

Dora Puchalskaya's Mother Vera Gitman



This is my mother Vera Gitman, photographed in Vladimir-Volynskiy in 1951. She gave this photo to my brother Moro on the day of his departure to study in Kiev where his father lived.

On 22 June 1941, when the Great Patriotic War began, our father was not at home, he went on a business trip. A day later fascists came to our yard. In early 1942 the remaining Jews - women, children and old people - were taken to the ghetto in the former storage facilities at the market in the center of the town. The area was bared, but the gate was kept open for some time. I have dim memories about our life in the ghetto. Our mother had a yellow star on her clothes. I remember the never-ending feeling of hunger and fear. Our mother went to work. She washed dishes in a diner for officers. Once a man wearing a policeman uniform approached us. He knew our mother. She was much loved and respected in the town. He told my mother that when they closed the gate of

the ghetto, our mother and we would perish. Our mother said 'Get me a Ukrainian passport and help us to get out of here, if you can'. A day later this policeman took us out on a horse-ridden cart. All I remember is that his name was Sergei. It's hard to imagine how hard it must have been for him to get forged documents for us. He gave our mother a passport for Vera Grigorievna. Sergei took us to a remote Ukrainian village and disappeared for good. He was afraid that someone might report on him. At that time someone helping Jews was subject to death penalty while he rescued few Jewish families.

This was a beginning of our adventures. I don't remember in what farms or villages we stayed. Our mother took to any work she could lay her hands on: she learned to mow, thresh, weed the fields, milk cows and look after cattle when she had never done any farm work before. We pretended to be Ukrainians when we stayed with Ukrainian families and Polish staying with Polish families. We never stayed long in one village. Our wandering lasted for about three years. Every now and then our rescuer Sergei visited us. I don't know how he found us in various villages. Probably local villagers mentioned to him when they saw us. He brought us gifts and had long discussions with our mother. I don't know what was between them or whether there was something else besides friendship and support. In spring 1944 I understood that mother was pregnant. It's hard for me to talk about it. My mother never revealed this secret. I didn't ask her and she didn't tell me anything even when she was dying. I don't know who was the father of her child. Mother took her secret with her. I don't know whether there were feelings between her and our rescuer or whether it was submission to crude forces hoping to rescue us on her part.

Vladimir-Volynskiy was liberated on 22 July 1944. We returned home in early August. There were other tenants in our house and we found an abandoned apartment. We stayed to live there since its owners never came back. During the war 22,000 Jews from Vladimir-Volynskiy and surrounding areas were exterminated. There were only five Jewish families living in the town after the war, including us. We survived by miracle. In September 1944 our mother went to work as a primary school teacher and my brother and I went to the first form at school. He was seven and I was ten years old. I had to do many chores besides studying. In December 1944 our mother gave birth to a boy. She named him Grigori after our grandfather. She went back to work and I looked after the baby washing and feeding him. I loved him dearly.

In July 1945 our father returned home. He and mother talked through the night. In the morning father had reddish eyes from sleepless night. He kissed us 'good-bye' and left. Our mother cried a lot. She told us that our father had another family. He was in Zhmerinka when the war began. He went to look for us, but then there were Germans everywhere. Our father knew that Vladimir-Volynskiy was occupied and believed that were already dead. He met a Jewish woman, she gave birth to a girl in 1942. He was suffering and he found consolation and sympathy with her. After father was recruited to the army, he decided that he and mother had to forget what had happened to them and live together again, but our mother was a proud woman. She never forgave our father. My mother never remarried. I think she always loved my father and hoped that they would be together one day, but my father never asked her again.

Our life was very hard after the war. There was famine in 1946-47. Our mother's salary was hardly enough for us to live half a month. Our mother bought flour and made pies and buns. She sent me to sell them at the market. She was probably concerned that she would be recognized and arrested for her activities since private entrepreneurship was forbidden. She traveled to Moscow to see her

distant relatives several times. She bought women's underwear, stockings and fabric and I went to sell them in our town. We also grew potatoes and other vegetables in our small kitchen garden. Basically, we were trying hard to survive.