

# Bertha Isayeva

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Odessa

Ukraine

Interviewer: Alla Zhavoronkina

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*Bertha Isayeva is a young looking lady of average height. She has preserved her slim figure. One can tell that she takes good care of herself and doesn't give in. Bertha Isayeva is a lady with a big sense of dignity. She has a vivid mind and likes to discuss various subjects. She has her own point of view on any issue. She lives with her son Edik in a comfortable three-bedroom apartment in a new district of Odessa. Her son made a lot of things in their apartment. He also had their furniture manufactured by his designs to create comfort for his mother. Painting is one of her son's talents and hobbies. There are his works on the walls in their apartment.*



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### **My family background**

My mother's father Zalman Blehman was born in Sloboda village, Lepel district, Vitebsk province. He is registered as a farmer in my mother's birth certificate. I don't know when my grandfather moved to Odessa, but his children were born in Odessa after 1895. My grandfather was very ill. He was bedridden 14 last years of his life. I was about four years old when we came to see grandmother Dora and grandfather Zalman in 1926. My grandfather was in his bed. I remember that he had a big beard. I was afraid of my grandfather and was peeping through a chink. One had to cross my grandfather's room to get into other rooms, but I never went there and cannot say how many rooms they had. There were many children in my mother's family. It was a custom with Jewish families to have many children. They weren't a wealthy family. They lived in Lidersovskiy Boulevard, present Belinskogo Street. My grandfather kept few cows in an annex facility. I think they fed cows with hay. My grandparents sold milk to buy everything the family needed. I heard that my grandfather Zalman had a brother, who also kept cows. He lived in the very center of the town in Malaya Arnautskaya Street between Pushkinskaya and Richelieu Streets. This is all I know

about him I think that before my grandfather fell ill he looked after cows himself and my grandmother was helping him. They spoke Yiddish to one another. My grandfather died in 1927. He was buried in the Second Jewish cemetery in Vodoprovodnaya Street. This cemetery was removed in the 1960s. I don't know whether my grandfather Zalman was buried in accordance with Jewish traditions.

My mother's name was Dvoira, but we called her Dora. After my grandfather died my grandmother continued her cow keeping business. She didn't have any help and did all work by herself. My grandmother died in 1931. She was only 54 years old, still young, and I think, she worked herself out and down. I only have dim memories about my grandmother. My grandmother was buried near my grandfather in Vodoprovodnaya Street. I believe they were religious since my mother went to the synagogue later. My grandmother and grandfather had eight children.

One of my mother's brothers Bencion perished in 1921. There was famine [1](#) in the town then. People went to villages to exchange clothes for grain. Bencion and his friend went to a village and some bandits beat them to death throwing stones on them. Monia, the second brother, suffered from a heart disease. He died in the late 1920s. I remember a young man living in the house when we visited my grandmother. This was Monia.

I cannot remember my mother's third brother's name, but I just have to tell his story. He, his wife Dusia and their children Pavlik and Grisha live in Kiev before the Great Patriotic War [2](#). When the war began they left Kiev by foot. German troops were advancing fast. My mother's brother's family stayed in a kolkhoz near Mozdok in the Northern Caucasus. Chairman of the kolkhoz wrote in my brother's documents that he was Russian (he was fair-haired) and his beautiful wife Dusia Armenian. When German troops came and lined up all Jews, chairman of the kolkhoz dragged them out of the line and explained 'They are not Jews. She is Armenian and he is Russian!' The German officer believed him. Their rescuer was surely a Righteous man of the world [3](#). However, I think that when Soviet troops came back they shot this man because he was chairman of the kolkhoz during German occupation. My mother's brother worked as a stableman in the kolkhoz and Dusia was afraid of leaving their house. She stayed inside for nine months. She was in a state of shock after all of her relatives were shot. After they were liberated they had some problems with NKVD [4](#): 'How did you, Jews, manage to survive, when the rest of Jews were shot? It means you cooperated with fascists'. After the war they lived in Central Asia. This is all I know about this brother and his family.

My mother's older sister Tsylia was born in Odessa in 1895. My grandmother managed to give her a dowry, but other sisters got no dowry whatsoever. Aunt Tsylia was a housewife before the Great Patriotic War. Before the war all women in our family were housewives that was ordinary for the wives having decent husbands. Their husbands provided for them. Tsylia's husband Boris Gurovich was a logistics supervisor in various organizations. Their family was always wealthy. They had two daughters: Olga and Rita. Rita finished 10 grades before the war. Olga, an older daughter, was a doctor. She went to the army and served in a front line hospital during the war. During the war aunt Tsylia, Boris and Rita were in evacuation in Tokmak [Kirghizia]. After the war aunt Tsylia and her family returned to Odessa. Olga worked as a roentgenologist after the war. She married her former co-student who worked as a throat doctor. Her daughter Lina died in a car accident in 1980. Her daughter Yulia became an orphan at the age of one month. Olga grieved hard after her daughter. She became very ill. Her husband looked after their granddaughter. Olga died in 1998.

Her husband died in the end of 2000. Yulia studies in Medical Academy. Rita got married after the war and adopted her husband's surname of Gorenshtein. She worked as a secretary. She has two sons. Her older son Mark was a talented boy. In the 1950s he studied playing the piano in the school named after Stolyarskiy [Stolyarskiy, Pyotr: violin teacher in Odessa and one of the founders of the Soviet Violin School]. he had an incident in the ninth grade. I don't know whether it was anti-Semitism toward him. He had excellent marks in all special subjects, but he failed at his exam in the Ukrainian language and was to have another try in autumn. During his summer vacations Mark went on tour across the USSR with an orchestra of the town palace of students after obtaining permission of director of his school. He was late for his exam in autumn due to this tour and when he came to school he found out that he was expelled. Rita could not allow to let it happen. She went to Kiev and Moscow. A commission of higher authorities came to his school, but Mark was resumed. There were rumors that some 'big shot' wanted a place for his offspring in this school. Mark entered a music school in Kishinev. Later he finished Moscow Conservatory. He won competition for a job in the orchestra of Svetlanov [Svetlanov, Yevgeniy Fyodorovich (1928 - 2003), Soviet conductor and composer. In 1965 he became art director and chief conductor of the State Symphonic Orchestra of the USSR]. Mark was a concertmaster of the orchestra. Then he finished the Faculty of Conducting in the conservatory. Mark Gorenshtein is chief conductor of this orchestra now. Rita's younger son Alexandr is an artist. He studied in Leningrad and now he lives in Moscow. Rita lives in Moscow raising her grandchildren. Aunt Tsylya died approximately in 1983. Boris died some time later, but I don't remember the date.

My mother's sister Rosa married Solomon Vainshtein. They didn't have any children. Solomon was a woodworker and a nice specialist. During the Great Patriotic War Rosa was in evacuation with us and Solomon was recruited to the army. Since he was over 50 years of age they demobilized him some time later. He joined his wife in Tokmak. After the war they returned to Odessa. Uncle Solomon died in the late 1970s. Rosa died in 1988.

My mother next sister's name was Basia, but everybody called her Buzia. Buzia and her family lived in Odessa. Her husband Moisey Fafel was an accountant. Their only son Ilia was born in 1930. During the Great Patriotic War they evacuated to Tumen in Siberia. They went to work there. Even Ilia worked at a military plant, though he was only 11-12 years old. He is a veteran of the war and has an appropriate certificate. They returned to Odessa after the war. Ilia finished Odessa Polytechnic College. He became an engineer. Aunt Buzia died shortly after my mother in 1973. Ilia is my only remaining relative in Odessa.

My mother's next sister Clara married Ghideon Vitorgan, my father sister Manya's son. So it happened that Ghideon was my uncle and cousin brother at the same time. He finished Odessa Flour Grinding College and was chief engineer of a flour grinding trust in Astrakhan. Aunt Clara was a housewife. They stayed in Astrakhan during the war. After the war Clara worked as a seamstress in a garment shop for some time. Their older son Vladimir is an engineer. Their younger son Emmanuil Vitorgan is a renowned actor. He works in a theater in Moscow. Ghideon and Clara died in Astrakhan in the 1990s.

There is an interesting story about my mother younger sister Fania's birth. Nobody remembered her exact date of birth. They only remembered that it happened on Christian Easter. Since it is celebrated on different dates each year we had to follow this holiday each year to greet her. I believe she was Feiga by her passport, but we called her Fania. Her husband Izia Balan was a shoe

fitter. Izia earned well and aunt Fania never had to work. Aunt Fania was always concerned about her diseases. On 9 June 1941 her son Lyonia was born. He was under one month old when the war began. They evacuated to Mariupol by boat. We met there. Lyonia was all sun burnt. They were in evacuation in Tumen. After the war they returned to Odessa. Lyonia finished Odessa Navy School and sailed as radio operator. Then he got married and went to work at a plant. Now Lyonia and his family live in Germany. [Bertha refused to tell us names of the towns where her relatives live abroad. For some reason she thinks that it is not safe to disclose this information]. Fania's daughter Henrietta finished the Piano faculty in Odessa Conservatory. She didn't go to work being very ill. She died in 1993. Fania died in 1992.

My mother Anna Erlihman, nee Blehman, was born in Odessa on 9 January 1898. I don't know how she was growing up or whether she got any education. I don't know anything about her childhood or youth. I don't know how or where she met my father. My mother didn't have any dowry: she came from a poor family.

I didn't know my paternal grandfather Yoina Erlihman. He died in 1902. In my father's birth certificate my grandfather was called a townsman from Bendery. I read in my father's autobiography that my grandfather was a loader. However, I doubt it since two older sons of my grandfather Yoina studied in Germany. Therefore, my grandfather was a wealthy man. From what my father said my grandmother Doba owned a grocery store before the October revolution [5](#). I remember my grandmother a little. She rarely visited us. She was a gray-haired and an imposing lady with her hair popped up. She wore a thin glaze cotton dress. It was an electric blue dress with slight white stripes. Wearing this dress and a hat, with her hair gray, she looked as proud as a queen. She never played with us, kids. She lived in an old house in Odessa in 114, Bazarnaya Street. There was a terrible staircase to her apartment on the second floor. I remember a common kitchen, therefore, it must have been a communal apartment [6](#). I don't remember her furnishings: just a table, a chair, a bed and a cupboard. I only remember that it was a light room. I don't remember what my grandmother cooked: I really didn't see her often. She died in 1938, when I was 16, a big girl. She was buried in the Jewish cemetery, but I don't think there was a religious funeral. I think my grandmother and grandfather spoke Yiddish since my father knew Yiddish. My grandparents had eight children.

My father's older sister Tsyba moved to America before the revolution. I don't know the exact date. The family kept it a secret and nobody was supposed to know about it. It goes without saying that we had no contacts with her. My grandparents managed to send their older sons Naum and Solomon to study in Germany, before grandfather died. They received medical education there and returned to Russia with diplomas of doctors.

Naum worked as a surgeon in Kronshtadt for a long time. Before the great patriotic war he moved to Odessa and worked as chief doctor of the town polyclinic. During the Great Patriotic War he was mobilized to the army. He was a military doctor of the 1st range, a surgeon. Naum perished during an air raid when he was in his surgery in Sevastopol. A bomb hit the surgery. They recognized him by his wristwatch. Uncle Naum had a son named Boris and two daughters: Lusia and Tatiana. Boris was chief engineer at a big plant in Volzhskoye. Lusia finished a college before the war. She worked as a chemical engineer. Tatiana was a medical nurse. She lived in Odessa and died in 2001.

Uncle Solomon was a therapist. Before the war he worked in Odessa town hospital. During the war he was in the hospital with Naum and also perished in Sevastopol. Uncle Solomon wife's name was Betia. Solomon and Betia had two children. Their younger daughter Lena died in evacuation. I don't know exactly where it happened. After the war Betia and her older daughter Klava returned to

Odessa. After the war Klava finished Odessa Medical College and worked as a doctor in a recreation center. We still don't know where Solomon and Naum were buried. I went to Sevastopol with my children, but we couldn't find any traces. Aunt Betia died in the 1970s. Klava lives with her son in America.

My father's third brother Rafail was born in 1894. He was called Fulia at home. Before the great Patriotic war he worked as chief engineer at the Marti shipyard. He was married and had three children: Volodia, Nelia and Lena. Uncle Rafail wife's name was Fradia. They lived in an apartment on the 2nd floor in a new house in Preobrazhenskaya Street. During the great Patriotic war Rafail was summoned to the front. Fradia and her daughters were in evacuation in the Ural. Her younger daughter Lena died in the evacuation. After the war Rafail didn't return to Odessa. He remarried. After the war he worked at a plant and lived in Sterlitamak. Some time later he moved to Voronezh where he died tragically. A motorcyclist hit him to death in the middle 1970s. His son Volodia was a Navy officer in Kronshtadt before the war. He was at the front. In the late 1940s he perished in Sevastopol under unidentified circumstances. He was probably washed off his deck during a storm. Aunt Fradia died approximately in 1950. Rafail's daughter Nelia graduated from the Odessa University and worked in a library. In 2002 she, her husband and their son moved to Germany.

The fourth one was uncle Nulia – Nathan. I believe he lived in the same house with my grandmother. Uncle Nulia worked at the plant named after Stalin where my father worked. He was logistics manager. His wife was a housewife. Her name was Lisa. They had children: Rita, Yulia and David. They evacuated to Saratov with the plant. After the war they stayed to live in Saratov. This is all information I have about them.

My mother's next sister Manya was our neighbor in Odessa. Aunt Manya was married to Abram Vitorgan. Abram Vitorgan worked as a turner at the dairy in Troitskaya Street. They had six children. Their older daughter Sopha was married to Yevsey Kanevskiy, a Jewish man, colonel. He was a very nice and kind man. I remember that he always brought me books from his trips. They were colorful and nice. Yevsey had a good education. I think he knew 7 languages. He even served as an interpreter at the meeting between Voroshilov [7](#) and a Turkish military leader. They were in Minsk when the Great Patriotic war began. Yevsey perished in Belostok on the first days of the war. Sopha and her three children were evacuated from Minsk that was already on fire. She escaped as she was. They reached Buzuluk town near Orenburg. Then Sopha and her children moved to Frunze [Kirghizia]. She worked as a typist in an organization. Sopha was a nice person. She lived in a small room with her children Lilia, Tolia and Victor, but she managed to accommodate me and my co-student when we came to study there. After the war Sopha and her children returned to Odessa. Since she was an officer's widow she received an apartment in Zhukovskogo Street. Her older daughter Lilia graduated from Odessa University. Tolia finished Odessa Refrigeration College and moved to America in the 1970s. He has his own business there. Vitia, the youngest son, and his sister Lilia are in Israel now.

Manya's next daughter Tatiana lives in Vladimir, one of the sons, died in infancy. Then there were twin-boys Ghideon and Boris. Ghideon married Clara, my mother's sister. Boris finished Flour Grinding College in 1938 and received an engineer diploma. He moved to Leningrad. He worked as a turner at a plant. During the war he was recruited to the army and took part in the defense of Leningrad. After the war he worked as a turner in a scientific research institute. He was very handy and could fix the most complicated devices. Boris was married. He died in 2002. Aunt Manya died



in the 1960s. Abram died in the 1980s at the age of 98. Manya's younger daughter Beba was my age. She finished one year in a construction college before the war. Then there was a war and front line. After the war Beba entered a flour grinding college where she met her husband-to-be Misha. After finishing the college they both received job assignments to work as engineers in Moldavia. After working in Moldavia for some time they moved to Stanislav town, present Ivano-Frankovsk. This was a nice town and they stayed there for a long time. Beba and Misha worked in a design institute. In 1980s Beba, her husband and son moved to San Francisco to Beba's sister Tatiana.

My father had another sister. Her name was Brana and she died young. I was named after her. I don't know anything about her.

My father David Erlihman was the fifth child in the family. He was born in Odessa on 18 June 1891. He was named Duvid at birth. I think he had a primary education. Since he didn't have a secondary education he couldn't enter a higher educational institution. My father was a worker. At the age of 14 he was already an apprentice at the plant. Later he became a turner (in due time he was awarded the highest grade). He served in the czarist army from 1913 till 1917. He was released due to an illness or injury. I don't remember. After October revolution he worked at a plant. He finished a rabfak [8](#). He was promoted to foreman, and then shop superintendent at the mechanic assembly shop at the plant named after Stalin in Odessa. In 1937 my father joined the party.

I don't know how my parents met. Somehow, it never interested me! I even don't know whether they had a wedding party: we never talked about it.

## **Growing up**

I was born at home in 1922. My mother made an arrangement with a midwife, and by the way, she was a sister of Marshak [Samuel Marshak, a Soviet poet and translator], she was a good midwife. She lived in Moldavanka [poor Jewish neighborhood on the outskirts of Odessa]. We lived in Richelieu Street. When my mother started labor my father went to call the midwife. It was February and it was freezing and windy. They said in our family that my father carried the midwife all the way to our home.

My brother Zachariy was born in a maternity hospital on 22 July 1930. I remember this day well. My father sister Manya's family live on the second floor of our house. I was staying with them when my mother was in the maternity hospital. There was a steel ladder to the second floor. I remember my father screaming 'It's a son! A son!' when he opened the front door. He had a daughter and now there was a son – it was such joy! My mother was a housewife. I was eight years older than my brother. I helped my mother about the house. I also went to school, and I went to a gym and for walks. I remember once staying with my brother. We had a withe chaise longue. I put it in the sun on the balcony. My brother was lying in the chaise longue wrapped in cloth and I was embroidering. Suddenly somebody called me. I put down my embroidery and ran out when he began crying. I grabbed him and began to dandle him. Then I laid him on a needle unintentionally. How he was screaming, poor thing! Thank God, everything ended well. This was a kind of nanny I made.

We lived in a miserable apartment in the basement, three stairs down: it was a former furniture store storeroom. There were two rooms. There was a pump in the yard and there was also a toilet. There was no kitchen. We had two entrance doors there was space between them. There was a stool and a grets stove on it in this spot between the doors. Grets stove was a kerosene stove, only it made less noise. It produced a lot of smoke, though, so it needed to be watched. My mother always had a headache because of it. There was also a heating stove in one room. We used it for heating and cooking in winter. We stoked it with coal and wood. Since it was dark at all times we had electricity on in the morning during a day and in the evening. My brother and I had iron beds, and my parents slept on a nice sofa. There was also a table with carved legs, few chairs around it and a very beautiful cupboard.

I went to school at 8. Some parents sent their children to a Jewish school and some wanted to be no different from others and wanted their children to go to a Russian school. My cousin sister Beba and I went to a Russian school. There was an introduction interview at school where they asked various questions including what language our parents spoke at home. My parents told me to say that they only spoke Russian at home. I was admitted to this Russian school. This school #117 is still there in Zhukovskogo-Richelieu Streets. Beba got confused and said her parents spoke Jewish at home. She was sent to a Jewish school. My parents didn't speak Yiddish. Only rarely they spoke a word in Yiddish if they wanted to keep me unaware of their subject of discussion. I didn't know Yiddish. I cannot say that we observed Jewish traditions at home. My parents went to the synagogue on holidays, but they could not pray. They prepared to such holidays. My mother did washing, ironing and cleaning. When I came home it smelled of clean bed sheets. I liked it. We, children, always knew there was a holiday. We didn't follow kashrut and only after the war I got to know there was kosher food. However, we identified ourselves as Jews.

I loved Pesach since this meant spring. My mother cooked something delicious. She made pastries and gefilte fish. My mother didn't make matzah. I don't remember having any matzah before the war. My mother made pancakes to replace matzah. My parents dressed up before going to the synagogue in Pushkinskaya Street. It was small and it didn't accommodate all willing to come inside. Once my parents took me with them. There were many joyful and nicely dressed people. There were so many of them that they even blocked the traffic. After the war the synagogue moved from Pushkinskaya to Peresyp. We didn't celebrate Sabbath. (Sabbath was a working day before the war. I don't remember whether my mother took her chickens to a shochet, but I remember that there was a shochet. Almost all of our neighbors were Jews and there were few Russian families. We lived like one family. We knew all relatives and got along with our neighbors. There was no anti-Semitism before the war.

1932-33 was a hard period of famine. There were Torgsin [9](#) stores where people could exchange gold or other valuables for food. People were willing to give away their valuables for bread. My classmates' parents sold everything of value they had to get food. The only valuable we had was my mother's wedding ring that she exchanged for food products. She brought home bread and some flat cookies. I remember my mother giving me and my brother Zachariy oval sugarplum candy with one pink and another yellow sides. My mother divide one candy in halves: one for me and another for my brother. I was 10 and my brother was 2 years old. We threw lots for which color we would get: it was important for us at that time. Everything was sold on coupons then. My father worked, but he didn't earn enough. My mother always borrowed 150-200 rubles from my aunts, her

sisters. She paid her debts on my father's payday when he brought his salary home. My aunts were better off. Aunt Rosa didn't have children and her husband had a good job.

In 1937 [Great Terror] [10](#) my father's cousin brother Leonid Ledovskiy was arrested. His real surname was Krikshtein and Ledovskiy was his Party nickname. He and his wife were underground Bolsheviks. Her Party nickname was Krasnen'kova. They had two children. their son was born shortly after Dzerzhinskiy [11](#) died and was named Felix after him. They named their daughter Ivstalinka after Stalin and his initials I.V. In 1937 Leonid was arrested at night. We were horrified that he turned out to be an enemy of the people being an old underground Bolshevik. Could we talk or think about things? Well, we thought about those happenings, but we didn't talk. Nobody heard from him for a long time. Later militia called his wife. They offered her to repudiate him as an enemy of the people. They threatened to arrest her and send to GULAG [12](#) and send their children to a children's home for children of enemies of the people. It was a tragedy for her to refuse from her husband, but to save her children she had to repudiate from her husband. Leonid was in exile at the construction of Belomor-Baltic channel [Editor's note: Bertha must be wrong here since the Belomor-Baltic channel connecting the White Sea with the Onezhskoye Lake was inaugurated in 1933]. Prisoners worked on this channel manually with spades. He came back home shortly before the war. He had lost his teeth having scurvy. When the war began he went to the front where he perished. At the beginning of the war their son Felix also went to serve in the Navy. Leonid's wife and their daughter evacuated. Ivstalinka died of typhus in evacuation. Leonid's wife returned to Odessa after the war. Felix returned from the war and lived with his mother in a house on the corner of Zhukovskogo and Karl Marx Streets. Felix finished water Engineering College and worked in the navy design institute. During Khrushchev [13](#) rule in the 1950s Leonid's case was reconsidered and he was rehabilitated posthumously. Felix and his mother received a small amount of money as compensation for the loss of their breadwinner: such miserable peanuts. Felix's mother died shortly afterward. Felix got married and I lost contact with them. He probably moved abroad.

I had all excellent marks at school. I liked geometry and algebra and I was fond of literature. We had a nice teacher of the Russian language. She came from an old family of intelligentsia. Unfortunately, I don't remember her name. We listened to her with rapt attention. I liked Pushkin very much. We read a lot. We read newspapers and magazines at home. My friends were my classmates and my neighbor's children. I didn't care what nationality they were. At home we didn't celebrate Soviet holidays, though my father was a communist, but there were mandatory celebrations at school. We were raised patriotic. We celebrated October revolution anniversary [14](#). We went to parades. There was music and dancing in the streets. We were in high spirits and there was a holiday mood everywhere.

I was a pioneer and had all excellent marks and my portrait was on the board of honor in the children's cinema theater named after Frunze [15](#). In 1938, when I was in the 8th grade, few of my classmates and I got recommendations to join Komsomol [16](#). We had to go to an interview in the district Komsomol committee. We were very excited. I can still remember this event: there was a commission in a room. We were asked questions. We had to know the names of all members of the Central Politbureau of the Communist Party. I cannot remember all details, but I remember that it was quite a ceremony. When we became Komsomol members we were to take an active part in public activities. I was a pioneer tutor in the 5th grade. We issued wallpaper and drew patriotic posters. We also arranged concerts and attended a physical culture club.



I spent a lot of time in the yard. It was a fenced yard with a gate. Our janitor closed the gate at midnight, I think. On hot summer days young people slept outside. There was a garden in the middle of the yard. There was a summer tent house, benches and a table in the corner. I used to play there with other girls. We played with dolls when we were small. When we grew up we knitted and made doll clothes and embroidered shirts. I still have some of our crafts. I embroidered a pillowcase in a 'richellite' pattern: it's very fine work. First you embroider a pattern with special stitches and then you cut it out. I still have a peacock that my mother started; she embroidered a contour and I completed the feathers. My friends and I went to the Lunnyi Park in Primorskiy Boulevard: we read, embroidered and crocheted. We sat in a circle embroidering and one girl used to read aloud. We also played 'Baba, baba, give us fire' running from one tree to another standing by a vacant tree. There is a similar game now when there are chairs in a circle, the music plays and participants have to sit down on vacant chairs. Boys played their own games.

In summer my parents sent me to a pioneer camp. My father made all necessary arrangements at his work for us to go to a camp. I went to a different camp every year, but all of them were at the seashore. Every summer I looked forward to going to a camp. There were children from Moscow and Leningrad. One year about thirty children came. We made friends and cried when time to say 'good byes' came. It was a full and interesting life. We had sports holidays. I was a lissome girl and they even called me a 'girl without bones'. I actually folded in two reaching my heel with my head. I also went in for basketball in our palace of pioneers. We trained in rented gyms in town schools. Our coach Lyonia Pilin was an experienced basketball player. He was a member of the town basketball team that won the first places in Ukraine. We, girls, shouted for our town team because our coach played in it. I knew all players. I remember Footerman, a tall Jewish player. He seemed older to us, young girls.

When we grew older we used to go to the seashore, girls and boys, to bathe in the sea and play volleyball. We walked along Pushkinskaya Street and Primorskiy Boulevard. We sat on benches watching the sea. Or we got together at somebody's home to dance. We always enjoyed ourselves and had lots of fun. I remember one of our classmates' birthday when we got together and there were about thirty of us. We had one bottle of wine for all of us and we just had few drops of wine each of us, but we had so much fun.

There was a Jewish theater in Grecheskaya Street Odessa. It's where the Theater for young spectators is located. My parents often went to the theater, particularly they tried to attend first night performances. There were wonderful actors in the theater. I remember my father's cousin brother Iohann Zeltser visiting from Leningrad. He was a journalist and wrote scripts to the following movies: 'Happiness hunters' [(1936), about the establishment of the Birobidzhan [17](#) in the Far East], «Submarine T-9», and others, only I don't remember the names. He had a wife and three children. Regretfully, I don't remember their names. We went to the theater during one of uncle Iohann's visits. I admired this gathering of so many people enjoying themselves and nicely dressed. I can't remember the performance, but I remember this festive atmosphere. During the war uncle Iohann was a military journalist. He perished on the battleship 'Marat'. This battleship was near the shore defending Leningrad. It was partially destroyed during a batter. I had no contacts with his family after the war. I went to the theater for the second time with my mother. I was about 16 and was a big girl, but I didn't understand the language, but watching Bugova's [Lia Bugova: famous Jewish actress in Odessa, after World War II she performed at the Russian theater in Odessa] acting I couldn't help crying. It was the 'Overseas' performance about people leaving

or vice versa, coming back from there, I can't remember exactly. We didn't discuss this performance or the subject of departure at home. No, we didn't. We discussed beautiful acting. At that time I was sure that I was lucky to be born in this country, at that place and at that time. There was a drama club in our school. It was headed by Basmanov, actor of the Jewish Theater. I was in the 10th grade then. We staged some plays, but they weren't in the Jewish language, of course. I remember that he taught us acting and reciting. After I finished school this club was closed.

I finished school with a golden award: there were no medals at that time. I wanted to continue my studies in Leningrad. I was 17. My parents didn't want to let me go to another town considering my age. So I entered the Industrial College in Odessa. I had no problems with admission. I submitted my school certificate and they admitted me. I had a wonderful time being the first-year student. I had ideas and believed in the happy future like all young people at the time. I remember my first day in college. My friends and I came into a huge hall with a balcony and a staircase leading to the classrooms. There were boys on the balcony watching us. I made new friends in college. We used to go home together. I even had an admirer in college. He used to write me messages. He complained that I was always with my friends and he couldn't talk to me alone. His name was Lyonia. He perished during the Great Patriotic War.

## **During the War**

I remember the beginning of the Great Patriotic War. It was Sunday, 22 June 1941. Molotov [18](#) spoke on the black plate-shaped radio. He said that the war began. We didn't believe that there could be a war. It was a shock for us. On 26 June I passed my exam in physics. We didn't consider evacuation at the beginning. We thought the war was to be over within two weeks. We believed that our troops would just defeat Germans and that was it. However, when our government realized the war was going to last longer it took a decision for evacuation. My father's plant evacuated. They disassembled all equipment, loaded it on a train and shipped to Saratov. My father was appointed supervisor of this shipment and went to Saratov. We went by boat. My mother, my brother Zachariy, my mother's sister Rosa and I evacuated on the 'Tashkent' boat on 2 August 1941. The street leading to Tamozhennaya Square in the port was overcrowded. We had to climb a ladder onto the boat. People were jumping onto the lower deck missing the ladder. We were all sent to the hold where adults, old people and children were lying side by side. The boat departed at night fearing air raids. When it got dark an air raid began. It was quiet in the hold at first until somebody started a song: 'The sea stretched out wide and the waves are storming far away. My comrade, we are going far away, far from our land'. It was a popular song. Then people began to cry and scream. Everybody understood we were going to the unknown. The previous boat 'Lenin' bumped into a mine in the sea. It drowned. There were over ten thousand passengers on it. Only 419 survived. They were sent to Mariupol. In Mariupol I met a girl from this boat. She was 20 and she was a brunette, but when I saw her, her hair was white. It was horrible what she went through! People were fighting for their life grabbing others by their feet pulling them down. Many of them drowned.

We were accommodated in a school building in Mariupol. We slept on the floor on our luggage. We were there several days. Aunt Rosa went to Tokmak. My mother, Zachariy and I went to Saratov by a freight train. I don't remember how we managed to get food on the way, but we somehow survived. It was a long trip and we arrived in Saratov in winter. It was December, minus 36 degrees. We joined my father in Saratov. We lived in a room and our landlady lived in another in

her apartment. One railcar with the plant equipment got lost and some officers [from NKVD] came for my father. I don't know by what miracle they didn't shoot him at once, but he was taken to court. We didn't have anything to eat. My mother went to the evacuation agency at the railway station where she could get some bread. My mother fell ill with typhus. My father was in jail and my mother was ill. I don't know how we managed. Besides, we became enemies of the people in our surrounding since my father was in jail. Fortunately, everything turned out well. This ill-fated railcar arrived and my father was released. Life was hard in Saratov and we went to my mother's sisters Rosa and Tsylia in Tokmak [3. 625 km from Odessa in Kirghizia]. My father stayed to work at his plant in Saratov. They manufactured mines.

We were very poor and starved. My brother was just a boy of 11. There was anti-Semitism and it was very hard for him. He was often called: 'zhyd – running on a rope'. I didn't face any anti-Semitism. I was older and others didn't dare to abuse me. I worked at the motor repair plant. I was a turner apprentice. The plant repaired vehicles from the front. When my management heard that I studied in college they transferred me to work in the quality assurance department (OTK). We rented a room in a house on the outskirts of Tokmak. We worked two shifts and in the evening I was afraid of going home in the dark. I took off my shoes and walked barefooted. My mother was a night watch in a watermelon plantation. In 1943 I went to study in Kharkov College of Housing Construction evacuated to Frunze. My mother and brother stayed in Tokmak.

After Ukraine was liberated teachers and students willing to go back to Ukraine were allowed to go home. My college returned to Kharkov in March 1944. I came back with my college. Kharkov was burnt to ashes. The power in the town switched from Germans to our troops and then back again four times. We were accommodated in a hostel with no glass in the windows. We woke up covered with snow in the morning. It was terrible, but I still felt happy to be near Odessa. I remember this unspeakable joy when we heard that Odessa was liberated in April 1944. It's hard to find words to describe what happened to us: we hugged, kissed and cried. Our dear Odessa was liberated! It was required to have a permit to go to Odessa. How was I to go back to Odessa? I went to the dean's office before the academic year began and obtained a certificate for going home to Odessa to pick up warm clothes for winter. At that time my mother moved to my father in Saratov and there were no other relatives staying in Odessa. I was the first one to come to Odessa.

There were tenants in all apartments in our house. Jews were away: some didn't return from the ghetto. There were only Russian neighbors living in their apartments. A postman and his invalid mother lived in our apartment. I asked our Russian neighbor Valia to let me stay overnight in her apartment. Valia was one year younger than I. When the war began she placed a big cross on her door for Germans to know that there were Russians living in this apartment. Few days later I went to my college and they gave a bed in the hostel. When my parents and my brother returned, I lived in the hostel and they stayed with our relatives or acquaintances. Actually, it seemed nobody expected to have us back in our town. Our belongings were stolen after we evacuated. Only in 1948 we managed to get our apartment back through a court.

I remember Victory day very well. I was sleeping under the piano in my aunt Rosa's apartment on 9 May. There were those black plate-shaped radios in apartments and they were always on. At night the radio announced capitulation of Germany. We went mad of joy listening to each word of it. Then people began shooting. We didn't go to sleep for the rest of the night and at dawn we ran to the town council. There were crowds of people there. They were crying and laughing and there was

music playing.

## After the War

I met my husband Georgiy Isayev in college. I studied at the Electric Engineering Faculty and he studied at another Faculty. He was born in Tbilisi in 1923. He was Russian. I didn't care about his nationality. This is the way we were raised. After finishing college in 1950 I followed my husband to Kaluga where he had his job assignment [19](#). I went to work in a design institute. We designed hospitals, houses and telephone stations. I received 150 rubles per month. I sent my mother 80 rubles each month. My mother had to go to work after the war. She picked any work she could lay her hands on. After the war my brother Zachariy studied in a food school and continued his studies in Odessa College of Food Industry.

Fortunately, the period of 'doctors' plot' [20](#) in 1952 didn't affect my family, though my cousin Olga Gurovich and her husband were doctors. One distant relative worked as a doctor in the Jewish hospital. I remember Stalin's death in 1953. I lived in Kaluga at that time. I remember that many people were crying and fainting. He was the father of all peoples. The only thing I knew was that there would be a replacement for him. I didn't feel distressed. The regime remained the same and it was all right with me. I don't think there were any changes.

In 1951 my father was very ill. In early 1952 I came to Odessa to have my baby there. My father died few months before his grandson was born. My father was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Slobodka [neighborhood on the outskirts of Odessa ], and I don't think there were any traditions observed. Shortly after he died my son Eduard was born. I was to go back to work and my mother went to Kaluga with me. Then my mother left home and I hired a baby sitter to look after my son while I went to work. Some time later I divorced my husband and returned to Odessa in 1955. My husband and I never resumed our relationships afterward. Eduard was two years and a half. My mother helped me to raise Eduard.

In Odessa I went to work at the Giprocommunstroy design institute. I worked there 35 years before I retired. When I returned from Kaluga I began to reconstruct our apartment. I had an annex constructed where we had a balcony. We put a stove in it and made there a kitchen. I had water, gas and sewerage facilities installed. I had to borrow money from my relatives and then it took me some time to pay back my debts. Our apartment became more comfortable. About this time I bought a 'Record' TV set. It was a big TV with a small screen. My relatives and neighbors came to watch TV with us.

My mother was a very nice and kind person. After my father died she dedicated her life to me and Eduard. I spent my vacations with colleagues. We traveled and went hiking. We bought tours through trade union committee at work and paid 30% of their cost. I traveled to various locations across the USSR. Eduard was with my mother at home when I traveled. My mother died in 1971. We buried her near my father in the Jewish cemetery in Slobodka.

My brother Zachariy finished Odessa College of Tinned Food Industry in the middle 1950s. After finishing college he went to work at Giprocommunstroy where I was working at the time. My brother and I got along well and always supported each other. Zachariy married Lisa, a Jewish girl. In 1968 his daughter Larisa was born. In the late 1990s they moved to Australia. We keep in touch calling each other on the phone.

I started my career at the institute as an engineer. Then I became senior engineer and then team leader. I never faced any anti-Semitism at work. Over 50% of employees were Jews. Our director Konstantin was summoned to the regional party committee many times. They reprimanded him for the wrong national policy. They believed there were too many Jewish employees working in the institute. I think he had three reprimands, but he didn't react to them. When Konstantin retired they began to replace Jewish chiefs of departments.

In 1968 our institute constructed a house and I received a two-bedroom apartment in Filatov Street. I bought new furniture and other necessities on installments. I bought a sofa for Eduard, a table, a wardrobe, bed sheets, crockery and a carpet. There was a so-called 'black cash' in our institute. Employees paid monthly ten rubles each and when the total amount reached about one hundred one of us could borrow it for his own needs. Therefore, an engineer, for example, could afford to buy expensive things: furniture or house appliances.

I didn't raise Eduard Jewish. I was also raised Soviet: in the course of time we lost Jewish traditions. Eduard had a Russian father and Russian friends. Besides, there was a 2% quota for Jews in educational institutions. It was hard to demonstrate one's Jewish identity under such circumstances. Eduard is Russian in his documents like his father. In 1959 Eduard went to school #49. After finishing the 8th grade he went to school #116. It was a popular school and admission was based on lower secondary school certificates and interviews. There were special classes with prioritized studies of physics, mathematic and humanitarian subjects. Eduard was planning to go to a technical college and went to a mathematic class. Alevtina Ivanovna Kudinova, director of school #116 was an amazing person. There was nothing she wouldn't do for her school. There were no obstacles for her. She loved her job. She introduced self-government at school: schoolchildren acted as deputy directors and directors. She hired best teachers. There were many talented children at school and there were many Jewish children. In the 1990s Alevtina Ivanovna arranged a meeting of her alumna that lasted few days. Alevtina Ivanovna died few months ago (2003).

Many Jews left the country in the 1970s and in the 1990s, but I never considered it; this was too serious a matter. Society didn't approve this at the time and these issues were discussed at work. Those who wanted to leave were considered to be traitors. Some of my colleagues also left. I've never traveled abroad, but I wrote letters. We met when they visited here. We wrote about routinely matters in our letters. We never discussed political subjects and there were no grounds for official authorities to interfere with our correspondence.

In 1970 Eduard entered the Electric Engineering Faculty in Odessa Polytechnic College. I hired private teachers for him and he had no problems with entrance exams. I wanted to be sure that he would be admitted since I didn't want him to go to the army. Eduard studied well in college. After finishing college he went to work at Giprocommunistroy where my brother and I were working. This was our dynasty in this institute. Eduard got married, but his marriage didn't last. His daughter Zoya lives in America now. Eduard is fond of traveling. He used to guide hiking tours to the Crimea. Now he is a businessman.

When perestroika [21](#) began I retired. Life became more difficult for older people, but in the latest years we learned many new things about our history and life abroad. We lived in the world of limited information before. As for me, I've never spoken my mind in public and I don't feel any need in the freedom of speech really.



I know that there is a Jewish community nowadays, but I do not take any active part in its life. However, I know more about Jewish life in our town. I receive two Jewish newspapers: 'Or Sameach' and 'Shomrey Shabos' and I know that we have a Jewish cultural Center. Recently I went to a concert of the children from the Jewish school 'Or Sameach' [22](#) in the Philharmonic Theater. They are such wonderful children: how they dance and sing! I am very glad that there are Jewish schools and kindergartens where they tell children the history of Jewish people and teach religion. I know that there is a Jewish library at school, but I do not use its services. I receive packages from Gemilut Hesed each month. They are very good packages. It is nice of them to support old people and pay for medications. I am not religious, but I read in Jewish newspapers about what needs to be done on holidays. It is very interesting to know such things. I am a Jew and I must follow our customs and traditions. I sympathize with Israel and I am very concerned that there is shooting and fighting there.

## **Glossary**

### **[1](#) Famine in Ukraine**

In 1920 a deliberate famine was introduced in the Ukraine causing the death of millions of people. It was arranged in order to suppress those protesting peasants who did not want to join the collective farms. There was another dreadful deliberate famine in 1930-1934 in the Ukraine. The authorities took away the last food products from the peasants. People were dying in the streets, whole villages became deserted. The authorities arranged this specifically to suppress the rebellious peasants who did not want to accept Soviet power and join collective farms.

### **[2](#) 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.

### **[3](#) The Righteous Among the Nations**

Non-Jews who rescued Jews during the Holocaust.

### **[4](#) NKVD**

People's Committee of Internal Affairs; it took over from the GPU, the state security agency, in 1934.

### **[5](#) Russian Revolution of 1917**

Revolution in which the tsarist regime was overthrown in the Russian Empire and, under Lenin, was replaced by the Bolshevik rule. The two phases of the Revolution were: February Revolution, which

came about due to food and fuel shortages during WWI, and during which the tsar abdicated and a provisional government took over. The second phase took place in the form of a coup led by Lenin in October/November (October Revolution) and saw the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks.

## **6 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 shared apartments continued to exist for decades. Despite state programs for the construction of more houses and the liquidation of shared apartments, which began in the 1960s, shared apartments still exist today.

## **7 Voroshylov, Kliment Yefremovich (1881-1969)**

Soviet military leader and public official. He was an active revolutionary before the Revolution of 1917 and an outstanding Red Army commander in the Russian Civil War. As commissar for military and naval affairs, later defense, Voroshilov helped reorganize the Red Army. He was a member of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party from 1926 and a member of the Supreme Soviet from 1937. He was dropped from the Central Committee in 1961 but reelected to it in 1966.

## **8 Rabfak**

Educational institutions for young people without secondary education, specifically established by the Soviet power.

## **9 Torgsin stores**

Special retail stores, which were established in larger Russian cities in the 1920s with the purpose of selling goods to foreigners. Torgsins sold commodities that were in short supply for hard currency or exchanged them for gold and jewelry, accepting old coins as well. The real aim of this economic experiment that lasted for two years was to swindle out all gold and valuables from the population for the industrial development of the country.

## **10 Great Terror (1934-1938)**

During the Great Terror, or Great Purges, which included the notorious show trials of Stalin's former Bolshevik opponents in 1936-1938 and reached its peak in 1937 and 1938, millions of innocent Soviet citizens were sent off to labor camps or killed in prison. The major targets of the Great Terror were communists. Over half of the people who were arrested were members of the party at the time of their arrest. The armed forces, the Communist Party, and the government in general were purged of all allegedly dissident persons; the victims were generally sentenced to death or to long terms of hard labor. Much of the purge was carried out in secret, and only a few cases were tried in public 'show trials'. By the time the terror subsided in 1939, Stalin had managed to bring both the Party and the public to a state of complete submission to his rule. Soviet society was so atomized and the people so fearful of reprisals that mass arrests were no longer necessary. Stalin

ruled as absolute dictator of the Soviet Union until his death in March 1953.

**11 Dzerzhinskiy, Felix (1876-1926):** Polish communist and head of the Soviet secret police. After the Revolution of 1917 he was appointed by Lenin to organise a force to combat internal political threats, and he set up the Cheka, the Bolshevik secret police. Lenin gave the organization huge powers to combat the opposition during the Russian Civil War. At the end of the Civil War, the Cheka was changed into the GPU (State Political Directorate) a section of the NKVD, but this did not diminish Dzerzhinskiy's power: from 1921-24 he was Minister of Interior, head of the Cheka and later the KGB, Minister for Communications and head of the Russian Council of National Economy.

## **12 Gulag**

The Soviet system of forced labor camps in the remote regions of Siberia and the Far North, which was first established in 1919. However, it was not until the early 1930s that there was a significant number of inmates in the camps. By 1934 the Gulag, or the Main Directorate for Corrective Labor Camps, then under the Cheka's successor organization the NKVD, had several million inmates. The prisoners included murderers, thieves, and other common criminals, along with political and religious dissenters. The Gulag camps made significant contributions to the Soviet economy during the rule of Stalin. Conditions in the camps were extremely harsh. After Stalin died in 1953, the population of the camps was reduced significantly, and conditions for the inmates improved somewhat.

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

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

## **14 October Revolution Day**

October 25 (according to the old calendar), 1917 went down in history as victory day for the Great October Socialist Revolution in Russia. This day is the most significant date in the history of the USSR. Today the anniversary is celebrated as 'Day of Accord and Reconciliation' on November 7.

## **15 Frunze, Mikhail (1885-1925)**

Soviet political and military leader.

## **16 Komsomol**

Communist youth political organization created in 1918. The task of the Komsomol was to spread of the ideas of communism and involve the worker and peasant youth in building the Soviet Union. The Komsomol also aimed at giving a communist upbringing by involving the worker youth in the political struggle, supplemented by theoretical education. The Komsomol was more popular than the Communist Party because with its aim of education people could accept uninitiated young proletarians, whereas party members had to have at least a minimal political qualification.

## **17 Birobidzhan**

Formed in 1928 to give Soviet Jews a home territory and to increase settlement along the vulnerable borders of the Soviet Far East, the area was raised to the status of an autonomous region in 1934. Influenced by an effective propaganda campaign, and starvation in the east, 41,000 Soviet Jews relocated to the area between the late 1920s and early 1930s. But, by 1938 28,000 of them had fled the regions harsh conditions, There were Jewish schools and synagogues up until the 1940s, when there was a resurgence of religious repression after World War II. The Soviet government wanted the forced deportation of all Jews to Birobidzhan to be completed by the middle of the 1950s. But in 1953 Stalin died and the deportation was cancelled. Despite some remaining Yiddish influences - including a Yiddish newspaper - Jewish cultural activity in the region has declined enormously since Stalin's anti-cosmopolitanism campaigns and since the liberalization of Jewish emigration in the 1970s. Jews now make up less than 2% of the region's population.

## **18 Molotov, V**

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

## **19 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.

## **20 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.

## **21 Perestroika (Russian for restructuring)**

Soviet economic and social policy of the late 1980s, associated with the name of Soviet politician Mikhail Gorbachev. The term designated the attempts to transform the stagnant, inefficient command economy of the Soviet Union into a decentralized, market-oriented economy. Industrial managers and local government and party officials were granted greater autonomy, and open elections were introduced in an attempt to democratize the Communist Party organization. By 1991, perestroika was declining and was soon eclipsed by the dissolution of the USSR.

## **22 Or Sameach school in Odessa**

Founded in 1994, this was the first private Jewish school in the city after Ukraine became independent. The language of teaching is Russian, and Hebrew and Jewish traditions are also taught. The school consists of a co-educational primary school and a secondary school separate for boys and for girls. It has about 500 pupils every year.