

# Irene Shein

Irene Shein

Tallinn

Estonia

Interviewer: Ella Levitskaya

Date of the interview: June 2005



*Irene Shein lives with her husband in a two-room apartment in a new district of Tallinn. Irene is of average height, plump, but agile. She is quick and I think she does everything very easily. She has bright and vivacious eyes. Her gray hair is cropped. Irene and her husband lived in Tashkent and its influence is noticeable in the style of the apartment. There are a lot knick-knacks, typical for Uzbekistan - bowls, pots with Uzbekistani pattern etc. Irene and her husband Efim are very hospitable and open for communication. I could feel that they are a friendly couple. Both of them had a hard living, but they still rejoice in every coming day, kindness and open-heartedness.*

[My family background](#)

[Growing up](#)

[The Soviet Invasion of the Baltics](#)

[The deportation of Estonian citizens](#)

[The Second World War](#)

[After the war](#)

[After the fall of the Iron Curtain](#)

[Glossary](#)

## My family background

Probably in the life of any human being there is a moment, when a person starts taking interest in his roots. In Parnu [120 km from Tallinn] archive a member of the local Jewish religious community named Efroim Shein was mentioned. The entry was made in 1872. He was a great-grandfather of my father. His full name was Haftole-Hertz Efroim. Haftole-Hertz Efroim Shein was buried in Tallinn's Jewish cemetery. I put down the inscription from his tombstone and a rabbi translated it. The inscription in Ivrit says, word for word: 'Here a great and wise man, a Torah-follower, is buried.' He died on the 17th Adar, year 5657, i.e. in 1897 in common chronology. These are just scraps of information.

I know about my father's family from my grandfather Sholom-Iosif Shein, who was born on 10th May 1866 in the Estonian town of Parnu, which belonged to the Russian empire at that time. I know that my grandfather had a brother named Hari-Moishe and a sister, Tsvirl [Tsviya]. Unfortunately there is hardly anything I know about that family.

My paternal grandmother; Khaya-Leya Shein, nee Teiman, was born on 15th October 1873 in the town of Panevezhis, Lithuania. My great-grandfather's name was David Teiman. That is all I know about him. My grandparents got married on 2nd September 1892 and their marriage was registered by the rabbi of the town of Parnu. They apparently left the town as all their children were born in the Estonian town of Valga, on the border with Latvia [200 km from Tallinn].

There were six sons and three daughters. The eldest child, Rohe-Gitl, was born in 1893. She was called by the Russian name of Rosa [1](#). My father's elder brother was called Efroim, and he was born in 1896. He was named after Great-grandfather. My father was born in 1898, shortly after his grandfather Naftole-Hertz Efroim Shein died. So Father was named Naftole-Hertz. In 1900 Ester was born and Ella followed in 1902. The next son, Leib, was born in 1903 and Abram in 1904. Then came Isroel in 1906 and the youngest, Pesach, was born in 1911.

When Grandfather Sholom-Iosif got married, he made a living on cattle breeding. Then he was involved in timbering. The elder sons, Efroim, my father and Leib did not get secular education, they went only to cheder. They were elder sons and had to work to help their father. They were hard-working. Our family was rather well-heeled, but it was gained by hard labor. The daughters and younger sons got both Jewish and secular education. Though father did not manage to go to lyceum, he knew how to count well, was knowledgeable about timber, graders of wood, measuring timber. He was well up in everything related to work.

The family was very religious. There was a synagogue and a prayer house in Valga. The prayer house was at my grandfather's place. The kashrut was observed at home. The family followed Jewish traditions. All members of the family went to the synagogue on Sabbath and on Jewish holidays. Yiddish was spoken at home. Everybody spoke good German and Estonian.

At that time there was no anti-Semitism in Estonia. People were appraised by their moral traits and character. Other religions and traditions were respected. Even in the period when Estonia belonged to the Russian empire, there were no pogroms, which were customary for the entire territory of Russia.

All my father's siblings were very different in their character, but all of them were decent and well-bred. There was no noise, no arguments. All of them grew up loving and respecting their parents, whose word was the law, even when the children reached adulthood. I think that all my aunts and uncles had pre-arranged marriages, which was customary for the Jews.

My father's eldest sister, Rohe-Gitl, was married to a doctor, Moses Levitin. They had an only son Grigoriy, or Gersh. Rohe-Gitl died at a young age, in 1919. After the time of evacuation her husband moved to Leningrad and died there when he was as old as the hills. Rohe-Gitl's son was also a doctor and was conferred the title of 'honored doctor.' He was single. We didn't keep in touch with him, and I don't know about his fate.

Efroim's wife Roza, or Reize, was a dentist. They had an only daughter, Ronya, who was four years younger than me. Ester married Max Gladkovskiy, a doctor. Ester had two daughters. She and my father were the only ones in the entire family who survived the war. She died in 1985. Her daughters are still alive. Leib had a son, who was approximately of my age. I don't remember the wives and children of my father's other brothers. Having got married Father's sisters were housewives, taking care of the household and children. Three brothers - my father, Efroim and Leib - worked with Grandfather, the rest of the brothers had their own business.

My maternal grandfather, Ilia Goldberg, was from Vitebsk [2](#). His Jewish name was Ele. My great-grandfather Meyer Goldberg was a Hasid [3](#). They say he was very handsome. Great-grandmother was petite. She had a strong Belarusian accent. I know about them only from my mother. Grandfather died a long time ago, in the 1910s. It was likely that great-grandmother moved to Riga to her son, my grandfather. She only spoke Yiddish. She knew neither Russian nor German. Her house was at Elizavetinskaya Street in Riga. She was a housekeeper. Mother said that she recognized all bills and receipts by color. Great-grandmother died in the early 1930s, before I was born.

My maternal grandfather was a merchant. He was educated. My maternal grandmother was from Sebezha [Pskov oblast, Russia, on the border of Latvia and Belarus, 500 km from Tallinn]. Her name was Rosa, Jewish name Tsipe-Roha. I don't know her maiden name. Grandmother came from a rich family. Her father Yankle was a merchant of the 1st Guild [4](#). My mother's family lived in Riga.

Grandfather had to take frequent business trips abroad and Grandmother always accompanied him. At customs the officers checked their passports, when they were crossing the border. They often were confused as two names were written in Grandfather's passport - his secular and his Jewish one: Ilia Mironovich Goldberg, alias Ele Meerovich. His wife's name also was written in his passport: Rosa Yakovlevna, alias Tsipe-Roha Yankelevna. Grandfather was irritated with that nagging and gave his children only secular names. The eldest daughter was Tatiana, the second son was Solomon. My mother Evgeniya was born in 1903.

Before the Revolution of 1917 [5](#) the family was well-off. Mother and her siblings finished a Russian lyceum. Mother was fluent in Russian and German. She was also pretty good at English and read French books in the original.

Though my mother's family was secular, Jewish traditions were strictly followed. The food was kosher, Sabbath and Jewish holidays were marked, and my grandparents went to the synagogue on holidays.

During the revolution they lost everything, though the Soviet regime was in Latvia only for a couple of months. The sequestered property was not returned to the family. Mother's elder sister Tatiana was a good milliner. After the revolution she left for Berlin and ran a fashion house there. When Hitler came to power [6](#), Tatiana came back to Riga and started living with Grandmother. She was single.

Mother's brother Solomon also left for Berlin. He worked as an orderly in the hospital and studied at the medical department of Berlin University. My mother and her parents stayed in Riga. Solomon graduated from university and became a doctor. When the fascists came to power in Germany in 1933, Jews were persecuted and Solomon immigrated to Palestine. There he became a famous

gynecologist. He got married to an immigrant from Moscow. Her parents immigrated from Russia after the revolution. She spent her adolescence in Paris. She learned how to play the grand piano. When the fascist dictatorship commenced she left for Israel.

Uncle Solomon's wife is much younger than he. She was born in 1915. They had one son. When Solomon was alive, she corresponded with him and after his death she kept in touch with his wife. The correspondence was in English. Solomon's wife is still alive. When her husband was in Israel in the 1990s, he found my aunt. Solomon died in Israel in the middle of the 1980s.

My maternal grandmother Rosa was an educated woman. Grandmother finished lyceum. She was taught French by a French governess. My mother also had a governess, but she was Lett. She raised my mother. When Mother got married, her governess, an elderly lady, stayed in their house with Grandmother.

Mother entered Riga conservatoire, the grand piano department. Of course, it was hard for the family, as they had become much poorer. I don't know exactly when Grandfather passed away, but he was no longer alive by then. Mother was considerably assisted by Grandmother. She came from a rich family and had some valuable things. Grandmother sold them and paid for my mother's tuition. Mother also tried to earn some money. She embroidered custom-made linen.

I never asked my parents how they met each other. All I know is that all father's siblings had pre-arranged marriages. I think my parents also had a pre-arranged marriage. They got married on 2nd February 1930. I don't know where their wedding took place.

Mother left Riga for the small town of Valga. My paternal grandfather gave them a house as a birthday present. It was located on the same street, where my grandparents' house was. I spent my childhood in that house. Of course, the mode of life in a small town was different. There were patriarchal rules in the family, according to which the parents were revered. Mother had to call on her mother-in-law just to greet her and ask how she felt. Father was the bread-winner. He worked very hard to maintain the family. Mother was a housewife and practiced playing the piano.

## **Growing up**

I was born on 17th August 1932. I was named Irene. I barely saw Father in my childhood. He left early in the morning and came back late at night, when I was sleeping. He didn't have a car. He took the horse cart. Village roads were earthed roads and after rain they turned into bog. It was hard to ride on those roads. Father came home worn out. I remember there was a gadget to take off our boots. Rarely did Father have a day off and if so he was just lying on the couch almost all day long, trying to recoup.

He always visited his parents on days-off. Grandmother gave us a ring and asked how all of us were doing. When Father said that everything was OK, she asked him to come over. No matter how exhausted Father was, he went to his parents right away.

Before the wedding my mother had a recess in her studies at the conservatoire. She finished it when she lived in Valga. There was no grand piano at home, but there was a grand piano in a window case in a store. Mother went to that store and asked the owner if she could play that piano. Later, Father bought her a piano.

Though we were rather well-heeled, my parents raised me rather rigidly. I couldn't choose dishes at the table. I was supposed to eat what was laid on the table. If I didn't like it, I could choose not to eat and stay hungry. I remember when I was about two years old, I said that I 'wanted' some dish and Father told me to leave the table. I was supposed to say 'I would like.' I was not allowed to be finical.

Later, when I was in exile, I was grateful to my parents for raising me strictly and teaching me to eat what I was given. Rotten potatoes and soup from grass were a good meal for me in exile. Father had trouble with his stomach as he was often on the road and ate dry food. After getting married Mother always cooked oat gruel and made sure that he followed a diet.

My parents paid a lot of attention to my education. First, I had a baby-sitter, then they hired a governess. During my childhood, my parents and governess spoke only German with me. I easily learned German and Estonian, which was spoken by our maid, who was Estonian. That good woman was very kind and let me away with all kinds of pranks, which I wouldn't have with my mother.

Later, Mother started speaking Russian with me for me to learn that language. I spoke broken Russian. It was hard for me to pronounce certain sounds. I had a Russian tutor who came to our house. Finally I had a good command of Russian. When I turned five, there was a ballet stand made and I was taught ballet dancing. Before I went to school, Mother took me to a French teacher.

I started reading pretty early. I enjoyed lying down on the couch and read a book. When my parents noticed that I was not merely looking at the pictures, they started buying me books. They ordered Russian books in the USSR. I was so anxious to get a new parcel with books. I could easily read in any of the languages I was taught.

I liked visiting my grandmother in Riga with my mother. When Grandmother left the house on Elizavetinskaya Street, it looked too spacious. They moved to another house and all books were taken. Grandmother had a large library. In Riga, Mother and Tatiana went out while I stayed with Grandmother. She took out her bands and ostrich feathers from the dancing parties of her youth and let me play with those things. I remember that Grandmother had a large table set of dishes with monograms. When we came over, it was on the table all the time.

Grandmother's sister Sofia lived in Riga. Her husband was a military doctor and took part in World War I. Their son lived in Israel. Aunt Sofia had a fashionable house. She arranged receptions there and invited writers and actors. They were rich. They had a carriage with harnessed horses. I remember the cabman helped Aunt Sofia get off the carriage. Mother sometimes took me to Aunt Sofia's place.

My parents went to the grandparents on all Jewish holidays. All siblings, who lived in Valga, got together there. It was a rule. They came to pray in the prayer house, which was also located in grandfather's place. I still keep my father's prayer book. Grandfather died in 1939. He was buried in accordance with the Jewish rite in the Jewish cemetery of Valga. After his death the holidays were marked in the house of Father's elder brother Efraim. Grandmother died a year later, i.e., in 1940. She was buried next to Grandfather. They didn't know at that time that in about a year there would be no serenity in the family.

## **The Soviet Invasion of the Baltics**

Mother told me a story of her visit to a milliner in Riga before she got married. Mother's dress was not ready to try on and the milliner suggested that my mother should go to the fortune-teller, who lived nearby, and meanwhile she would finish her work. Mother went there. The fortune-teller told her that she would be married soon, but would live with her husband only for ten years. Mother had been waiting for that term and finally it happened – the Soviet regime came to power.

My parents were strongly against the annexation of Estonia to the USSR [ [7](#) ]. How could they perceive it differently? Mother said that either in 1917 or 1918 when the Soviet regime was established in Riga, products vanished from the stores – there was frozen cabbage instead. When the Soviets left, things changed. Mother remembered that and we had some products stored in our house. Then searches commenced. They came to us as well as and took all excess products that we had. We could have even been arrested. At that time God had mercy on us.

First they had some people move in our house. Then we were evicted and given another place to live. The house we moved into was in front of our former place. Families of NKVD officers [8](#) and the commandant of the town lived there. My parents didn't communicate with them. The NKVD office was in our former house. There was a large basement for food storage, and the NKVD kept the people they arrested in that basement.

My father was also arrested. It was a real extortion: they put a pistol to my father's head and had him write a note to Mother. The text of the note was dictated by NKVD officers. It was written there that my mother had to give them all the money and precious things we had. Mother didn't have anything really precious. She had a wedding and an engagement ring, a mascot given to her by her parents and a small gold watch. There was sterling silverware - knives and forks. Mother gave all that to the NKVD, but father was not released.

Then Mother was arrested as well. One of my mother's pals was in the house, when she was being arrested. That lady took me with her. I was really worried for my parents. I had boils all over my body as a result of all the stress. My skin was peeling off. I stayed with my mother's pal for a while. Then my parents were released from prison.

In 1940 I entered a Russian school. I went to the 2nd grade right away. I vaguely remember that period of time. I only studied there for a year.

## **The deportation of Estonian citizens**

I vividly remember the day of 13th June 1941. Mother went to the bathhouse with her friend. On their way they were passing our former house, where the premises of the NKVD were located at that time. NKVD officers in blue caps were crowding by the entrance. I remember Mother said that they would be really busy that night. Unfortunately she was right. The day of 14th June 1941 is remembered by all Estonians as the night of deportation of Estonian citizens [9](#).

They came to us early in the morning. NKVD officers informed us that our family was to be deported. We were blamed of being rich, 'socially dangerous elements.' We were given half an hour to pack our things. We were allowed to take only one suitcase and a blanket. Mother was at a loss and even forgot to take money with her. Father was taken away at once and we were not allowed to see him again.



Mother and I were told to get in the car with some people and we were taken to the train station. There were cattle trains. There were guards by the cars. We were squeezed in the car. There were double-tiered bunks along the walls of the car. There was no wash basin and toilet. There were only women with children and elderly people. Men were to take other cars, headed for the Gulag [10](#).

We met Rosa, Uncle Efroim's wife, and her daughter Ronya. They told us about Uncle Efroim's arrest. Then we found out that another one of my father's brother, Isroel, was also sent to the Gulag. On our way we also met Father's cousin, who was to go to the Gulag, too. There was a train car in front of us and we saw him. We were not allowed to leave the train. There was a convoy between the trains. Uncle asked the soldiers to give us some money. He stuck some banknotes on the bayonet and the soldier pushed them through our window.

There were Estonians, Jews and Russians among those people heading into exile. People were not selected by nationality, but by social origin and income. The lists were compiled beforehand by local communists. It was obvious that some people were included in the list for merely being in the black book of the people who made the lists.

It is hard for me to say how long we were on the road. It seemed forever. Then we got off the train and took a barge. We went down the river in an unknown direction. Deported Lithuanians were on the barge as well. Next to us there was a large family of Lithuanian Jews - husband, wife and their children, who were of different age. Father suggested to Mother and Aunt Rosa to stick together in exile as it would be easier for us. My mother and aunt refused hoping that their exile area would not be far from their husbands.

We arrived at a tiny settlement called Vavilovka, in Bakhchar district of Tomsk oblast [3300 km from Moscow]. It was the place of our exile. Aunt Rosa and her daughter were not far from us, in the adjacent settlement. We were housed with a family. We were given a small, unfurnished room. We slept on our suitcase. Mother was sent to work in the field. Back at home Mother had never been involved in any physical work. She was a pianist and she took good care of her hands. Here she had to work from dawn till night. Mother's hands were chafed and grazed.

We were terribly starving. We barely ate bread in the first years of exile. Mother sold those few things that we had taken with us. When we had nothing left to sell, she sold half of her coat. She had a long coarse coat. She made a jacket out of it and sold the remainder to a peasant lady, who made a skirt from it. I could not go to school as I had nothing to put on and I had to stay in. I didn't have any overcoat.

It was a settlement in Taiga. Vavilovka had existed for only ten years. It was mostly populated with Russians, exiled from the USSR during that time [the time of the Great Terror] [11](#). After 1941 a few Estonian families came there as well. Mother and I were the only Jews in the settlement. First, we were helped by one exiled Estonian lady. She gave me a chunk of bread a couple of times.

Then Mother and I gradually managed to settle. We followed the example of others exiled - we planted vegetables on a small plot of land. When I grew older I went to people to dig their kitchen gardens. I was fed for work and given a bucket of potatoes and a bowl of sauerkraut. Local people planted flax and spun threads from that.

Mother and I learned how to knit jackets from those flaxen threads and took orders. We were paid for that. But still, we lived from hand to mouth. Mother didn't throw away potato peelings. We ate them. In the summer she collected 'orach,' a type of grass. We boiled it, made gruel out of it and added it to one potato. Then we used the cooker and made fritters from that 'orach.'

A commandant was in charge of the exiled in the settlement. Exiled Estonians didn't know how to address him. Then they decided that if he was from the USSR, they should call him comrade. So some of the guys said 'comrade commandant' and he replied, 'We are not comrades to you. Your comrades are the wolves in the forest.'

The work in the field was seasonal and when it was over, Mother and other Estonian ladies were sent to saw logs. Now tractors have diesel fuel, but at that time instead of fuel tanks there were tanks where small birch pieces were put. They burned and produced the heat which made the tractor work. There was a daily ration. Each woman was supposed to saw a certain number of boxes of birch pieces.

There were severe winters in Tomsk oblast and all women were in thin footwear, as they had left their homes in the summer, on 14th June. In another winter women dug wells. There were few men in the settlement. It was the time of the Great Patriotic War [12](#) and all of them were in the lines. Only the wounded or crippled came back from the front. One of these men dug wells in the settlement. He put dug clay in a bale, suspended to a winch. Women were rotating that winch, took out heave bale, emptied it and put it down. They were lucky if it was blue clay. It was used as soap, for washing, bleaching the walls.

Then I started working. From spring till fall I worked in the fields during the harvest season. When the season was over, I worked as a mailwoman. I had to collect the mail in the regional center of Bakhchar and distribute it to the houses in Vavilovka.

There were cases when Estonians escaped from exile. I was called to the commandant and he demanded that I should report on those who were on the point of escaping. I never reported on anything or anybody.

I didn't go to school. Those who didn't work, weren't given bread and that meant – dying from hunger. Mother studied with me in accordance with school syllabus. Even when both of us worked, we didn't have enough food to eat. We were rescued by Uncle Solomon. Mother remembered the address of her brother in Israel and wrote him a letter. She started getting parcels from him. Uncle could not send us parcels in his name. Nobody would ever have given them to us. There was some Jewish organization, which collected and distributed parcels. I don't remember what it was called. We managed to survive only owing to those parcels.

There were boxes with power soup, grains, soap, threads, needles. Of course, those parcels were opened up and checked. I don't know if it was done on purpose but the packages with soup were open and mixed with soap. We ate it all the same and it tasted good to us. We sold threads and needles and exchanged them for products.

There were even clothes in the last parcel. Some of the clothes had been stolen, but still we got something. Probably Mother was told by Solomon where Father was. She started corresponding with Dad. The letters were rare and short, but still we knew he was alive. It meant a lot to us. He



served his term in the camp, located in Sos'va, Sverdlovsk oblast.

## **The Second World War**

We knew about the war. We followed the events. There was a loud-speaker in the settlement. People clustered around it to listen to round-ups. There was even a local paper. We were looking forward to victory. All of us thought that we would be released from exile after the war was over, but nothing changed for us when the victory came on 9th May 1945 [13](#).

Uncle told us about many of our family members who perished. My father's brothers Leib, Abram and Pesach, their wives and children were shot in Estonia. Only Father's sister Ester, who was in evacuation with her family, survived. The family of my father's sister Ella was exterminated in Riga. Grandmother Rosa and Mother's sister Tatiana and many relatives of Grandmother who lived in Riga, were also murdered. Who knows whether they were shot by Germans, or by Estonians and Letts who started exterminating Jews before the arrival of the Germans... Estonia was one the first among the occupied countries, reporting to Hitler that no Jews were left on its territory [cf. Judenfrei] [14](#).

I am sure if we hadn't been deported on 14th June 1941, Estonians wouldn't have helped the Germans and wouldn't have accepted them as the liberators from the Soviet oppression. Many Estonians suffered during deportation and blindly hated the Soviets, being ready to fulfill any orders just to get rid of the Soviet regime. We should not forget about that either. And Jews probably wouldn't have been appalled by the Soviet regime more than by fascists, and many of them would have left and survived. Things would have been vastly different ... What can I say about that. Things happened the way they did.

## **After the war**

My father's other two brothers died in the Gulag. We only know the date when the eldest brother, Efroim died -14th June 1942. The circumstances are not known - emaciation, disease, accident or murder. We do not know anything about Isroel. All we know is that he didn't survive the Gulag.

Men were sentenced for a certain term. Father was sentenced to six years of Gulag, without trial, and in 1947 his term was over. He was released from the Gulag camp and went to Estonia. In 1948 there was a decree of the Soviet government to exempt from exile those who were exiled being minors. I was also given an exemption. Only mother stayed in Siberia. She was on permanent exile and could only hope for a miracle.

I and another Estonian girl, Leya, who was six years older than I, went to Tomsk. We walked to Tomsk in deep snow, covering a distance of 250 kilometers. There was Taiga along the way. There was an old man with a sleigh in front of us. A wooden case with our clothes was on that sleigh. We couldn't go on the sleigh all the time, as the horse was lean and it wouldn't have been able to bear the extra load. From time to time, when we were too weary, he let us go on the sleigh.

Liya is still alive. We keep in touch via the phone. Her acquaintances lived in Tomsk. We stayed at their place for a couple of days and then went to Novosibirsk. It was easier to get home from there. When we were leaving, we left some money on the table for accommodation. But they found us at the train station and returned the money. So we reached Novosibirsk. The train station was huge, but there were throngs of people, and there was no space. Many people were coming back from

evacuation. There were no tickets, but my fellow traveler managed to get some for us somehow. We reached Moscow by train and from there we went to Tallinn. This happened on 4th February 1948.

Father wasn't allowed to live in Valga. He settled in the small town of Johvi. I knew the address and found him. He worked as a procurer of agricultural products. Estonians received him very well and helped him a lot. Estonian neighbors from Valga gave Father a lot of family pictures. When we were liberated, the new hosts of our apartment threw our pictures on the garbage heap in the yard. Neighbors collected them and gave them to Father when he came back home.

I went to school, Father worked. Our distant relative Maria Sorkina, who lived in Tallinn, helped us a lot. She was not our consanguine; she was a relative of Rosa, the wife of Father's elder brother Efroim. Maria and her husband didn't have children and she was very attached to her niece Ronya and to me. When I was in exile, Aunt Maria sent letters to me and supported us the best way she could, though it could have done harm to her and her husband. We corresponded with Mother and sent her parcels. She wrote in her letters that she was an accounting clerk at dairy farm. We did not see an end to her exile.

In 1948 the campaign against 'cosmopolitans' started in the USSR [15](#). People were fired, arrested, exiled and sent to the Gulag. There were rumors that those who had come back from the Gulag, would be sent there once again. Once I went to Tallinn to see Aunt Maria. She told me that at night apartments would be searched and told me to spend the night in the place of pals of hers. Then we found out for sure: that night many apartments were searched by NKVD officers.

There was a Jewish family from Pervomaysk [Ukraine, 500 km south of Kiev], which lived in Johvi. Both spouses had lost families during the war and they got married. I don't know how they came to Johvi. Of course, it was hard for them to live in a strange town, and Father helped them. He wasn't a local, but he came from Estonia. They gave Father the address of their pals in Tashkent and he decided to go there to avoid further repressions. I think that decision saved us from another exile as many people were exiled again.

For a while we stayed at the place recommended by these people from Johvi. Then we had our own lodging. Father found a job at a timber storage facility. The person in charge of the timber storage facility was not knowledgeable about timber, but Father had practical knowledge, though he was not educated. He knew what he was doing. Father was very consistent and accurate.

Fortunately, Father had a common passport, without restrictions [cf. Passport 24] [16](#). I got my first passport in Tashkent. We didn't tell even our closest friends about our past, our time in exile. We understood that it would be safer for us. My bosom friend told me many years later that she had guessed what kind of past I had, but asked me no questions. We kept writing to Mother, but we didn't send the letters directly to her, but to some of the acquaintances, so as not to attract attention.

We lived with the family of a cashier in Tashkent. She told me that I could try working as an accountant assistant. Gradually I was well up in book-keeping and started working independently. Then I entered the evening department of Tashkent Financial College. Of course, it was hard to combine my studies with work. When I was going to enter the college, I was told at work that my studies should not interfere with my work. There was a lot of work and often I came home with a

large case of documents in order to work at night.

I was too pressed for time and didn't communicate with Father much. Sometimes I tried to ask him about the camp, but he didn't tell me anything, avoiding the subject. That is why there is hardly anything I know about that period of his life. My cousin Ronya came over to us and often asked him about the camp. My father was the only uncle, who survived. She didn't remember her father.

Ronya and her mother remained in exile. She was too small to leave the exile. Their life was very hard, but in spite of that she entered Tomsk Polytechnic Institute. She graduated from it and became a construction engineer. At that time Ronya didn't return to Estonia, but stayed in Tomsk. She got married there, gave birth to a daughter, worked.

She didn't know anything about her father and often asked about him when she came to us. Father was at a loss for words, but still told her something at times. Ronya asked if she could find her father's tomb and my dad said that it was impossible.

I know that a doctor from Chernovtsi, Rozental, worked in Sos'evo as a nurse. That lady saved my father's life. He had problems with his stomach. When he came to the camp, where even healthy people died of hunger and beriberi, he started getting sick. He was sent to the aid station, when he was in the severest condition. Rozental did her best for Father to convalesce. She even managed to get cod-liver oil for him. Father was lucky to get better.

I am still grateful to that wonderful lady. I still keep her in my heart. I understand that most likely she is not alive any longer, taking into account her age, but I would be happy if some of her kin or friends would write to me. I would be happy if that happened.

Stalin died in 1953. Many people cried at that time, mourned over him as if he was a relative. Both Father and I understood what a dreadful person he was. Stalin knew and approved of all things happening in the USSR. Of course, all things were done as per his order. Stalin's death was not a sorrow for us. We didn't think that Mother would be released after his death. We didn't believe in a miracle.

In 1955 I went to see Mother. She lived in the district center Bakhchar, 250 kilometers away. I went there by plane. There was an old lady next to me who was constantly telling me how scared she was. I had to go to the regional prosecution office and get the permit to visit my mother. I remember entering through the thick metallic doors of that office. Suddenly I was frightened – I was not sure whether they would let me out again.

In the end, I was permitted to stay with Mother. She felt unwell, but tried not to show it. I went to see the commandant, who remembered me working there as a girl and carrying heavy bales of mail from Bakhchar. I said that Mother was alone, sick, and asked him to release her before her term was over. Mother was to go through medical examination and in 1956 she was declared as disabled and released from exile. Mother came to us in Tashkent. She lived with us and worked in a kindergarten.

Rehabilitations commenced [17](#) after the Twentieth Party Congress [18](#), when Nikita Khrushchev [19](#) held his speech. People found out about Stalin's trespassing and crimes, committed as per his order. Those who had been innocently convicted were exonerated. But at that time none of our family felt that. The pandemonium machine of the KGB [20](#) worked very well and all archives were

kept.

Only in 1993 Mother and I received rehabilitation certificates. It was written in my certificate that I, Irene Shein, was exiled from the town of Valga, Estonia, without trial and was in special exile in Bakhchar district of Tomsk oblast in the period from 14th June 1941 till 25th January 1948. In accordance with the law of the Estonian SSR as of 7th December 1988 on extrajudicial mass repressions in the Soviet Union in the period of 1940 – 1950 I was fully exonerated.

The years in exile were considered in my labor experience – one year in exile was recognized as three years of experience. But nobody could return me the years of my childhood and adolescence...

I worked as a chief accountant for many years. My work was appreciated. I worked in the Central Design and Construction Bureau of the Fish Industry of the Uzbek SSR. Everybody treated me very well there. I was awarded with prizes and given bonuses. I felt no anti-Semitism, neither at work nor at home. Nobody paid attention to nationality. In general, the population of Tashkent treated Jews very well. They didn't care what kind of nationality the person was, it was really important whether the person deserved to be respected. People were addressed like: sister, brother, father... There were all kinds of things at work, but nobody ever mentioned my nationality.

I had a pre-arranged marriage with my first husband, Moses Melamed. Moses was from the Moldavian town of Dubossary. He was born in 1927. We had a true Jewish wedding – with a rabbi and under the chuppah. People stuck to Jewish traditions in Tashkent. Synagogues were open. Boys were circumcised. There was a Jewish orchestra playing at Jewish weddings. The musicians were very good.

In 1960 our daughter Elena was born. My husband and I didn't stay together for a long time. He had a hard character. He worked at the plant and was too fond of the bottle. After we got divorced, my daughter and I lived with my parents. I know that my first husband immigrated to Israel in the 1970s and died there.

My second husband was Efim Brener. We met at work. Efim was a very good person. Life was hard on him, but it did not make him embittered. Efim was born in the village of Zagnitkov, Vinnitsa oblast, in 1926. His father was called Semion Brener and his mother's name was Elka. Efim was the eldest child. He had three younger sisters –Dora, Sarah and Raya.

Efim didn't even manage to finish the 7th grade. When the war was unleashed, the Germans captured Vinnitsa oblast and then the military enlistment office told all the young guys who had not reached drafting age to get together and leave the place in order for them not to be captured by the Germans. They walked for 700 kilometers. They were trying to keep away from the Germans, outrunning German columns. They reached some station, where they were supposed to be taken to Middle Asia. Their train was bombed. Many guys perished and the team leaders couldn't find them. They remained without documents as those had been taken by team leaders. Finally somebody told them to be on their own as their rescue was up them. Some of the guys came back home, others were killed by the Germans.

Efim decided to go to Kazakhstan, where his countrymen lived. In 1943, when he was 17, he left for the army as a volunteer. When Efim was to leave his village, his father saw him off and walked for

40 kilometers with him. The father wanted to get evacuated with the family. They agreed to meet in Tashkent at the place of their acquaintances. The family didn't manage to get evacuated. It is not clear who killed them – Germans, Romanians or local people. All of Efim's relatives perished.

Efim served in the army until 1948. He finished military school. He wanted to go on with his studies, but he was supposed to go to town for that. He didn't have the opportunity to do that and so he requested to be demobilized from the army. He already knew that his family had perished. Efim was overwhelmed with grief and didn't want to go back to the place, where his loved ones were killed. He left for Tashkent.

He didn't have a place to live. He didn't acquire any profession, so he was on odd jobs – apprentice in a shop of headwear production. Later he became the foreman and finally he was in charge of the shop. Then Efim was in the trade business as a supplier. Later he was in charge of the warehouse. He worked there for six years. It was hard for him to work in that field as there were a lot of abuses, so he went to work at a bakery plant. He worked there for 23 years and also retired from that job.

Efim got married after he had been in Tashkent for a year. He has two sons. Semion was born in 1949 and Edward in 1952. His elder son graduated from Tashkent University, the younger one from the Railroad Institute. Then they were drafted for compulsory service in the army and left for Israel afterwards. Efim's wife died and he remained by himself. We got married in 1977. We are still together. My husband is a very close person to me. He is kind and reliable.

When people started immigrating to Israel, I was happy for those who were leaving, but I could not leave. My parents were old and unwell. I couldn't leave them and they couldn't go with me.

Having finished school my daughter entered Tashkent University, the Faculty of Applied Mathematics and Mechanics. During holidays Elena went to Tomsk to see my cousin Ronya, with whom we had kept in touch for many years. Ronya introduced Elena to her future husband, Boris Swartzman. Boris's father had also been in exile. Boris was born in Tomsk in 1950. He graduated from the Faculty of Applied mathematics and Mechanics of Tomsk University. They got married after Elena graduated from the university, in 1983. Elena moved to her husband in Tomsk. In 1985 their daughter Irina, or Inna, was born.

When Father was alive, we observed all Jewish traditions and marked Jewish holidays. Each Pesach my father led the seder. When Efim and I got married, his sons with their families and our little grandson Efim joined us for seder. He remembers how my father was reading from an ancient book. After Father died we did not hold seder any longer. We always bought matzah, cooked Jewish dishes. Efim went to the synagogue.

My parents probably had a chance to come back to Estonia earlier, but Father didn't even want to hear of it. He said that he had to leave his house twice in Estonia and he was not willing to do that again. When he was dying and losing his memory he said, 'I want to go home.' And where was that home? Maybe it was in Estonia. Father died on 12th May 1985. He was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Tashkent in accordance with the Jewish rite. An old sophisticated man carried out the ritual and he knew how things were to be done.

Mother survived Father by 14 years. Until the last moment of her life she had a clear mind and wonderful memory. Mother died on 12th February 1999. She was buried next to Father. She died on Friday evening, on Sabbath. It was hard to find Jews who would do everything in accordance with the ritual on that day. But still, she was buried according to the Jewish rite. They had a common tombstone.

After my parents' death my husband went to the synagogue for a year and ordered Kaddish for them. My husband and I went to the synagogue on the day of the death of our parents. We brought vodka and honey cake for people to have a drink and commemorate the deceased after prayer. We marked holidays the way we did when they were alive.

### **After the fall of the Iron Curtain**

After the breakup of the USSR [in 1991] our live in Tashkent was harder. We always had so many friends, but later there were less and less. Factories and plants were broke, the production was idle and people started leaving the place. We started losing friends and feared that we would be lonely. and the older you get, the harder it is to make new friends. It was hard physically and materially. It wasn't an easy decision for us to move.

In 1999 our daughter and her family moved to Tallinn. In spite of the fact that she was born in Tashkent, she was the daughter of an exiled and was entitled to Estonian citizenship. My daughter and son-in-law work in Russian schools. They don't know Estonian, and I don't think it is right. Of course, it is hard, but you can't succeed, if you don't try.

My granddaughter had finished nine grades before they moved to Estonia. She had to go to the 8th grade in Tallinn, as she didn't know Estonian, and final exams in school were in Estonian. She studied Estonian for a year, her score was good enough and she was transferred to the 9th grade. The 9th grade is the final one in Estonia. By the time she had finished school her score in Estonian was about 100, which was the highest. Of course she has an accent, as it is hard to get rid of it. Inna finished school with distinction and entered the IT department of Tallinn Polytechnic University. That year she was transferred to the second course as she did well.

My husband and I moved to Tallinn in 2000. We sold our house in Tashkent and bought an apartment in a new district of Tallinn. Of course, it was easier for us. The district, where we are living, has very good infrastructure. Everything is close by: the polyclinic, pharmacy, post-office and stores. We feel independent.

Life in Estonia is well organized. The Estonian government is very benevolent to my husband, who went to the motherland of his exiled wife. My husband had a high pension, but Estonia and Uzbekistan didn't have any agreements, so his pension wasn't considered here. But he was given a pension here, even a card for free medical treatment and discounts for medicine. It is really important at our age. My husband and I had to go through difficult operations here. Efim has a permanent residential permit, which is difficult to get here. The state is supporting us. None of us regrets leaving Tashkent.

Twice a week Efim goes to the synagogue, to the religious Jewish community [21](#). He prays and communicates with people. I rarely leave home and it is pretty hard for me. I always go to the synagogue on the commemoration day of my parents, it is sacred for me. Of course, it is hard for



both of us that the graves of our loved ones remained in Tashkent. We will probably never have a chance to go there again. There is a memorable plaque in the synagogue. People can order a block there, where parents' and relatives' names are written. It is pretty expensive, 1000 kronas [about USD80], but I put one for my parents and grandparents there. It is memorable. Efim put one for his parents there, too.

We always attend meetings held annually on 14th June, the day of deportation. We also mark Jewish holidays. We keep in touch with the Uzbek community. It is rather small in Tallinn. There are very few Uzbeks there. Many people go there because they used to live in Uzbekistan. We also follow traditions of Uzbekistan, as it has become a second motherland for both of us. Uzbeks saved me – gave me lodging, work and skills. I lived in Tashkent for 50 years. It was a long and happy life.

The chairman of the community, a pure Uzbek, preserves all Uzbek traditions and one of them is to treat elderly people with respect. We are always invited there and we feel the warmth. The community is not funded to hand out treats. We have a potluck party, that means that everybody brings what he has. We sit at the table and talk. We are grateful to the fate for being alive, having good children and grandchildren, being together. That is really a lot.

## **Glossary:**

### **1 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; Yury 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.

### **2 Vitebsk**

Provincial town in the Russian Empire, near the Baltic Republics, with 66,000 inhabitants at the end of the 19th century; birthplace of Russian Jewish painter Marc Chagall (1887-1985).

### **3 Hasid**

Follower of the Hasidic movement, a Jewish mystic movement founded in the 18th century that reacted against Talmudic learning and maintained that God's presence was in all of one's surroundings and that one should serve God in one's every deed and word. The movement provided spiritual hope and uplifted the common people. There were large branches of Hasidic movements and schools throughout Eastern Europe before World War II, each following the teachings of famous scholars and thinkers. Most had their own customs, rituals and life styles. Today there are substantial Hasidic communities in New York, London, Israel and Antwerp.

#### **4 Guild I**

In tsarist Russia merchants belonged to Guild I, II or III. Merchants of Guild I were allowed to trade with foreign merchants, while the others were allowed to trade only within Russia.

#### **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 World War I, 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 Hitler's rise to power**

In the German parliamentary elections in January 1933, the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) won one-third of the votes. On 30th January 1933 the German president swore in Adolf Hitler, the party's leader, as chancellor. On 27th February 1933 the building of the Reichstag (the parliament) in Berlin was burned down. The government laid the blame with the Bulgarian communists, and a show trial was staged. This served as the pretext for ushering in a state of emergency and holding a re-election. It was won by the NSDAP, which gained 44% of the votes, and following the cancellation of the communists' votes it commanded over half of the mandates. The new Reichstag passed an extraordinary resolution granting the government special legislative powers and waiving the constitution for 4 years. This enabled the implementation of a series of moves that laid the foundations of the totalitarian state: all parties other than the NSDAP were dissolved, key state offices were filled by party luminaries, and the political police and the apparatus of terror swiftly developed.

#### **7 Occupation of the Baltic Republics (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania)**

Although the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact regarded only Latvia and Estonia as parts of the Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, according to a supplementary protocol (signed in 28th September 1939) most of Lithuania was also transferred under the Soviets. The three states were forced to sign the 'Pact of Defense and Mutual Assistance' with the USSR allowing it to station troops in their territories. In June 1940 Moscow issued an ultimatum demanding the change of governments and the occupation of the Baltic Republics. The three states were incorporated into the Soviet Union as the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republics.

#### **8 NKVD**

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

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

After the Soviet Union occupied the three Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) in June 1940 as a part of establishing the Soviet system, mass deportation of the local population began. The

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

## **10 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.

## **11 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.

## **12 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.

### **13 Victory Day in Russia (9th May)**

National holiday to commemorate the defeat of Nazi Germany and the end of World War II and honor the Soviets who died in the war.

### **14 Judenfrei (Judenrein)**

German for 'free (purified) of Jews'. A term created by the Nazis in Germany in connection with the plan entitled 'The Final Solution to the Jewish Question', the aim of which was defined as 'the creation of a Europe free of Jews'. The term 'Judenrein'/'Judenfrei' in Nazi terminology referred to the extermination of the Jews and described an area (a town or a region), from which the entire Jewish population had been deported to extermination camps or forced labor camps. The term was, particularly in occupied Poland, an established part of the official and unofficial Nazi language.

### **15 Campaign against 'cosmopolitans'**

The campaign against 'cosmopolitans', i.e. Jews, was initiated in articles in the central organs of the Communist Party in 1949. The campaign was directed primarily at the Jewish intelligentsia and it was the first public attack on Soviet Jews as Jews. 'Cosmopolitans' writers were accused of hating the Russian people, of supporting Zionism, etc. Many Yiddish writers as well as the leaders of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee were arrested in November 1948 on charges that they maintained ties with Zionism and with American 'imperialism'. They were executed secretly in 1952. The anti-Semitic Doctors' Plot was launched in January 1953. A wave of anti-Semitism spread through the USSR. Jews were removed from their positions, and rumors of an imminent mass deportation of Jews to the eastern part of the USSR began to spread. Stalin's death in March 1953 put an end to the campaign against 'cosmopolitans.'

### **16 Passport 24**

Such passports were issued to people that authorities didn't put full trust into: they were former political prisoners or those that had recently arrived in the USSR, etc. There was a note in such passports stating that the owner of that passport was not allowed to reside in the 24 biggest towns of the USSR.

### **17 Rehabilitation in the Soviet Union**

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

## **18 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.

## **19 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.

## **20 KGB**

The KGB or Committee for State Security was the main Soviet external security and intelligence agency, as well as the main secret police agency from 1954 to 1991.

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