

# Ninel Kunina

Ninel Aronovna Kunina

St. Petersburg

Russia

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Ninel Aronovna is a sunny person, she is very rotund and shining, she smiles a warm smile and has kind eyes.

Evidently, early in her life she was a very beautiful woman, as until now she retains fascination and charm,

which can rarely be found in a person, who has lived such a hard life.

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## My family

I, Ninel Aronovna Kunina, was born in Leningrad [today St. Petersburg] in 1929. I left Leningrad only twice: for one and a half years in the mid-1930s, when Daddy worked in Chelyabinsk, and then for one and a half years at the beginning of the 1950s, when after my graduation from the finance-economic technical school I, as a young specialist was sent to work [1](#) in Anapa in Krasnodar region [South of Russia, Black Sea coast]. The whole blockade I spent in Leningrad [2](#), not departing for any other place. I couldn't imagine my life outside this city, just as I can't imagine it now in any of the possible places of Jews' emigration.

My genealogy according to my ancestors' records and my personal recollections appears in the following way. The parents of my father, Aron Movshevich Aronson, Granny Itta Isaacovna Aronson and Grandpa Movsha Aronson lived in Kiev. Grandma Itta was a housewife. She died when she was approximately 37, when her daughter Freidochka was killed in the course of a massacre. This shocked the whole family, and my daddy Aron, while recollecting some events, used to say: 'It was when Freidochka was so-and-so many years old...' This massacre of 1905 was a famous one. Afterwards I read about it in books [3](#). Grandpa and Grandma lived in Kiev [today Ukraine] surrounded by anti-Semites. At that time Daddy was just an infant. When he was wounded in Kiev and people carried him towards home, neighbors yelled at Grandma: 'Go out, your little kike is being carried around dead!' I don't know exactly, what the cause of Granny's death was: the murder of her daughter Freida or her son's serious injury.

The family of Grandma Itta lived very poorly. When Daddy was going to school, Grandma used to give him breakfast to take with him, and at school he boasted of how his mamma loved him as she spread a thick layer of butter on his bread. Only later Daddy realized, that it was not butter, but mashed potatoes. It was an unpretentious Jewish family. However, Grandma had an Astrakhan fur coat, there were a few silver glasses at home, and my daddy as the elder son inherited the largest silver one. Grandma had a long pearl necklace – you can see it on a photo I keep – but at the time of the pogrom she hid all valuables in the stove, and when pogrom-makers came, Grandma stoked the stove as she didn't know that pearls could burn.

Grandma Itta had several sisters. I saw and poorly remember one of them; her name was Chasya. She was married to the jeweler Libenzon. Grandpa had a brother, Boris, a very rich person. He owned four small houses in Kiev. In 1977 I was in one of them, there was a big orchard near the house. The only daughter of Boris was called Bella, she fell in love with a poor, handsome man, and when her parents didn't permit her to marry him, she ran off with him to a small nine-square-meter room, where his mother lived as well. Bella's mother didn't stand firm and after some time went to see her daughter. She saw that her little Bella, brought up by a governess, was washing the floor in this room, so she burst into tears and took her daughter and son-in-law to her place. Bella gave birth to a son, who was named Mikhail in honor of Grandfather.

After the death of Grandma Itta in 1915 four children remained, and my father among them. It was 1917. The eldest sister Berta was 18; she had been earlier married to a very pious elderly Jew, whose surname was Greben. And they were bringing up all the children of Grandma and Grandpa together: my daddy Aron, who was 14 at that time, Nina, who was ten, and Samuel, the youngest, who at that moment was only eight years old.

Grandpa Movsha died in 1921 at the age of 50. He wore a beard, so it seemed to my dad that he was a very old man. All his life Grandpa was a tailor, he sewed clothes. It was dangerous to stay in Kiev during the Civil War [4](#) and the whole extended family finally moved to Petersburg – this was in 1923. There, Berta and David's daughter Ada was born.

My father was born in 1903 in Kiev; that is where he studied at school, his mother tongue was, certainly, Yiddish. At the age of 16 he left for the army. In the years of the Civil War Daddy at first was in the cavalry; I recollect, that he often narrated of how a horse saved the life of its equestrian, carrying him off on its back at the time of battle.

In 1920 Daddy became an aide-de-camp of the legendary commander Guy [5](#), it was the 84th squad of the rifle battalion, 36th rifle brigade. Daddy was 17, but he already was a valiant and famous person, a hero. There are photos, where Daddy can be seen at the feet of Guy, whose aide-de-camp he was. Guy's wife was a Jewess and loved my father very much. My daddy's friendship with Guy went on both after the Civil War and when Father married Mom.

In 1933 – by this time we lived in Leningrad – Daddy was sent to study at some regular courses in Moscow, and there we visited Guy. I was only four, but I remember a moment that surprised me. On the table in Guy's study there were several telephone sets. It was a great surprise for me, because in Leningrad in our room we had a telephone, but its set was attached to the wall. But when in 1937 Guy was executed by shooting, Daddy did away with all the photos, reserving only collective ones, where it was difficult to recognize Guy. Father came back to Kiev after the Civil War safe and sound, and in 1923 the whole family left for Leningrad.

My father got acquainted with Mom in a pioneer camp [6](#). Dad was the camp director, and Mom was the matron. Dad chased after Mom for a year, took her to the Jewish club, where there were placards in Yiddish. Mom was born illegitimately and didn't know any other language except Russian. But she read on a placard: 'Proletarians of all countries unite!' Dad didn't believe that she really read it and asked her to prove it. Mom didn't know that the written Jewish characters should be read from right to left, and in that way gave herself away. It is not known, if she was a Jewess or not, but Dad loved her very much. [Mrs. Kunina's mother's origin is unknown].

In October 1925 they got married and Dad moved to live with Mom, to her large family and to their big apartment. There in 1926 my brother Volodya was born, and one and a half years after their wedding Dad found a room near mother's apartment, rented it, and in it we lived till 1954. Father's extended Jewish family frowned upon his marriage, as he didn't marry a Jewess, and for ten years they didn't accept her into their family. Certainly, Mom was present at my father's family get-togethers, but she always felt coldness and insincerity directed toward her by his relatives. We had to see all relatives often, as all of us lived in the same street, we visited each other at birthday parties, celebrated all major Jewish holidays.

However, later, after the war [1941-1945] [7](#) Aunt Berta and Mom kept in very close touch with each other. Apparently, the tragedy of war revised people's attitude towards each other. Mom her whole life long felt herself as a Jew's wife, took interest in culinary recipes of Jewish cuisine and knew from Aron all the Jewish holidays, which we always celebrated. So my brother and I were raised in a Jewish, but not religious atmosphere. We didn't pray and didn't eat kosher food, and felt an atmosphere of religiosity only when visiting Berta.

Berta always celebrated all the Jewish holidays with lighting of candles and prayers, as she was the wife of a religious man. Her husband, David Greben, had his own seat in the Synagogue [8](#), and every time we got together in their large 40-square-meter room in Leningrad with the whole big family to celebrate both Rosh Hashanah and Pesach. There were a large number of people: our family – my mom, me, a baby in Mom's arms, the four-year-old Volodya, my brother, and Dad –, the family of Father's brother Samuel; plus David had a brother, so he came too with his wife and their three sons; the family of my father's sister Nina. Her husband Isaac died early, in 1936, and her whole life long she was good friends with her husband's sister and brother. Thus at the table about 40 persons were gathered! There they sang Jewish songs and danced hand in hand with each other, Daddy danced putting his thumbs in his underarms. But all this was done quietly in order not to attract attention of the neighbors, and David, who was a pious Jew, never wore a beard or side locks.

Berta died in 1968 in Leningrad, a month after her husband David's death. Her whole life long she worked as a dentist, but when they came back after evacuation – during the war they lived in Omsk – she started working as a passport-clerk in the housing office. Her husband didn't work after the war but was retired; he died in April 1968 in Leningrad. Their daughter Ada, married name Ronina, studied in the Conservatory, and died in 1993.

My father's younger sister Nina worked as an accountant in a theater, she died in Leningrad in 1975. Her husband, Isaac Berlin, worked as an engineer at the Kirov Factory in Leningrad, he died in 1936. Their son Yakov Berlin, who was born in 1935, now lives in Israel in the city of Arad.

My father's younger brother Samuel had studied and worked as a chief of the shipping department at the Karl Marx Factory, he died in 1985 in Leningrad. His wife Nina died in Leningrad in 1969, their son Mikhail, who was born in 1933, now lives in Berlin, Germany.

The parents of my mom, Aleksandra Aleksandrovna Aronson, nee Lukina, were people of a very uncommon fate. They both were illegitimate children. Their mothers placed them both in an orphanage for foundlings in Petersburg. [It seems that the babies' mothers were seduced and became pregnant, they had to give birth, because abortions were not possible at that time, and attempts of terminating a pregnancy often resulted in the woman's death.]

Grandma was born in 1868. All foundlings were baptized in the Orthodox [Christian] faith; the tsarist government took care of these children. Trustee services placed them in families and regularly paid for their living. A state inspector came systematically and inspected if they treated the child well. A Finnish family took care of my grandma, though they themselves had seven children, and till the age of 16 she lived in a village not far from Petersburg. Great-grandma, while having placed Grandma in an orphanage, named her Evgenia and gave her the surname Savova. This resulted in the name Evgenia Savovna Savova, as in the orphanage they gave the patronymic according to the surname. Grandpa was called Aleksander, surname Lukin, which resulted in the name Aleksander Lukich Lukin. [It was a tradition that has remained till nowadays: for children whose father was unknown or it was undesirable to mention him, the patronymic was either simply invented or derived from the surname.]

My 16-year-old grandma was brought to Petersburg and got fixed up in a job as a housemaid for a 'smolyany' lady. Smolyany were the girls who studied at the Smolny Institute for Noble Maidens [9](#) in Petersburg-Petrograd [Petersburg was given the new name of Petrograd in 1914, and Petrograd became Leningrad due to Bolsheviks after Lenin's death in 1924]. Then Grandma got married to another illegitimate child and the government gave them a nice marriage allocation for the wedding.

The new family was able to buy a horse and my grandpa started to work as a cabman, but in 1905 [10](#), at the time of street disorders, Grandpa was lashed with whips and became disabled. Grandma alone worked as a servant for the millionaire Evreinova. Grandma had six children and Evreinova felt sorry for her, giving her leftovers from the kitchen. My grandparents' family lived in a wooden house with stove heating, occupied one room, and the corridor and a small pantry were rented to lodgers, as housing was very expensive. Grandpa died long before my birth, I don't know exactly when.

My mom Aleksandra was born in Petersburg in 1901. She completed a three-year school and spoke Russian. She studied only three years instead of eight or ten as usual, because she was the eldest daughter in the family and so had to bring up younger sisters and brothers. At the age of ten she learned to sew and knit and sold things she had made, supporting the family.

Before the revolution Mom worked at a sewing factory for a master, a very kind man, who granted fabrics to the workers and Mom was able to dress her sisters and brothers. In 1917 the master was arrested as a factory-owner, the factory was nationalized, but workers decided to intercede with the new government for mercy for this master. After being set free the master came to the factory and thanked his workers. After she married my father Mom worked as a salesperson in a food store, and she worked as a salesperson till she retired.

I was born in Leningrad on 10th August 1929. You have already realized that my father was a person with firm ideological principles, a Party and Soviet man. He gave my brother the name Vladimir after Vladimir Ilyich Lenin's death in 1924. And I was given the name Ninel. Reading this name back to front you get Lenin.

Daddy never obtained any university education, he only studied at different courses, it is now called extension courses. Once he studied at such courses and obtained a certificate of a certain profession, another time he studied at other courses. He was good at doing a lot of things, a person with 'magical hands'! Besides, he was a man of bright intellect. We never were hard up until he retired and didn't experience noticeable want; we had everything necessary due to my father's talents. Daddy was a very cheery and witty person as well as very kind. Everyone could turn to him with any question, and he didn't refuse anything to anyone. He made with his own hands everything what he was able to do; if not, then he tried to buy it.

In 1930 the collectivization of agriculture was carried out in Vologda [11](#). Villagers were 'driven' to kolkhozes [12](#) and were forced to hand over cattle and household equipment to the general use under the direction of a special brigade of VKPB members. Father was a member of the VKPB [VKPB is CPSUB – the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks)] and one of those who participated in the collectivization. They were called the 'twenty-five-thousand persons.'

I remember books by Stalin and Lenin in our house. Besides, Dad bought books by Pushkin [13](#) and other fiction and children's literature for my brother and me.

My father was highly successful, and in 1934 he was sent to conduct industrialization in Chelyabinsk, where he served as an assistant director of the Chelyabinsk abrasive factory, and Mom for the first time in her life didn't have to work for one and a half years. [This means, that Aron was sent to set up large-scale industrial enterprises in the vast territories of the Soviet Union]. She was very homesick, so in 1936 she took me and my brother and left for Leningrad. Two months later Dad was paid off in Chelyabinsk and joined us in Leningrad. And in 1937 the whole governing body of the Chelyabinsk abrasive factory was shot [14](#). In that way, being unaware of this at the time, Mom saved Daddy's life.

Daddy was a supply agent; now it is called administrator. He procured everything that was needed for the governing body. While working as an assistant director of the Chelyabinsk abrasive factory, Dad visited Moscow and was at the reception of Ordzhonikidze [15](#), the Minister of Heavy Engineering, on account of supplying of factory workers. The point was that there were food difficulties in the country, famine, and there was a rigid order of supply depending on the number of workers. But Father wanted to obtain an improvement of the ration supply, which was permitted only in the presence of such-and-such a number [thousands] of workers. The crew size at this factory was much smaller, but Dad got the permit from the authorities to make an exception for this factory.

My father was forced to try to get from Ordzhonikidze the permit of making an exception several times, so he repeatedly had to go to Moscow and at long last Ordzhonikidze's secretary was told: 'You throw this Jew out, but he will get in through the window, so we are to comply with his request.' In such a way Dad was able to supply workers with white bread loaves and other foodstuffs. When Ordzhonikidze killed himself, Daddy put his portrait into a black frame. Dad honored him very much and always remembered how Ordzhonikidze helped poor working people.

After one of his trips to Moscow my father stopped in Leningrad and took me with him to Chelyabinsk. It was a short detour on the way, but Daddy couldn't refuse the possibility of taking me with him [Moscow and Leningrad are at a distance of 650 km from each other]. Mom and my brother Volodya couldn't take me with them at once, as I was sick and lived at Grandma Evgenia's. This was the first time I saw a train, and it seems we travelled for four days in a carriage with numbered, reserved seats. In Chelyabinsk Mom and my brother on horseback met us at the railway station.

It was a very cold winter and my brother got his nose seriously frostbitten. We didn't get used to the intensely cold weather in the Ural winter, and though the summer there was warm, the winter nevertheless was very cold. In Chelyabinsk we lived in some apartment, I think it was an official apartment, which belonged to the factory. There was quite common state furniture in it, and there was not enough furniture, because we had not taken anything from Leningrad with us.

After his return from Chelyabinsk, Dad worked as a deputy director of some factory, where he was several times given places in a sanatorium [recreation center]. He went to these resorts alone, without Mom. I don't know why, but he never spent his leave with us and Mom. At this factory he also dealt with the problems of the enterprise's supply. Dad was given his own room in place of the one he had rented, and now we lived in a communal five-room apartment [16](#) with stove heating, in which gas was installed in 1939. But there was no bathroom in it. We lived relatively poorly. Five families lived in this apartment: three rooms were occupied by Jewish families, and two by Russian families. Before the war there was no anti-Semitism in our apartment. My parents were friends mainly with Russians. Mother again got a job at a food store and had to work all the time so my brother and I were brought up and educated by Grandma Evgenia. At the time I was already ten.

I was brought up by Grandma, as Mom worked a lot. How were we educated? I danced a lot at home, that was why parents placed me in a ballet school, but I didn't turn out to be a ballerina. Then my parents bought my brother and me a violin, as they wanted my brother and me to study music, but this also was not successful. We had a gramophone, at that time it was very fashionable, and my parents bought a lot of records. I still keep them. My brother and I listened to music including Dad's Jewish records. Daddy instilled in us love for animals: we had a dog, a German shepherd Ralph. There were fish in our fish-tank and white mice with red eyes, as I recall now.

Daddy bought my brother and me bicycles and the three of us rode out, we rode out along Zodchy Rossy Street [beautiful street in the center of St. Petersburg], there were no trams and cars at the time and we easily bicycled as much as we liked. On their days off my parents took us in the country, we visited Sosnovka [suburb of Leningrad] for picnics.

I went to a state school, together with my brother. My favorite subject was Mathematics. I remember my first teacher very well; she was loved by everybody. I spent summers at a pioneer camp twice, and exactly there I was caught with news about the outbreak of war. My brother was 14, I was eleven. All children were sent to the forest as planes were already flying; I don't know now which ones, but in any case a plane in the air was a great event for us. In the evening parents took us home.

## The war



In the winter of 1941 schools didn't operate. My brother Volodya began to be an apprentice to a shoemaker, then to a driver; he earned additionally at the Karl Marx Factory as a driver. At the beginning of the war he was 14, he was sent to dig trenches in the environs of Leningrad, and on 8th August [1941] the German landing party force landed in Strelna [suburb of Leningrad] and barred the way for everyone who dug trenches. These people perished, no doubt. And Volodya alone was able to run away, he went around the Germans. You see, my brother knew these places well because every summer we were on holidays near Strelna. He came running home on the 10th of August. I remember it well, because it was my birthday, there were guests at home. And we led a relatively peaceful life, there were not even ration cards [17](#). My brother saw the German troops for the first time. He was so shocked with it that he came home running, had a little snack and slept for a whole day.

Father was taken away to the front immediately after the beginning of the war [on 22nd June 1941]. First he was at the Leningrad front, and in 1945 he reached Germany. In May 1945 their military unit was sent to the war with Japan [18](#), from where he sometimes wrote to us. I kept his postcards depicting pretty Japanese girls.

In Leningrad under the blockade Mother and I lived together. It is very hard for me to recall this. These dreadful bombardments, these destroyed houses, these hungry people, these huge trucks transporting naked corpses with cut-off soft body parts to the present memorial cemetery [the Piskaryovskoe Memorial Cemetery]. My whole maternal kinsfolk, except Granny Evgenia and Mom's sister Zinaida and her daughter, perished, mainly from starvation. Zinaida's husband was killed at the factory because of ration cards [i.e. someone killed him to get his ration cards]. He was an electrician and lived in barracks. He was found in spring, covered with coal, when his corpse had already begun to decay. Many close friends of ours perished on the Leningrad front. Boys from our school didn't reach the front line [the foremost front line]; they were killed during the bombardment.

From September 1941 ration cards were introduced, and Volodya had to work, being a 15-year-old, in order to obtain a worker's ration card, which allowed you to get twice as much bread. I recall his rate of 250 grams while I was given only 125 grams of bread. Winter came, and children didn't go to school, because it was a terrible winter, terrible frost, without water and light. We went for water far away – some to the river Neva, some to water-pumps. We had stove heating at home: before the war, Dad had stored up firewood, and we learned to saw it into small blocks. Mom bought a little metal hot plate, we warmed ourselves with it and cooked our meals on it. We certainly didn't have electric light, but we lived in the center of the city, and in the Ligovsky Prospekt near Moskovsky railway station there was a bread-baking plant, which had its own electric power station. We missed electric light and walked there as if for an excursion to look at the lit up electric light bulbs of the plant.

My mom worked at a store on the outskirts of the city. We didn't starve, but there was no urban transport running. She lived near the store – it was called 'she was under barracks conditions' – and came home seldom, in order to bring us food and to make certain that my brother and I were alive. Sometimes I went to her work place, where we slept on the boxes and in the morning, when the store opened and the sales assistants began to distribute foodstuffs by coupons, we, the children, were seated at the table to glue these coupons on the sheets of paper, because they had to give a report on the foodstuffs.

By spring Mom rented a room not far from the store, and I began to work often in the store, gluing coupons. There were a few dreadful episodes. Once I was walking along the street and heard a dreadful scream of a child. A few men and I stepped out at this scream and saw that a woman was eating a living child. It was not just dreadful, it was so horrifying, that I simply can't talk about it. Another day I went on foot to Mom's work and heard hasty steps behind me, turned around and saw that a tall, very slim man wanted to come up to me. He was dystrophic, utterly sick. I was short for my age, because children at that time didn't grow, but not starved, so I was strong enough to run away from him.

In spring trams were running and I began to visit Grandma Evgenia, who already wasn't getting up because of asthenia. She was saved by the fact that for a coupon one bottle of vodka was given per month. She told me that she kept the bottle in her bed, and when she felt frozen, one drink of vodka warmed her up and she revived. Coming back home from Granny I went by tram, a bombardment was launched. I was afraid of bombings very much. All people rushed out of the trams and ran under the houses' arches, stood there until they would announce the end of the bombardment through loudspeakers. Those loudspeakers are present even now in the old districts of our city.

At that time I saw the director of my mom's store, a tall handsome man, who went off, not waiting till the announcement of the end of the bombardment. Other people also went, and I followed them. It was right near Liteiny Bridge. When I had passed a part of the bridge, a powerful explosion sent that part of the bridge into the Neva River. I hurried as much as possible, but the grown-ups were far away, trams ceased to work and all people were going on foot. I walked for about ten kilometers. I came to Mom's work place and saw her crying, then she began kissing me. Mom usually was cold and never kissed me. I asked her what had happened; it turned out that her director had come back earlier and had told her, that I was in the Neva with that part of the bridge.

In spring 1942 schools opened again, I got acquainted with the daughter of my mom's female colleague. We were friends, studied in the fifth grade, and we had only one bag for both of us. We also had no clothes. Americans sent us packages with clothes, and stockings, only of white color, fell to my share. I, a twelve-year-old, decided to dye them blue, so I wore blue stockings. Instead of a coat I asked Mom to buy me a quilted jacket, which was very warm.

In the summer of 1943 Mom took me, a 13-year-old, on the staff, as an apprentice sales person. At school there were holidays, but I worked at the store all the same. But now I had to go for work by eight o'clock in the morning and left at ten o'clock in the evening. I was so desperate to sleep. What work could they assign to a 13-year-old girl? I had the job to deliver buckets with water to women, who were storing up peat for heating, they dug peat straight out of earth. It was very hot there and peat glowed, igniting spontaneously. And another time, when cabbage leaves were brought to the store, I had to sell these leaves. At the end of summer I sold aerated water with saccharin. From the 1st of September I went to school. I wasn't awarded with a medal 'For the Defense of Leningrad,' because I didn't have a job before January of 1943. Such an unfair law!

## **After the war and later life**

In January 1944 Volodya went away to the front and reached Prague. He was sent to the Far East and in this corner of the world he could have met our father, but he didn't, because Father was not



given the address of his son's military post. After the end of the war, from September 1945 till October 1947, all the young armed forces personnel took part in the rebuilding of the destroyed houses in various cities. In October 1947 we received my brother's letter from the hospital, where doctors had diagnosed his pulmonary tuberculosis only when he was expectorating with blood [that is to say too late]. He was demobilized, Daddy borrowed money from his sister in order to bring his consumptive son home, from the hospital of Yoshkar-Ola to Leningrad.

In Leningrad foodstuffs were given by ration cards till December 1947, later this was abolished. Having been in hospital for some time, my brother was discharged and got a job as a truck driver. He worked a lot, as he needed a high-calorie diet. At this time we were living on the outskirts of the city, now it is a district near Udelnaya metro station. Mom bought a piglet, fattened it up, in such a way my brother received fats, lard and pork.

In 1948 my brother got married, but his daughter was born two weeks after his death. He died of tuberculosis, because at that time there was no penicillin, by means of which this disease can be cured now, and the doctors failed to save him. He was 23. Every day Mom told me, 'I shall hang myself all the same, I don't want to live without my son.' She couldn't get over her son's death. Nothing happened to her, of course we did everything to assuage and support her. Mom died much later, in 1983.

After the war I continued to study at school, and at the time I strongly felt anti-Semitism from the part of my classmates and from the part of my teachers as well. Back then there were continued repressions and search for 'enemies of the people' [19](#), and I was the only Aronson in the class [that is to say she was the only Jewess]. In 1947 I left school after the ninth grade, without having completed my studies for one and a half years. I was 18, I was now a grown-up girl and couldn't allow such an attitude towards myself. I was given a school progress record and information paper instead of a diploma and certificate. Until now recollections of that time make me sick.

In 1947 I entered the finance-economic technical school. Before the beginning of my studies I went to Estonia with a relative, who had an acquaintance there, a Finn, who was married to an Estonian. Mom gave me fox fur so that I could barter it for foodstuffs. Moreover, we had to work, it was the hardest time, people mowed rye, and we bound sheaves with other workers. The master paid us well, for one workday he gave us a bag of potatoes. Since we were not able to take it with us, because for a week we got seven bags of potatoes, we bartered it for butter and brought home seven kilograms of creamy butter. There was no food, there was starvation, and for us it was great luck.

I was trying hard to work well, I was young and had no practical skills, and as a result I greatly strained the tendons of my right hand. And when I went to study on the 1st of September, for some time I could not write at all. At the technical school I felt no anti-Semitism, despite the fact that we were 'one and a half Jewesses' – I was half Jewish and Fira Trostinetskaya was a pure Jewess. She was my, well, not exactly a friend, but we maintained very friendly relations with each other. Now she lives in Germany.

In 1950 I successfully graduated from the technical school and right away passed the exams for a financial economics institute, the department of instruction by correspondence, as according to the law I had to work three years in a certain place, where the technical school sent me after graduation. I was afraid of this assignment, because leaving my mom was frightful for me and

something I was not used to. I was sent to work in the town Anapa in Krasnodar region. I was an inspector of state revenues in the finance department of some town district. [She worked and studied at the same time in order to earn her living]. I worked there for a year; we raised taxes from the state enterprises. In our department there was a sub-unit, which was engaged in tax collection from the population. Taxes were levied on every tree that was growing in your garden and on every animal – sheep, chickens. And if you did not have any hens you had to hand over eggs. Go to the market and buy eggs. And pay tax with these eggs!

Under Stalin it was an awful work, it was just like serfdom! Once I was sent to help the tax inspector to raise taxes from the population. And people let loose dogs upon us in order to prevent us from entering the house, as they had no money to pay the taxes. And these taxes were required for the constructions of Communism Tsimlyanskaya GES. [GES is a Hydroelectric Power Station, was constructed in 1953, is situated on the river Don; Tsimlyanskaya GES generates electricity for the cities of the South of Russia, in the town of Tsimlyansk.]

I was nearly killed there! It was the period of vintage. In this period it was necessary to gather grapes of certain sweetness; for that people were recruited from everywhere, from the whole Soviet Union. And naturally there were criminals too. I was sent to a sovkhos [20](#) together with a male cashier, who paid out wages to the sovkhos workers, and I collected tax right there while they had money, in order to get from them at least something. And the cashier himself was originally from this 'stanitsa' [village]. Moreover, salary payment was carried out late in the evening, because during daytime people were working in the fields, cut off bunches of grapes.

The father of this cashier, a native of the village, came up to him and warned him not to go home, as he heard a conversation that some persons wanted to rob the cashier. He asked, 'Do you have any weapons?' But the cashier didn't take a weapon with him, and he couldn't just not go home, as his little children were staying there. And the cashier and his wife said, 'I shall go home in any case, even if they may kill me.' But I didn't want to die, I was only 20. Then the father of this cashier said, 'Ride in a roundabout way!' It was a detour of 20 kilometers. We went on horseback, he rode the horse hard and we managed to escape from these 'zaks.' [Zak: short for zaklyuchenny – prisoner in Russian. Former prisoners, even after their release, are sometimes called 'zaks,' this epithet sticks to some criminals for their whole life, they say: 'He is a former zak.']

When I came to the town [Anapa] and gave a report of my business trip, the chief said to me, that I had collected less money, and I said to him in response, that I would never make such a business trip again, as I was a young specialist and had to work only in my field of specialization and not to collect taxes from the residential population. These were very audacious words, the chief could have discharged me, but everything turned out all right.

I was a second-year student in the institute, and in spite of the fact that I had a diploma of a financier after the technical school, I was refused employment everywhere. It was 1951, the very height of anti-Semitism. And only in February of 1952, by knowing the right people, by way of several people I could meet the deputy director of the plant 'Svetlana' Petrov. During the blockade of Leningrad between 1941 and 1944 he was a simple engineer, and one cook of this plant, a Jewess, fed the weak and hungry people, among which was this engineer. He turned out to be talented and became the deputy director of the plant. And when this cook, a pensioner as well, addressed him with the request to give a job to some Jew, he did not refuse her. In such a way I, a

specialist with an incomplete university education, began to work at the plant as a tester of measurement instrumentation; it was merely a worker's position instead of a financier's position.

My female chief was an anti-Semite and tried to get rid of me; I was advised to address the chief of the special design office, where the planning department was, led by a Jew. He took me on in the position of a technician, though I was the only person with special economic education. And when at the end of 1952 my dad was arrested, I stayed at work in the evening and shared my trouble with him. His name was Naum Efimovich Ostrovsky. He ordered me to tell the 'First Department.' ['First Department' or 'Special Secret Department' employees had access to state secrets of the defense and other industries, they couldn't go abroad for ten and more years, on the other hand their salary was a bit higher than that of ordinary employees.] Our plant belonged to the electronic industry, and everything was classified as secret. I refused, then my chief said, 'You did not tell me anything, and I don't know anything.'

The Doctors' Plot [23](#) in the USSR affected us marginally. My paternal relative, a doctor/gynecologist, Mikhail Kogan, was arrested, his family lived on the poor salary of his wife. Relatives feared to communicate with them. In March 1953 Stalin died. All of our acquaintances were sad about Stalin's death. And my chief Ostrovsky suffered in the following way: in the evenings he taught political economy at the institute, and at this time the textbook of political economy was first published, and in the circle of his colleagues at the plant he said, 'It's a pity, that this textbook was not checked by Stalin.' One of the colleagues reported to the Party Committee, that Ostrovsky 'demoralizes the Party' by saying that 'even a textbook cannot be corrected by anybody except Stalin.. Ostrovsky was expelled from the Party, discharged from his work, and he died at the age of 49.

In our design office there were a lot of Jews, they got into the plant in the following way: straight away after the war Jews had an opportunity to get into institutes, and upon their graduation from an institute, according to the law, they had to be placed in a job. There were not enough competent specialists, and factories submitted their claims to the institutes, which were called 'raznaryadky,' in order to get a certain number of specialists. Thus Jews began to get even into the closed factories [22](#). At this design office there was a very industrious and gifted engineer, who acquainted me with his brother, who later became my husband.

My husband Vladimir [23](#) or Velvel Kunin was born in 1924 in the town of Nikolaev of Odessa region [today Ukraine]. He didn't go to the front because of myopia. At the beginning of the war he was 17. My husband's father took him to Kirov region into evacuation, where there was the only veterinary institute. Volodya completed the institute and upon his return from evacuation entered the Leningrad Pedagogical Institute, the Physics and Mathematics Department, became a Physics teacher first at school, and then at the radio-polytechnic school. My husband was a very good person. I don't want to tell you anything more except some general things. This is our personal life. Everything was OK with us, we were happy. He died. For me life goes on. He had poor eyesight. In evacuation he studied to be a vet. And who needs vets in Leningrad? When he arrived in Leningrad, he started to study for another profession!

In January 1961 our son Leonid was born. Now he lives in Petersburg, he married a Russian woman, but they don't have children together. I gave birth to Leonid at the age of 31. When Lenya grew up, I asked my husband to change his name from Velvel to Vladimir, as my son needed to receive a

passport, but with such a patronymic –Leonid Velvelovich – at that time he wouldn't have been taken into the Military Institute, which was his dream when he was 16 years old. But then he was taken in with the patronymic Leonid Vladimirovich.

Among my friends there were a lot of Jews, and once I was taken to the synagogue at the holiday of Simchat Torah. And an elderly woman came up to one of our boys and began to propose her daughter to him as a wife. And then she complained, that she had a nephew, and whereas he was clever, and good, and kind, and whereas he was so outstanding on the whole, who was his wife? Natashka! [meaning that she was a Russian girl, as Natasha is a Russian name]. We laughed, of course.

In general I rarely went to the synagogue, as it wasn't safe to go there [24](#). So we often got together at the home of someone of our friends. There we danced a lot and it was great fun.

After the war in Israel in 1967 [25](#) we had a proverb: 'Don't beat kikes, but beat in a kikish style.' We never traveled to Israel but a lot of people from the plant departed [emigrated for permanent residence]. My friends left. I loved them, I took an interest in their fate, but I immediately told them not to write to me, as my son was studying at the military college and I was still working [26](#). I was given the telephone number of elderly people who were in contact with them, who corresponded with them, and I got to know about their life from these people. [The situation in the Soviet Union was such, that if you had friends or even more so 'relatives abroad,' you would be considered a real spy, recruited by a foreign secret service, and you would be immediately dismissed from work, or they wouldn't admit you to university and in every possible way the authorities would put obstacles in your way to a successful life. All people kept secret the existence of friends, who had left for foreign countries.]

When Soviet troops were in Hungary [27](#), there was a famous journalist from Moscow, comrade Borzenko. And one of our acquaintances from Leningrad, let us call him Sidorov, while understanding that we were misinformed, wrote a letter to Moscow with the following content: 'If you see that our troops are met well by the residential population, then you are a fool; and if you see that our troops are met with animosity but write the opposite, then you are a scoundrel.' He addressed it like this: 'Moscow, to the journalist Borzenko.' There was no signature. This Sidorov was a prominent scientist, headed a large laboratory, often drank too much, and, certainly, in a state of drunkenness dared to write such things.

Six months passed, he was called to the 'Big House' and was asked if he had written a letter to Borzenko. Plenty of time had passed, the hangover had passed, and Sidorov forgot everything and began to deny it. Then he was shown his letter and had to recall everything. Sidorov was a smart man and asked, 'What am I to do?' It was impossible to deny the charge. But times had changed [28](#), people were no longer put in prison, and he was offered to point out the reason for such a sentiment: 'We have often listened to the BBC's broadcast, The Voice of America [29](#), I have lost control of myself and this case happened...' At work he was removed from the leadership of the laboratory and became a junior research fellow with a significant loss in salary. And his wife told him, 'You will not drink cognac, you will drink vodka now!'

My husband died in 1999 at the age of 75. We lived a happy life. Now I am visiting Hesed [30](#), I am a volunteer and help those, whom I can help with something. I have a lot of friends. Certainly, I have become accustomed here to the Jewish life. I visit the synagogue on major holidays. I go to

concerts, which are arranged by the Jewish community. But I remain an irreligious person, I only began to believe in God, and I pray to myself and not in the temple.

## **Glossary:**

### **1 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.

### **2 Blockade of Leningrad**

On September 8, 1941 the Germans fully encircled Leningrad and its siege began. It lasted until January 27, 1944. The blockade meant incredible hardships and privations for the population of the town. Hundreds of thousands died from hunger, cold and diseases during the almost 900 days of the blockade.

### **3 1905 Russian Revolution**

Erupted during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05, and was sparked off by a massacre of St. Petersburg workers taking their petitions to the Tsar (Bloody Sunday). The massacre provoked disgust and protest strikes throughout the country: between January and March 1905 over 800,000 people participated in them. Following Russia's defeat in its war with Japan, armed insurrections broke out in the army and the navy (the most publicized in June 1905 aboard the battleship Potemkin). In 1906 a wave of pogroms swept through Russia, directed against Jews and Armenians. The main unrest in 1906 (involving over a million people in the cities, some 2,600 villages and virtually the entire Baltic fleet and some of the land army) was incited by the dissolution of the First State Duma in July. The dissolution of the Second State Duma in June 1907 is considered the definitive end to the revolution.

### **4 Civil War (1918-1920)**

The Civil War between the Reds (the Bolsheviks) and the Whites (the anti-Bolsheviks), which broke out in early 1918, ravaged Russia until 1920. The Whites represented all shades of anti-communist groups - Russian army units from World War I, led by anti-Bolshevik officers, by anti-Bolshevik volunteers and some Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries. Several of their leaders favored setting up a military dictatorship, but few were outspoken tsarists. Atrocities were committed throughout the Civil War by both sides. The Civil War ended with Bolshevik military victory, thanks to the lack of cooperation among the various White commanders and to the reorganization of the Red forces after Trotsky became commissar for war. It was won, however, only at the price of immense sacrifice; by 1920 Russia was ruined and devastated. In 1920 industrial production was reduced to 14% and agriculture to 50% as compared to 1913.

### **5 Bzhishkyan, Hayk (1887-1937)**

Also known as Guy Dmitrievich Guy, was a Soviet military commander of the Russian Civil War and Polish-Soviet War. He was twice awarded with the Order of the Red Banner; in 1919 for battles in the Volga Region of 1918 and in 1920 for the Polish campaign. On July 3, 1935 he was arrested and accused of "participation in an anti-Soviet terrorist organization" by the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court of the USSR on December 11, 1937 and shot the same day. His books were declared politically harmful and banned. He was rehabilitated on January 21, 1956. (Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hayk\\_Bzhishkyan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hayk_Bzhishkyan))

## **6 All-Union pioneer organization**

A communist organization for teenagers between 10 and 15 years old (cf: boy-/ girlscouts in the US). The organization aimed at educating the young generation in accordance with the communist ideals, preparing pioneers to become members of the Komsomol and later the Communist Party. In the Soviet Union, all teenagers were pioneers.

## **7 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.

## **8 Big Choral Synagogue in St**

Peterburg: Built in 1893, its Grand Hall is designed for 1200 parishioners. In the early 20th century, the rabbi was David Kazenelenbogen (1850-1931), he often asserted Jews' rights before the government, struggled against their assimilation. After the Bolshevik revolution in October 1917 and till his death he was practically the only rabbi in Petrograd-Leningrad. The Jewish city commune experienced continual repressions from the authorities, it was winded up in 1929, the synagogue's property was brought out in 1922, and in 1930 the synagogue was closed.

## **9 The Smolny Institute for Noble Maidens**

A women's educational institution, set up by Empress Catherine the Great in 1764 and closed in the days of the revolution of 1917.

## **10 1905 Russian Revolution**

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### **11 Collectivization in the USSR**

In the late 1920s - early 1930s private farms were liquidated and collective farms established by force on a mass scale in the USSR. Many peasants were arrested during this process. As a result of the collectivization, the number of farmers and the amount of agricultural production was greatly reduced and famine struck in the Ukraine, the Northern Caucasus, the Volga and other regions in 1932-33.

### **12 Collective farm (in Russian kolkhoz)**

In the Soviet Union the policy of gradual and voluntary collectivization of agriculture was adopted in 1927 to encourage food production while freeing labor and capital for industrial development. In 1929, with only 4% of farms in kolkhozes, Stalin ordered the confiscation of peasants' land, tools, and animals; the kolkhoz replaced the family farm.

### **13 Pushkin, Alexandr (1799-1837)**

Russian poet and prose writer, among the foremost figures in Russian literature. Pushkin established the modern poetic language of Russia, using Russian history for the basis of many of his works. His masterpiece is Eugene Onegin, a novel in verse about mutually rejected love. The work also contains witty and perceptive descriptions of Russian society of the period. Pushkin died in a duel.

### **14 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.

### **15 Ordzhonikidze, Grigoriy Konstantinovich (1886-1937)**

Ordzhonikidze was appointed to the Politburo in 1926, but by 1936 Stalin began to question his loyalty; specifically when he discovered that Ordzhonikidze was using his influence to protect certain figures that were under investigation by the NKVD. Meanwhile, rumors had been spreading

that Ordzhonikidze planned to denounce Stalin in his speech at the April 1937 Plenum. Ordzhonikidze was found dead before he could make his speech; his death was ruled a suicide. According to Khrushchev's memoirs, Ordzhonikidze revealed to Anastas Ivanovich Mikoyan (a fellow Caucasian Party member) the night before his suicide, that he could no longer deal with what was going on in the Party, namely the arbitrary murders of Party members.

## **16 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.

## **17 Card system**

The food card system regulating the distribution of food and industrial products was introduced in the USSR in 1929 due to extreme deficit of consumer goods and food. The system was cancelled in 1931. In 1941, food cards were reintroduced to keep records, distribute and regulate food supplies to the population. The card system covered main food products such as bread, meat, oil, sugar, salt, cereals, etc. The rations varied depending on which social group one belonged to, and what kind of work one did. Workers in the heavy industry and defense enterprises received a daily ration of 800 g (miners - 1 kg) of bread per person; workers in other industries 600 g. Non-manual workers received 400 or 500 g based on the significance of their enterprise, and children 400 g. However, the card system only covered industrial workers and residents of towns while villagers never had any provisions of this kind. The card system was cancelled in 1947.

**18 War with Japan:** In 1945 the war in Europe was over, but in the Far East Japan was still fighting against the anti-fascist coalition countries and China. The USSR declared war on Japan on 8 August 1945 and Japan signed the act of capitulation in September 1945.

## **19 Enemy of the people**

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

## **20 Sovkhoz**

State-run agricultural enterprise. The first sovkhoz yards were created in the USSR in 1918. According to the law the sovkhoz property was owned by the state, but it was assigned to the sovkhoz which handled it based on the right of business maintenance.

## **21 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.

## **22 Closed factories**

Secret ammunition establishments, factories, which worked for the army and for the defense of the country. These could be weaving-mills, which produced camouflage clothes, design offices, which designed ammunition equipment and so on.

## **23 Common name**

Russified or Russian first names used by Jews in everyday life and adopted in official documents. The Russification of first names was one of the manifestations of the assimilation of Russian Jews at the turn of the 19th and 20th century. In some cases only the spelling and pronunciation of Jewish names was russified (e.g. Isaac instead of Yitskhak; Boris instead of Borukh), while in other cases traditional Jewish names were replaced by similarly sounding Russian names (e.g. Eugenia instead of Ghita; Yuri instead of Yuda). When state anti-Semitism intensified in the USSR at the end of the 1940s, most Jewish parents stopped giving their children traditional Jewish names to avoid discrimination.

## **24 Struggle against religion**

The 1930s was a time of anti-religion struggle in the USSR. In those years it was not safe to go to synagogue or to church. Places of worship, statues of saints, etc. were removed; rabbis, Orthodox and Roman Catholic priests disappeared behind KGB walls.

## **25 Six-Day-War**

(Hebrew: Milhemet Sheshet Hayamim), also known as the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, Six Days War, or June War, was fought between Israel and its Arab neighbors Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. It began when Israel launched a preemptive war on its Arab neighbors; by its end Israel controlled the Gaza Strip, the Sinai Peninsula, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights. The results of the war affect the geopolitics of the region to this day.

## **26 Keep in touch with relatives abroad**

The authorities could arrest an individual corresponding with his/her relatives abroad and charge him/her with espionage, send them to concentration camp or even sentence them to death.

## **27 1956**

It designates the Revolution, which started on 23rd October 1956 against Soviet rule and the communists in Hungary. It was started by student and worker demonstrations in Budapest and began with the destruction of Stalin's gigantic statue. Moderate communist leader Imre Nagy was appointed as prime minister and he promised reform and democratization. The Soviet Union

withdrew its troops which had been stationed in Hungary since the end of World War II, but they returned after Nagy's declaration that Hungary would pull out of the Warsaw Pact to pursue a policy of neutrality. The Soviet army put an end to the uprising on 4th November, and mass repression and arrests began. About 200,000 Hungarians fled from the country. Nagy and a number of his supporters were executed. Until 1989 and the fall of the communist regime, the Revolution of 1956 was officially considered a counter-revolution.

## **28 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.

## **29 Voice of America**

International broadcasting service funded by the U.S. government through the Broadcasting Board of Governors. Voice of America has been broadcasting since 1942, initially to Europe in various European languages from the US on short wave. During the cold war it grew increasingly popular in Soviet-controlled Eastern Europe as an information source.

## **30 Hesed**

Meaning care and mercy in Hebrew, Hesed stands for the charity organization founded by Amos Avgar in the early 20th century. Supported by Claims Conference and Joint Hesed helps for Jews in need to have a decent life despite hard economic conditions and encourages development of their self-identity. Hesed provides a number of services aimed at supporting the needs of all, and particularly elderly members of the society. The major social services include: work in the center facilities (information, advertisement of the center activities, foreign ties and free lease of medical equipment); services at homes (care and help at home, food products delivery, delivery of hot meals, minor repairs); work in the community (clubs, meals together, day-time polyclinic, medical and legal consultations); service for volunteers (training programs). The Hesed centers have inspired a real revolution in the Jewish life in the FSU countries. People have seen and sensed the rebirth of the Jewish traditions of humanism. Currently over eighty Hesed centers exist in the FSU countries. Their activities cover the Jewish population of over eight hundred settlements.