

# Mira Dernovskaya

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- **My family background**

I, Mira Dernovskaya, was born in 1929 in Leningrad and have lived in this city practically all my life, except for the two years after graduation from the Institute, including the time of the German blockade of Leningrad from 1941 to 1944 [1](#).

My ancestors on the maternal side, the Etkins, came from Lithuania. My grandfather, Avraam Mordkhe Etkin, was born in the 1860s in the village of Yanovo, near Kaunas. He was born into a religious Jewish family. He finished the Kaunas yeshivah and served as a rabbi of Porkhov town in Pskov province from 1914, though in his documents he was registered as a craftsman, a foreman in the bookbinding business.

Mum told me that grandfather, apart from his religious duties, was very much interested in engineering. In his last years, when he was already a very sick man (he had a bad heart), he asked his daughter, my Mum, to take him to town to listen to the radio. The only loudspeaker hung in the central square then. Grandfather performed his duties as rabbi until his death in 1926. I was born later, therefore I never saw him, only heard stories about him from my mother.

His wife, my grandmother, Hana Lea Etkina was born in the 1870s in Yanovo, also to a religious family. She married my grandfather, and their three daughters were born there: the eldest Nekha Dina in 1896, Haya, my mother, in 1899, and the youngest, Dveira, in 1901. Grandmother was a housewife, the wife of a Porkhov rabbi from 1914. Grandmother died in 1936 and is buried like grandfather, in the Jewish cemetery in Porkhov. All Jewish traditions were strictly observed in their family and their native tongue was Yiddish.

Nekha Dina - or as we called her by her Russian name, Nadezhda - was married, and her son was born around 1926,. Her husband worked in a warehouse and she was a housewife. They lived in Leningrad.



Dveira - whom we called Vera by her Russian name - was a beauty. A musician from an orchestra had fallen in love with her, he had a nickname 'Koppel- pipe', and his surname was Pasternak. He was very persistent courting her, and eventually she married him. He finished a construction school, and later an institute, and became a builder. They lived in Ashkhabad, Turkmenistan.

There, Dveira's husband first became site supervisor, then rose to chief controller of civil construction in Turkmenistan, and later worked in the Ministry of the State Control [this supervised state enterprises all over the country]. Dveira was a housewife. She had a sick heart. They didn't have children. Dveira died rather young, at the age of 45, in 1946, right after the war.

Grandfather's brother Yankel Koppel Etkin was also a rabbi. He was older than my grandfather. He was born in Yanovo in 1854, mastered the bookbinding craft, and completed the Kovensk yeshivah. After 1890 he moved to Pskov province, where he was a rabbi in the district center Ostrov. He was a widely educated man. Besides traditional Jewish subjects and religious duties, he was knowledgeable about natural sciences: physics, mathematics, chemistry; he was also fond of philosophy.

Uncle Yankel had collected a large library, which was handed over after his death to the Saltykov-Schedrin Public Library [today the Russian National Library] in Leningrad by his children as a gift. Unfortunately, I don't know what books he had exactly. Yankel began to collect them when he was young, before he got married. He collected all kinds of scientific books and probably there were also religious books as well. In this library there was a department named after Yankel Etkin.

He died of gullet cancer in 1919 and was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Ostrov. In 1924 the family erected a monument on his grave. The monument is crowned with a Star of David, and there is an inscription in Hebrew. A lot of people attended the unveiling of the monument, including all the relatives.

They say that his wife, Mina Ida, was a very active person, highly respected in town. They lived simply but not poorly. They had seven children, but they hired a maid to mop the floors and wash linen. Mina Ida salted herring herself, made various pickles and stocks, and baked very tasty buns, which she used to give to the synagogue.

All Yankel's children - three brothers and four sisters - were born in Ostrov. They were all beautiful and capable. They started to work at an early age, at 11-12, as accounting assistants. When they grew up all of them left Ostrov and lived in different cities: Leningrad, Kalinin [today Tver], Sverdlovsk [today Ekaterinburg], Moscow.

Only the youngest daughter remained with her parents, looking after her sick father. Their mother died in 1927 of a heart attack and is buried in the Jewish cemetery in Ostrov. All Etkins were quiet, self-possessed people, full of dignity. They were respected in the city, their opinion was listened to; they played a leading role in social life.

The Dernovsky family, my paternal relatives, was absolutely different in character. They were quick-tempered people, but cheerful, buoyant. When they gathered on holidays they would really enjoy themselves; they sang, danced, joked, laughed, 'played the fool', and the old didn't lag behind the young.

My paternal grandmother and grandfather lived in Novorzhev, though people say that my grandfather was from Polish Jews. My grandfather on my father's side, Haim Yankel Dernovsky, (his folks called him Yasha) was born at the end of the 1850s in Novorzhev, Pskov province. He was a tailor. Having completed his term in the army, he married at the end of the 1880s a young girl, Sora Gita, also from Novorzhev.

My grandmother was born at the beginning of the 1870s in Novorzhev, and she was a housewife. I don't know how they got acquainted. Grandfather and she didn't have children for five years after the wedding. Then a boy was born, but he died as a baby of diphtheria. After that they had no children for a few years. They were very unhappy, they went to see doctors and a rabbi in Pskov, and prayed a lot.

At last, in 1897, Sora gave birth to twins: my father Grigory (Girsh) and his sister Malke. The girl was big and healthy and my father was small and weak. All the Novorzhev folks came to look at the children and to congratulate the parents, since all Jewish families had many children in the neighborhood - childlessness was rare. My father was very much cared for in his childhood, they even hired a nurse from the village and bought a cow. But after these twins, children started to be born one after another.

In total there were seven kids in the family, four brothers and three sisters: my father and his twin sister, Bentse born in 1899, Milya born in 1901, Lea born in 1903, Eugene born in 1906 and Henah born in 1908.

Grandfather and grandmother were religious people. They observed all Jewish traditions, like all their Jewish neighbors. I don't know for certain, but I guess that they knew Yiddish and spoke this language amongst themselves, went to the synagogue and celebrated all Jewish holidays at home. I remember that there was usually was a crowd of people in the house, friends, guests and neighbors. They were such cheerful and happy people, a large and amicable family. But I can't describe their life in detail - they didn't tell me, and I didn't ask. Grandmother Sora Gita died in 1936 in Novorzhev, and I was seven years old then and lived in Leningrad, so what could I ask? Grandmother is buried in Novorzhev in the Jewish cemetery.

Before the war, after grandmother Sora's death, grandfather Yasha lived with our family during the winter - we had a 24-square-meter room in a communal apartment [2](#). In the summer grandfather would leave for Novorzhev to go to his daughter Milya. She was a housewife, her husband, a tailor, and they had three children. She was the only one of father's brothers and sisters who remained in Novorzhev, all the others lived in Leningrad.

My father and his twin sister were the oldest children. Father's younger brother Bentse finished two institutes. He had a degree in law and in economics. He worked as an economist before the war at a large plant, I think the Baltic Plant, in Leningrad. His wife was a doctor and they had one daughter.

Father's brother Eugene first finished the railway technical school, then graduated from an institute. He worked in the research expeditions of the Leningrad State Institute of Transport Design, and designed various transportation objects and railway roads. He was a cheerful and sociable man, a women's favorite, though he wasn't particularly handsome.

Before the war he divorced his first wife and left for the construction site of the railway in Vorkuta. There he snatched away a young wife Sophia from a geologist and married her.

Father's youngest brother Henah was the director of a furniture shop in Leningrad, his wife was engaged in fabric painting. They had one daughter Lyuba.

Aunt Malke was a bookkeeper. She married in Rybinsk, but then they too moved over to Leningrad. Her husband worked in supplies. They had two children, a daughter and a son. Lea finished the Leningrad Pharmaceutical Institute with her husband and worked as a pharmacist in a drugstore. Because her husband was a military officer, they used to travel a lot all over the country. Their daughter was born in 1938.

My father Grigory Dernovsky became a tailor like his father. My mother Haya Dernovskaya [nee Etkina] was tall and beautiful. In her youth she worked as a milliner. After marrying she became a housewife. My parents lived in different cities before marrying, they were engaged to each other, but they hadn't met before the wedding.

The rabbi of Pskov knew both families very well. The wedding took place in Pskov in 1927. Afterwards the young couple moved to Leningrad and rented a room. Daddy started to work in a tailoring workshop. At first he was a cutter, then a foreman.

### • **Growing up**

I was prematurely born in 1929. Mum was hit in a shop with a bag full of potatoes. I 'regarded it as a signal to action' and was born before the time. I was small, thin, but, as it turned out, sturdy. Until I reached school age, I was brought up by Mum.

In August 1931 my brother Abram was born, he was a wonderful boy. He died in a tragic accident. When he was 1 year and 4 months old, he poisoned himself with undiluted acetic acid. It happened early in the morning. Everyone was at home. We lived in a communal apartment. The bottle full of vinegar stood on the kitchen table. He had drunk it all in front of everybody, and I, a three-year old, stood there and repeated: 'Abrashka, don't touch it!' Mum was sick for a very long time after that misfortune; she didn't rise from bed for a month.

Before the war Daddy worked in a tailor's workshop, which was located in the building of the hostel of the Military Mechanical Institute. All the teachers from this institute ordered clothes there, and supplied him with theatre tickets. Mum and Daddy were very fond of theater; they wouldn't miss a new play.

They also loved music and songs. Daddy bought a gramophone as soon as they appeared on sale. At home we had many records, including records of all the singers popular at that time.

My maternal grandfather was a taciturn man in everyday life, but very quick-tempered. My father was also hasty, but he calmed down quickly. He sometimes thrashed me for some fault with a belt, but would calm down at once and never remember the incident. And Mum never punished me, even for serious wrong-doings, but would necessarily recollect the event in similar cases: 'Do you remember once you did this and that bad?' I had a Dernovsky, rather than an Etkin, character. Now I have become more restrained. But as a youth I was very hot-tempered.

All brothers and sisters of my father, except for Milya, were better off than us, but grandfather Yasha lived with us and with her, but of course, other children also helped him. Grandfather remained a religious man up to the end of his life, he went to synagogue each Friday and on holidays, had a Talmud, wore a white coverlet with light-blue tassels for prayer, and tied black boxes to his hand with belts, inside of which were fragments from Torah. [Editor's note: The interviewee is referring to the tallit and tefillin, which he apparently does not know the name of.]

His son, my father, was not particularly religious. I don't remember him praying. Mum was from the family of a rabbi, so she did pray, but seldom went to synagogue, only on holidays when father used to join her. All Jewish holidays were celebrated in our family. I especially remember Pesach. Mum was very skilful at cooking traditional Jewish meals.

She prepared kosher food separately for herself and grandfather and non-kosher for Daddy and me. But we chose what was tastier, because only mother and granddad were Orthodox. Daddy and I didn't keep kosher, but liked delicious food.

On Jewish holidays relatives came to us. It was forbidden to celebrate any religious holidays then, but we had wonderful neighbors in our communal apartment, so we could rely on their keeping silence. And they never let us down, though they were completely different people in regard to age, origin, educational level and culture, but all of them were decent people. With the children of some of them I still keep friendly relations, for example, with our neighbor Lyalya, granddaughter of an Orthodox priest who had his parish somewhere in Shuvalovo.

He was put in prison in 1938 and perished somewhere in a camp. Among our neighbors, only one was Jewish. It was the family of our friend, whose father managed to exchange with one of our other neighbors and move to our apartment. My parents were very amicable with this family. On New Year holidays all neighbors had decorated New Year trees, but it wasn't a Jewish tradition to have one, so we never had a fir-tree.

The closest relations my parents had was with Samuil's family. He was Mum's cousin and the son of an Ostrov rabbi. I tenderly called him 'Uncle Mulya.' He was a bookkeeper. His wife Mary finished the pedagogical class of a grammar school, a dental surgery school in Warsaw and a medical institute. Before the war she worked as a dentist. She was clever, well-educated, knew several languages, mathematics, and loved books and theatre.

Uncle Mulya and Aunt Mary frequently visited us, and we would often go to their place. They lived nearby. Daddy loved to play cards with them. Mum wasn't so enthusiastic about card games. She didn't have the passion of the Dernovsky family in her character. After father's death I never saw her play cards.

Uncle Mulya and Aunt Mary had two children who died in tragic circumstances. Kopik, named in honor of his grandfather, my grandfather's brother, rabbi Yankel Koppel Etkin, died at the age of 8 or 10 of osteomyelitis. And their older son Mosya, a student of the third or fourth year at the Medical Institute, went to a pioneer camp to work as an instructor and drowned in a river at the age of 20. Mary and Samuil could hardly overcome this tragedy. I loved Mosya, too, and was very upset about his death. Even now I look after his grave in the Jewish cemetery.

Uncle Mulya and Aunt Mary loved me very much, especially after the deaths of their own children. My parents 'were trembling over me' because they, too, suffered from the loss of their son, and were not young any more - they got married rather late. Whenever one of the children fell ill with scarlet fever in our large communal apartment, where 8 families lived - and that happened about 4 times - I was immediately sent to Uncle Mulya, and I lived there through the whole period of the quarantine.

I remember, that when the blockade of Leningrad began, but public transportation was still working, they came to us on my birthday - it was in November 1941 - and presented me with a book. We treated them with a special dish - fried eggs. It seems that at the time it was still possible.

- **During the war**

Before the war, in May 1941, Mum and I were on vacation as always in Maksatikha in Kaliningrad region. The location was very beautiful - a river and forests all around. We rented a room for the whole summer. Mum was pregnant that year, and was expecting a baby. I finished four classes of high school. When the war began, we thought that it would soon be over and moved to the district center Bezhetsk, and in August returned to Leningrad.

Father was at defense works at that time. At first we didn't even get registered to avoid being evacuated and waited for Daddy to come back. In September we registered after all. When father returned from defense works, it was already impossible to leave, the city was under complete blockade.

Grandfather Yasha, as always, was living with his daughter Milya in Novorzhev that summer. When the war began, Uncle Grisha, Milya's husband, was called up at once. She was given a horse and a cart at work, so that she, her children and father could go to the country. Grandfather categorically refused to leave. Everyone thought then that the war would soon be over. Grandfather said that for him, such an old man (he was older than 80 then), there was no need to go anywhere.

Aunt Milya also thought that she was leaving just for a couple of days to hide from the bombings in the village. They left without any luggage. Milya only changed clothes from an everyday dress to a woolen one, just in case. Nobody believed that the Germans would occupy Novorzhev. Here her three children and her niece 9- year-old Zhenya, Uncle Bentse's daughter, who was visiting them that summer, were also with Milya.

Uncle Bentse asked for a few days leave at his work and went from Leningrad to Novorzhev to get his daughter. The railway track didn't go as far as Novorzhev then, and the nearest railway station was about 40 kilometers away. With much effort, sometimes on foot, sometimes getting on a passing horse-cart he reached Novorzhev and found only two men in the entire town, one of whom was my grandfather Yakov. But grandfather was already extremely frightened and agreed at once to leave with his son for Leningrad. Nobody knew where Milya and the children were at that time.

When Uncle Bentse brought grandfather to Leningrad, Mum was in her last months of pregnancy, Daddy was not at home, and grandfather was taken by Uncle Bentse's wife Mariam, the doctor of a front hospital. Grandfather soon died in her apartment.



On 9th December 1941 Mum gave birth to a girl. She gave birth in a hospital. It all happened in candlelight and the doctor who attended the delivery shouted: 'Come on! Make it faster, the candle's about to burn down! You'll have to do it in darkness!' The girl was called Lilya. She had nothing to eat. Neither did we. Daddy worked in a hospital as a tailor and spent all day there. Mum had an infant in her arms.

Sometime in January I was sent to a shop and I was robbed of our ration cards. It was a tragedy in those times, but fortunately they didn't steal all the cards. Those for bread remained, and as no other products were available anyway, we managed somehow.

Daddy died of exhaustion earlier than Lilya. He died on 14th February 1942. We lived in a large communal apartment. Father's body couldn't be taken away right then, so we didn't stoke the stove in that room for several days, and lived in the neighbor's room. Then father's friend and Mum took the corpse on sledges to the synagogue, and there the corpses were sent to the Jewish cemetery in Alexandrovskaya farm. Now there is a large area of land there, where the Jews who died between 1941 and 1942 are buried. Father is buried there too. We even have the number of the trench, but it is now impossible to establish where that trench really is. Therefore, I go there and stand on the site and remember father.

Mum remained alone with two kids. When father's body was taken away, we heated the stove in our freezing room; and to keep the warmth, somebody might have closed the smoke pipe plug, and all three of us got poisoned by fumes. We were unconscious, but I shouted or mumbled something. Our apartment belonged to some architect before the war and consisted of a suite of rooms. The door between our room and neighbors' room was closed up, but the audibility was good, besides our neighbor Lyalya slept just beside that closed door. She heard me 'squeal' (that's what she called it). The neighbors broke the hook on the door to our room and pulled us out into the open air. Lilya died 2 weeks after that.

We remained with Mum the two of us and we survived by a miracle. Mum was a quiet, restrained person, but very irresolute. It was very hard for her to be alone. After father's death Mum sold his things and some of our belongings in order to survive. As Daddy had been a tailor, we had some cuts of material set aside for his suit or Mum's coat. Mum sold all that, including our piano, on which I learnt to play before the war. That's where my music studies finished.

When Mum was sick and was lying in hospital in the winter of 1942, the yard-keeper started to steal our firewood, and he did it openly before my own eyes. And I, a small, but a very resolute girl, went to complain to the public prosecutor - someone must have advised me to do that. The public prosecutor listened to me and made a telephone call.

The larceny stopped, but I was uneasy all the same, and we took all the firewood with the help of my neighbor inside, chopped and sawed it in the kitchen, and then piled it up in the room. In the spring of 1942 an artillery shell hit our house, but our apartment remained intact.

There was a period, when Mum didn't rise from bed at all, and it seemed that she would never get up again. But she rose. It was a miracle. One of Daddy's fellow countrymen arrived with a food products caravan from Ladoga. He had dropped in to us to find out whether Daddy was alive. He left his ration for us, mainly bread, and Mum had a chance to eat a little and recover.

Once my neighbor, who worked as a maid in a hospital, brought us some potato peelings. We made thick pancakes out of them. They tasted so delicious that I told Mum: 'After the war is over, we will never peel potatoes'.

Mum had no profession. She went to work in a hospital, where she repaired soldiers' regimentals, and at the end of 1944, when the Military Medical Academy returned from evacuation, she got a job in the laundry there. She washed, ironed and sorted out linen, and did all the various assignments in the laundry.

After a while she was transferred to the position of cloakroom attendant in another clinic of the Military Medical Academy, where she worked up to her retirement in 1962. She was easy-tempered, beautiful, and behaved always with dignity. She was highly respected there and heard a lot of compliments from military officers and doctors. Mum was rewarded with a medal 'For the Defense of Leningrad'. I, too, was awarded with such a medal. Mum was awarded in July 1943, I, in November.

During the autumn and winter of the blockade of Leningrad we didn't study at school. Classes began only in May 1942. I received that medal as a schoolgirl, a pupil of the 5th form, for my work in an agricultural farm near my school in the summer and autumn of 1942, and then in 1943 and 1944, to provide Leningradians with potatoes and other vegetables.

We lived in a large barrack. I remember how we dug up potatoes in September. It was prohibited to take potatoes out of the farm, they even used to search us, but all of us were hungry and we ate them right there in the field uncooked.

The destiny of our relatives who survived and who died in this terrible war is as follows. Father's brother Bentse, who worked in one of the large Leningrad factories, was exempted from service in the army at the beginning of the war. When the factory was evacuated, he volunteered to go to the front and was soon killed in the defense of Leningrad. Much later, his remains, with a capsule containing his data, were found by pathfinders in the place of the former the Volkhov front (the so called 'Neva patch').

The remains were buried in a common grave in Volkhov, and there is an obelisk above the grave, with his name engraved among others. His wife Myriam was mobilized as a doctor, and was head of the therapeutic department of a front-line hospital in Leningrad. When the hospital was evacuated in 1943, she asked for a leave to look for her daughter Zhenya, who was staying with Aunt Milya. She found the girl, took her, and returned to the hospital. Myriam lived to be 101. She and her daughter are buried in the Jewish cemetery in Leningrad.

During the war Eugene, Dad's second brother, laid and repaired the destroyed railway tracks at the front lines and liberated territories. When the war began, he sent money for evacuation to his relatives and their children. He sent his wife Sophia with his institute to Vologda, their daughter Tatiana was born there. After the war they returned to Leningrad. Uncle Eugene died in 1978 in Kaunas, Lithuania, where he had moved to be closer to his daughter's family.

Uncle Henah was a soldier, too, and fortunately he survived. His daughter Lyuba and his wife were in evacuation near Penza. Uncle Henah also died in 1978 in Leningrad.



Milya, after leaving Novorzhev with the children, traveled to Yaroslavl on a horse-cart for two months. Then they sailed down the Volga River to their relatives in Stalingrad. When the Germans came to Stalingrad, they were evacuated to Sverdlovsk region in the Urals.

Her husband Grigory was at the front and survived. After the war they came to Leningrad, where Uncle Grigory worked as a tailor. Milya died in 1973. She and her husband, who died in 1968, are buried in the Jewish cemetery in Leningrad. Their older son died, their second son and daughter live in the USA now.

Lea was caught by the war in Stalingrad. She and her three-year-old daughter were sent to a military garrison in Kushka, since she, as a doctor, was subject to draft. Her husband was at the front and survived. After the war they returned to Leningrad. Aunt Lea died in 1991.

Father's twin sister Malke was evacuated with her daughter from Leningrad to Samarkand. Before the war her older son entered the Military Medical Academy, which was evacuated to Ashkhabad, Turkmenistan. He passed a short course of training there and was sent to the front, where he soon died. Aunt Malke's husband also fought in the war, but survived. He died in 1948. She died in 1968. She, her husband and their son-in-law are buried in the Jewish cemetery in Leningrad.

The husband of mother's sister Nekha, like Uncle Bentse, was killed in October 1941 on the Volkhov front. Her son was at the front, too. He left for the front as a pupil in 10th grade, and lost his leg in the fight. After the war he continued to study and became a lawyer. Aunt Nekha died in October 1948 during an earthquake in Ashkhabad. Aunt Dveira also died in Ashkhabad in 1946 from heart disease.

Mother's cousin Samuil died in the blockade of Leningrad. His wife Mary was evacuated in 1943 to Sverdlovsk, where her husband's brother and sister owned a house, and she died there in 1976.

#### • **Post-war**

Mum and I lived very poorly after the war, but I finished ten classes all the same, though all my relatives advised me to go to technical school to acquire a major as fast as possible. But I studied very well and insisted on finishing school. Relatives helped us a little, but basically it was Mum who managed to make ends meet.

After finishing the 10th grade of school in 1948, I entered the Faculty of Radio Engineering at the Leningrad Institute of Electrical Engineering. At school I liked chemistry most of all, but Jews were not admitted to the faculty of chemistry at the university. There was no admission to any faculty at that time at all because of anti-Semitism.

I entered this Institute quite accidentally, thanks to a recommendation by a friend. I was going in for gymnastics then, and was a member of the city gymnastics team. I passed the entrance examinations very well. With such marks, and as a sportsman, I was admitted to this prestigious faculty to major in radio- location.

When I was in my first year, there was one curious event. Mum received a letter from one of the pre-Baltic states from our distant relative Dora, who was searching for us. During the war Dora was in a ghetto, but survived owing to a miracle. Later she moved to Israel. This letter, about which we

didn't speak to anybody, was the reason for my being called to the First Department for a 'conversation'. [Editor's note: The staff of the 'First Department' or 'Special Secret Department' consisted of employees who had access to state secrets of defense and other industries.

They were not allowed to travel abroad for 10 years or more, but their salaries were higher than that of average employees.] However that conversation didn't have any special consequences. But this is an indication of how well coordinated the censorship or some other appropriate service was then. In my third year at the Institute I was transferred to another faculty, the Faculty of Power Engineering.

They were forming a group of students there to be trained for a new specialty, the 'electric drive', and gathered people from different faculties. I majored in this subject, and I graduated from the Institute with distinction in 1954.

After graduation I was assigned to the coal industry, and I found myself at a research institute in the city of Stalino. I became a junior researcher, and frequently descended to coal mines. The staff of the laboratory consisted of fourteen employees: thirteen men and me. I worked there for two years and persuaded the chief of the department to let me go to Leningrad.

I was even given letters of recommendation to various establishments, but I didn't take advantage of them, and immediately after my arrival I went to the machine-tool factory, where I was preparing my thesis as a student. I got a job in the Chief Designer Department right away as a designer of the 1st category, as I already had experience in the field. After that, for twenty years, I worked as a project designer.

I hadn't encountered anti-Semitism - neither in our large communal apartment, nor at work. I was probably lucky. There were always decent people around me. One of the reasons for that might be that I was a sociable person, talkative, not wicked, and didn't have any enemies. Somebody could have expressed his bad attitude behind my back, but nobody had ever offended me as a Jew face to face. I was never under pressure at work, either, as all my bosses happened to be Jews.

Of course I could feel anti-Semitism in everyday life, especially in 1952-1953, when the notorious Doctors' Plot [3](#) was underway; offensive words could be heard in the street and in shops. And it could be this was the reason why I was assigned to that coal industry enterprise in Stalino, despite my honorary diploma.

In 1968 the plant was apportioned a block of flats for its centenary, in which Mum and I received a one-room apartment in exchange for our room in the communal apartment. All our relatives who lived in Leningrad came to celebrate. Twenty guests gathered in our small apartment. All the Dernovskys had so much fun that 'all hell broke loose'.

My Uncles Henah and Eugene, who were still healthy and cheerful then, took their booze and snacks to the bathroom and sat there, using a board stacked on the bath-tub as a table. They would pop out of there from time to time, announce a toast and pop back, and everybody sang and danced in the small corridor. There were no drunkards or revelers among the Dernovskys, but everyone was cheerful and buoyant, with the exception, perhaps, of Aunt Lilya, who was a more constrained person.

Mum lived with me in that apartment for 8 years. She, as always, was highly respected by the tenants of our house. She quietly listened to everybody, never gossiped, and people sought her advice. She had her own place on the bench near the entrance, and nobody occupied it. If someone was sitting in that corner when she came out, he would rise at once and give her the place. This is what kind of person she was. Mum died in 1976, and is buried, like Daddy, in the Jewish cemetery. She was buried in the grave of my brother Abram, and on the monument above the grave I had Dad's dates engraved too. I retired in 1984, when I was 55. I worked in my former place for a few more years under a contract.

When I retired I had a lot of spare time. My friends and I often went to the movies, to theatre, or for a walk in the Tavrichesky Garden, sometimes even had dinner at the Metropol restaurant, here prices during the day were significantly lower than in the evening. In the summer we would go out of town to Repino, Solnechnoye.

But then the standard of living of pensioners went down sharply, and we could no longer go to cinema or theatre, we couldn't even afford to drop in to a café any more, to say nothing of a restaurant. But I am an energetic person. I heard about the existence of the Jewish Center Hesed Avraam. I went there at the end of 1997 and offered myself as a volunteer. And now I work there for the program called Humanitarian Help. The opportunity to help people that really need help makes my life more exciting. I dine in Hesed's charitable restaurant. I attend very interesting cultural events, listen to lectures on the revival of Jewish traditions. All this is very important to me.

- **Glossary:**

### **1 Blockade of Leningrad**

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

### **2 Communal apartment**

The Soviet power wanted to improve housing conditions by requisitioning 'excess' living space of wealthy families after the Revolution of 1917. Apartments were shared by several families with each family occupying one room and sharing the kitchen, toilet and bathroom with other tenants. Because of the chronic shortage of dwelling space in towns shared apartments continued to exist for decades. Despite state programs for the construction of more houses and the liquidation of shared apartments, which began in the 1960s, shared apartments still exist today.

### **3 Doctors' Plot**

The Doctors' Plot was an alleged conspiracy of a group of Moscow doctors to murder leading government and party officials. In January 1953, the Soviet press reported that nine doctors, six of whom were Jewish, had been arrested and confessed their guilt. As Stalin died in March 1953, the trial never took place. The official paper of the party, the Pravda, later announced that the charges against the doctors were false and their confessions obtained by torture. This case was one of the

worst anti-Semitic incidents during Stalin's reign. In his secret speech at the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956 Khrushchev stated that Stalin wanted to use the Plot to purge the top Soviet leadership.