

# Masha Blumenthal

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Riga

Latvia

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## Growing up

I don't know much about my family history. Only the last name remained [in my memory]: Epshtein. When I was born no grandparents on my father's side were still living. Nothing was ever said by my parents. My grandfather died not long before my birth and my grandmother died earlier. I was born on 20th January 1926.



Why do I have a name like Masha? Because my grandfather on my mother's side was called Moisha, and since I was born instead of a boy they named me Masha, which sounds similar to Moisha. Moisha Ban was from Liepaja. My grandmother's name was Hina. What I can say about her is that she was a good mother and a good grandmother. She passed away when I was two years old and she had eleven children. I have no idea what profession her husband held. I don't know why my parents never told me. They were very busy, I guess. In general we saw them very seldom. My father's name was Haim Epshtein and my mother's name was Hene, according to her passport, though we called her Helena. They were born the same year, 1889. I don't know what their level of education was. They got married very late and had three children: in addition to me, there was my older brother, Meier, who was born in 1927 and the younger, Abraham, Abrashenka, was born in 1929.

My mom studied very little since there were eleven children in her family. At best she finished the fourth grade. My mom was naturally cultured. My dear mother was so nice. My dad also didn't receive any special education. But my mother's brother Yosef was a smart one! Having only three or four years of education, on his own he made it to the position of head accountant in a bank, a private bank in Liepaja [port city 215 km west of Riga]. Another of my mother's brothers, Naum, or Nokhum, born in 1900, also made it on his own. He worked at a linoleum factory in Liepaja. Two of my mother's sisters left for South Africa, and her brothers also left for different places. I don't remember their names. There were also a lot of children in my father's family: one sister and three brothers. His sister Fani lived in Israel, she left in the 1920s. Abraham lived in Israel, too. Ruvin, the nicest looking of the brothers, and Zalman lived in Liepaja. There were wives; there were children.

All of them were killed in Liepaja during the events of July 1941, at the beginning of the war on Latvian territory [1](#). The whole family was killed.

My parents were not rich, but middle-class. To give you an example of what this means, we had a three-room apartment with everything for the five of us. We lived very well. They rented this accommodation from the landlords and in the back room mother sewed various women's clothing, dresses, and undergarments on a Singer-model machine and father sold them. This little shop was near the market. Their clientele was practically comprised of village people, in other words plain folk. Thus, mother didn't sew anything extravagant. She sewed practical things. And so my parents left in the mornings and returned late in the evenings. They weren't home the whole day and therefore a woman cooked for us and played with us during her free time.

When we reached the proper age, we were sent to private day-care. It was a woman in her forties, Jewish, who lived in a very large apartment. She didn't have more than five or six pupils. And when I turned six, I was sent to a preparatory class where we learned letters and numbers. I remember to this day that there was a teacher who told us that one must wear white clothing in the sun and not black, since it attracts heat. She led us in these types of practical discussions. It was like this with school.

### **My school years**

In Liepaja we had three Jewish schools. In one of the schools lessons were taught in German. This school was considered very fashionable. It was for children of the richer parents. I don't know if they paid for studying at this school or not. The second was in Yiddish and the third in Hebrew. I attended the school that was in Hebrew. In our school we had the rather poor children. The parents who were better off, like my father, helped the school a lot. In addition to the preparatory class I studied in this school for six years. And then in the 1930s there remained only one Hebrew secondary school and I passed the exams to enter it. I was accepted, but could only study there for two years because the war began.

I went to this grammar school for two years before the war. The main language of instruction was Latvian. But the children spoke German among themselves. It wasn't difficult to enter that school, but you had to pay 500 Lats a year, not including the books. 500 Lats was a huge sum of money. The only children who came there from the Hebrew school were my cousin Hene, Zalman's daughter, and me. Hene was very gifted, but she couldn't pay for her education, her father was poor, and she was admitted free of charge. It was a mixed school. The other pupils were from the German Jewish school. I had no friends among boys in my class. My friends from the grammar school - Boka, or Brokha, Kil, Mina Tsal, with whom I used to sit at one desk, - were sent to Siberia on 14th June 1941 [2](#). Of course, all their families survived, except their fathers. At that moment it was a lucky outcome for them. Now they all live in Israel.

In school I participated a lot in sports. I was considered a good sportswoman. In our school on holidays the sport was always gymnastics and I was selected for competitions.

We couldn't afford what 9th grade girls can afford now. We were very unpretentious: dark blue dresses with white cuffs and a collar, a black apron. The first time we were allowed to put on anything we liked was for a school party in late May 1941, on the eve of war. But I didn't have anything special. Father bought me - Mother never went shopping in her life - some dark blue

woolen material and a piece of bright silk cloth. Mother went to the tailor and I got a beautiful dress. Only once did I put it on! As I said before, Mother was not a fashionable tailor. My parents hardly bought me anything new until I turned 14. I wore Mother's and Grandmother's clothes. A poor Jewish woman-tailor would come to our place, they fed her, and she would sit and remake our clothes from early morning till night.

I used to earn my own money. I had to. Not because my parents needed the extra Lats, but for educational purposes. It was like this. When I was finishing my 6th year of school, I was 13, and some Jewish acquaintances asked to take their kid for a walk a couple of hours a day. I am sure my parents didn't do it for the money.

Each summer they would send me to a private rest home in Vainede, not far from Liepaja. The place was wonderful. I was very pale and thin. I would go there from the age of ten for almost the whole summer. Boys wouldn't be sent. The older [Meier] was strong and didn't need rest, Abrashenka was too weak to go, and he would hang on to Mother. I used to cry in the train. I was the only child in the rest home. The Jewish lady who kept that rest home, was a good friend of Mom's. I can't remember her first name, only the last name - Vainberg. The same people came there every summer - from Lithuania, Riga, Liepaja. The meals were good - four times a day. I really had a good rest there.

I wouldn't say that my parents were religious fanatics, but they observed religious holidays. They attended the synagogue on holidays. During Passover, it was required from the age of 13 to follow the restrictions on food. They saw and knew very well what I ate but pretended not to notice. Oh, and on Friday evenings they shut down everything and Dad went to the synagogue and Mom was probably at home. Everything was as it should be: fish and challah, Mom lit the candles. And since we missed our parents very much, for we didn't see them all week, it was during this time that we three entertained them. I dressed up in my mother's high-heeled shoes and in general we all had a great time. The language of conversation in the house was German; but we also spoke Yiddish often.

In our school there was a Rabbi with a rather handsome beard. As a child I very much enjoyed ice-skating. And somehow it had to happen that on a Saturday I was returning from the ice rink with my skates when I met the Rabbi. Dad was called to the school. What do you think Dad did? He came home and said: 'Was it not possible for you to walk with your skates so that the Rabbi would not see you!' As you can see, my parents judged fairly. It wasn't allowed to do that on Saturdays. Saturday is a holy day, after all. And they kept to the restrictions, though not in relation to me.

My mom and I embroidered a lot at home. We embroidered a tablecloth for a set of twelve or more; we embroidered during the whole year. We didn't embroider for sale, just for ourselves. Earlier in the kitchen there were shelves and we embroidered little covers for them. On the topic of reading, I don't remember that we had an especially large library. In school and in the secondary school there was a good library so I borrowed books from there. I began to take lessons on the piano but we didn't have instruments at home and there wasn't enough money and the apartment was small. Thus I didn't study long.

My parents never participated in any Jewish societies or trade unions - they just had no time for that. They were real workaholics! And their only day off was Saturday. The only one! They used to work the whole week, including Sundays. And when they were at home on Saturdays, they wanted

nothing more than to be with their three kids. Just to walk in the park, tell them a fairy-tale or two.

My childhood was very, very beautiful. In the courtyard where we lived, there were Baltic Germans, Poles, Lithuanians, and Latvians. There were neither any arguments nor any discussions on national differences in general. Only now do I understand it. We all played friendly.

My brother Meier went for sports. He was slim and handsome. He was three years and three months younger than me. Meier's photo I got from a Latvian lady, Mrs. Rimov, who saved my brothers and me in Liepaja. When I returned, she gave back the photos to me and presented me some cups and spoons because I had nothing.

Liepaja was a completely charming little city, pretty and clean. Then it was considered the second city after Riga. It was during the Soviet period when the Soviets arrived and made Liepaja into an army city. They closed it off and it was forbidden to enter without permission. They neglected it so much that it became scary and I, for example, am not drawn to it. They made it so that Daugavpils became the second city after Riga. I remember the clean beach, and nearby the pavilion where well-dressed couples came to rest and dance. It was a cultural city, pretty cafes, and wonderful stores! We have a real sea, not a gulf, and people traveled from Germany, vacationers came - to stay and swim. On Peldu Street, which led to the sea, there were private homes like villas with flowers and waterfalls in front.

There were organized stage shows and my aunt, who was much older than me, was at a concert where Sergei Rachmaninov [1873-1943] himself performed. I went to these types of concerts with my aunt since my mom didn't have any time to. There was an opera in the city. There was one Jewish tenor - Haim Shelikov. A very famous tenor. Something unfortunate happened to him - his younger sister of 17-18 years died and he was supposed to sing, I cannot say which opera it was, either Carmen or Tosca, there was no one to replace him and he was forced to sing. And I remember that my mom told me that he sang like never before. Oh, that things that happen when there is grief and pain! My mom went to the opera with Dad or Aunt Dora. Mom didn't have time for popular music so I went with my aunt. There was a very talented violist, Zara Rashina, from Riga. When she came to our town my aunt and I went to her concert.

### **During the war**

Nazi troops entered Liepaja on 30th June 1941. I remember an incident, it was either the 1st or 2nd of July, we still lived in our house and knew that nothing good awaited us. We were standing at the window when we saw the SS men coming and looking towards our window. They didn't know where Jews lived, how could they have possibly known? And there comes a neighbor, it seemed we got along well, and we see how she is pointing towards our window. It was our good luck that we saw it. We immediately took off through the black passageway to Aunt Fani's, the wife of Yosef Ban. And this Aunt Fani had her own home and we lived with her. An order was given that all Jews had to hand over everything they had: bicycles, radios, various equipment, in general everything. Everyone handed over their belongings thinking they would be left in peace. Then came an order that all Jews must wear a yellow star on their chest and back and that it was forbidden to walk on the sidewalks, only next to them. Then every day men were called as if to work.

Dad was still alive then - every day he went to work. They were gathered on the fire-square in the center of Liepaja. This is how it began: on 21st July in one family some dad didn't return, on the

22nd in another family some father didn't come back, then on the 23rd my father didn't return and on 24th July Uncle Yosef didn't return. And in this manner little by little people disappeared. Later when only a small population had remained the pogroms began - they would go from house to house gathering people and simply taking them out and shooting them.

This is how it was with us: Uncle Nokhum Ban attended a Latvian school where he had a co-worker who started working with the SS men and helped gather people to be shot. I don't know if he shot people himself or not, though he probably did. But, since my uncle was a Jew he came and warned us before the pogroms: 'Tomorrow, the day after tomorrow you should not be at home. They will come for you.' We had really nice acquaintances, also Latvians, and I gathered my brothers, cousins Mepita and little Dov and went to the neighbors. I would ask, 'What would happen if we were found with you?' And she would tell me, 'What happens to you will happen to us.' And she hid us. The rest of the times it was in a different place, we hid in our aunt's house. She knew where to hide. This is how it was on several occasions.

Oh, and before the big round up of December 1941, on Chanukkah, that Latvian SS-man's wife came and told us that her husband had gone crazy and was taken to the hospital. However, since other friends of theirs participated in the shootings they shared this information with her. They, of course, didn't know that she would come to us. She came and warned us. And after these enormous pogroms there remained approximately 800 people out of about 7,500 Jews in Liepaja. And when there remained 800 people, they decided to herd us into a ghetto.

The ghetto wasn't the scariest place, since they settled us into homes where people had lived and everything was there. Our parents succeeded in taking some things from the store and we had some stuff: Latvian acquaintances came over and we gave them dresses and they gave us butter and bread. 30-35 people lived in one apartment. In comparison to what was to come that was normal - we were clean and wore our own things rather than something from another person's back. We were in the ghetto a whole year: from July 1942 to July 1943. We worked in the basements: gathered potatoes in the barracks, cleaned toilets, windows, and floors. We did all the dirty work. We spent the evenings at home under guard. When the Germans entered, only the men went to work. The women and children were not touched. And when they took us to Kaiserwald [3](#) that is when the real work began.

It was scary to lose our father, I do not deny it, but we had our mother. A mom is a mom! Though when they separated us from our mom that was scary. In the ghetto we were still with our dear mom. That day, the day of separation from Mom, was the scariest for me. It was in July 1943 in Kaiserwald. They brought us to Kaiserwald at night and in the morning we woke up together and they began to separate us - the elderly separately and little children as well. How Aunt Fani was able to remain with her children, I do not know. Just as the Soviets [4](#) set off for Riga in August 1944, they were killed. All of the others and Mom, Aunt Fani, and her children Mepita and Dov were put into wagons or buses and sent to the gas chambers.

In the beginning we lived in Kaiserwald and were transported to work someplace and in the evenings returned to the barracks. And then they took away 500 women and we were transferred to VEF [State Electro-technical Factory] on Brivibas 197; on the left side where storehouses used to be, two-story plank-beds were made and we slept next to each other like sardines. After work we stood for hours while we were counted. We stood until we went crazy. Once I even fainted, and if I

had not been only 18 or 19 years old I would have immediately died. If anyone a little older fell then we would never see them again. We were horribly hungry! In VEF at least it was possible to eat - a little piece of bread or horseflesh, gross but possible to eat. But in Kaiserwald they gave us soup - which had live worms swimming in it! It was impossible! We were terribly starved.

And when I was in Stutthof [5](#) I sat and thought: 'What is better: to suffer and remain alive or to die immediately. For if I lived I would never again be normal.' Our camp was in Torun, Poland. And the Russians began to bomb. We were gathered up on 20th January 1945 at five o'clock in the morning. It was my birthday. I turned 19 years old. They led us across the River Vistula; I have seen this bridge on television many times since then. I don't know if that bridge is long, but then it seemed to us never-ending. We walked all night. In this year, 1945, it was very cold and we were dressed in one pair of tights and a prisoner's dress topped by a jacket. This was all. The shoes were not shoes but clogs. They rubbed sores on our feet until they bled. We held on by our last strength.

It was morning, around five or six o'clock when they took us from the camp and around twelve o'clock we arrived in Bitgosch. This is all Poland. There were five women, we were the last in this column. A Pole came up to us and said, 'Listen, girls. Do you want to stay here?' 'Of course we want to!' 'The Germans just freed the shed, they led away the horses. If you want, hide here.' We told ourselves: what were we to lose? We agreed. And set forth. The armed escort was occupied with himself. There were even instances when he would suddenly disappear and in 15-20 minutes return in a suit. You understand! He took off his uniform! He worried about himself and didn't pay that much attention to us.

We succeeded in leaving. There were five women - four from Liepaja and one from Riga. He transported us to the shed. There was quite a lot of hay there. We were to hide under it if we heard something. And then what street fights began! The shed where we lay was covered in holes. We left the shed on 26th January and lying there outside were Russians, Germans, more Russians. Just like that in the street, they still hadn't cleaned them up. And on the morning of the 26th the gates of the shed opened and the Pole said to us, 'Girls! You are free! The war for you is over!' We were so worn out that we didn't even ask his name or his address. We were so confused! How stupid! We went out and saw Russian army cars. They were giving out food. We took everything but ate it carefully. Then we were led off to a filter station.

Then began the torture from the side of the Russian soldiers and officers. At the filter station we were questioned. And they did this only at night. He said, 'Well, now tell me who are you; where are you from.' I began to talk about everything I'd lived through. I finished and he said to me, 'Okay that is all very well, now tell me what really happened.' And this is what it was like for two or three nights in a row. When he gave me my documents, I went to the police station and received my passport. I returned to Latvia in March 1945. Until March I was at the filter station [6](#).

## Post-war

When I was freed and we were in Bitgosch in Poland, I had the opportunity to go anywhere I wanted. We went to a Jewish community center. They gave us a little money and said, 'Where to?' 'To Riga.' 'You want to go there?' I said, 'I must, my relatives will come and I won't be there.' 'We'll give you money, a ready ticket, so leave for wherever you want! To America, to Africa.' I was drawn home. Only when I returned did I learn about the horrible fate of my brothers.



Well, in Riga there was no money, there was nothing. There was one woman with me from Liepaja and we went to the factory where wallpaper was made. When we entered, there was a Latvian man, stout and elderly. 'What do you want girls?' 'We need work.' 'And what are you able to do?' 'We cannot do anything! We want to work! We need to eat!' He thought and thought and took pity on us. He said, 'Well, okay.' And to this day I do not remember what we did there, but we worked. And all in all he paid us. We lived like this until June 1945 in Riga. I didn't know the fate of my mother or my brothers then.

My brother Meier, like us, was taken from the camps. He worked on the railway. Here in Latvia and in Germany. Like I was in VEF, he was on the railway. When they led them away, they liquidated the camp. He was very strong, of the three of us he was the strongest, he had a good sporty figure. It was 3rd May and he would have turned 18 years old. But something happened and his leg hurt and he was not able to march with the rest of them and the guard took him away and shot him! And three hours later they were all free!

Abrashenka, my younger brother, had big black eyes. And in our house in Liepaja there was a boot-making shop. Abrashenka loved to go to the boot-maker after school. He sat there and the boot-maker liked to talk with him. And as the Germans entered, the boot-maker said, 'I thought about saving that boy. I have a lot of relatives in the village. But is it possible to save a boy with such eyes! You can't possibly hide this child; he needs to move around. They will see right away that he is not our child.' Abrashenka was not strong before the war. But nonetheless he held on for four years and survived. He was taken to the hospital. He could not even speak. He had tuberculosis of the throat. In the hospital doctors - British and American - surrounded him. He died on 13th July 1945.

I learned about this in 1982. I was still in the state to go to their graves, but was afraid of the police. Contacts with the Germans?! Just think of my husband's career! I was afraid then, I was always afraid and now due to my health I simply cannot. My son often goes to Germany and promises to go to Neustadt Anzei where he is buried. I want him to go, to give thanks. Every week German students go there and clean up.

Later I left for Liepaja, where I lived and worked until 1949. When I came back from the camp and entered my apartment, every piece of furniture was standing in its place. But the people who had settled in our apartment wouldn't give anything back. Even some tapestries that we had sewn were hanging on the walls. They allowed me to take only a small buffet.

My husband, Konstantin Naumovich Blumenthal, is from Riga. His father was sent to Siberia on 14th June 1941 [the day of mass deportation of Latvian citizens to the east of the USSR]. He succeeded, along with his mother and sister to evacuate and in 1945 was accepted to the Moscow Conservatoire for fortepiano. When he graduated in 1945 and came here it was of course logical to expect work in Riga like others from the city. But he didn't find work. He was sent to Liepaja [7](#). He always joked, 'I was lucky! Otherwise we wouldn't have met.' He was sent to work as a teacher in a music school.

When he arrived he didn't know anybody. He rented a nice room from a landlady, where he boarded. Later I lived there. Once he somehow asked his landlady, 'In general are there any Jewish girls here?' The landlady answered, 'There is one!' It is true there were very few of us, very few. At first his acquaintances met me so as not to traumatize me. My husband accidentally saw me, so I

wouldn't know. He said he liked the girl. Then he invited us to a restaurant and everything went from there. We went steady for almost two years and got married in May 1951.

I was dating my husband one year and ten months. Then his aunt came from Moscow and told him, 'If you have serious intentions towards this girl, go ahead, if not - leave her alone. She is too serious, too good for you just to use her.' So we married. We didn't have a religious wedding. Just a civil one.

We went to the registration department and put our signatures on the marriage certificate, it was on Saturday, 5th May. And he left for work right away; he had examinations to attend in his school. And only the following day did I move to his place and we started to live together. There was no celebration - not a tea party, nothing. You can imagine in what kind of mood I was with my closest relatives all dead by then. There was no joy. Yes, I felt happy, of course, because I didn't have to be alone anymore, because I found my man! Wedding! Everybody's happy? With no one to congratulate us? Just put your signature, that's it! One friend sent flowers to my apartment, another presented six plates. That's all. But this sad beginning didn't prevent us from living a wonderful life together. The difference in our education - I was far less educated - and his high position at work didn't hamper our peaceful and decent life. A very interesting life.

We lived in Liepaja and he worked in the school, but he wanted terribly to go to Riga. His mother died in 1948. In 1954 a Conservatoire in Riga advertised a competition for a post in the department of 'General Fortepiano.' He turned in his documents, went through the competition, but without a place to live. Oh, no big deal! His sister Luba lived in Riga. She allowed us to live with her. He finished as professor of the fortepiano class in the conservatoire. He worked five years in Liepaja and 35 years in the conservatoire.

I really wanted to continue my studies. But first there was the language. In order to study, even in the ninth grade, I didn't have the knowledge of the Russian language. What was there to live on? I needed to work. And then my head didn't even function. I simply could not. I began, as they say, self-education. I read a lot in Russian. My husband laughed, my first book in Russian was 'Anna Karenina.' Of course, the first time I read it I didn't understand a thing. But the second time it was nothing! My husband really laughed! I spoke Russian with my husband and with my son I spoke German and Yiddish.

At first it was difficult financially and we didn't want a child. Then we already decided that the years were passing by and we decided to have one child. Roman was born in 1959. I was busy with the child my whole life! I had two children, my husband was worse than a child! Everyday he had to be dressed! True, he did the handiwork himself.

When we moved to Riga I wanted to find work, but he didn't allow me. It was in 1954 after the case of Doctor's Plot [8](#) and I couldn't start a job anywhere. Yes, what an education! My husband told me, 'No need. It is important to me that you are home.' He worked in the conservatoire, and studied for four hours at home each day. I needed to take care of him.

We lived with my husband's sister until 1960. She had a bedroom and a living room and we lived in a 12-square meter room through which people went to get to the bathroom. At the bottom were stores, in which refrigerators ran and it was extremely cold. When I brought Roman home from the hospital it was 17 degrees Celsius in the room. It was 15 degrees but we placed a space heater,



which brought the temperature up by two degrees. My husband needed to study. We put the piano in the large room. But of course it bothered people. Then we lived in a communal apartment [9](#) where the rooms were luxurious. When they began to build the special residence for artistic workers, where we now live, my husband wrote to the ministry and described all of our problems. The Ministry of Cultural Affairs said: 'Do as you wish, but give Blumenthal a two-room apartment on the second floor.' Thus we have already lived in this apartment for 27 years.

Roman has two children, a fifteen-year-old girl, Diana and a three and half- year-old boy, Eduard. His wife, Marina, is a journalist. She is a Russian Jew. Roman graduated from the Latvian University, the Department of philology with a major in Germanic languages. Though he quit this for business and currently works for a private trade company.

During the Soviet times none of the Jewish traditions were held on to! Nothing! We were even afraid! Roman didn't even know what happened to me during the war. I didn't tell him anything. He found out that I was in a camp when he was 30 years old! And my relationship with my son is the most trusting and close-knit you can imagine! He and I were great friends. But I didn't want him to know. After all, the KGB [10](#) had called me to Riga from Liepaja just to explain to them how it was that I remained alive! Why?! That's why I didn't tell Roman: a child could tell his friend, his friend tells someone else. It was horrible!

Many people criticize the current government in independent Latvia [11](#), but I'm thankful to them that my granddaughter now studies at a [Hassidic type] Hebrew school. When she was little, on her way to school in the mornings, if she was asked the question of: where do you study little girl, she could answer, 'At a Hebrew School!' And she would be proud of it. It wasn't like that in the Soviet times. They are very strict in her school! But one can pray an extra time for all that they do well at this school! She complains that the clothing is strict; she wants a mini-skirt. But there are eight to nine students in a class and the rooms are bright and gorgeous. A car comes to pick her up, takes her to school and brings her home. They are fed three times a day. And it all only costs 18 Lats a month. Now she is entering the ninth grade and then we'll see.

My granddaughter asked me this question: 'Grandma, what do you believe in?' - 'Dianochka, I only believe in one thing. In goodness! People must be kind to one another. Like it is written in the Bible. Do not do unto others as you do not want to have done to you.' This is what I believe in. I believe in human decency. But I cannot adhere to strict orthodoxy!

## Glossary

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

## **2 Deportations from the Baltics (1940-1953)**

After the Soviet Union occupied the three Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) in June 1940 as a part of establishing the Soviet system, mass deportation of the local population began. The victims of these were mainly but not exclusively those unwanted by the regime: the local bourgeoisie and the previously politically active strata. Deportations to remote parts of the Soviet Union continued up until the death of Stalin. The first major wave of deportation took place between 11th and 14th June 1941, when 36,000, mostly politically active people were deported. Deportations were reintroduced after the Soviet Army recaptured the three countries from Nazi Germany in 1944. Partisan fights against the Soviet occupiers were going on all up to 1956, when the last squad was eliminated. Between June 1948 and January 1950, in accordance with a Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the USSR under the pretext of 'grossly dodged from labor activity in the agricultural field and led anti-social and parasitic mode of life' 52,541 people from Latvia, 118,599 people from Lithuania and 32,450 people from Estonia were deported. The total number of deportees from the three republics amounted to 203,590. Among them were entire Latvian families of different social strata (peasants, workers, intelligentsia), everybody who was able to reject or deemed capable to reject the regime. Most of the exiled died in the foreign land. Besides, about 100,000 people were killed in action and in fusillade for being members of partisan squads and some other 100,000 were sentenced to 25 years in camps.

## **3 Kaiserwald concentration camp**

Kaiserwald was the old German name of the Mezapark area of Riga. In summer 1943 Himmler ordered to eliminate all camps in the east, exterminate all inmates who were unable to work, and take the rest to another concentration camp. In summer 1943 prisoners from Polish concentration camps started building the camps. The 'Riga- Kaiserwald' had 29 'Aussenlager' (subcamps); The sorting out took place in the central camp. The male inmates who were able to work were sent to clear fields from mines. In August and September 1944, when the Soviet armies advanced to the Baltic countries, some inmates were sent to the Stutthof camp near Gdansk, and about 400 inmates were sent to Auschwitz. The rest were executed on 2nd October 1944 during elimination of the camp. From Stutthof the inmates were taken to various camps. The ally armies rescued them from extermination. At the most 1,000 Latvian Jews taken to Germany lived till liberation. The total of 18,000 Jews were exterminated in Kaiserwald during the Great Patriotic War.

## **4 Soviet Army**

The armed forces of the Soviet Union, originally called Red Army and renamed Soviet Army in February 1946. After the Bolsheviks came to power, in November 1917, they commenced to organize the squads of worker's army, called Red Guards, where workers and peasants were recruited on voluntary bases. The commanders were either selected from among the former tsarist officers and soldiers or appointed directly by the Military and Revolutionary Committy of the Communist Party. In early 1918 the Bolshevik government issued a decree on the establishment of the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army and mandatory drafting was introduced for men between 18 and 40. In 1918 the total number of draftees was 100 thousand officers and 1.2 million soldiers. Military schools and academies training the officers were restored. In 1925 the law on compulsory military service was adopted and annual drafting was established. The term of service was

established as follows: for the Red Guards- two years, for junior officers of aviation and fleet- three years, for medium and senior officers- 25 years. People of exploiter classes (former noblemen, merchants, officers of the tsarist army, priest, factory owner, etc. and their children) as well as kulaks (rich peasants) and Cossacks were not drafted in the army. The law as of 1939 cancelled restriction on drafting of men belonging to certain classes, students were not drafted but went through military training in their educational institutions. On the 22nd June 1941 Great Patriotic War was unleashed and the drafting in the army became exclusively compulsory. First, in June-July 1941 general and complete mobilization of men was carried out as well as partial mobilization of women. Then annual drafting of men, who turned 18, was commenced. When WWII was over, the Red Army amounted to over 11 million people and the demobilization process commenced. By the beginning of 1948 the Soviet Army had been downsized to 2 million 874 thousand people. The youth of drafting age were sent to the restoration works in mines, heavy industrial enterprises, and construction sites. In 1949 a new law on general military duty was adopted, according to which service term in ground troops and aviation was three years and in navy- four years. Young people with secondary education, both civilian and military, with the age range of 17-23 were admitted in military schools for officers. In 1968 the term of the army service was contracted to two years in ground troops and in the navy to three years. That system of army recruitment has remained without considerable changes until the breakup of the Soviet Army (1991-93).

## **5 Stutthof (Pol**

Sztutowo): German concentration camp 36 km east of Gdansk. The Germans also created a series of satellite camps in the vicinity: Stolp, Heiligenbeil, Gerdauen, Jesau, Schippenbeil, Seerappen, Praust, Burggraben, Thorn and Elbing. The Stutthof camp operated from 2nd September 1939 until 9th May 1945. The first group of prisoners (several hundred people) were Jews from Gdansk. Until 1943 small groups of Jews from Warsaw, Bialystok and other places were sent there. In early 1944 some 20,000 Auschwitz survivors were relocated to Stutthof. In spring 1944 the camp was extended significantly and was made into a death camp; subsequent transports comprised groups of Jews from Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary and Lodz in Poland. Towards the end of 1944 around 12,000 prisoners were taken from Stutthof to camps in Germany - Dachau, Buchenwald, Neuengamme and Flossenburg. In January 1945 the evacuation of Stutthof and its satellite camps began. In that period some 29,000 prisoners passed through the camp (including 26,000 women), 26,000 of whom died during the evacuation. Of the 52,000 or so people who were taken to Stutthof and its satellites, around 3,000 survived.

## **6 SMERSH**

Russian abbreviation for 'Smert Shpionam' meaning Death to Spies. It was a counterintelligence department in the Soviet Union formed during World War II, to secure the rear of the active Red Army, on the front to arrest 'traitors, deserters, spies, and criminal elements'. The full name of the entity was USSR People's Commissariat of Defense Chief Counterintelligence Directorate 'SMERSH'. This name for the counterintelligence division of the Red Army was introduced on 19th April 1943, and worked as a separate entity until 1946. It was headed by Viktor Abakumov. At the same time a SMERSH directorate within the People's Commissariat of the Soviet Navy and a SMERSH department of the NKVD were created. The main opponent of SMERSH in its counterintelligence activity was Abwehr, the German military foreign information and counterintelligence department. SMERSH activities also included 'filtering' the soldiers recovered from captivity and the population

of the gained territories. It was also used to punish within the NKVD itself; allowed to investigate, arrest and torture, force to sign fake confessions, put on a show trial, and either send to the camps or shoot people. SMERSH would also often be sent out to find and kill defectors, double agents, etc.; also used to maintain military discipline in the Red Army by means of barrier forces, that were supposed to shoot down the Soviet troops in the cases of retreat. SMERSH was also used to hunt down 'enemies of the people' outside Soviet territory.

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

Graduates of higher educational institutions had to complete a mandatory two-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.

## **8 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.

## **9 Communal apartment**

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

## **10 KGB**

Committee of State Security, took over from NKVD: People's Committee of Internal Affairs; which earlier used to be called the GPU, the state security agency.

## **11 Reestablishment of the Latvian Republic**

On 4th May 1990 Supreme Soviet of the Latvian Soviet Republic has accepted the declaration in which it was informed of the desire to restore independence of Latvia, and the transition period to restoration of full independence has been declared. The Soviet leadership in Moscow refused to acknowledge the independence of Latvia and initiated an economic blockade on the country. At the referendum held on 3rd March 1991, over 90 percent of the participants voted for independence. On 21st August 1991 the parliament took a decision on complete restoration of the prewar

statehood of Latvia. The western world finally recognized Latvian independence and so did the USSR on 24th August 1991. In September 1991 Latvia joined the United Nations. Through the years of independence Latvia has implemented deep economic reforms, introduced its own currency (Lat) in 1993, completed privatization and restituted the property to its former owners. Economic growth constitutes five-seven percent per year. Also, it's taken the course of escaping the influence of Russia and integration into European structures. In February 1993 Latvia introduced the visa procedure with Russia, and in 1995 the last units of the Russian army left the country. Since 2004 Latvia has been a member of NATO and the European Union.

## **12 Latvian Society of Jewish Culture (LSJC)**

formed in autumn 1988 under the leadership of Esphir Rapin, an activist of culture of Latvia, who was director of the Latvian Philharmonic at the time. Currently LSJC is a non-religious Jewish community of Latvia. The Society's objectives are as follows: restoration of the Jewish national self-consciousness, culture and traditions. Similar societies have been formed in other Latvian towns. Originally, the objective of the LSJC was the establishment of a Jewish school, which was opened in 1989. Now there is a Kinnor, the children's choral ensemble, a theatrical studio, a children's art studio and Hebrew courses at the society. There is a library with a large collection of books. The youth organization Itush Zion, sports organization Maccabi, charity association Rahamim, the Memorial Group, installing monuments in locations of the Jewish Holocaust tragedy, and the association of war veterans and former ghetto prisoners work under the auspice of the Society. There is a museum and document center 'Jews in Latvia' in the LSJC. The VEK (Herald of Jewish Culture) magazine (the only Jewish magazine in the former Soviet Union), about 50,000 issues, is published in the LSJC.