. We got ready for a big concert devoted to some Soviet holiday. There was a scene with pigeons that were released by the choir during the song about peace. In the USSR the dove was considered as symbol of peace.

There was a lady who was the chairman of the artel for the blind. She wanted me to work for her. I couldn't image how performances with blind actors could be staged. The lady was positive that I could do that. One of the benefits was that they gave me a room in the hostel, and I didn't have a place to live at the time. These blind people made knitted fabric of different color and variegated

and patterned fabric. When I came to the workshop and saw how those blind people felt the beauty, I accepted the offer. I enjoyed it. Those people, who could hardly tell darkness from light, turned out to be so sophisticated and capable. It was very interesting to work with them. There was a club and a stage in the artel. I was given lodging, a poky room of the hotel type.

In March 1953 Stalin died. Everybody mourned and I cried as well. I didn't lament over him, but over those people who were destroyed by him. He had lived too long on this earth. I understood a lot. That is why the speech by Khrushchev [29](#) at the Twentieth Party Congress [30](#) was no surprise to me. I intuitively understood what a malefactor he was. Khrushchev just revealed new facts.

I wanted to leave Kuybyshev by all means. Finally I managed to exchange my poky room for a room in Kostroma [about 300 km northeast of Moscow]. Kostroma is such a wonderful town! I have warm recollections about it. I love it. I lived there for seven years. When I moved to Kostroma, I found a job almost right away. Then I wrote a review and took it to the newspaper. To my surprise, it was accepted right away and I was hired by the paper as a reviewer. I did my job in good faith and it took me long to prepare my reviews. I praised and criticized, dwelled on the roles created by actors. The actors feared me. They told each other: she is the one, who is writing such reviews... In reality, I was objective. If someone deserved praise I did praise him or her, but I was never flattering. I was objective.

I was single and I had suitors of course. They remained at a distance, which I created myself. I could not play love games. I could not be with a person who was my soul mate. There were good people among my suitors. They were very interesting. They were my friends. I do not think I was bereft of anything. I received a lot. Any communication enriches you. I do not only mean communication with people, but communication with art, nature. If you love life, you will always find something for yourself. If you don't love it, nothing will help. I love life, people, nature. I have not remained empty-handed.

In evacuation in Kuybyshev I met the Niskiy family, who also lived there in evacuation. I made friends with them. They were wonderful people. During evacuation I was closer with Boris's wife. Boris, like I, was born in Poland. He used to be a Polish Komsomol [31](#) member, ardent fighter for social justice. Finally, his dream came true: he came to the country he believed in – the Soviet Union. He started working, studying. Everything looked OK. He got married here. His son was born here. Then the country took a revenge on him, for his belief in Soviet slogans. In 1948 Boris was imprisoned for being a Polish communist. His son died while he was innocently locked up in prison for his belief.

After the Twentieth Party Congress, rehabilitation [32](#) of Stalin's victims started. Boris and his wife happened to be Tallinn. We kept in touch. Then there was another tribulation: after all suffering Boris's wife lost her mind. Once I received a letter from Boris, saying that his wife had died. He wrote that he couldn't stand the loneliness and wanted me to move to Tallinn and live with him for a while, as it would be easier for him to get over his loneliness. I could not refuse him. At that time Boris was sick. He had heart trouble.

I left for Tallinn. I lived there a little while, helped him abide by his loss, as it seemed to me. I went back to Kostroma. Boris could not abide the fact that his wife was dead. She was a wonderful and smart person. She taught history at school. Boris asked me to come to him again. He was so sick that I understood that there was no way I could leave him in the lurch. In 1976 I moved to Tallinn. I

was retired. I looked after Boris, took care of the house, read a lot. Boris was getting worse and worse. He had a stroke. Then there was another stroke.

We lived together for 15 years, and ten were the period of his serious illness: two strokes, two infarctions, a lot of operations. They said that it was useless, that he was doomed to die after the first infarction, after the first stroke. I didn't pay attention to that. I put all my heart and efforts into my husband. Then the doctors told me that it was an unprecedented case, that it was my merit that he had remained alive for ten years, with such diseases. Boris died in Tallinn in 1991. I had nowhere to go. There were people close to me, who became my friends.

The Jewish community of Estonia [33](#) is helping me. I am lonely and old. They try to make my life easier. They bring lunches and provide other assistance. I found good friends in the community. One Nata Rit is the worthiest. She became a close person to me and all my unrealized maternal love is given to her. In old years, diseases are not the hardest, the loneliness is.

I have a lot of time to think things over. I live a duplicate of my life: I recollect, reassess the events that I have lived through. It is wonderful that they created this Centropa program and decided to record recollections of old people. Each life is a novel, written by life, and we are the co-authors. Those novels depend on us. It is wonderful that all I had to go through or other people had to, even the dreadful, breaking moments will be remembered by human hearts.

In 1991 the Soviet Union was dissolved and Estonia gained independence [34](#). Of course, the Soviet Union was a scary empire, where human life was not worth a dime, only great goals were appreciated. It seems to me what came to pass is not very good either. All mean things in people are revealed – thirst for money grubbing, gains at any cost. Maybe it is like with a flood. The garbage pops up to the surface and it has to settle. I don't know. Nature always revenges for violence and such a rapid breakup of the USSR was also violence of sorts. There were things when rivers were turned round. Maybe now they would like to fly to Saturn to open up a restaurant there. But still, I remain an optimist. I believe that things might turn better.

My dream is that such a person will be at power, who will bring justice, mercy, pity on the weak and helpless. There are people who are trying to do that, but they do not accomplish that, unfortunately. But I believe it is possible. I cannot help believing. There are people who have done so many good things to me that I know for sure that there is kindness. Every person should try to leave a trace, a trace of kindness which will stay in hearts and memories for good.

## Glossary

### **[1](#) 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.

### **[2](#) Goldfaden Abraham (1840-1908)**

Poet, playwright, stage director, creator of modern Jewish theater in Yiddish. Started by writing Hebrew and Yiddish poems for press publications. Published Dos Jidele, a volume of song texts. In

1867, together with singers Izrael Grodner and Moshe Finkel, founded in Iasi (today's Romania) the first permanent Jewish theater, becoming its manager, director, and set designer. Initially staged vaudevilles and operettas, later started writing plays himself. The theater's success during an all-Russian tour contributed fundamentally to the development of Yiddish theater. In the 1880s, Goldfaden moved to Lvov, and in 1903 emigrated to the United States, where he set up a theater. He is the author of about 60 comedies and operettas, such as *The Recruits*, *The Two Kuni-Lemls*, *Raisins and Almonds*, *The Grandmother and the Granddaughter*, and drama plays such as *Shulamith*, *Judas Maccabeus*, or *Bar Kokhba*.

### **3 Comintern**

The Communist International, also known as the Third International, was created by Vladimir I. Lenin in 1919. Its openly stated purpose was: to fight "by all available means, including armed force, for the overthrow of the international bourgeoisie and for the creation of an international Soviet republic as a transition stage to the complete abolition of the State." The Comintern's mission was to spread Communist revolution into the whole world. But at its 7th World Congress in 1935 the Comintern on Stalin's orders gave up the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism as its mission, and called for the creation of people's fronts against fascism in Western countries - which was Moscow's primary policy at the time.

### **4 Pieck, Wilhelm (1876-1960)**

First President of the German Democratic Republic (1949).

### **5 Lomonosov Moscow State University**

founded in 1755, the university was for a long time the only higher educational institution in Russia open to the general public. In Soviet times, it was the biggest and perhaps the most prestigious university in the country. At present there are over 40,000 undergraduates and 7,000 graduate students at MSU.

### **6 Sholem Aleichem (pen name of Shalom Rabinovich) (1859-1916)**

Yiddish author and humorist, a prolific writer of novels, stories, feuilletons, critical reviews, and poem in Yiddish, Hebrew and Russian. He also contributed regularly to Yiddish dailies and weeklies. In his writings he described the life of Jews in Russia, creating a gallery of bright characters. His creative work is an alloy of humor and lyricism, accurate psychological and details of everyday life. He founded a literary Yiddish annual called *Di Yidishe Folksbibliotek* (The Popular Jewish Library), with which he wanted to raise the despised Yiddish literature from its mean status and at the same time to fight authors of trash literature, who dragged Yiddish literature to the lowest popular level. The first volume was a turning point in the history of modern Yiddish literature. Sholem Aleichem died in New York in 1916. His popularity increased beyond the Yiddish-speaking public after his death. Some of his writings have been translated into most European languages and his plays and dramatic versions of his stories have been performed in many countries. The dramatic version of *Tevye the Dairyman* became an international hit as a musical (*Fiddler on the Roof*) in the 1960s.



## **7 Mendele Moykher Sforim (1835-1917)**

Hebrew and Yiddish writer. He was born in Belarus and studied at various yeshivot in Lithuania. Mendele wrote literary and social criticism, works of popular science in Hebrew, and Hebrew and Yiddish fiction. In his writings on social and literary problems Mendele showed lively interest in the education and public life of Jews in Russia. He was preoccupied by the question of the role of Hebrew literature in molding the Jewish community. This explains why he tried to teach the sciences to the mass of Jews and to aid the people in obtaining secular education in the spirit of the Haskalah (Hebrew enlightenment). He was instrumental in the founding of modern literary Yiddish and the new realism in Hebrew style, and left his mark on the two literatures thematically as well as stylistically.

## **8 Zuskin, Benjamin (1899-1952)**

One of the leading actors of the Moscow Jewish Chamber Theater. A close friend of Solomon Mikhoels, he headed the theater for the last few years of its existence. In 1949 came the Party order to liquidate the theater, and Zuskin was arrested along with other members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. He was tortured and died in prison.

## **9 Jewish Pale of Settlement**

Certain provinces in the Russian Empire were designated for permanent Jewish residence and the Jewish population was only allowed to live in these areas. The Pale was first established by a decree by Catherine II in 1791. The regulation was in force until the Russian Revolution of 1917, although the limits of the Pale were modified several times. The Pale stretched from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea, and 94% of the total Jewish population of Russia, almost 5 million people, lived there. The overwhelming majority of the Jews lived in the towns and shtetls of the Pale. Certain privileged groups of Jews, such as certain merchants, university graduates and craftsmen working in certain branches, were granted to live outside the borders of the Pale of Settlement permanently.

## **10 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.

## **11 Enemy of the people**

Soviet official term; euphemism used for real or assumed political opposition.

## **12 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.

## **13 NKVD**

(Russ.: Narodnyi Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del), People's Committee of Internal Affairs, the supreme security authority in the USSR - the secret police. Founded by Lenin in 1917, it nevertheless played an insignificant role until 1934, when it took over the GPU (the State Political Administration), the political police. The NKVD had its own police and military formations, and also possessed the powers to pass sentence on political matters, and as such in practice had total control over society. Under Stalin's rule the NKVD was the key instrument used to terrorize the civilian population. The NKVD ran a network of labor camps for millions of prisoners, the Gulag. The heads of the NKVD were as follows: Genrikh Yagoda (to 1936), Nikolai Yezhov (to 1938) and Lavrenti Beria. During the war against Germany the political police, the KGB, was spun off from the NKVD. After the war it also operated on USSR-occupied territories, including in Poland, where it assisted the nascent communist authorities in suppressing opposition. In 1946 the NKVD was renamed the Ministry of the Interior.

## **14 Odessa**

A town in Ukraine on the Black Sea coast. One of the largest industrial, cultural, scholarly and resort centers in Ukraine. Founded in the 15th century in the place of the Tatar village Khadjibey. In 1764 the Turks built the fortress Eni-Dunia near that village. After the Russian-Turkish war in 1787-91 Odessa was taken by Russia and the town was officially renamed Odessa. Under the rule of Herzog Richelieu (1805-1814) Odessa became the chief town in Novorossiia province. On 17th January 1918 Soviet rule was established in the town. During World War II, from August - October 1941, the town defended itself heroically from the German attacks.

## **15 Mandatory job assignment in the USSR**

Graduates of higher educational institutions had to complete a mandatory 2-year job assignment issued by the institution from which they graduated. After finishing this assignment young people were allowed to get employment at their discretion in any town or organization.

## **16 Markish, Peretz (1895-1952)**

Yiddish writer and poet, arrested and shot dead together with several other Yiddish writers, rehabilitated posthumously.

## **17 Pogroms in Ukraine**

In the 1920s there were many anti-Semitic gangs in Ukraine. They killed Jews and burnt their houses, they robbed their houses, raped women and killed children.

## **18 German Invasion of Poland**

The German attack of Poland on 1st September 1939 is widely considered the date in the West for the start of World War II. After having gained both Austria and the Bohemian and Moravian parts of Czechoslovakia, Hitler was confident that he could acquire Poland without having to fight Britain and France. (To eliminate the possibility of the Soviet Union fighting if Poland were attacked, Hitler made a pact with the Soviet Union, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.) On the morning of 1st September 1939, German troops entered Poland. The German air attack hit so quickly that most of Poland's air force was destroyed while still on the ground. To hinder Polish mobilization, the Germans bombed bridges and roads. Groups of marching soldiers were machine-gunned from the air, and they also aimed at civilians. On 1st September, the beginning of the attack, Great Britain and France sent Hitler an ultimatum - withdraw German forces from Poland or Great Britain and France would go to war against Germany. On 3rd September, with Germany's forces penetrating deeper into Poland, Great Britain and France both declared war on Germany.

## **19 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.

## **20 Molotov, V**

P. (1890-1986): Statesman and member of the Communist Party leadership. From 1939, Minister of Foreign Affairs. On June 22, 1941 he announced the German attack on the USSR on the radio. He and Eden also worked out the percentages agreement after the war, about Soviet and western spheres of influence in the new Europe.

## **21 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.

## **22 Babi Yar**

Babi Yar is the site of the first mass shooting of Jews that was carried out openly by fascists. On 29th and 30th September 1941 33,771 Jews were shot there by a special SS unit and Ukrainian militia men. During the Nazi occupation of Kiev between 1941 and 1943 over a 100,000 people were killed in Babi Yar, most of whom were Jewish. The Germans tried in vain to efface the traces of the mass grave in August 1943 and the Soviet public learned about the mass murder after World War II.

## **23 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.

## **24 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 anti-Semitic 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.'

## **25 Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAC)**

Formed in Kuibyshev in April 1942, the organization was meant to serve the interests of Soviet foreign policy and the Soviet military through media propaganda, as well as through personal contacts with Jews abroad, especially in Britain and the United States. The chairman of the JAC was Solomon Mikhoels, a famous actor and director of the Moscow Yiddish State Theater. A year after its establishment, the JAC was moved to Moscow and became one of the most important centers of Jewish culture and Yiddish literature until the German occupation. The JAC broadcast pro-Soviet propaganda to foreign audiences several times a week, telling them of the absence of anti-Semitism and of the great anti-Nazi efforts being made by the Soviet military. In 1948, Mikhoels was assassinated by Stalin's secret agents, and, as part of a newly-launched official anti-Semitic campaign, the JAC was disbanded in November and most of its members arrested.

## **26 Creation of the State of Israel**

From 1917 Palestine was a British mandate. Also in 1917 the Balfour Declaration was published, which supported the idea of the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Throughout the interwar period, Jews were migrating to Palestine, which caused the conflict with the local Arabs to escalate. On the other hand, British restrictions on immigration sparked increasing opposition to the mandate powers. Immediately after World War II there were increasing numbers of terrorist attacks designed to force Britain to recognize the right of the Jews to their own state. These aspirations provoked the hostile reaction of the Palestinian Arabs and the Arab states. In February 1947 the British foreign minister Ernest Bevin ceded the Palestinian mandate to the UN, which took the decision to divide Palestine into a Jewish section and an Arab section and to create an independent Jewish state. On 14th May 1948 David Ben Gurion proclaimed the creation of the State of Israel. It was recognized immediately by the US and the USSR. On the following day the armies of Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon attacked Israel, starting a war that continued, with intermissions, until the beginning of 1949 and ended in a truce.

## **27 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.

## **28 Artel**

A cooperative union of tradesmen or producers involving shares of overall profit and common liability.

## **29 Khrushchev, Nikita (1894-1971)**

Soviet communist leader. After Stalin's death in 1953, he became first secretary of the Central Committee, in effect the head of the Communist Party of the USSR. In 1956, during the 20th Party Congress, Khrushchev took an unprecedented step and denounced Stalin and his methods. He was deposed as premier and party head in October 1964. In 1966 he was dropped from the Party's Central Committee.

## **30 Twentieth Party Congress**

At the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956 Khrushchev publicly debunked the cult of Stalin and lifted the veil of secrecy from what had happened in the USSR during Stalin's leadership.

## **31 Komsomol**

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.

### **32 Rehabilitation in the Soviet Union**

Many people who had been arrested, disappeared or killed during the Stalinist era were rehabilitated after the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956, where Khrushchev publicly debunked the cult of Stalin and lifted the veil of secrecy from what had happened in the USSR during Stalin's leadership. It was only after the official rehabilitation that people learnt for the first time what had happened to their relatives as information on arrested people had not been disclosed before.

### **33 Jewish community of Estonia**

On 30th March 1988 in a meeting of Jews of Estonia, consisting of 100 people, convened by David Slomka, a resolution was made to establish the Community of Jewish Culture of Estonia (KJCE) and in May 1988 the community was registered in the Tallinn municipal Ispolkom. KJCE was the first independent Jewish cultural organization in the USSR to be officially registered by the Soviet authorities. In 1989 the first Ivrit courses started, although the study of Ivrit was equal to Zionist propaganda and considered to be anti-Soviet activity. Contacts with Jewish organizations of other countries were established. KJCE was part of the Peoples' Front of Estonia, struggling for an independent state. In December 1989 the first issue of the KJCE paper Kashachar (Dawn) was published in Estonian and Russian language. In 1991 the first radio program about Jewish culture and activities of KJCE, 'Sholem Aleichem,' was broadcast in Estonia. In 1991 the Jewish religious community and KJCE had a joined meeting, where it was decided to found the Jewish Community of Estonia.

### **34 Reestablishment of the Estonian Republic**

According to the referendum conducted in the Baltic Republics in March 1991, 77.8 percent of participating Estonian residents supported the restoration of Estonian state independence. On 20th August 1991, at the time of the coup attempt in Moscow, the Estonian Republic's Supreme Council issued the Decree of Estonian Independence. On 6th September 1991, the USSR's State Council recognized full independence of Estonia, and the country was accepted into the UN on 17th September 1991.