



The Centropa Lithuanian Reader Volume 2 Our World Destroyed

Stories from our Lithuanian interviews
2005–2007

Interviews conducted
by Zhanna Litinskaya

The Centropa Lithuanian Reader Volume Two: Our World Destroyed

This second volume of excerpts from the Lithuanian interviews covers the Holocaust period.

In the first section, our respondents tell us what life was like under Soviet occupation, which began in May 1940 and lasted until the Germans swept through the country in June 1941.

Conventional wisdom in right wing Lithuanian circles state that “the Jews welcomed the Soviets.” While some poorer families did (and there were many Lithuanians as well as Jews who hoped for a more egalitarian society), our respondents paint a far more complex picture. They also paint a portrait of immediate shortages, round-ups, nationalizations and deportations to Siberia.

Life for practically everyone was bad under the Soviets but what came after beggars belief. The true horrors begin in the next section.

Here we read of the atrocities carried out by Germans. Here we read eyewitness accounts of how Lithuanians hardly needed encouragement from the Germans to begin attacking, and murdering, their Jewish neighbors. Some, in fact, did not even wait for the Germans to arrive.

The rest of this fascinating volume is divided into longer chapters, as

some of our respondents have remarkable tales to tell. Zalman Kaplanas and Rafel Genis speak of joining the Red Army. “I wanted revenge against the Germans,” Kaplanas said in his very moving interview. He is clearly one of our best story tellers.

The other stories are equally gripping. Liza Lukinskaya describes life in Kaunas ghetto, and then being hidden in a convent. Frieda Shteinene tells us of two horrid incidents in her interview.

Dobre Rozengergene was a prisoner of the Kaunas ghetto, and then survived several concentration camps.

All stories of Holocaust survival are unique and Ranana Malkhanova speaks of how she and her mother spent three years being hidden by Lithuanian peasants.

Finally, Fania Brantovskaya recounts her days in the Vilnius ghetto, and how she joined the partisans, where she met her future husband.

Recently, Fania Brantosvkaya and two former Jewish partisans were investigated by the Lithuanian prosecutor’s office of possible war crimes. Charges, however, were never filed.

During the Soviet occupation June 1940 until June 1941

Dobre (Most) Rozenbergene Jurbarkas

We didn't discuss the Soviet Union at home, but other Jewish families spoke of Russia all the time, talking about how equality and fraternity flourished there. Well-off people like my family were not seeking a better life. As they say, the best is the enemy of the good.

But to be honest, my parents and brother, who was an independent grown-up, couldn't help being worried about the events taking place in Fascist Germany. They understood that our small country would be finally either under the Fascists or under Communist Russia.

That is why when the Soviet Army came in June 1940 my parents took it calmly. They didn't want this to happen, of course, though they understood that they should better be part of Russia, than under the thumb of the Fascists.



Soon our lives changed and the worst fears of my father were proven right.

There was mass nationalization. Our shed was sequestered and Father remained without his business. It was a good thing that my parents had stashed some lump sum of money, and the whole basement and our coop was full of food, so we weren't so

harshly affected by the changes.

But Uncle Max's houses were taken away. My mother was wise to let her cousin Mere, her husband Daniel and their daughter Raya live in the second half of our house. She was the daughter of Grandmother's sister Braina. She was much older than my mother.

My mother asked for Mere's advice regarding many things.

Part of our house was given to Mere and Daniel, so the authorities had no claims on our property. At that time Grandmother lived with Fayvel's family in Kaunas. In 1939 they sold their house and moved to Kaunas, where Grandmother Chaya Riva and uncle's wife kept a small store. Grandmother's store was nationalized but she wasn't included on the deportation lists as she was considered to be a petty entrepreneur.

In 1940 I went to a new school. It was our Yiddish lyceum, which was now called secondary school. The classes were taught by the same teachers in the Jewish language, so we felt no difference so far. Some lessons were in Russian.

First, it was a little bit hard for me. My parents knew Russian very well and helped me a lot. Pioneer and Komsomol organizations appeared instead of the Zionist ones. I didn't even think of joining them as our family was classified as rich and we had to get ready for the worst: exile to Siberia.

There was no official information in this regard, but there were rumors that our family was on the deportation lists.

I often think that it would have been better, if our family had been exiled: it might have saved my parents and brother. We were not

exiled. Probably, we would have been, as many of our pals, less well-off than we were, had been exiled. Grandmother Elke took the changes very hard. She had heart trouble. She kept to bed and died a couple of weeks before the outbreak of the Great Patriotic War.



Iosif Yudelivichus Kaunas

In 1939 the war started. Vilnius became the capital of Lithuania again. My parents and I went to see Aunt Malka and I loved traveling by train. I met my cousins. But my parents were getting more and more concerned. There were vivid fascist and anti-Semitic moods. They had not affected us—yet. Anti-Semitic signs suddenly sprang up, calling for Lithuanians to only buy from Lithuanian merchants, not Jewish ones.

But no further actions had been taken yet, these were just signs and slogans. When in June 1940 Soviet Army came in Lithuania, most Jewish people, including intelligentsia, which my parents belonged to, were relieved.

Nothing changed for us directly, but then products vanished from the stores. Wives of Soviet officers appeared in the streets looking dowdy and ill-kempt. Of course I did not like to see Soviet officers to be uncultured people, who often even did not know how to use tableware.

There were times when almost all of us considered Soviet people to be ideal. The most amusing thing that lower strata of society, like our servants, were mostly perturbed with the brusqueness and ill manners of Soviet people. Mother often had

to comfort Elya, who quite often came across their harshness. Now almost every day the proletarian meetings were held in the city.

Nationalization of property commenced, but people had not been arrested and exiled in Kaunas yet. Later on at the beginning of 1941 the family of mother's cousin Shapiro and his family, who lived in Ukrmerg, were exiled. He had a tiny store, which barely brought any income, but still he was considered a capitalist.

Father was not afraid of the exile as he was a lawyer, owning no property and being no Zionist, so he was of no danger to the Soviets.

Our tenant's house, where we were living, was sequestrated. In 1940 we moved to the apartment in a small wooden house not far from the train station.

There were a lot of changes in the life of mine and brother's. All educational institutions had been shuffled. Some of them were closed down and the assignment of the rest of the students was not clear.

In fall 1940 we went to school. Most of my classmates went to other institutions, but I met new boys and girls. I was not pleased with the ongoing, as there were a lot of friends among those who left.

I had to get used to new friends and teachers and to learning in Yiddish. When the Soviet regime was in power, there was teachers' congress, were some of the teachers took the floor against the innovations in the educational system, introduced by Soviet regime.

Many participants of the congress were arrested when it was over. In general, the pre-war year was tense.

Then many of my comrades turned 13 in 1941. I was invited for celebration of bar-mitzvah and started thinking what I should do next.

Father even did breathe a word of celebration of my bar-mitzvah. Brother's bar-mitzvah had not been marked either. My anxieties were of no importance. My thirteenth's birthday was in December and on the 22nd of June our life took a sharp turn- Hitler attacked Soviet Union.



**Geta (Ushpits) Jakiene
Shakai**

In June 1940 there was a turnaround in our life. Soviet militaries entered Lithuania and soviet regime came to power. First, there were no vivid changes, though the lists of rich people were made.

My father's name was also included in the list. Once in the middle September I was held up at work - Shakalis and I had to make adjustments in accounting.

It was dark and he saw me off. The windows of our house were dark and I gingerly came in. There was nobody there. Certain things were missing in the house. My room remained untouched. My linen was on the sofa. I was afraid to stay home by myself and went to the office. I spent a night there, sleeping on the chairs.

Next day I found my father and his family. It turned out than he and stepfather were evicted. Their house was sequestrated with the exception of my room.

Father's house was nationalized right after the Soviets came to power. Father and his family had to live in a small room at the house, where the several rich Jewish families were taken together. Our rabbi's wife shared father's room. The rabbi was deported to Siberia.

By that time several families had been deported from the city. There were Zionists, rich people both Lithuanian and Jews were among those unwanted by soviet regime. I was not willing and I could not live in the house by myself, so I moved to the place of my distant relative. I had stayed there for a year. I saw my siblings couple of times, they came in Shakai on Jewish holidays. I also visited them in Kaunas. I did not go to Prenai to visit my grandma. I still cannot forgive myself for that...



**Liza (Abramson) Lukinskaya
Kaunas**

In June 1940 the Soviet Red Army troops came to the Baltic countries and Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia were annexed to the USSR.

Many poor Jews hoped for a better life and they welcomed the Soviet soldiers as liberators with flowers. Other rich Jews and Zionists stood still, waiting for trouble to arrive. It soon came.

Many of them were exiled to Siberia. My parents, however, took things in stride, and hoped for the best. There was a tank division with the families of the soldiers on the border with Germany, in Skaudville. My mother, a funny and sociable woman soon made friends with those ladies. She played the piano in the army club and militaries often came over to my parents' place to listen to music and have a good time.



**Rananan (Kleinstejn) Malkhanova
Vikaviskis**

Our life had been calm and happy by summer 1940, which is embossed in my memory. In 1940 everything changed. The Red Army came to Lithuania and our town as well. It's difficult for me to say what my parents' attitude towards the Soviets was, as I was too little.

I know that the poor Jewish people expected the Soviet regime to free them from poverty. But our family was making a good living so I doubt that we welcomed the Soviets.

I do remember that the wave of changes that took place on the very first day. The Jewish school was converted into a common school where the subjects were taught in Lithuanian. My father was fired and we were evicted from the apartment.

We went back to our house, which hadn't been nationalized yet. Then they were after my father. The book on the municipal self-government of Vilkauskis, containing the photographs of its members, including my father's, was displayed in the window case of the town book store.

I don't know what happened to the other members, but my father was mildly repressed.

My Father was sent to teach at a Lithuanian school in a small town, Lazdijai [about 110km from Vilnius]. My father came home on Saturday and left on Sunday. Our life changed as well.

My mother fired the maids and did work about the house by herself. She didn't want to be blamed for exploitation.

A Soviet officer moved into our apartment and he was given the best room. It was harder and harder to do things about the house. Not only did my favorites, bananas and oranges, vanish from the stores, but the primary products disappeared as well. There were only two types of bread, compared to the 20 types we normally had then.

The officials who came from the USSR bought everything from the stores. Nothing was left: there were no sausages, butter, food, cakes, and manufactured goods.

There was a deficit of the usual things, linen, soap, and soda. I remember the officers pulling huge bales and packages to the post-offices. They must have been sending presents to their families. My grandfathers' stores were nationalized.

Fortunately, none of us were exiled, though our surnames were in the list of people to be exiled. Though, the word 'fortunately' is irrelevant here. My kin wouldn't have survived, if they hadn't been exiled. Another year had passed. I kept on studying at the same school which was turned into Lithuanian from Jewish.

In 1941 my brother Zeyev finished a ten-year school, former lyceum, with honors. My parents rejoiced and started thinking of his future, but their plans weren't to be carried out.



Zalman Kaplanas
Jurbarkas

In June 1940 I came back to Jurbarkas on holidays. The town hadn't changed during my absence. On Saturday, 15th June, Joseph and other Jewish guys went to the forest for a picnic on the occasion of our reunion. There we saw two large trucks filled with chattels and trunks. Women and men were in the car and we showed them the way to the border, which was 10 kilometers away. When we came to the city, we saw the Soviet frontier squad. Thus, in accordance with the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, Lithuania had been annexed to the Soviet Union.

In a couple of days we understood that things were getting worse. First, many products and goods that used to be in abundance, vanished from the stores. Soviet soldiers and officers bought out practically everything in large quantities: toilet soap, stockings, cosmetics, underwear, footwear, clothes, not to mention the food!

Butter, sausage, usually sold in ten different kinds, ham, cheese, canned products, smoked fish, alcohol practically vanished from the stores. We couldn't have imagined at that time that there was such an acute deficit of food and goods in the USSR.

Then nationalization started. They confiscated my Grandfather Morduchai's house and store. He and his family had to move to a village.

The wives of Soviet officers were walking around in the confiscated dresses and lingerie with fur boas.

Outstanding religious and Zionist activists, members of the Lithuanian governing party were arrested. It was the time when the director of our lyceum was arrested. Our family wasn't affected by the changes as Father was considered to be poor.

In two months, when I came back to Vilnius I was shocked that my friend Shailik, his parents and other members of our circle were arrested and exiled. I don't know the details. It was perilous to try finding out anything as there was a chance that I might be imprisoned, too. On 1st September 1940 the academic year started. I was given a small, but rather cozy room in the hostel.

Now, I had a place to live. A Komsomol organization was founded at university. I was spurred on to enter it. I saw what the Soviet regime was doing, using high party ideals as a smoke screen, and decided not to join either the Komsomol or the Communist Party. I devoted the whole year to my studies, passed the summer term exams and decided to stay in Vilnius to work in the library a little bit longer.



Rafael Genis
Telsiai

In the late June of 1940 the Soviets came to the Baltics. My parents took it calmly and didn't discuss this issue with us. A Russian officer was housed in one of our rooms, but our store was not taken from us. At first, our lives practically didn't change. Our town wasn't affected by repressions and arrests and deportation. Nevertheless, life was getting worse. Many products vanished from the stores. People only bought primary goods because of high prices. I was thinking of how I could help my family.

At that time the military unit, located 23 kilometers away from Rietavas, had a vacant position of a mechanic. I went there and was hired right away. My salary was 450 litas per month. I rented a room not far from the military unit. I went home to Rietavas only over the weekend. I gave almost all my salary to Mother. Here I

started studying Russian and soon I could speak with my pals fairly fluently. I was a mature and materially independent young guy. I even had a Lithuanian girlfriend, whom I intended to marry in the future.

Evacuation stories

fleeing from the Nazis and their collaborators

Frieda Shteinene
Siauliai

There was a radio at home and on 22 June 1941 we found out that the war had begun. The second day a bomb landed in the park right in the center of town. It was like a bolt from the blue. Just imagine: a small cozy town, Sunday, summer, people are strolling with their families, children are playing, amusements are open, people are eating ice cream... and within this lovely scene a bomb slams into our park! People started stampeding.

They packed and left the town, which bordered on Latvia. In couple of days there appeared retreating troops with the heavily wounded being on the carts. Father was constantly busy. He evacuated women and children. On the third day, mother was sitting by the window and sewing, while I watched the retreating Soviet army pass by our window. Then I asked mother what war was.

Mother explained it to me and said that we would be leaving soon, but still I could not understand why I could not go outside, to see my friends Shmulik and Chone, who were living across the street, and who I played with every day. I never saw them again. Both boys perished in the occupation.

Mother had been sewing and packing all

night long. She put clothes and linen in large mattress cover. Nina was very little, besides she had measles. Our neighbors-Lithuanians by the name of Yordi- brought us freshly baked bread and a bucket of honey.

On the fourth day a large truck was sent from district ispolkom. My mother, Nina, I, the

family of a communist Etis, who was working in ispolkom, wife and children of a Russian lieutenant, were in that truck. Father and other men stayed. they were responsible for evacuation. Shortly before our departure a group of children came up to us. They were from pioneer camp in Palanga, which took the first hit from fascists. Those, who were older - 14-15, went on foot. The smaller ones, were put in the truck. Father took off some of our things from the truck. Aldona and Sergey -pioneer leaders-the members of komsomol, also went with us. The truck was driven by our distant relative, husband of my father's cousin Ioffer. We left our native town without having an idea for how long. Of course, we hoped that Red Army would swiftly and ultimately rebuff fascists. When we were going along Vilnius street I saw grandmother Chaya looking out of the window. She recognized me and even stretched her hand towards me. It was the last time I saw her. Grandmother and aunt Basya had to stay, as it was impossible to transport a palsied old lady.

Hardly had we reached the border, we were met by Lithuanian national patriots, who were not willing to let the truck in. Somehow, we managed to cross the border and we headed for Riga. We were fired at on our way, fascists aircrafts were whirling over us. We were stopped by soldiers and told to mask ourselves as our bright clothes and striped mattress attracted attention. I remember I was helped to get off the truck at the moment when the shooting started. The soldiers who was standing by me, was wounded in the leg. He started limping and I was put in the car and we moved on 'under bullets'. Mother was very worried. She cried hard.

We reached Riga. We were not allowed to proceed and were taken to a large house. I

was surprised to see that there toilets in the house. There was no sewage in Zagare and there were only outhouses. We spent a night in Riga and headed in the morning. Some children also joined us in the truck and their parents walked. They wanted their kids to be saved at any cost.

We got to Pskov [Russia, about 80 km from Lithuanian border, about 650 km to the west from Moscow]. Mother and Nina stayed in Pskov, because mother wanted to find out anything about father. Besides, she was afraid that I would catch measles from Nina. So, she wanted to separate us. I went farther with other passengers. Our truck was sent to an orphanage, from which the children living there had already been evacuated. We spent a night at good beds and in the morning we started waiting for the truck. Somehow, the truck did not reach us as it was requested by the militaries for the front. We had been waiting for a while and Alexey arranged for another truck, which took us to the train station. There was a echelon with the fugitives and we got on that. Alexei and I had been running along the platform, looking for mom, but we could not find her, and I had to get on the train with sobs and snivel.

We were on the road for several days, and I vaguely remember our trip as I was crying all the time. We reached Perevosk district of Gorky oblast [now Nizhegorodskiy oblast, about 300 km to the east from Moscow]. At first, we stayed at school for couple of days. Then we were bathed, shaved. Our clothes were washed. All I had was my underwear and dress. Then either 11 or 12 people were taken to the village Goryshkinio of Gorky oblast. Aldona went with us. We were given a separate house. The four guys slept on Russian stove, and the girls were on the floor covered with the mattresses stuffed with grass. The rural girl Nadya was always with us. She gave us food and took care of us. We were fed in the canteen. We had pottage from wooden plates. Usually it was a pea soup with rye bread. In 1941 there was a want of bread, and they mixed bread with grass. It was a poor village, but they

shared all they had with the fugitives. Every day kolkhoz gave us a bucket of milk and potatoes. Nadya pared it, boiled and added milk and eggs there. She made it so that there would be enough for everybody. Besides, it was pretty tasty. Before going to sleep, we were given a glass of milk and bread. The summer was almost over. My dress was torn, and it had to through away my panties. When I was going outside, I pinned my dress at the bottom for the guys not to see.

There was an orphanage not far from old church in that village Goryshkino, located on two large hills. The church building was covered with plywood and boards to make warmer. We stayed there and were given quilts. There was fall, then winter. In spite of the fact that church was made warmer, it was really chilly. We slept four to a bed, lying close to each other and covered ourselves with four blankets one on the top of the other. We slept on the side by turns. We went outside to the toilet having put a blanket and shoes on. At first, we all missed our parents and cried at night. Then we somehow got acclimatized and had a certain routine. On New Year they made a holiday for us. There was a large adorned New Year tree. Girls were given tutus from gauze and we played the snowflakes. we were so happy. It was also the first time when we were given lavish food.

In fall 1942 I got a letter from mother and I was so happy. It turned out that she had been looking for me all this time. She went to Kazan, where the representative office of Lithuania was, and finally she was given the address in Goryshkino. When I was reading the letter out loud, all girls and boys were sobbing, and I had the tears of happiness. Mother wrote that she and sister were living in Yaroslavsk oblast. Father was drafted in 16 Lithuanian division. Mother and Nina were supposed to move in Balakhna, where the division was based, to stay closer to father. Afterwards they wanted to come and get me. Mother asked me to stay in the orphanage as there was some nutrition there, while they had a very poor living.

Now I was happy. I could stay here as long as I needed knowing that my family was waiting for me.

In early 1942 our orphanage was relocated in Ichalki. It was a rich village with fertile lands. There was a river nearby. Ichalki villagers were much more well-off here, so we had much better living conditions. We settled on the first floor of the wooden school premises. It was well heated. We slept on the cots, on the mattresses stuffed with grass. Unfortunately, that building burnt down together with our food ration in the basement, mostly potatoes. After fire, we crept in the basement, took out burnt potatoes and gnawed it. After fire boys were transferred to some wooden building and girls were housed in a brick building near Piarna river. By that time we had our own husbandry- chickens, cow, pigs. I usually pastured pigs along Piarnu river and plunged there all day long. I became a good swimmer there. Once, I was pasturing a cow with a Lithuanian girl Stepha. The cow led us far away and we got lost. They hardly could find us. Once I saw a wolf. I thought it was a dog and started even calling it smacking my lips. Fortunately, peasant ladies were going towards me. They scared the wolf off and took me home. By that time according to lendlease there was a humanitarian assistance from the USA - canned meat, egg powder and scrumptious marmalade. Life was getting better.

Here in Ichalki I finally went to school. All evacuees studied in a separate class. Our classes were in Lithuanian and learnt that language. We also had Russian classes. Here I made friends with classmates. My best friend was a Lithuanian Valya Volnayte. She was a strange girl- not like anybody else. She had six fingers on one hand. She was very sublime, an introspective and deep. My other friends were Misha Dordik, a 16- year old Jewish boy from Minsk, Lithuanian Jew Spekmen, Jewish twins Baron- a brother and a sister. I had many friends and pals.

It was hard for me to part with my friends, when in 1943 my father came to get me.

Those who were staying burst into tears. They did not know if they would see their parents again. The parents of most kids stayed in occupied Lithuanian and were sure to die. At that moment none of us knew anything about our kin. The director of our orphanage gave me winter coat and valenki [warm Russian felt boots]. Father and I were so happy to see each other ! we got on goods train, father put his military coat on the floor and we fell asleep. We came in Balakhna, where mother and Nina were living. It turned out that we were robbed on our way.

Father backpack was cut and leather and boots were taken out. Father planned to give it to mother. At that time those things were very precious. The rusks were untouched, the thieves had pity on us. Soon father went to the front. He was a cabman. He took support staff- tailors, hairdressers, launderers, to the front. He was often on the leading edge and he had to take part in the battles and to smell the powder.

It was hard to describe our meeting with mom. Sister Nina forgot me completely and even took me with children's hostility and jealousy. Since my hair was still very short, she tease me 'shaved gord from broken pot'. Gradually we started getting along. We moved to Kirov [about 400 km from Moscow], where my grandmother Mina, her son Iosif were living. Grandmother worked as a warden at selection station, and Iosif was a worker.

We settled in the hostel of the glove-making factory, where mother was offered a job. The factory was evacuated from Poltava. Here a lot of Jews- evacuees from Ukraine and Byelorussia, were working. Grandma and we lived in different ends of the town, our hostel was on the bank of Viatka river. There was a grief- Iosif died and grandmother got sick from that hard sorrow. She had lobar pneumonia, requiring hospitalization. We had to look after her. Mother got the cuttings from the gloves and made children's clothes from them. We took them to the market, sold and bought butter,

honey and wheat bread with that money. Then we walked along the rails across the city to grandmother's hospital. No matter how hard it was, but grandmother Mina recouped. She moved in with us, when she came back.

I helped mom the best way I could as I was the eldest and had to go through the school of survival in the orphanage. We were given a land plot for gardening. It was clay, but within a week we dug it and planted potatoes there. As soon as the snow melted in spring, I went to the forest to pick up the sorrel, meadow onion. Then there were berries and mushrooms. We lived in one room with 6 more people. There were Jews among the workers. The people were interesting.

I went to school in a village, Skopino. It was hard at first as could hardly speak Russian. I had poor marks in the third grade, but gradually I became one of the best students. Though I was very good at the arts. I did not like math, and I was not very good at it. I swam as good as the villagers, but I could not ski at all. I envied the local kids, who skied easily. I started learning that as well. Owing to my perseverance I also learned how to ski. It was handy in winter.

Father was in the lines. We were looking forward to his letters. With 16 division he liberated Vilnius, Siauliai, and Latvia. We started dreaming to come back to the motherland. We marked victory day- 9 May 1945- in Kirov. I remember vividly how we celebrated it. There was an evening party at the club with food and dances. Finally, we

got the invitation to come back home. We could go without it. Finally, we came back in Siauliai in fall 1945. Father was working in Zagare at that time. It was alarming time. There were a lot of nationalists in the forests. Father said that he slept with the gun under his pillow. That is why we had to stay in Siaulia. In early 1946 mother and Nina went to Zagare, and I stayed in Siaulia as I had to study. There was only an elementary Russian school in Zagare. Father became the chairman of the cooperative society in Zagare and it was a rather high position.

I lived at Pakaynis street with grandmother Mina and aunt Rochel. upon my arrival I was enrolled in the 5th grade. In 1946 mother gave birth to a girl Anna, her Jewish name was Chaya (in honor of my perished grandmother). I did not communicate much with my sister. I do not know how she grew up. as she was with mother in Zagare, and I was in Siauliai. When Nina finished the fourth grade, she also came to Siaulia to continue her education. Now we all lived together. There were children of different nationalities in our class, mostly Jews and Russians as it was a Russian school. I do not recall any cases of anti-semitism, or insults against Jews. There was a boy from a mixed family- his mother was a Ukrainian and his father Jew Nikilberg. He called me kike, but one Russian guy stood up for me and even beat the offender. I do not remember any insulting cases against me. I joined komsomol, I was very active, I even was the editor of the school paper.



Iosif Yudelevichus
Kaunas

In 1941 grandmother did not manage to get evacuated and was imprisoned in Kaunas ghetto. There was this selection during a big action in September 1941, and she happened to be among the Jews whose lives were going to be spared. But Grandma was not willing to go through the ordeal of anticipating what would be an inevitable death, or maybe she was just very proud, but I was told she just waved her hand and went over to the group of the people to be executed. She was taken to the forest along with other people and shot there.

We fled into Russia, and once there, father wrote to a friend, who suggested we should go to Sukhoy Log, Sverdlovsk Oblast. It was a large settlement in agricultural area and father's friend said that we would have potatoes there for sure. Sukhoy Log consisted of industrial community and couple of dispersed hamlets. First we were sent to the resort area Kuryii, a scenic place at the bank of the river. Here we stayed for a while. Father looked for a job and asked every day. But no one offered him anything.

Then mother took over. Even now I am wondering how she--having been pampered all her life--changed so completely. She

became a tough mother and wife, a woman who knew how to get what she wanted.

She went to the officials and made a scene, saying that we 'westerners' didn't escape from the fascists just to die from hunger because some officials refused her husband work. Suddenly Father had a job as a lawyer! He started getting food cards, including dependent's cards for us. It was getting a little easier for us. By that time we almost ran out of money and started exchanging everything we had of value just for food. Luckily, mother had been smart enough to bring along all her jewelry, so we managed.

I was not picky, and had to eat anything they were able to get. In a while father got another job at fish factory and the situation with products became much better as the employees of the factory got much better rations.

Besides, father was on some odd jobs-making applications, filing claims etc. and people were paying him with products. e were not lodged in the settlement, but in an adjacent village.

I do not remember the name of our hostess. We were given one through-room and the hostess had to walk across our room to get to hers. She was a grumbler, constantly

complaining that we were making her hut cold. I cannot say that she treated Jews in a bad way. I think she did not care what nationality we were.

Like many other dwellers of that area she associated her aggravated material position and the lack of products and food with the arrival of crowds of evacuees. They maltreated fugitives of all nationalities. It

was strange, to put it mildly, and it spoke for the shallowness of people.

The war was on and their husbands and sons were dying in the lines, and they, at any rate, did not see the true reason- the war, but thought that our arrival was to blame.



Geta Jakiene
Kaunas

22 June 1941 was a warm day. In spite of the fact that it was Sunday, I had to go to work to fulfill a task. I worked calmly for a while. Then I had some premonition. I walked out and saw that there were crowds of people outside carrying their things, including feather beds. They were scattering in different directions. My first thought was that those people were getting ready for deportation. Then I heard the word «war» and found out that Germany attacked Soviet Union.

I ran out to work as I had the keys to the safe and desk and I had to decide what to do

with the documents. Director Shakalis and chief engineer Khakhlymov were at work. Khakhlymov was Russian. He came to work for us in 1940. Shakalis said that we had to leave right away ,as fascists would be in the city soon. He sent me home to pack my things.

I ran to my dad and said good-bye to him. I thought that I was leaving only for couple of weeks and that I'd see him again soon. I only took the documents, underwear and an old coat.

There was a horse drawn cart waiting by the office and they were waiting for me. Shakalis was very worried as he could not find his wife. It turned out that she had left earlier in some cart.

The three of us- I, Shakalis and Khakhlymov- headed toward Vilnius. We saw the fugitives on our way as well as retreating units of the army. There were a lot of wounded people. There were fascist planes above our heads.

We, peaceful citizens, who were not guilty of anything, were being bombed. For the first time in my life I understood how close the death was. I dreaded that I could not say good-bye to grandmother and my siblings as I did not know when I would see them again.

We reached the outskirts of Vilnius. Shakalis left me here in a small wood and took Khakhlymov to look for his wife. He told me to wait for him there. He said he would come back and get me if he had not been killed. I had been waiting for 24 hours. I cried having lost home that he would return, but Shakalis kept his word. Late at night a car came with Shakalis, his wife and Khakhlymov.

Shakalis found his wife in a hospital. That lady was a nurse and was evacuated with a hospital. His wife was pregnant. The lady did not like me instantly. Maybe it was feminine jealousy as I was a young and pretty lady.

We reached Smolensk in that car. Here Shakalis and Khakhlymov came to the military enlistment office. Both of them were drafted in the army and sent to the front right away as they were communists. Shakalis's wife was sent to agricultural works in kolkhoz in the vicinity of Smolensk. I did not know anything about fieldwork and the next day I was assigned as an assistant to the secretary of komsomol organization. I had worked for a while. People had a very good attitude to me. In general, Russian people turned out to be very kind and outgoing. Probably I would stay there, but some unexpected meeting changed my life. I must have been protected by God. I met fugitives—some Polish Jews, who were on the square by the administration building. They had already

known what was happening to the Jews and they talked me into heading east with them. I took the locomotive train with my new pals, who treated me like a relative.

Only later, after the war, did I find out the bitter truth from Leya: my father Gerts Ushpits, his wife and two children perished in Skakai. They were shot in the first days of occupations along with other Jews. My grandmother and all her grandchildren were executed in Prenai. Only Leya, Meishe and me were the only ones out of our entire family, who survived the war. Leya and Meishe were in Kaunas. They had stayed in Kaunas ghetto during the entire period of occupation and saw all horrors of that. Before ghetto was liquidated, Leya and Meishe managed to find a shelter and survive somehow.

We were on the road for about two weeks. Soon I ran out of the bread that I was given in kolkhoz but my new pals gave some to me. Though, we did not have much food with us. At that time I found out what it was to starve. We came in the city Ulyanovsk [now Simbirsk, Russia, about 800 km to the East from Moscow]. At first I was taken to the evacuation point, where all of us were fed. Here we finally took a bath. I was sent in a small settlement in the vicinity of Ulyanovsk and housed in with a Russian lady. I did not work for a while and the lady gave me food. Unfortunately, I cannot recall her name. I will be grateful to her till the end of my days. Her husband was in the lines and she lived with her small daughter. She treated me like her sister. Once in late fall, I went to the lake, slipped down and fell in freezing water. The hostess took frozen dress from me, rubbed me, tucked me in bed, and gave me warm tea. It was a motherly care. The hostess even gave me her clothes as I practically had nothing. I started speaking a little of Russian as before that I did not know a single Russian word and explained what I wanted with the help of the gestures.

With time I found a job as an attendant in the orphanage. I had a lot of work to do. The

children who were found in the region, were hungry, dirty and lice-ridden. We washed them, shaved their heads and disinfected their clothes. I had meals here. The food was scarce, but it was enough for me. I did not need much. In a while, in 1942 I was employed at the military plant. When I was working with the tool, I felt that I was helping the front and making contribution in the victory. I settled in the hostel. There were 8 ladies in one room. There were different people- kind, nice, and blatant thieves. Someone stole my food cards for several time and I starved. The only warm thing I had- a jacket - was also stolen. We had meals in the plant canteen, where we gave our food cards. In the evening we had carrot drink, sang patriotic songs and waited for the news from the front. In general we lived the life during the war. I was here on the victory day, the 9th of May. After that I started thinking about heading home, though I understood that my relatives most likely had perished.

In 1943 I sent a request in the search bureau in Buguruslan and they replied that none of my relatives -dad, grandma, Leya, Meishe- were in the lists of the evacuees. I sent couple of letters at old addresses in Lithuania and got the response to my surprise.

Uncle Yankle, the husband of my aunt from Pilviskeie, wrote to me. He came back from concentration camp in Germany and miraculously received a letter sent at his old address. From uncle's letter, I found out my sister Leya and brother Meishe, survived Kaunas ghetto.

Soon I received Leya's letter from Kaunas. Leya wrote that I should not hurry home as many fascist followers left in the woods and made all kinds of diversions. I insisted on my return and Leya sent me the invitation letter. At that time it was hard to get tickets. It looked like the whole country was going somewhere either to the west or to the east. I stood in the line for couple of times. Once, a man at the train station put me in the line saying that I was his wife and I managed to get the ticket to Lithuania.

I was recommended to be a military trainer at the vocational school. I went to Lipetsk [today Russia], an industrial town, where there were a lot of schools. I was hired by one of the vocational schools right away. I rented a room. I worked hard. All I had to wear was a military uniform. Lithuania was still occupied, and I didn't care where I should live. I did well at work. I had military awards: two Great Patriotic War Orders and others.



(This is me, 1945)

Zalman Kaplanas (Vilnius)

I wanted revenge against the Germans

Early in the morning on 22nd June 1941 we woke up to the sounds of bombing. The hostel building was shuddering from the blast. We went down to the basement to wait until the air-raid was over. Among the students there were some Fascists. They took out knives and started to threaten the Jewish students. Early in the morning on 23rd June I left the hostel taking basic things with me - linen, some food and a student's card, which was the only document I had. Now it took me about three hours to get to the train station, though before it was only 20 minutes. The city was in flames, buildings were collapsing. The bombing was incessant. One of my acquaintances, Rosa, a student, and a 35-year old Polish Jew were my company on the way to the train station. The Polish Jew told us what the Fascists were doing with Jews in Poland and that was the reason why he had fled in 1939 and come to Vilnius. We were even more discouraged.

It was really hard for us to get to the train station. There was a dreadful panic. People were nudging to squeeze in the car. We

were lucky: at the eleventh hour we jumped in the car of the train which was leaving Vilnius. The train started rolling. Before that moment I didn't have a chance to think over the events, remember my kin. Now, I understood that it was most likely that I'd never see neither my parents nor my brother again. Jurbarkas was occupied as it was the town close to the [German-Soviet] frontier. The Fascists entered Vilnius just after we left.

It took us more than 24 hours to get from Vilnius to Minsk [today Belarus], though the distance wasn't that great. We got off at the goods station. Minsk had already been bombed. The three of us - we decided to stick together - went to the university, hoping that we would join the Belarusian students. It seemed to us that the Fascist attack was a misconception and soon the valiant Soviet army would defeat them. We couldn't imagine that horrible calamity was ahead.-We walked around the city, and our appearance was really different from the rest of the people. We were dressed much better than those around us. I was clad in an

elegant vest suit and tan Swiss leather boots, and was carrying a tan portfolio. My companions stood out just as much.

Hardly had we walked for 500 meters and we were taken to the police station. During the first days of the war people were afflicted with rumors and panic of spies. They saw a spy in every stranger who looked different. We showed them our documents.

As the letter were in Lithuanian, the policeman thought us to be foreign. Thus we were immediately considered to be spies. A young officer took us in the yard of the police station, told us to lean against the wall and raise our hands ... My life would have ended right here if not for a lucky chance... A police lieutenant came to the police station and asked who we were. When our documents were shown to him, he started to reprimand his subordinates. As it turned out he had served in Vilnius for a year and understood Lithuanian. He apologized and asked us to leave as soon as possible.

In the suburbs of the city we stayed in some kitchen garden for about three hours waiting for the bombing to stop. Then we joined the people who were walking in the western direction. It took us a week to reach Mogilev [300 km from Vilnius]. I saw a lot of deaths on my way. The Germans were constantly bombing. Mothers were carrying frightened little kids. Old people were driven in carts. I saw how the columns of convicts were convoyed from Minsk prison. There were mature gray-haired people, the elite of the nation. They could hardly move as their feet were chafed and bleeding. They were guarded by NKVD people with dogs on both sides. It was a terrible scene. I remember it as if it was yesterday.

The three of us got on the train and went to Tambov oblast [today Russia], covering a distance of almost 1000 kilometers. Here I was sent to a kolkhoz. We were given lodging in the houses of farmers. It was a warm summer and we slept on a hay stack.

We were mocked at, because we hardly understood Russian. When we were trying to say something our Lithuanian and Jewish accent seemed preposterous. The local people were even more captivated by our bourgeois attire, despite the fact that everything we had was starting to wear out completely.

I worked there for almost three months: July, August and beginning of September. I was despondent by the atmosphere in the village. Almost everyday somebody was drafted into the army, in the action lines and people got together on that occasion. It looked like a funeral and a wedding at the same time. People were dancing, singing, playing accordion and those who were to remain without husbands were crying and moaning.

I understood that the locals treated me, a young and strong man, with contempt [because Zalman was not drafted]. I addressed the military enlistment office a couple of times, asking them to send me in the lines. The response was the same: wait for your turn. We didn't know at that time that it was Stalin's order not to draft people from the newly-annexed lands. The Soviet regime didn't trust us.

I left my landlady the miserable money that I earned, my bourgeois clothes. She gave me a simple working jacket, pants and shoes instead of boots, a bottle of milk and rusks. I said good-bye to my fellow travelers and went to the military enlistment office for them to take me to the front. I had been waiting for the decision for a couple of days, lying on my jacket in the yard of the military enlistment office along with the rest of the guys like me. In three days, the 300 of us were aligned in columns and sent somewhere. We had no idea where we were heading.

It was horrible. Every day we had to walk about 30 kilometers, falling from emaciation. We would walk for 50 minutes and then had a 10-minute break. We were fed with herring and bread. Being starved

and exhausted we were thirsty as well. So, we reached Atkarsk, Saratov oblast [today Russia], where we stayed at the draftees' point for about three weeks. We went through some quick training here. Then, we were given the uniform, a rifle, and got on the train. I was assigned to the combat engineering separate battalion of the South-Western front. I had to go through another training session: on blasting, grenades and mines. We were in Krasnodar region, far from the front, 2200 kilometers from home.

In about a month I was called by the commander of the squad who appointed me to be signaler of the squad. When I came to the command post of the battalion with the assignment and the commander found out that I was from Lithuania, he got angry with me and cried out that I had no right to be in the lines. I was kicked out from the squad. They took my uniform and sent me to the penalty squad. In a while I came to the replacement depot. Commanders from different divisions came here to take the soldiers. This time I decided to be more cunning. I didn't have the documents on me. When I was called and asked where I was from, I said I was from Belarus. I remembered the towns we were passing by on our way from Minsk, and recalled the town of Smilovichi. I named Krasnoarmeyskaya [Red Army] Street and a number of the building at random, understanding that streets named Krasnoarmeyskaya were in almost all towns. I also mentioned that all buildings were one-storied. Things went smoothly.

By that time my Russian was pretty good, over two years had passed since the Soviet regime had been established in Lithuania. I had to speak Russian all that time, besides all subjects in the university were taught in Russian in 1940-41. My Jewish accent didn't embarrass anybody because before the war there were a lot of Jewish towns in Belarus, where people spoke with a strong Jewish accent.

Again I was in the training squad. From morning till night we had a marching drill,

studies on defense and assault methods. At that time the allies' supplies system lend-lease commenced. [Lend-lease is the system of transfer (loan or lease) of weaponry, ammunition, strategic raw materials, provision etc.; supplies in terms of lend-lease were made by the USA to the ally-countries on anti-Hitler coalition in the period of WWII. The law on lend-lease was adopted by the US Congress in 1941.] Apart from food products, canned meat, ham and egg powders the army also got good uniforms. We were dressed in English things: warm uniform, underwear, fore and aft cap, boots.

We had been trained for three months and on 9th May 1942 we were supposed to be sent to the lines.

At night, on 8th May I was woken up and called in the headquarters dug-out. It was dark in the dug-out. The light was coming from the table lamp. The representative of SMERSH was sitting at the table. I was interrogated. I was asked questions about who I was and who my parents were. I was telling my 'legend,' but the lieutenant was asking for more and more details. Suddenly I heard the voice coming from the middle of the dug-out: 'Enough fooling around, we know everything about you, who you are and where you come from!' The captain came up to me and told me that in the best case scenario I would be sentenced to ten years in the camps or sent to the penalty squad for fraud and deliberate misleading of the army commandment. I began to justify myself saying that I was lying only for one reason: to be in the lines.

I had a sleepless night. Even now I can't comprehend how they could possibly find out about me. Probably they had a hunch. In the morning all transgressors were aligned on the drill square. As it turned out there were 180 of us. This was quite a scenic view. Before aligning us they took our new English military coat, boots and underwear and gave us all written-off uniforms. For instance, the sole of one of my boots was tied with a rope and my military coat was

without one lapel. The head of the political department of the division held a speech from the pulpit. He said that we certainly weren't the enemies, but as per order of the Defense Committee we weren't entitled to be in the lines as we didn't manage to command the loyalty of the party and government. We were sent to the city of Engels to be involved in construction works of the aviation plant.

Engels is a town located on the bank of the Volga River opposite to Saratov. We settled in the barracks close to the construction site. The hardest days of my life started here. Even now I recall those moments with a shudder. The mode was the same as in the concentration camp.

We slept on the bunks without linen using our coats as a blanket. In the morning we got up early, had a bowl of soup made from semi-rotten cabbage, a tiny slice of bread, and off to work we went. Our daily standard was to overhaul four cubic meters of earth. Late in the evening we had the same soup. In a month and a half I weighed less than 50 kg. I started walking with a stick as I was so emaciated that I could hardly move.

Once during work I lost consciousness and when I came around I was in the hospital. I stayed there for a couple of weeks. I was well fed and my young organism recouped very quickly. But still, I didn't feel very well. I had another physical examination where it was decided what kinds of work I was capable of doing. I heard two Jewish ladies, the doctors, saying that I would die if I was sent to such hard labor. They were sorry for me. I think those two unknown ladies can take credit for rescuing my life. I was sent to a Lithuanian kolkhoz.

That Lithuanian settlement not far from Engels was founded at the end of the 18th century, when, during the Polish rebellion of Kosciuszko, the tsarist government exiled entire villages here. Having passed thousands of kilometers in Russia I wasn't surprised by the indigence and gloominess of the lives in Soviet kolkhozes. When I

came to this Lithuanian village it seemed to me that I was home in my Klaipeda. There were clean well-built stone and wooden houses resembling my parental house in Lithuania, with laced curtains, flowers on the window sills and flower-beds in front of the house.

There were several large Lithuanian families in that village. We, the group of six people - five Lithuanians and one Jew - settled in the house of a Lithuanian landlady. Her name was Gaidite. She was a widow, her husband had been killed in action and her elder son was in the lines. She was very hospitable. She fed us and let us sleep on a large Russian stove.

One of my companions, an elderly Lithuanian, was wounded in the urine bladder and he suffered from uroclepsia. It was summer time. He put a couple of pants on and in spite of that they were drenched, producing a stench. In a couple of days the other guys left the place as they couldn't stand the smell and left their comrade. The odor was unpleasant for me as well, but I was sorry for the elderly Lithuanian and stayed with him. The landlady was moved by my good attitude towards that Lithuanian. Once she mentioned that I was a Jew but treated the Lithuanian better than his comrades. Since that time Gaidite started treating me better than the rest. She tried to give me more food. She said that I reminded her of her son with my kindness.

We worked in the kolkhoz. It was the beginning of fall. We loaded the grain on camels and took it to the commodity point in Saratov. There was no bridge across the river in Engels. There was a ferry. Once, at the end of October I heard Lithuanian speech on the ferry boat. A man and a woman were having a conversation. I broached the conversation with them and found out that in Balakhna, a town not far from Gorkiy, there was a Lithuanian battalion being reformed. [The battalion was called Lithuanian because it was formed mostly of former Lithuanian citizens, who were volunteers, evacuated or

serving in the labor front.] They told me the way. The evacuated Lithuanian government was in Saratov, in Bristol hotel, and Lithuanian citizens could address their requests there. I didn't lose hope to be in the lines, especially understanding that my kin had most likely perished. I remained by myself and had nothing to lose.

The next time I was in Saratov, I went to the hotel. At once I recognized the people who were receiving me. These were Kviadaras, the head of the Forestry Department of the Republic and the Minister of Agriculture, Mitskis. I told them my story and asked to send me to the Lithuanian battalion. Then Kvyadaras told me in Lithuanian: 'You are a child, a boy why are you rushing in the lines? It is pandemonium there ... They are moving to Stalingrad now.' I was persistent, explaining that I can't idle around being young and strong, I have to fight the Fascists. Besides, my relatives had perished. I was issued documents, and I went to the military enlistment office. Again I had to go through physical examination and I was recognized fit for the front lines. It was January 1943.

The landlady gave me warm clothes, rusks, pig fat and saw me off like a son. I reached Saratov and from there I squeezed in the overcrowded train, as during evacuation, and went to Gorkiy, then Balakhna, where the Lithuanian squad was located. Again I had to go through an examination. There was a Jewish doctor, Epstein, who didn't want to issue a conclusion that I was fit for the front line service. It was hard to talk him into changing his conclusion, but I managed. The conclusion said that I was fit for the front-line service.

I was sent to the second squad of the Lithuanian division #16, which was getting ready to be sent to the front lines. Again I was given a uniform. The training lasted for two weeks. After that the mandate board considered my case and it was decided that I should go to Podol infantry military school. The duration of studies was four months. In June I was supposed to graduate. At that

time there was a turning point in the war. The Soviet Army was attacking and the commandment decided to prolong my studies aiming to preserve officers. We had several extensions: the first time for six months, then for three months. As a result we studied for 15 months at this school, revising the same material.

I graduated from the school in the rank of a junior lieutenant. I was sent to Yartsevo, Smolensk oblast, where the Lithuanian rifle division #50 was being reformed. I was platoon commander for 24 hours. The next day I was called by the regiment commander Churbaneyev and was assigned commander of squad. I was in that position for about a week. Then I was assigned the personal aide of the headquarters commander. I worked for a couple of weeks and then I was supposed to go through the investigation of the board consisting of general and colonels. They wanted to check me. I was asked many questions. In the end they were satisfied with my answers.

The same evening my school comrade, a Lithuanian guy named Markovich, brought me a letter from Jurbarkas [Lithuania had already been liberated]. His relatives wrote me a detailed letter, saying how my relatives perished. On 3rd July 1941 my brother Mendel was shot in the Jurbarkas cemetery together with 350 young Jewish people. Father was shot with the group of Jews in August. He had to dig a grave for himself. My dear mother, whom I loved best of all, was sent to Kaunas ghetto, where she died on 28th September 1941 during a big action. I was grieving. I was in a terrible mood. It's one thing to think that your loved ones might have perished, and quite another thing is to know about that for sure. I was alone in the whole world.

In the morning I was called to the headquarters and told about my assignment to the post of the aide of the headquarters regiment commander. I lost control, burst into tears and said that I didn't want to work or to live. The regiment commander reprimanded me brusquely and told me to

leave. I went outside, sat on the steps and started crying. I felt that somebody was giving me a hug. It was the regiment commander. He sat next to me and started comforting me. He told me that in Ukraine his wife and children had been murdered by the Lithuanian Polizei. He said that we should survive no matter what, for our foes not to gloat over our death. He said that I was capable and would cope with work. He said he would be helping me. So, I became the personal aide of the regiment commander. Our regiment wasn't involved in battles that much. Our battles were of short duration and not very critical. We fought in Smolensk oblast, liberated a part of Belarus. The Fascists were hardly resisting us. They mostly were retreating. In two months, in September 1944 we were transferred to Lithuania to the prewar military camp of the Lithuanian army Gaizhuna. It was the place of a mass abandonment of post. Lithuanians left for the forests, having taken the weapons. 25-30 people left our regiment with the guns. Every morning the regiment commander asked, 'Kaplan, tell me how many?' and I reported how many people were left with weapons and how many of them were unarmed.

On the anniversary day of the October Revolution there was a mess in the barracks. The soldiers were drinking moonshine with the local broads and at dawn many of them headed for the forests with them. It turned out that 180 deserted the regiment. It was a big scandal. The commandment and I were threatened with the camps, but what could we have done? In a couple of days, as per order of the Supreme Commander, our regiment was reformed. Our banner was taken from us, and that was it. I was transferred to Vilnius, where the capital regiment was formed from those who remained in our former regiment. In the lines I was offered to join the Party on multiple occasions. I honestly said that I was raised in bourgeois Lithuania and wouldn't be able to give my life for Lenin and Stalin. A long time ago I made up my mind not to enter the Party.



(with my friend Vladislav Polushkin, 1943)

Rafael Genis

After the war ... A Lithuanian lady had used the foundation of our house to build her own there. I went in. We had a long conversation.

She told me about the execution of local Jews, about the deaths of my kin. As it turned out my parents and Grandpa Nakhman were denounced by the neighbors. They were those Lithuanian guys, who were my friends, who came to our house. All my kin, Grandpa Nakhman, Father, Liber with his family and Isroel, were shot in the first days of the occupation of Telsiai.

On the day when the war broke out, my brother Liber and his wife Ida with their baby daughter - about two months old - came to see my parents. The lady said that she noticed the tail of the column, where Liber and Ida with the stroller, were walking. The Fascists took the stroller away and it was rolling on the curb. My brother darted after the stroller and the German shot him right away, then they shot the baby.

There were about 14 places out of town where Jews were executed. I don't know exactly where my kin perished. Father's sisters Chaya Riva and Channa also perished. And my brother Dovid, who was studying at Telsiai yeshivah, was shot in Rainai along with 300 rabbis. My mother and sister Tsilya lived a bit longer. One lady, who crept out from the pile of corpses told me about it later.

They were in the ghetto in Telsiai. Lithuanians often went there to hire people. One of them wanted to take Tsilya and save her that way, but my sister clung on to my mother and didn't agree to part with her. Then a furious Fascist shot both Tsilya and my mother.

My birthday was on 21st June 1941. It was Saturday and my pals from the military unit wanted me to celebrate it with them, so I didn't go home. My pals and the head of the cart fleet Shalin celebrated with me. We drank a bottle of vodka and went dancing to the club. We stayed there until midnight. I went home and fell asleep straight away.

At 6am I was awoken by Shalin: 'Get up, the war has started!' I should say that I wasn't surprised. We understood in the military unit that the war was inevitable. There was talk about it. We said that we wouldn't give up a single piece of our land.

Shalin sent me over to the garage and ordered us to dismantle the cars for the Fascists not to take them. There were a lot of them and it took us a long time. We dug a huge pit and covered the cars with timber waste as the saw mill was nearby. By that time the town, where the military unit was located, was almost vacated. Some people ran away, others were hiding.

There was one truck in our unit. I drove it - I had recently learnt to drive. I drove three members of the party, the commanders. I remembered one of them: Vaikus. In general, I was lucky to be able to drive and was ordered to take the Communists. There was no gas and I could not fill the car up. We went to the district town Telsiai. I was worried about my relatives, but I had neither a chance nor time to go to Rietavas. People weren't permitted to go there any more. Rietavas was closer to the border and the Germans had already occupied my town, besides my passengers were getting nervous and made me hurry. We arrived in Telsiai. I saw a large truck by the building of the district administration, where the leaders of the district, party members were sitting. My passengers joined them. I didn't think long and also jumped in the truck and we headed off.

We were going towards the Russian border. We were stopped by Lithuanians in Mazeikiai [town in North-West Lithuania, close to the Latvian border]. They had already taken the German side and they were not willing to let us through. Our activists had weapons, they shot a couple of times and the Lithuanians ran away. There was a covering force of Russian Army soldiers. They didn't let any single civilian car, a cart or a pedestrian pass. There were a lot of people. At that time a low-flying German plane started firing at people a couple of times. Many weren't moving. Our car was crushed. The passengers scattered. My sandals were torn so I went barefoot. My feet still remember the hot July asphalt. At that time a military column was passing the border, and I got under the tarpaulin of one of their trucks and went with them. We reached Pskov [town in Western Russia, close to the Latvian border]. I was afraid that they would find me, so I jumped off the truck and sat on the curb.

It was the first time I was in a Russian town. It was so dirty! It seemed to me that I happened to be in a cesspool after clean Lithuanian towns. I walked around the town and reached the train station. There was a

car with evacuees. I got on the train and it left shortly. It was a locomotive train packed with people. There were mostly women, children and elderly people. I had neither drink nor food

We traveled for two or three days. We reached Gorky oblast and got off at the station Bogoyavleniye [about 700 km from Moscow]. There were carts there and we were taken to a kolkhoz. I was housed by a smith, Mikheyev.. I was still barefoot and Mikheyev gave me straw shoes.

Now I had some shelter, but I had to look for a job. The smith had no job for me. I went from house to house in the village, went to the rural administration, to the canteen. Finally I was hired by the bakery. I lived and worked here until 8th March 1942. On 8th March I got a notification from the military enlistment office and went there right away. I was drafted into the army in the Moscow region. I still cannot understand why I wasn't assigned to the 16th Lithuanian division, which was also being formed in Balakhna, and where many Lithuanians were being drafted no matter if they were Jewish or not. I was just a stranger: my Russian was broken and my mentality was different.

I and hundreds of unseasoned recruits were thrown in the battle. We even had never held a weapon in our hands. I don't remember anything about the battle, but the whistle of the bullets.

Soldiers from Russia often asked me how I was living in capitalist Lithuania and I honestly and straightforwardly told them that we had a good living - we had a lot of food, abundance in goods and no oppression. I was called to the party organization several times and accused of anti-Soviet propaganda. I tried to explain that I didn't concoct anything. I was arrested and kept in custody for 14 days along with other 'anti-Soviets' - the wardens of the liberated villages etc.

When I finished the sergeant school I went in the reserve regiment of the tank army of the First Ukrainian Front. We covered almost all of Ukraine, having liberated Sumy, Poltava and the Chernigov oblast. Once in Poltava [today central Ukraine] I was in a dugout, and it was hit by a bomb. I was covered with earth. Fortunately, they found me and sent me to hospital. I had a bad concussion. After the hospital I happened to be in the 9th Tank-Destroyer division, which reached Kiev.

There were a lot of tragic and sad things of course. Every day some of our pals didn't come back from the battle. So many of them were lost! We couldn't even bury them, just leave the cadavers on the battle field and move on. We saw boys dying. Even now I can't get how we were able to survive. We hadn't washed ourselves for months, didn't change our clothes, slept in wet dirty clothes, were frozen to death, but still we fought. Though, I should say that we were fed quite well at the time when there were problems with nutrition.

Knowing the Fascists' attitude towards the Jews, and reading the military press, I understood that Lithuanian Jews, including my relatives, were exterminated. When we were liberating towns and villages in Ukraine, the local people told us about executions of Jews in ghettos and camps, about the atrocity of the Fascists.

I saw horrible pits, the places where Jews perished and understood even more that I remained alone. My task was revenge. I went in every battle to take revenge and exterminate as many Fascists as possible. In summer 1943 I undermined four enemy tanks and every burning tank was a monument for my kin.

I reached Kiev with the army of Marshall Rybalko [Marshall Pavel Semyonovich Rybalko (1892-1948) commanded the Third Tank Guards Army, which liberated parts of Eastern Europe from Nazi occupation in WWII] and took part in the liberation of this city. At night on 6th November we crossed the Dniepr on boats. There was a gun crew with us and they put boards one in front of the other and placed two anti-tank weapons on each of the boards. The German artillery fired on the boats from the high right bank. They hit our boat and I swam to the right bank. I was drifted away 500 meters as the current of the Dniepr was strong. I was in Kiev. There was a barge by the dock. I reached it and then I remember only a flash of the blasted shell. I can't remember anything else.

I came around in a Tambov [today Russia] hospital. I had a concussion and an eye injury. There were fragments of shell in my eye. They said they would operate after the war, when they would have more time. They suggested removing my eye, but I refused. I had the fragment in my eye for 26 years, and only then I had it operated. I was moved to a hospital in Saratov [today Russia] from Tambov.

I was discharged in early January 1944 with the so-called 'white card': I could not be in the lines any more. I had to get recouped somehow. I had to find a lodging and a job.



(with my mother Ester Kleinstein, my brother Zeyev and my father Moses Kleinstein, 1935)

Ranana Malkhanova

Surviving in the ghettos, looking for safety

On the night of 22nd June 1941 the town had been bombed from 3.30am. Our frontier town was one of the first to be hit by the fascists [German Nazis]. There was a terrible panic. People were trying to escape to wherever they could. It was good that it was Sunday and my father wasn't at work. He managed to get a cart with a horse. All of us got on it taking only a small suitcase and left the town. A large truck passed us. There were young people in it, my brother's coevals. They started talking my brother into leaving with them for Russia, but my mother was strictly against it. She thought that all of us had to stick together and didn't let Zeyev go.

We were only several kilometers away from Vilkaviskis and the Germans on bikes were moving towards us. It was the first time I heard their abrupt phrase, 'Schnell, schnell!' [German for 'Quick, quick!']. We and other fugitives were stopped and told to go back to the town. Upon our return the first selection was made: the young men were separated and taken to the basement of the printing house. My father and brother didn't

have a chance to say goodbye to us; they were arrested. My mother and I headed to our house, but it was in shambles. My mother found some Jewish people she knew, whose house was miraculously safe. I don't remember what we were living on at that time. My mother must have sold her precious things which she managed to take with her. During the first days of the occupation there was an order saying that Jews were supposed to wear clothes with a yellow star on the sleeve. Those who disobeyed were to be shot at once. It was hard to find yellow cloth, but my mother managed and embroidered Jewish stars on the clothes.

There were a lot of bans. A curfew was introduced for the Jews which was earlier than the other citizens. We weren't allowed to go into the stores and walk on the pavements. The mournful Jewish figures walked along the sidewalk, and the poor Jews were to walk on the road. If any of the rules were violated, Jews would be executed. Every day we took some food, sandwiches and bread to the printing house.

The guard was a Lithuanian. He looked away, when we approached the basement. The windows were barred and we saw hands stretching out. We gave them the food and didn't know how it was distributed. We didn't manage to see neither my brother nor father.

Once, when we were coming back from the printing house, my mother and I overlooked the order and walked on the sidewalk. A bigwig fascist, accompanied by his aides, was moving ahead of us. He was an elderly man, corpulent and paunchy. Having seen my mother and me, the fascist started stamping, spitting and crying out some German words. I understood some of the words and was able to understand that he was threatening all the Jews, saying that he would crash and smear us. My mother and I then moved to the road.

In that period of time I saw Grandfather Jacob [Kleinstein] only once. He lived in his house with his sisters. That was the way we lived by 8th July 1941. Some of the neighbors informed us that the men had been told to leave the basement and run towards the barracks. Many ladies followed them, but my mother was petrified. We were told that there were all the young men and lads who hadn't managed to escape. They were told to take off their clothes and leave their precious things in the barracks. Then they were given spades to dig their graves. The area was encircled with barbed wire. Naked men were forced to go under that wire. Then some Lithuanian pal said to my mother that my father refused to do it and he was hit by the spades and then shot dead.

After some time, the remaining Jews in the town were taken to those barracks. [On 28th July 1941, the systematic murder of the Jews in Vilkauskis began. At first about 900 men were murdered. A ghetto was established for the remaining Jews, most of them women and children, in the local barracks, close to the mass graves of the executed men. The Jews in the ghetto were killed on the day after Rosh Hashanah, 24th

September 1941. Only a few survived until the liberation.] I didn't see my grandfather and his sisters. They were most likely killed. There was a huge heap of things in the barracks: men suits, shirts, shoes. Some papers and documents were scattered.

I saw how women rushed to that heap screaming. They were hoping to find traces of their husbands, sons, and brothers. My mother stood still. I don't know whether she felt compunction for not having let Zeyev go with the youth. My mother never cried in my presence and made no comments on the events. Though, reminiscences on the pre-war times gave her so much pain that she couldn't even speak. I don't remember how much time we spent in those barracks: a month or a month and a half. It was like a bad dream. The Lithuanians we knew brought us food. I remember the feeling of constant hunger and thirst. We went to the toilet in the same room of the barrack, crammed with wretched and frightened women, children and elderly people. There was a terrible stench. It was summer and we had no chance to take a bath.

Craftsmen were selected among the Jews: seamstress, watch repairers, cobblers. The rest of the Jews: elderly men, women and children, were murdered. My mother turned out to be rather swift, which wasn't unusual for her before the war. In an extreme situation, a person has to be ready to do things beyond his/her capacity. She met the family of the tailors and managed to introduce us as their relatives. Owing to that we remained untouched. In late August all of us had survived. The Jewish craftsmen were aligned and told to walk on foot. We were convoyed by the local polizei [see Lithuanian Polizei]. Those beasts tried to curry favor and tortured the poor even worse than the fascists: beat them, insulted them, made them run without giving them a break. They even made people do their toilet calls on the spot. Those who were behind were shot on the spot. I stayed close to my mother and she tried to comfort me.

We were taken to Pilviskiai, my mother's hometown, the place where my grandparents lived. Their house was vacant. They were most likely killed during one of the actions in Pilviskiai. There were a lot of vacant houses in the town, as their dwellers had been shot. We were shown where to live. My mother and I settled in one house with the family of the tailor. Thus, Pilviskiai was transformed into a small ghetto. We stayed there for about three months.

Somehow life was gradually getting better, if it could be called 'life.' My mother stayed indoors most of the time. It was difficult for her to walk along her native streets with a yellow star. She helped about the house and learnt how to do rough seaming jobs and assist the host. I don't remember what we were eating. I, who was used to being pampered to eat, was constantly hungry. At that time I wasn't picky. I ate whatever I got, whether it was a slice of stale rye bread, potato or gruel. My mother was really happy if she could get a glass of milk for me. I felt pretty good in Pilviskiai. I had curly and fair hair, blue eyes, and didn't look like a Jew at all. I was fluent in Lithuanian. That's why I ran around the town without the yellow star, as I was taken to be a Lithuanian girl. The reason why I had a chance to move freely in the streets was because I was able to notice a lot.

On the evening of 13th November, I was in a hurry to get home, as it was fall, and it gets dark early. I saw polizei men knocking on the doors of the houses where Jews found temporary lodging and heard them swearing. Some old people, sobbing women and children were ousted to the central square.

I wasn't that joyful kid I used to be some months ago. Tribulation made me grow up and become observant. I understood immediately that the most terrible and last action against Jews was underway. The remaining Jews would be murdered. I went home and cried out, 'Mother, let's run!'

In a few words I told her what I had seen and my mother packed soap, towel and underwear in the punnet. We put on warm knitted jackets and headed out to nowhere in particular. We tried to convince the family of the tailor to go with us, but they refused, saying that there was no escape from those beasts and didn't believe in the rescue.

It was cold and drizzling. My mother and I were dragging along the soft shoulder and reached an estate. We did take a risk to knock on the door. We saw a barn and went there. We slept there until dawn. I was sleeping, while my mother kept her eyes wide open. In the morning I knocked on the door. A Lithuanian opened it and let us in. There was no need of introducing ourselves, as my mother looked like a typical Jew. The host said that he would gladly give us a hand, but his neighbors weren't very good men and would stooge on all of us. He said that he would let us stay for one day and then we would have to leave.

The host gave us a lot of food to eat until we were full and then we stayed in the barn the whole day. At dawn the host came and told my mother where to go. During the day he had managed to talk to somebody regarding a shelter for us. We went to a tiny hamlet, which didn't even have a name. An elderly Lithuanian peasant couple lived there. Lithuanians were tacit people. Nobody asked us any questions. They silently put a bowl with food on the table and heated the bath. My mother and I enjoyed it very much.

I'm still surprised with human nature under severe conditions, when our life could end at any minute, and we were finding reasons for joy. We slept in the attic on the haystack. We stayed there for about three weeks, and then we started wandering. It's hard, even impossible, to restore those years in my memory. We constantly changed places. At times we stayed in one place for only a couple of days, but sometimes we stayed for a couple of months. Almost nobody refused in giving us a hand. There were cases when people were scared to shelter us because of

their neighbors or polizei men, but still they tried to find a place for us and directed us where to go. Now I think back to how we ran for our lives and the horror of the fascist occupation. We didn't stay in the peasants' house for very long, as there wasn't enough room, and besides it was dangerous for us to stay there. Garrets, basements, sheds and barns were the places for us to stay. We were very well fed. People gave us the best they had. I think the hosts didn't let themselves eat an extra piece, but gave us milk, sour cream, a full bowl of thick soup and a piece of pig's fat on a slice of bread.

When we were ready to leave, the hosts gave my mother a parcel wrapped in clean linen. I remember how we hid in a hamlet in the house of the Lithuanians with the surname Marma. Their house burnt down to ashes and all of us slept on hay in the shed. The hostess cooked food on the fire in the yard. She cooked a separate dinner for us, but not worse than for her family, instead better and more substantial. I was given some clothing. I was getting bigger and besides, while roaming the clothes wore out quicker.

Winter was the hardest on us. My boots were torn apart and my feet were bigger. One Lithuanian lady taught my mother how to knit, and gave her needle and threads. My mother knitted thick socks for me and I was walking around in them in the snow. Strange as it may seem, in those wandering years, neither my mother nor I got ill. We didn't even sneeze. Many peasants were impressed by my Lithuanian. They even invited their relatives over to hear me speak and sing Lithuanian songs that I knew. In my early adolescence I truly loved Lithuanian people, and their consideration. It was a shame how their gloominess covered their real kind hearts.

I grew older and didn't care. All I wanted was food and a roof over my head. I wanted to read and learn something new. Peasants usually kept books on the garrets where we often had to sleep. Usually these were the books on the vitae of holy people and other

Catholic books. There was nothing more for me to read, so I read each of those books from cover to cover and knew all the holy people and Catholic prayers. In one peasant house they even suggested that I should be adopted, baptized and raised as their own daughter, but my mother objected to that of course and wanted to leave that house as soon as possible. When we left, the peasant woman gave me a rosary, and I said the rosary when I was in the shelters. The best place where we lived was in the hamlet of the Lithuanian family Strimaitis. They were very well-off. They owned 40 hectares of land, which was a lot for a small Lithuanian family.

By that time the Soviets hadn't managed to take away their land. The host was an agronomist. He had a large house, beautiful orchard and I was allowed to take a stroll there and eat fruits from it. I liked to watch the horses in the stables. The Strimaitis had a lot of them. The most important thing for me was that I had a friend now: the daughter of the hosts. Her name was Mildei. She was my age. The host told all the neighbors that I was his distant relative from Kaunas. On Sundays he took his daughter and me to the cathedral and my mother had to stay in the shed. There were interesting books in that house which I read. We stayed with the Strimaitis for about four times on different occasions, and each time we stayed for a few months.

We were lucky. We mostly came across good people. Only once we got into trouble. It happened in summer 1943. As usual, we went from one hamlet to another. We were pointed towards the hamlet where a good elderly couple lived. We went to the hamlet and saw the following: a half-naked young man was taking a bath over a basin by the well. An elderly woman was pouring water on him from the pitcher. We noticed at once that the guy was wearing pants of the polizei uniform and boots. We wanted to leave, but it was too late. 'Hey Yids!' he cried out. All of a sudden he started pointing a pistol and moved towards us threatening us with it. His mother tried to hold her son

back, and burst into tears and besought him not to take a sin on his soul and let us go. This lasted for a few minutes, but it seemed like an eternity. 'Fine,' he said, 'I'll take you to the police station!'

He went to put his clothes on while we waited for him for quite some time. We didn't dare to escape. If we had, he would have killed us at once. He let us run in front of him on the road. After some time we met a man on the way. It turned out that he was a district headman. He asked who we were and where he was taking us. He said that he wanted to shoot the Yids, but because of his mother he was taking us to the police station. They had a vivacious talk along the road.

We followed them. There was rye-grass on the left side of the road and at that unforgettable moment, the man turned back, pointed at the grass and said, 'Run!' My mother and I dashed off. I don't remember for how long we had been running, panting and falling. When we crossed the field, we saw the orchard of the Strimaitis'. It was the second miracle of the day, and again we were in the hands of good people. It was hard for them to bring us back from our trauma. Again we stayed with them for some months.

I don't recall any other places where we went. In summer 1944 we happened to stay with the Strimaitis once again. Three years had passed since the fascist occupation.

We knew that the Soviet Army had already liberated Vilnius and were looking forward to welcoming it. We spent the last days before the occupation in a small coppice by the yard. Mildei brought us food. When it got dark we went to their house and spent the night there. Once, when we were in the forest, I heard a noise from the road. I rushed to the road and saw a soldier in uniform which wasn't familiar to me. I understood that the Soviet soldiers had arrived. I rushed to the forest and told my mother, 'Russian soldiers have come!' My mother came out with me, first cautiously,

and then when she was sure that those were Soviet soldiers, she went out in the open. We cried tears of joy and hugged each other. It was the end of the war for my mother and me.

The leading Soviet squads were ahead of us, and the Soviet field hospital wasn't far from the hamlet of the Strimaitis'. My mother and I often went there to help out the wounded. My mother broached a conversation with one of the employees, he was really astounded to hear my mother's good Russian. My mother told one military man our tragic pre-war story. He advised us to go to Vilnius, as there might be battles. My mother decided that nobody was waiting for us in our native town. There was no house, kin, friends, and the mere streets of our town would make us go back to our previous life and hurt the wounds in our hearts once again. So we had to get to Vilnius and start a new life. We were given a lift by passing cars, to Kaunas [about 90km from Vilnius], wherefrom we reached the small town Kaisiadorys [about 50km from Vilnius]. There was a good train connection there. My mother and I took a goods train and on 24th August 1944, we got off at the Vilnius train station.

We walked along an empty city. We were surrounded by annihilated houses and apartments, wherein people had lived, planned, hoped, loved and envied. We could take any empty apartment. We inhabited a house on Georgievskiy Avenue, which later became Stalin Avenue, and is currently Gedemin Avenue. There were doors which separated the apartments in the long corridor. We got a three-room apartment. It was well furnished. There were sets of dishes in the cupboards, and some garments in the wardrobes. We felt miserable. It seemed to us that we were illegitimate intruders. Then the employees of the communal organization went to all the apartments and made lists of the things in the house. We were supposed to pay some money for the furniture and dishes, but were totally broke. We were given all that for free. One of the guys turned out to be

rather kind. He said, 'Well, use the things earned by your tribesmen. Let them have peace in Heaven.' He gave up on us and left.

....

I always keep in my heart the people who saved my life. I've kept in touch with my rescuers for many years. Now the parents [Strimaitis] and their daughter Mildei, with whom I still keep in touch, were conferred the title 'Righteous among the Nations' by the museum Yad Vashem. The Lithuanian family of Mamra, who had been sheltering us for a long time, was exiled by the Soviet regime. My mother and I exerted every effort to find them, but didn't succeed.



(With my husband, 1939)

From Ghetto to Convent

Liza Lukinskaya

The last year of peace before the war brought me joy and love. I met a wonderful Jewish lad. We fell in love with each other. Ilia Olkin was born in 1919 in the Lithuanian town Panemune. His father, David Olkin, was a pharmacist. He had his own pharmacy in the town. Ilia's mother, grandmother and three younger sisters lived in Panemune as well. I can't remember their names now. All of Ilia's relatives perished during the German occupation. We started seeing each other and spent almost all our time together as Ilia also lived in the hostel. Soon Ilia became the leader of the Komsomol organization of Vilnius University. He was one year my senior. He was working at the chair and dreaming of post-graduate studies. Ilia came to Skaudville with me and asked for my hand in marriage. My parents liked him very much. Having met my parents, Ilia introduced me to his. Thus, the first year of my first true love had passed.

...

Ghetto

In the night of 22nd June Vilnius was unashamedly bombed. First we decided that it was some civil defense training, which we had got used to in the previous year. Soon, it was clear that the bombs were real. There

was fire after the bombs had been released. I tried calling home, but there was no connection. On the second day I, Ilia and three of his pals decided to leave. We took some necessary things and documents - we had hardly any money as we didn't manage to receive our scholarship - and went to the train station. It was hard to get there. The trains weren't leaving. Then we decided to walk towards the East, to Russia. I remembered that my grandmother Anna lived in Kharkov, on Feurbach Street, and Mother often told me that I had to go to Granny in the event the war started.

We were walking on the road along with thousands of people. People with babies and old men, who could barely walk, were on carts. Many were going on foot in the Eastern direction. The Soviet troops were retreating with us. It was accompanied with bombing, during which people hid away in the bushes by the road and in ditches. After the bombing not all of them came back to the road. It was dreadful and seemed interminable. We were let in some places to spend the night. We didn't have money and Ilia's pals paid for us. They were much older and had money on them. On our way retreating soldiers in passing cars told us that the Germans had entered Vilnius.

We reached Belarus - I remember the name of a village: Berezovki near the town Kobylniki [150 km from Minsk]. We stayed with local peasants, whom our friends paid good money. We had stayed with those people for about a week until the moment when some of the retreating Soviet soldiers said that if they sheltered Jews, the Germans would shoot them. The host took us to Kobylniki in a cart. There we stayed for a couple of days at the place of a local Jew. We saw Fascists there. The next day there was the first Fascist action. They demanded all members of the Communist Party and male Jews to step out into the square. On that dreadful day Communists were shot and Jews were ordered to bury them. Ilia and his pals were also there. In the evening they told us about it with horror. One of the men was shocked. He didn't see any way out and decided to hang himself. I, the only woman in our company, turned out to be the most decisive. I said that we wouldn't be staying there any minute longer. We had nowhere to go and we decided to return to Lithuania - be it as it may, at home even walls seemed more helpful.

In spite of the curfew hour, we went out of town through back yards and alleyways, reached the forest and spent time there. On the way back we walked mostly at night, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible. Sometimes we were given a lift, but still we walked most of the time. A couple of times we asked some people to let us spend the night in their farmstead, but none of the hosts let us in. I can't blame them and I don't think they were anti-Semites. The order of the Fascists had already been conveyed to the population and they knew that they would be shot if they sheltered Jews.

So, we reached Vilnius. Our dear and favorite city bode danger. Fascists and Lithuanian polizei were all over the place. We were told that the polizei were looking for Ilia as he was the secretary of the Komsomol Committee. We decided to leave Vilnius and go home. We were lucky: some cart heading for Kaunas took us. There were

25 people in it. We reached some farmstead in the vicinity of Kaunas and a police patrol stopped us. All the Jews were told to leave the carts. I started explaining that we were poor students on our way home and besought them to let us go. I succeeded in that: we were the only ones whom they let go. I don't know why, but during the years of occupation I was really lucky when I was about to face death. It was the first time of my luck, and you will be able to see other spells of luck further in my story. We were released and we ran after that very cart and got on it. We were detained in the vicinity of Kaunas. It was horrifying as that time we were stopped by the Fascists and again I talked them into letting me go. Ilia was arrested. I could only shout to him that I would be waiting for him in Kaunas at Aunt Fanya's place.

Aunt Fanya was alone. Her husband was exiled to Siberia one month before the outbreak of the Great Patriotic War. Aunt Fanya had a forlorn hope to see me alive. She told me that all men were shot and I should not hope to see Ilia again. She also said that somebody in Siauliai saw my parents and brother on the truck with the wives and children of the militaries. As it turned out later, our family was saved thanks to Mother's hospitality and cordiality. Military guys and their wives loved her and when the war was unleashed, Russian militaries came to our house and sent our family in evacuation together with their wives. I found out about that after war. Now, when my aunt said that parents had left, I felt better. At least some members of our family could count on being rescued.

I understood that I had no place to go in Skaudville and stayed with Aunt Fanya. The first evening I stayed with her, a gypsy came over to read the cards as Aunt Fanya was very worried about her husband and started believing gypsies. Aunt, who had never believed neither cards nor fortune-telling, talked me into cartomancy. That lady spread out the cards and told me about all my life. She said that I was worrying about

one young man, who was detained and that he would come to me in three days. Two men and one woman were on a long trip, also thinking and worrying about me. I would also meet them, but in three or four years. All those things came true.

Ilia came back in three days. He survived by a miracle. He was taken to prison, where Jews were detained before getting shot, but it was packed. The drunk polizei didn't want to bother, kicked him on his back and let him go. We started living at Aunt Fanya's place. Daily hazards and adversity made us close and we practically became like husband and wife. It was dangerous to appear in the city, especially for young men. Every day they were caught and executed. We didn't want to venture out again. I went out to get some scarce products for our food cards. There was a curfew hour in the city, and it started earlier for the Jews than anybody else. I took silver spoons my aunt gave me to the commission shop. When they were sold, I wasn't given any money and told instead that Jews needed no money as soon all of us would be murdered.

In July it was announced that Jews were to settle in the ghetto. First there were two ghettos - a big and a small one. There was an overhead crossing connected to the small ghetto. There were vehicles on the road and people were walking in the streets, while we were prisoners and forbidden to leave the ghetto territory without a guard. Aunt Fanya and I were in the small ghetto. My husband and I lived in one small apartment with Aunt Fanya and Aunt Ida, who moved to the ghetto with us, and some strange woman, who wanted to join us.

All ghetto prisoners were supposed to work. I and my husband did digging work at some construction sites at the aerodrome in a crew of young and able-bodied people. We were escorted by Jewish policemen on our way to work. All prisoners had yellow hexagrams on the back and on the chest. A Judenrat was founded in ghetto, which was in charge of all vital issues and followed execution of the orders of the

commandment. There was Jewish police in the ghetto. All craftsmen, tailors, cobblers and tinsmiths, who could be of any use, were issued working IDs.

The Fascists even had an orchestra in the ghetto, where Uncle Abram was playing. There is his picture with several members of the orchestras of 'die-hards.' My aunts Fanya and Ida didn't have anything: they were housewives. In about a month Fascists made a tentative action: they cordoned off the ghetto, placed machine-guns on the bridge and ousted everybody from their houses. We stood in the square for a long time, and the Fascists just mocked us and let us go.

When in a while the same situation happened again, everybody was relatively calm, thinking that they would let us go after taunting us. Nothing of the sort: it was the most dreadful action on liquidation of the small ghetto - on that day the Fascists sent ten thousand Jews for execution. On that day I didn't go to work as I felt unwell. Ilia happened to be in a crew at the aerodrome and they were permitted not to return to the ghetto as the next working shift wasn't released from the ghetto. I was waiting for my husband by the gate and crying, without knowing whether he would come or I would have to die alone. My Ilia came back, he couldn't part with me.

They started classifying people: craftsmen were set aside. All of us - my husband, I and three elderly ladies - turned out to be among those who were to be taken to nowhere. At once I darted to the policemen and said that my husband and I were young and could work, and added that we were working hard at the aerodrome and would work even harder. He separated me and Ilia with the butt of his gun. We were taken to the big ghetto with a small cluster of craftsmen. In the morning we saw my aunts Fanya and Ida being taken to get shot.

Then we were allowed to come to the small ghetto and take some things. I found

something: a brown coat with a fur collar, given to me by Aunt Fanya, was hanging on the fence of our house, the place where I left it before the action. I took my coat and it served me for a long time, keeping me warm in wintertime, during the occupation and preserving the memory of a dear person.

We started living in the big ghetto. We could only leave the ghetto on our way to work. We settled in the place of my Uncle Abram Abramson, who had been a violinist before the war. He had a good house in Kaunas and they were given three rooms in the ghetto.

Almost all musicians perished after the liquidation of the small ghetto and the orchestra didn't exist anymore. Uncle Abram was involved in hard physical labor like all men. I lived in Uncle's apartment by myself, and Ilia found lodging at the place of his friend. The matter is that my uncle's wife was a greedy woman and constantly was rebuking me for eating their daily bread.

Once I finished working late at the aerodrome, came home and turned on the light in the kitchen to cook some food. My aunt came in and said that I shouldn't waste electricity at night and turned off the light. The next day I told Ilia that I wouldn't stay with my relatives any longer. He found a room where a guy, whose entire family had perished, was living.

We moved in with him. In a while Ilia and I registered our marriage at the Judenrat. In the evening we had tea with bon-bons. That was the way we celebrated our wedding.

Food was the most vital problem in the ghetto. Ghetto dwellers, who managed to keep some precious things, exchanged them for products. We had nothing: we left Vilnius empty-handed. We earned our daily bread this way: old people, who had no chance to leave the ghetto, gave us some things to exchange for products and told us what they wanted to get, we received the surplus. E.g. from exchange they wanted to get a loaf of bread or a certain quantity of

grain, and what we got in excess of that belonged to us.

My husband even managed to get caramel for me. I had a sweet tooth and there was some underground store in the ghetto where he bought me candies. I don't know how the owners of the store managed to get products. They most likely had their person in the police.

The second problem was work, which was very hard. We had to work under any weather conditions: in terrible heat and in minus 30 degrees below zero. Now I had somebody to protect me - my husband, who always was there for me in adversity. Once I didn't go to work, when the frost was severe and stayed at home. Jewish policemen found me and made me go to work in severest frost. After that my aunt literally made me go to one of my acquaintances, married to a Jew, who was a foreman of a special team, which served for Estonian and Fascist big-wheels.

That lady was a nurse and she worked at the first-aid post. Before the war she was friends with my mother and even came to see my parents in Skaudville. The nurse recognized me and made arrangements for me to work in the city - I cooked food for the team, where her husband was working. I managed to get some food for me and my husband.

Once, in the apartment of some Fascist boss, where that team was repairing something, his wife let me use the telephone. I called my Lithuanian friend. She came over there and we had a long talk. Then she brought me food a couple of times. I was lucky in many things. People treated me very well.

Even policemen and Fascists sympathized with me. For instance, we were sent to gather apples in one of the orchards. The German guard whispered to me in German: 'Take apples with you, I will be scolding you in front of everybody, but you pay no attention to that.'

Once I met a Lithuanian soldier, who used to play in a brass band in our yard in Siauliai. Though he saw me when I was a girl, he recognized me. He also gave me a large chunk of bread and sausage and saw me off to the gate of the ghetto. Once I was in the group of the youth sent to harvest potatoes in the village. I was missing my husband. In about three days he came and brought me a couple of candies.

My husband made it possible for me to leave work there and come back to the city. People from the ghetto were often taken to work to other cities. Some of them were even taken to Estonia. We were afraid of being included in those teams. People said that Estonian policemen were very cruel and working conditions were very harsh. People died there very quickly. At any rate, I don't know any single survivor from those who worked in Estonia.

Once I was included in that team and policemen came to get me. I was given some time to pack and they took me. I thought I wouldn't see Ilia ever again. Shortly after that he came. With the help of his friends Ilia made arrangements for me to be released - as if I was sick and couldn't work in Estonia. Those friends of my husband were from the underground.

By the end of 1942 my husband had become an active member of an underground organization, acting in the Kaunas ghetto. It was a strong and large organization, which had infiltrated all the authorities of the ghetto, including the Jewish police.

They warned people of the coming actions so that as many Jews as possible could be saved. My husband also was on assignments of the underground. He got weapons and brought them into the ghetto. I don't know whether the people from the underground were involved in the organization of the insurrection in our ghetto, but they had been provided with weapons by 1944.

One of the tasks of the underground was to save young people and children. The latter were stealthily taken from the ghetto to an orphanage, to Estonians, who presented them as their own children. It was so to say a global task, viz. not to let the fascists fulfill Hitler's order on the 'Final Solution of the Jewish question' that is the extermination of Jews as a people.

It was obvious that the underground members decided not to fight within the ghetto as it led to irrevocable losses and deaths of innocent ghetto dwellers, who had nothing to do with the underground organization.

It was decided to arrange escapes for as many people from the ghetto as possible.

In November 1943 my husband Ilia Olkin left the ghetto in a group of five people. The group had connections with Lithuanians. They were met and taken to Belarusian forests. My husband said good-bye to me and both of us hoped to see each other again.

My husband asked his friends from the underground to make arrangements for me to leave the ghetto at the earliest convenience and take me to the place where I could wait for the Soviet Army. In a while the intermediary gave me a letter from Ilia.

Life was hard for me when my husband left, but I thought that he broke through the ghetto, would help me leave it so that we would meet in a partisan squad and never part again.

The spring of 1944 was very hard. There were constant actions in ghetto. People were taken to executions more often. In April the Fascists carried out the most horrible actions against children. Within an hour they walked from house to house and took all the ghetto children, including infants. Everybody, who couldn't find a shelter, perished.

The underground organization also reinforced its activity. Now people were taken out of the ghetto en masse. Security guards by the gate were bribed and many people were taken via the gate. The whole network was organized. Women were taken from the ghetto in a truck as if for work and they weren't coming back. Of course, all that cost a lot of money as both Germans and policemen were to be bribed.

Unfortunately, I should admit that Jewish policemen made a fortune on the sorrow of their fellow Jews. It was important to take people from the ghetto, but it wasn't the most important thing. People, having left the ghetto, were to be provided with shelter. Underground members also took care of that.

I was haunted by premonitions. No news was coming from Ilia. Besides, his friends from the underground paid more and more attention to me. At that time they knew that my husband had perished. I also felt it, but nobody told me about that.

Convent, coming home

The underground members told me about the place on the free side, where I could go into hiding. They acted fast. They met a Lithuanian woman. Her last name was Kutorgene. She was a rather elderly lady, a doctor -ophthalmologist, who had her own practice in Kaunas. Kutorgene had already saved one Jewish girl. One of her patients was a Catholic priest, who helped her save people. That priest made arrangements in the convent to hide a Jewish lady.

The only condition was for that woman to speak very good Lithuanian and not to look typically Jewish. I met all those requirements and underground members suggested that I should leave the ghetto. I met Kutorgene at a house, where I was supposed to come after my escape. At that time I wasn't in the ghetto and I could come into the city while performing work in the service team.

Before leaving the ghetto I went to see my relatives -Uncle Abram and his wife, Aunt Liza and the rest. I said nothing of my intentions as it was dangerous. It was problematic to leave the ghetto at that time: police guards had been replaced by SS-security who couldn't be bribed. I couldn't leave with the team as the number of those who entered the ghetto had to be the same as those who left, otherwise the whole team would be shot.

My escape was prepared beforehand. First of all, I was well dressed. The cobbler made me a good pair of shoes. I looked like a true Lithuanian, not like a harrassed ghetto woman. There were secret places in the fence made by the underground members, where barbed wire was cut and connected by pegs. It was done in an area far from the main gate, out of sight of the guards. That manhole wasn't checked by the Fascists who thought that it was impossible to get through there as it was coming onto a street so overgrown with weeds that it was difficult to walk through. I buried my documents in a convenient place.

One of the underground members, my husband's friend, helped me walk through, he distracted the SS-guard, took him aside, while I parted the wire and crept through the hole and dashed to the impassable street. This happened one evening in late May 1944.

I saw the crew on their way back from work to the ghetto, and I hid for nobody to recognize me and call me. I managed to cross the bridge and came to the center of the city, where Kutorgene lived, near the Opera and Ballet theater. I went to her office, where the patients were received, and made an appointment. When it was my turn, I entered the office.

Kutorgene recognized me immediately and took me to the living-room. Soon her consulting hours were over and she came to me. Kutorgene told me to sit at the table and we had lunch. Her son came and she

introduced me to him, saying openly that I was a Jew from the ghetto.

I understood that her son was aware of her anti-Fascist activity and thought that I shouldn't be afraid of him. But Kutorgene didn't tell her relative, who was seeing me off to the station and buying me the train ticket to the convent, that I was a Jew. She just told him to see me off, saying that I made up my mind to become a nun. On my way, the man was talking me into not going to the convent and staying in this world as I was so young! I kept silent.

I saw a lady from my lyceum at the train station and tried to hide away, for her not to recognize me. I asked the man to buy me a train ticket. I didn't want to attract attention by the booking office. I wasn't frightened, on the contrary, for the first time in so many years I felt free. However, I was to be very disciplined and attentive.

When I tried to get on the train, a Lithuanian guy started chatting me up. I was flirting with him, having decided that if I was of a somewhat suspicious appearance, he was beyond suspicion and it would be easier for me. I talked the guy into going in the freight car, not in the passenger car. There were fewer people and it was dark in the freight car, so it would be difficult to distinguish me. We had been talking for a long time and I fell asleep.

Suddenly I woke up from words spoken in Yiddish. I was speaking Yiddish in my dream. The guy was looking at me agape and I burst into laughter and said that I was learning German and spoke it in my dream.

I got off in the town of Dotnuva [about 100 km from Vilnius], the place in the closest vicinity to the convent of Saint Katrina, where I was expected. I calmly went up to the policeman at the station and asked where I could call the convent from. He took me to the director of the train station and I called the convent. I was told to wait at the station and they sent a cart to pick me up.

When it arrived, it turned out that they were supposed to go to another place before the convent. I was afraid to go with them as in that place the crew from the ghetto was working and I didn't want to be recognized. I went to the convent on foot.

They were waiting for me at the convent. The abbess, Mother Prontishke, was very affable with me and invited me to sit at the table at once. There were well-forgotten products on the table - I had even forgotten of their existence - bananas, oranges, apples, fried chicken and fish.

The abbess and the priest were sitting at the table. They started asking me about life in the ghetto. I felt really drowsy as a result of fatigue and tension since my escape from the ghetto. I begged them pardon and said that I was really sleepy. The abbess took me to a room with three bunks. She tucked me into bed and said that I shouldn't get up in the morning when the girls would be going to pray as I should rest as much as I wanted.

In the evening, when the girls came back from work, I was asleep. Early in the morning, the bell rang calling for prayer. One of the girls came up to me, kissed me on the cheek and calmly invited me for a prayer. I explained to her that the abbess allowed me not to pray today.

After that nobody addressed the issue of praying. The abbess gathered all novices and told them that I was a Jew and would be in hiding there. The food would be brought into my cell and she strictly forbade everybody to say anything about me, even to their closest relatives.

I stayed in the convent until the arrival of the Soviet troops. I rarely left my cell. I started knitting to kill time. The girls brought me threads. Of course, it was sad to stay in almost all the time and I took walks in the convent garden. It was the season when the berries ripened: currant, strawberries.

I enjoyed eating them straight from the bushes. Sometimes I went to the cathedral by the convent. I sat in the last pew so that the parishioners wouldn't see me - people from local villages came to the cathedral - and I listened to the Catholic mass.

May and June had passed. It was early July 1944. The German army was retreating. A Fascist unit was positioned in the convent garden. I had been staying in my cell for several days. When the Soviet troops were approaching, the abbess had the girls go home as she feared repressions from Bolsheviks. I also was to go. I was dressed like a true Lithuanian peasant.

Looking at me, the girls were crying and laughing at the same time, so unusual I looked. They came to love me during that period of time. We were given a cow. Thus, the three of us - a girl, me and a cow - went to her farmstead. The girl told her parents and neighbors that I was a Lithuanian teacher from Vilnius, escaping the Bolsheviks. However, one of her neighbors told her mother that I was most likely a Jew, but luckily he didn't betray me.

When the Fascists came to the farmstead, they were sympathetic when they heard my story and ranted about the Bolsheviks. One of them knocked on my window and offered me to run away with them, when the Soviet troops were approaching. I replied that I couldn't leave with the army and would have to go my own way. In the morning the Soviet army entered the farmstead.

I was the first to come up to them. I was overwhelmed with joy. I couldn't believe myself: three years in the ghetto were behind me. I told the soldiers that I was a Jew from Kaunas and they broke joyful news to me: Kaunas had already been liberated. On that very day I went back to the convent. I wanted to say good-bye to the girls and the abbess, who saved me. I stayed there for a couple of days, and decided to go back home.

I was looking forward to seeing Kaunas, finding out something about my parents and husband.

It was the end of August 1944. The abbess kissed me and gave me some food and money for the road. I walked through the forest to the train station. On the way some cart caught up with me. I was lucky again - the cart was driven by my school teacher from Siauliai. He recognized me and took my things on the cart. I couldn't get on it as it was full.

Thus, we reached the train. There were no tickets. Only militaries could get on the train. Then some military said that I was his wife and I was let on the train. Thus, I got to Kaunas. There at once I found the underground members, who helped me leave the ghetto.

During the liquidation of the ghetto all my relatives perished: my father's siblings. The members of the underground organization told me that my husband, Ilia Olkin, perished in spring 1944. He died by accident. A partisan squad, where he served, was dislocated to a Belarusian village. At night, on the way back from the task, my husband said the password.

The sentinel shot Ilia either because he didn't hear the password, or because it had been changed. He was severely wounded and passed away by the morning... My premonition was true. I became a widow without a chance of knowing the happiness of married life in peaceful times. My mood was terrible and I thought that I wouldn't get married again and keep the last name of Olkin.

I decided to look for my kin. Those, who were seeking their relatives, sent letters to the municipal council of Kaunas. There I found a letter written by my father. He was hoping to find his brothers and thought that they would know something about me.

My loved ones had no idea that I happened to be in Kaunas at the beginning of the war.

They were looking for me in Siauliai and Vilnius, sending inquiries there. My name was Olkina at that time, but they were looking for a Liza Abramson.

My parents and brother were in evacuation in the Urals, in the settlement of Kosa, Komi-Permyak oblast [1500 km from Moscow]. In 1944 they came to Kharkov, where after the evacuation Grandmother Anna was living. I sent a letter to their Kharkov address - in Russian but with Lithuanian letters as I didn't know the Russian alphabet.

Having received my letter, Father was crying and laughing at the same time, walking to and fro in the room. He called Mother from work. She was working in a pharmacy. My parents wrote me a letter, to the address of the municipal council. There was no place for me to live in Kaunas and I stayed with my acquaintances. I found out that all of them were alive and healthy.

My brother Abram had married his friend from Vilnius during the war and now he was living there. My brother's wife was the daughter of the most famous tailor in Vilnius. My brother was seeing her before the war, but it happened so that they met again and got married in evacuation.

My brother was drafted into the army and served in the 16th Lithuanian division. Since he was an excellent accordion player, he joined the military orchestra right away. Right after the liberation of Vilnius a Lithuanian band was founded, where my brother played the grand piano. His wife was a singer and she worked with him. I went to see my brother in Vilnius. At that time they lived on the premises of the philharmonic society. At first, I stayed with them. We slept on the floor.

....

I kept friendly relations with Abbess Prontishke at first, after the war. The convent was threatened with closure due to the politics of the Soviet regime, in accordance with the struggle against religion.

As per request of the abbess I arranged for her an appointment with the plenipotentiary of the Council of Ministers for Religion. She came to Vilnius, stopped by at our place and met with that person. He treated the abbess with respect, but nothing could be changed.

Soon the convent was broken up and closed down. The abbess left for her motherland and I never saw her again. I also saw Kutorgene. She worked as a doctor for a couple of years in Kaunas. She died in the mid-1950s.



(This is me, 1959)

Frieda Shteinene, two war stories

Grandmother lived in a poky house with her daughter Basya. Grandmother had a palsy and was bed-ridden, therefore Basya had to quit her work and look after her. The life of my aunt Basya is perfect example of the daughter serving her mother with complete sacrifice for her own future. Basya was a pretty woman and had suitors.

In 1939 one young man wooed her, but she turned him down as she understood she would not be able to look after her mother. She stayed in town during the war as grandmother Chaya could not be transported. Basya remained with mother. Both of them died. My relatives told me about it.

Grandmother's sister, whose married name was Binn (I cannot recall her first name), lived in grandmother's native town. She had a daughter Merele. She and her mother were not able to get evacuation either, and stayed in Pashvetinis.

In October 1941 a large anti-Jewish action was planned in Zagare and Jews from adjacent towns were brought in here. Merele, her mother and brother were also brought in Zagare. The Jews were executed on the central square and in the park. Merele saw Basya on the square. My dear and favorite grandma was taken by a Lithuanian in a big basket. She was so emaciated and light that it was not hard to carry her. Grandmother and Basya were killed straight on the square. They did not had to be put through ordeal for a long time.

Merele's mother saw one of her acquaintances among the Lithuanians who were involved in the execution, and besought him to save her kids. She could not leave as her leg was wounded. The Lithuanian took Merele and her brother from the square and found them a shelter at his neighbor's place.

Merele and her brother started doing the hardest work for the Lithuanians. Merele was 16 and her brother was 18 years old. It was the second when he was to face

execution and his nerves could not stand it. Merele's brother got sick and could not work any more. Then the Lithuanians merely killed him as he could not work.

Merele found out about it by chance from other work hands and she escaped immediately. She was roaming for a while, and then she asked the padre Kunigas for help.

They padre knew Merele's family very well and found a Lithuanian lady who agreed to make up a story that Merele was her daughter out of wedlock. Her name was changed into Lithuanian Marite and married to elderly Latvian guy Tennessis. The fiancé knew her story, but he fell in love with her indeed. She was a true beauty. Thus, Merele was rescued.

After war she found our family and told us a story how her mother Basya and grandmother Chaya perished. Merele had four kids from her husband. She lived in a village and worked as hard as a peasant woman. After war the relatives suggested that she should leave her husband and come back to the Jewish kin, but she decided to stay with the person who saved her life. She remained faithful to her husband, who died long before she did.

Merele died two years ago [2005]. Shortly before her death she told me that she did not want to be buried in the Jewish cemetery, but next to her husband, the Lett. She was buried in the Latvian cemetery not far from Zagare.

Frieda Shteinene, another family story

In 1927 grandmother gave birth to son Chaim. He was 5 years older than me. We was my friend and protector when I was a child and I grew up. Chaim and grandmother were in evacuation in Kirov. He worked in kolkhoz, then he was drafted in the army at the age of 17. He was assigned to the 16th Lithuanian division. When the Great Patriotic War was over, he had served for three more years and came back in Siaulia in 1948. Here he met a wonderful girl Dina Levina and married her. Her fate is amazing. She was born in a Polish town Vilnius in 1933. She came of a very rich family. Her parents were musicians.

When the Soviets came to power, Dina's father was exiled in Siberia [Deportations from the Baltics], and at the very beginning of the war she, her mother and elder brother happened to be in Vilnius ghetto. During one of the first actions Dina was sent in Ponary and one of those who managed to climb out from the pit with the executed people. Dina said that there were about 10 wounded people, sprinkled with the lime, but they were getting out of the pit- being having no clothes and covered with blood stains, they were walking along night Vilnius.

It was the autumn, cold and people were not letting them in, some of them even told to return in the pit. On the outskirts of the town some Polish lady sheltered the runaways. She gave food, clothes and bed linen. Somehow ghetto was informed of their escape and ghetto underground organization assisted them. Some of the people came back in ghetto, others were sheltered by somebody. In real, I do not know the fates of other survivors.

Dina's mother, who was staying in ghetto, told her not to come back. She and Dina's elder brother perished in ghetto. Dina was rescued by a teacher, either Russian or Polish. She gave her the documents of the deceased teacher and Dina had survived the war with the help of those documents

serving for different people. When Vilnius was liberated, Dina was feeble that she turned out to be in a military hospital. A Russian lady, a doctor, wanted to adopt her, but she had to leave with the army.

Dina was in an orphanage, after which she got some vocational education and was given a mandatory job assignment (trade) in Siaulia. Here she met Chaim and they got married. In couple of years Dina was told that her father was alive. During Great Patriotic War he survive by miracle and moved to Israel via Asian countries. Father started inviting Dina to Israel. At that time former Polish citizens could leave for Poland. Dina and her husband left there in 1956, wherefrom they moved to Israel.

Chaim died in 2004. Dina is currently living in Jerusalem with her children- son Aron and daughter Sophia. Dina has many grandchildren. I can say that her postwar life was a reward for the horrors and atrocities she suffered from the war.



(with my aunt Leya)

Dobre Rozenbergene from ghetto to concentration camp

At night on 22nd June 1941 we woke up from strong blasts. It seemed to us that the land was upturned. Jurbarkas was very close to the German border, so there was no time to procrastinate. Father horsed a cart, Mother took some precious things, money, documents and we hit the road. We didn't manage to go far. We saw the Germans in about 10 kilometers from Jurbarkas. We had no place to go to, so we came back home.

Every day orders were released, and they were getting worse and more preposterous. At first, Jews were banned from being outside during the curfew hour, which was two hours earlier for the Jewish population

Further events of our life, having taken a sharp turn, are vague in my memories. I picture them as certain stills of an old worn film. The first reason for it is that my parents and brother were very protective, just not letting me out of the houses, and the second reason was the protective reaction of my young body, blocking the horrors from the memory.

I remember the registration of the Jewish population on the first occupation day.

than for the others. Jews were banned from going in most of the stores, and the cards, given to the population, could be used only in two stores to get the food products. We were not permitted to walk on the pavement. Jews could be easily recognized not only by their peculiar appearance, but by yellow stars on their attire, which were mandatory as per order of the Fascists. It was one of the first orders, and those who disobeyed were to be executed. Mother had been sewing those bands with stars all night long.

...

I don't remember our way to Kaunas [about 100 kilometers]. I was on the floor of the cart and periodically dozed off, seeing my parents and brother alive. Though they still tried to lie to me, saying that I would see my mother in Kaunas, I was aware that she was not alive. I remember how we drove into the Kaunas ghetto. We got off by the gate of the ghetto, guarded by a sentry. Soon my Grandmother Chaya Riva and Leya rushed towards us. They were crying, embracing and kissing me. My kin took me with them and I never saw Mere and Raya again. I know that both of them perished in 1942 during one of the actions.

Grandmother and Leya lived in a poky room of about four meters. It used to be a warehouse of the local synagogue. Grandmother's sister Braina and her husband rabbi Montse had lived here. They let Grandmother and Leya stay there. When the two of them were there they could manage somehow, when I came there was no room to swing a cat. I was sick in the first days. I had a nervous breakdown and was covered with furuncles all over. I was treated by rabbi Montse. He gave me something to drink and made poultices. We were afraid to call a doctor as it was widely known that there was no mercy for the sick: they put them out of their misery right away. Now I learnt what it was to be famished. I had nothing to eat.

In a while one of our acquaintances from Jurbarkas came. She wanted to find out about her kin. She saw our living conditions. She also didn't have that much space, but she invited us to come with her. There was a rather large room, though it was also densely populated. We were given a corner: a quarter of the entire square. There was a bed by the wall, where Grandmother and I slept, Leya slept on the mattress on the floor. The hostess with her nine-year-old grandson and a daughter-in-law were in front of us. Besides, a young schizophrenic girl was also in the room. She hardly ate anything and barely got up. She was executed during one of the first actions.

The first year in the ghetto was very hard. We were cold and hungry. Leya set up a small stove in the middle of the room and stoked it the best way she could, as it was next to impossible to get firewood. We were starving: we got a little gray bread and grain. We lived in constant fear of actions, the frequency and purpose of which we could not predict. During one of the actions children and old people were taken, other actions were against those incapable of work and those who had no profession, sometimes people were chosen randomly, without any principle. During one of the big actions, I, being 13 and looking like an 18-year-old, and grandmother looking like an 80-year-old, were taken to the 'good side,' to the ones who were to live. Aunt also was with us as she looked very good. Many people were surprised how we could have been so lucky. At that time Leya had a very good acquaintance in the Jewish police, who was helping us. He must have helped us that time.

In the second year of our stay in the ghetto we gradually adjusted to the dreadful conditions and tried to get acclimatized. Leya found a job. She left the ghetto with the working crew and came back to the ghetto after work. She even managed to bring us some food. I went to work in the children crew. We weeded gardens beyond the ghetto territory. We could stealthily eat a carrot, onion and bring something to my

grandmother. Having worked in children's crews for a while, I found out about the so-called 'angels' in the ghetto. 'Angels' were children, hired by rich Jews, who were living in the ghetto, to work instead of adult and healthy people.

I also became an angel. I worked on the aerodrome instead of a grown-up man. The work was hard: I dug ditches with a heavy shovel. In the morning I got a slice of bread and some sugar; if I had a good host, I could get a piece of sausage or pig's fat. At times I was given frozen marmalade or a potato. I was happy to get anything. The person I was working for got a yellow working card, and was protected by it during the actions. Then my pals helped me be included in a good crew, which unloaded cars. We unloaded firewood and stacked it. Now I managed to bring some firewood home. It was the most precious commodity in the ghetto. In the evening Leya and I came home - it didn't take me long to consider the room where we were staying home. When we came home, Grandmother would have already made scarce dinner from the food we could get. She was constantly praying and fasted when she was supposed to in spite of starvation. Leya became like a second mother to me. Before the war she got married. Her husband Yakov was in the lines. Leya didn't have children, and her unused maternal instinct was directed at me. Leya was like a mother to me in many ways, as well as my best friend, as our disparity in years was not great. She never left me by myself. If during the actions I was taken to the wrong side, she came with me and it turned out as if either God or my parents from another world were protecting me.

In October 1943 we were ousted in the street when the Kaunas ghetto was about to be destroyed. We decided that it was a regular action. In reality, we were classified in two groups as usual and one of them was to be executed. We were lucky: the three of us remained in the auspicious group of women. We were even allowed to take some warm things and food with us. We got on

trucks and headed in an unknown direction. First we thought we were taken to the execution place - fort 9, and when they passed it we understood that we were heading for work. Policemen yelled and beat us while we were getting on the cars. Those policemen were Western Ukrainians.

There were about 3500 of us in a car. We were packed like a tin of sardines. We traveled standing. Nobody gave us food, and it was impossible to get the things we had taken with us. We were thirsty, but we weren't given any water. Soon we started to relieve ourselves on the spot without looking at each other. It was the first time when I felt on my own skin that one of the main tasks of Hitler's people was to deprive people of human dignity and make them turn into stupid unreasoning cattle.

We got off on the platform and went to the camp. It was the labor camp of Goldfield, located in Estonia not far from Tartu. We settled in tents and started building a cantonment. Soon there were barracks. It was a camp with Gestapo security guards with German sheepdogs, trained to attack people. Each of us was given a number sewed onto our clothes. There were only Jews there, so there was no need in classifying us by nationality. It was the first time during the occupation when I took off my magen David. The camp was gradually growing. First there were only Baltic Jews, and in 1944 Jews from Hungary and Czechoslovakia were also brought here. We were involved in hard shoveling works, getting scarce camp rations: gruel and a slice of bread with sawdust and a slice of such bread with margarine for breakfast. We stayed in that camp for seven and a half months.

In summer 1944 there was another action: selection. I was taken to the line of workers, and my aunt and grandmother were taken to the line for execution. Aunt managed to run to me, but Grandmother waved her hand hopelessly and remained in the line consisting of old and feeble women. We had to get on the train again and travel in the

same tough conditions as on the way here. We came to the camp in the town of Kilele, also located in Estonia. We had stayed there for a week before starting work. We were taken to the timbering works. It was very hard work.

We were constantly thinking of my grandmother, assuming that she was dead, but we were lucky to see her once again. In about two weeks, on our way from work, we saw that some women who were selected in the previous camp were being taken to one of the barracks. It was guarded by Gestapo people, but we managed to see Grandmother and have a talk with her, separated by a barbed partition, fearing that we might be beaten or yelled at by the guard. Grandmother prayed for us. She said good-bye and having blessed us to live, promised to pray for us in another world. We must have had many people who prayed and pleaded for us. Grandmother and the other ladies were executed the next day.

I, a lean girl, and my aunt, remained in this horrible camp. We were given only potage. There was no water. Dozens of women died of hunger, because of working hard, and from infectious diseases. There were the same conditions as in any concentration camp - barracks with bunks, with sacks of hay on top of them, checkups, beating and all the other things invented by Hitler's system to exterminate people. Though, in the morning we were given thin coffee and a piece of bread. We had not had such a tidbit in any other camp. Many people were sick, but they couldn't stay in bed. If someone didn't get up for the morning roll call, he would be shot at once at the camp gates. We were not beaten, as we were so feeble that we fell and died without any external intrusion. My energetic aunt found some pals here and got an old basin and gave me a bath with soap every evening. She found that bar of soap very precious.

There was no way we could know that Hitler's defeated troops were rolling down to the West. We didn't know that in July 1944 Vilnius was liberated and Kaunas in

August. We could only second-guess, seeing the bold Fascists. In August 1944 we were taken together, shaved, for us not to escape on our way, as being bald everybody would see that we were convicts, and taken to the West. Now we were taken to the real death concentration camp of Stutthof. It was a huge international camp. There was a constant fume from the furnaces of the camp crematorium and we only had to wait for our turn. We didn't work there and we were hardly given any food. We could only remember morning coffee in Kilele. In the morning we got up for a roll call and afterwards we weren't permitted to go back to the barracks. We remained standing outside. Some of us fell down dead.

In a month they selected capable women for a labor camp. My aunt was selected, but I was totally emaciated, gaunt and bald and I was thrown out. Then Leya ran up to me. She was ready to die, but to stay with me. Women gave me better clothes to wear before another stage of selection. They put some make-up on my eyes, covered my head. That time both of us were picked to go to the labor camp Rustashin, which was practically a branch of Stutthof.

When we came there, first I decided that we were in paradise. There were small clean barracks, where about 40-50 of our good acquaintances were living. There were iron beds with mattresses instead of double-tiered bunks. There was even linen there! There was a shower room with cold and hot running water and towels. Here we weren't given mixed clothes like in Stutthof, but new dresses, warm felt pants and jerseys and wooden footwear, which was common for the camps. The nutrition here was very good: thick potage. However, we had to work very hard. We had to change the rails on the rail road. We crushed stones all day long. We had gloves on, but still our hands were bruised.

The turnkeys were Gestapo women since it was a women's camp. Many of them teased the prisoners, arranged control roll calls, had us align several times a night. Those

who couldn't stand were killed at once. We were lucky, our Gestapo women, Vanda and Marta, turned out to be ordinary women and treated the prisoners in a humane way. They even tried to help us the best way they could: they didn't say who was sick and brought them medicine. My aunt, who could approach anybody, soon made friends with them. Vanda and Marta told Leya about their families and sympathized with me.

At the beginning of March 1945 we were told to align in columns and go towards the west. It was cold. It snowed heavily. It was hard for us to walk, as our legs got stuck in the snow. I felt nothing. I was aware that I shouldn't stop as those who couldn't walk were shot at once. We didn't see Vanda and Marta. They most likely had escaped in the western direction as the Soviet Army was attacking. We had been walking and walking, making halts only over night. At night, on 10th March we were locked in an old wooden shed to spend the night there. Early in the morning the door was opened and Soviet soldiers entered it. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I thought that it was an agonal apparition. There were no security guards as they ran away at night. People were crying. My aunt was sobbing and embracing me. Women hugged and kissed the soldiers. They told us that we were free and could go home any time. We weren't given any assistance. Those were leading units of the acting troops who were heading towards the West.

We happened to be on Polish territory. We were bereft, sick, but free. We took the canned food and rusks left by the Gestapo and headed home. We walked during the day and stopped overnight in the houses of peasants, who let us in. Our worst fear was that the Fascists might come back. Even when Leya and I caught typhus fever we didn't stop. Sick and afraid, we were on the road without taking any medicine. It was dark in our eyes, but we didn't stop. We reached Lodsi, where a Jewish committee was acting.

We were told to spend the night in the former ghetto. We settled in an old Jewish house, the inhabitants of which had been exterminated with all the ghetto prisoners.



(With my family, 1939)

Fania Brantovskaya in the Vilnius ghetto

On 4th-5th September the situation in the town grew tense. Lithuanian and Polish residents were forced to leave their homes on Strashuno, Rudninku, Mesino and some other streets in the center of Vilnius.

On 6th September at 6am Lithuanian policemen knocked on our door rather politely. They gave us 30 minutes to pack and move to the Jewish ghetto. We could take as much luggage as we could carry with us. One Lithuanian, a more decent man than the others, told us not to worry since the ghetto was nearby, just across the street from the house and we could take a lot of things since we didn't have to walk far. We were just to cross the street to get there. We crossed Pilimo Street and were pushed into a yard across the street from the Jewish hospital on Shpitalnaya Street. Our Jewish neighbors and other Jews were in the yard already. My school friend Hona Tanhu lived in a house in this neighborhood. His mother heard the noise in the yard and came out of her apartment. She invited us to come in. We settled down in her apartment and felt a bit relieved – at least we had a place to stay again.

There were two ghettos created on 6th September: the one where we were was big with a central point on Rudninku Street. The smaller one was on Stikle and Jidu Streets.

Many Jews from other streets were taken to Ponary. All Jews from Antokolis, my grandfather Velvl and grandmother Rohe-Gisia, and all Jews from Lidskaya Street were taken to Ponary. We were almost lucky to be living near the ghetto and getting there before it was overcrowded. All sick and older people were taken to the smaller ghetto. People who specialized in some crafts were kept in the bigger ghetto. In late October 1941 the smaller ghetto was eliminated.

The ghetto was fenced. In narrower streets wooden or brick walls were installed. The Judendrat settled down in the building of my former Realschule on 6 Rudninka Street. Jewish police headed by Yacob Gensas also settled down there. There were police offices established in the ghetto. Jewish policemen watched over order in the ghetto and that all fascist directions were followed.

On the first days of our imprisonment various actions began. It seemed the fascists enjoyed changing the ways of selecting Jews for killing. Young people were taken to work in the peat bog and one day they were told to go to the sauna. My acquaintance Dodke Vedutskiy felt ill and didn't go with his comrades on this day. The young people were locked in a shed and burnt.

There were a few synagogues in the ghetto. The yard of one synagogue was in the

smaller ghetto. On Yom Kippur, 21st September 1941, all Jews that were praying there were taken to Ponary. My friend Motke Gurewich's parents were also there. His father told him to stay at home that day. The ghetto inmates used to make shelters to hide away during various actions. They were called 'malina' shelters [Russian slang for a secret apartment where those who were against the regime had their meetings]. Our schoolteacher's daughter was born in such a shelter and he named her 'Malina'. Unfortunately, I have no information about what happened to her.

There were a few Judenrat offices responsible for various aspects of life in the ghetto. There was a work office, a social service office, a shop maintenance office, an office of culture, a medical office and a funeral office. There was also a hospital primarily keeping patients with infectious diseases, a children's home in the hospital, and a drugstore in the ghetto.

The children in the ghetto were taught in schools organized by schoolteachers. There was also a sports ground, though nobody seemed to go there, and a library in the ghetto. There was only a small collection of books in the library, but I borrowed some to read and my name can be found in the library archive.

Our life was more of existence, really. My father was an excellent specialist and was given a yellow certificate. The color of these certificates was often changed and this was another 'monkey trick' the fascists played. Those who failed to obtain new cards were taken to Ponary. Each worker could register his wife and two children under the age of 16 as his dependents. Since I was short and tiny my father wrote I was born in 1926 instead of 1922, and I was registered as his dependent until 1942. This gave me the right to stay at home, obtain a dependant's card, in this way he rescued me from forced labor that I would not have survived. Many workers registered their relatives as their dependents: fathers as husbands, mothers

and sisters as wives, and even strangers to rescue them.

Those who went to work outside the ghetto were supposed to walk in groups. There were policemen on guard at the gate to the ghetto. One of them, the cruelest of all, beat people black and blue for trying to smuggle some miserable food into the ghetto: a glass of sugar or cereal, a few potatoes. Another order was issued ordering the inmates to live according to the work group division and we had to move to another apartment in Strashnogo Street near the location where my father worked.

One day all those who had worker's certificates and their families were moved to the smaller ghetto and all inmates in the smaller ghetto who had no jobs were taken to Ponary. We had hardly any food. One had to show the document confirming the sanitary treatment to obtain a bread card: that was because of the fear of epidemics in the ghetto. These cards were for little rations of gray bread with sawdust. Sometimes we were given black peas, frozen potatoes and cabbage. We were even given horsemeat once. It stunk when boiling.

Mama didn't fail to joke: she added some vinegar to the cabbage and called it ground herring.

She made 'liver paste' from peas, and 'sweet tsimes' from frozen potatoes. At one time we were given something called 'vobla' fish [salted fish]. They had taken off its skin, drained it in water and made cutlets.

Mama managed to go outside the ghetto once. She brought our belongings from the Lithuanian woman. I started knitting for policemen's wives. I remember knitting a sweater for the fiancée of the policeman at the gate torturing people. When searching people at the entrance to the ghetto, the guards stored everything they could find in the former Gleizer's sausage store at the entrance. However, everybody tried to hide whatever food in the inner pockets of their

clothes to smuggle it into the ghetto, and many of them managed.

The Judenrat organized a theater in the ghetto, but we didn't go there thinking that there was no cause for 'singing in the cemetery'. There were two choirs in the ghetto. Luba Levitskaya, the soloist in one of them, was captured once at the entrance to the ghetto trying to bring in half a kilo of peas. She was beaten badly and taken to the Gestapo. People said she kept singing at the Gestapo and then she was taken to Ponary.

Fortunately for me I had many friends and spending time with them made this horrible existence somewhat better. On my birthday a friend of mine brought me two branches of dandelions. She took a tremendous risk of bringing flowers past the guard. These two tiny branches embodied hope and a message from the outside of the ghetto.

My friend Honke, who had given us shelter in his home once, brought me a little bottle of perfume that he had kept from the perfumery they had owned. I knew there was an underground movement in the ghetto.

In January 1942 a partisan organization under the leadership of Yitzhak Vittenburg was established there. I asked my friends to give me a recommendation to join it. They tried to talk me out of it at first, but then they took me to this organization. This organization helped me to get a job: in 1942 I 'sort of' turned 16 [because her father had changed her birth date from 1922 to 1926] and had to go to work.

One day Sonia Madeisker, one of the leaders of the underground movement, visited me at home. Sonia lived outside the ghetto. She helped me to get a job in a shop. At the beginning we weaved straw shoes: the fascists used to wear them over their boots. Then we got knitting orders and I worked 12 hours a day. I had my own work coupon while my mother and Riva were still included on my father's work coupon [as dependents].

The underground organization of the ghetto united all parties and trends such as communists, revisionists, Bund etc. Their common goal was to fight against fascists. Vittenberg, a communist, was the leader of the underground movement. His deputy was Aba Kovner, a Bund member.

The organization consisted of groups of five members who only knew their comrades in the group. In our group the password was 'Lisa's calling' commemorating Lisa Roft, who had been a member of the underground, but perished. The younger members of the ghetto were instructed on how to survive in the ghetto, how to bring in food without the policemen noticing. We were also supposed to assist our teachers, who weren't used to physical labor.

We also gave people information about the situation at the front line and provided homes for people. The enemy was defeated near Moscow and the Soviet army was in offensive. The senior members brought weapons into the ghetto risking their lives. We were instructed in shooting in basements with brick walls. I visited one of these basements recently. We were also trained in making explosives, but it never came to action.

There were discussions about whether it was necessary to start fighting in the ghetto. In July 1943 Yitzhak Vittenberg was arrested. His comrades fought him back using their weapons. I didn't take part in it as I was a junior member. Then Gensas sent a message to the underground organization saying that if they didn't give in Yitzhak all 20,000 inmates of the ghetto would be shot. Yitzhak did a heroic deed coming out to face his executioners. He was severely tortured by the Gestapo and shot. The leadership of the underground organization decided to leave the ghetto and take people to the woods. Their groups, moving in the direction of Belarus, were captured. Their relatives in the ghetto were taken to prison or Ponary.

Out of the ghetto and into the partisans

I had a picture for my Polish passport taken in the ghetto, but I never got one.



(This is me photographed for my documents in the ghetto in Vilnius in July 1943)

Our group of five had gatherings in the library. On 23rd September it was decided to send a few girls to contact a partisan unit. They decided against Jewish guys with a common Semitic appearance. Kaplan, Vittenberg's deputy, instructed us on where we had to go and who to talk to.

I went home to say 'good bye' to my parents. Mama gave me all she had: boiled peas, a piece of chocolate, a lipstick and a nice blue shirt. I was to go with Doba Develtof, who had a common Slavic look. We were waiting for a signal. In the evening our contact person told us that a man would let us out through a small gate on Nemetskaya Street. I said 'good bye' to my family. My mother and sister were crying. I stayed strong. It never occurred to me that this could be the last time I saw them.

Though it was summer, I put on a winter coat with the fur collar torn off, as fur was supposed to be given to Germans, and we left. Grigoriy Yashunskiy, the cultural manager of the ghetto, went with us. He was going to hide away. At the gate Grigoriy went to the left and Doba and I went to the right.

On Nemetskaya Street a policeman approached us telling us to walk on the opposite side of the street. There were policemen standing at a distance of ten meters from one another and there were trucks with armed Germans heading to the ghetto. We knew there was something terrible to happen in the ghetto. I don't remember how we left the town and got to the woods. We ate the peas my mother had given me and then we found wild strawberries in the woods. Wasn't that a miracle – strawberries in September!

We walked through the woods all night. In the morning we came to a village called Zverinets and realized we had lost our way: the village was not supposed to be on our way. We approached a woman telling her that we were heading to our aunt in the village of Staryie Matseli to help her dig potatoes. The woman gave us some milk and boiled potatoes and we moved on.

In the evening we arrived in the village of Zhagaryay. The village of our destination was the next one. Some Lithuanian women digging potatoes yelled at us: 'Zhidovki!' [Jews]. We saw some armed soldiers in the village, but what else were we to do but continue on our way. A local guy offered us shelter. He may have understood that we were going to join the partisans. He took us to a shabby forester's hut where we stayed overnight. In the morning he brought us a bottle of milk and half a loaf of bread. There were swamps ahead of us and he made us sticks for walking. We followed him. The guy showed us out of the swamp and left. He showed us the way, though. For no

particular reason we got overwhelmed with joy all of a sudden.

We started singing Soviet songs aloud, when someone halted us: 'Halt, who's there?' Instead of saying the password, we started laughing and crying. We got hysterical. This was a distant patrol of the partisan unit that we bumped into. One of the guards went to report on us and another one stayed with us. At this moment Haya Shapiro, another girl from the ghetto, joined us. She said the ghetto had been eliminated the very night we left.

My friends, who were with my mother at the time, but survived, told me that the inmates were taken to some place in the open air. It was pouring, and my mother kept saying: 'We are alive, but how is Fania out there?' On that same day a big group of underground members left the ghetto through the sewer. Samuel Kaplinskiy, who had worked for the water maintenance agency, led them out of there. Kaplan, Asia Bik and Hvoinik, who were supposed to get out of the ghetto as well, got lost, were captured by fascists and hanged.

The partisan unit we met was the one named after Adam Mickiewicz. Its commanding officer met with us and asked us a few questions. A beautiful blonde woman, who looked like a Lithuanian woman was sitting beside him during the interrogation. He suggested that we joined his unit, but the woman said: 'I shall not let Jewish girls join your unit!' I was shaking from being hurt: did we escape from the ghetto just to get into the hands of an anti-Semitic woman.

Later it turned out that this woman whose last name was Glezer, was Jewish and just felt sorry for us, innocent Jewish girls. There were vague morals in the partisan unit and she was concerned about us. However, the partisans treated us like their sisters. I was trained in shooting and installing mines. I had no good boots, but was wearing shabby high-heeled sandals. I had small feet.

Borovskaya, the commissar of the unit, gave me the boots of her son who had perished.

My first task was to saw down the telegraph supports to break the communications. There were three of us: Haim Lazar, Rashka Markovich and I. We got lost and came to a village we didn't know. We slept on Haim's coat at night and he was very unhappy that we destroyed it. In the morning I realized that this was the village where a guy had given shelter to Doba and I. I knew the way from there and I led the group.

My comrades thanked me and I was happy.

Some time later we joined the group of Samuel Kaplinskiy, the one that had escaped through the sewer. We formed the big partisan unit 'For Victory!' under the command of Kaplinskiy.



(This is my husband Mikhail Brantsovskiy and I in July 1944 in ghetto in Vilnius)

Here, in this partisan unit, I met my true love. My future husband, Mikhail Brantsovskiy, came from Vilnius. He was born on 10th November 1921. The name Brantsovskiy was well-known in Vilnius. There was Brantsovskiy, who owned a

paper factory before the war. There was wood cut for the factory stored in the forest and our comrades used to joke: 'Misha [affectionate for Mikhail], we've burnt your wood'.

Mikhail wasn't related to the rich man. His father Max owned a food store. Mikhail finished a Hebrew gymnasium. Before the war Mikhail's brother, whose name I don't remember, went to visit his grandfather in Lida [today Belarus] and perished there. Mikhail, his father and mother were in the ghetto, but we had never met there.

A Jewish man from the police reported on Mikhail's father one day when he was hiding in a 'malina' shelter. Max was taken to Ponary. Mikhail's mother Dina stayed in the ghetto. Mikhail and I felt close to one another at once. We had a common fate: a happy cloudless childhood interrupted by the war and the ghetto. We were both worried about what happened to our dear ones kind of guessing their tragic end.

We had very moving relationships in the partisan unit. When Misha and I started seeing one another, a friend of mine came to tell him not to hurt me. I became a member of a group. I was given a rifle and then an automatic gun. I dragged it with me and took part in military missions. I rarely saw Doba. Since she looked like a Slavic girl, she joined an intelligence group.

We blasted trains and placed explosives in the enemy's equipment. We shot and killed them. Yes, I did, I killed them and did so with ease. I knew that my dear ones were dead and I took my revenge for them and thousands others with each and every shot.

Mikhail was at the head of a group. There were cooks and other logistics people in the unit to take care of the routines. We suffered from lack of vitamins. Once, a comrade of mine brought me half a lemon when he came back from a task. I thought that was very nice of him. Mikhail suffered from scurvy and wasn't involved in any missions. Somehow he managed to

overcome his illness. I suffered from stomatitis. Our doctor prescribed me an injection of cow milk. They must have infected me with something. I got a huge abscess and fever, but somehow I managed to recover.

We made blouses from parachutes and colored them with onion peels and herbs to prevent them from luminescence in the dark. Mikhail managed to get children's boots for me. At some stage I was secretary of the Komsomol unit.

On 24th December 1943 we went on a mission. We were to blast a bridge. There were only Komsomol members in our group and the mission was called a Komsomol one. The chief engineer of the local paper factory, a Polish man, was with us to help us. This took place during Catholic Christmas and his daughters came to visit him. I was invited to the party.

There were candles on the table and I cannot describe the feeling I had sitting at a festive table for the first time in many years. However, this was a rare occasion. Our life consisted of severe routines, earth huts, fires and missions. On 13th July 1944 we went on another mission. When we returned, the unit was preparing to march to Vilnius.

The Soviet army was in town, when we arrived there. Vilnius was liberated. I was happy and sad walking familiar streets. I knew I would never see my father, mother or sister again. From what the locals said the ghetto had been eliminated on 23rd - 24th September 1943.

Later I heard more details about my parents. My father perished in the concentration camp in Klooga in Estonia at the very end of the war. I don't know the exact date, but in fall 1944 he was still on the lists of the prisoners of this camp. The girls, who were with my mother, found me. They were taken to Riga.

One day all women over 35 were taken away. My little sister wanted to come with Mama, but a German pushed her away telling her she was too young. According to the information I have the women were taken into the sea on a barge and drowned. My husband's mother Dina Brantsovskaya perished in the same group with my mother.

My sister worked at the weaving factory in Riga. Riva wrote poems and the other girls told me a few lines from her poems. She wrote something like 'I'm standing by a machine weaving belts to hang fascists on them'. All I know is that my little sister perished in a death camp, one of those that fascists were destroying before the Soviet army came.

There were hardly any Jews left in Vilnius. When I saw older Jews, or they looked old to me considering how young I was, I felt like kneeling before them to kiss their hands. I approached them to talk to them and find out where they had been during the war.

What happened to our dear ones made my attachment to Mikhail much stronger. On 22nd July 1944 we actually became husband and wife, we started living together, and we got married on 17th August that year. We had no passports. We had our marriage registered in our partisan ID's; the registry office that had just been opened made an entry about our marriage.

The whole unit celebrated our wedding.

All partisan groups stayed in cottages in Vilnius together. Our group got a big mansion on Anglu Street. Later we got a big apartment in Pilimo Street. My husband and I had a big room there. We slept on mattresses on the floor. We spent our evenings with the group and also shared the food with them. We were intoxicated by the victory, our youth and love.

The Soviet regime needed specialists to restore the economy. We were invited to the Komsomol central committee where they asked where my husband and I had worked before the war. My husband had been a

worker at a shoe factory and they made him director of the factory. He turned down this high level position and became its technical manager.

My friend, who was just a first year student of the Faculty of Economics, was appointed manager of the planning department. Since I knew Russian, I was sent to work as secretary of a ministry. At first all ministers sat in one office. Later the minister I worked for got another office. I used to take my rifle to work putting it in the corner. The minister joked: 'One day you'll shoot me!'

We didn't care for any material riches. They didn't seem to matter in comparison to victory and freedom. However, we had to get used to peaceful life. Some time later we were ordered to submit our weapons.

In summer 1945 Mikhail and I were in the Lithuanian delegation standing on the Red Square [in Moscow] at the Victory Parade. These were unforgettable moments. My husband and five others were awarded the 'Medal for Partisan of the Great Patriotic War', Grade I, and they were one of the first awardees.